



Using Critical Pedagogies with Young EFL Learners in a Hong Kong Primary School

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Abstract: In many Hong Kong schools and those around the world, EFL and ESL curriculums tend to “play it safe” and “trivialize content” (Pennycook, 1990, p.13). They often fail to give students voices, consider students’ lived experiences or discuss issues of social justice. Drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy and critical applied linguistics, I conducted a critical action research project to explore the use of critical pedagogy in the Hong Kong primary EFL classroom. Over five sessions, primary six students and I engaged with controversial issues in Hong Kong, such as the Hong Kong identity and the treatment of foreign domestic helpers. I report my findings on how students engaged with ‘real-life’ topics and how their consciences were raised. I also report through self-reflection the challenges I faced while conducting the sessions and give suggestions on the use of critical pedagogy with young EFL learners.

Keywords: Critical applied linguistics, Critical pedagogy, Critical action research, Hong Kong primary education, ESL, EFL

1. Introduction

In many Hong Kong schools and those around the world, EFL and ESL curriculums focus on teaching language skills and grammar structures that have limited social meaning for students or relevance to issues their society is facing. Therefore, curriculums tend to “play it safe” and “trivialize content” (Pennycook, 1990, p.13). Lessons often look like what Friere (1970) describes as the “banking model” where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student, with students seen as “empty of knowledge and void of life experiences” (Smith & McLaren, 2010, p.333).

This can often make the material repetitive and meaningless for both the students and the teacher. Thus many students see English as something to acquire for further education or employment, void of any meaning and not as a language of discourse. This leads many learners to develop a “want-hate relationship with English” (Lin, 1999, p.394).

Taking a critical pedagogical approach can allow us to bring students’ lived experiences into the classroom and discuss issues that affect them and their society. Benesch (2010) suggests “critical pedagogies [should] introduce

material that has generally been ignored because of its political nature, and push inquiry beyond the safe and comfortable terrain of abstract ideas, definitions and testable fact(oids)” (p.115). Therefore, creating unique and meaningful lessons. While some may argue that EFL classrooms are not the place for such issues, I disagree. As teachers, we should not only teach the content but also encourage our students to think critically, become aware of oppression and seek change (Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas, 2012).

Through the use of a critical action research methodology, I show how students respond and engage with topics that deal with marginalized groups and the effect of ‘othering.’ I also document the challenges I face when teaching a critical unit to young EFL learners with the hope that other teachers can be encouraged to introduce critical issues into their ESL/EFL curriculums.

Although research has been conducted on the use of critical pedagogy in TESOL at the secondary level and post-secondary level (Lin, 1999; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas, 2012), there has been little research using critical approaches with young EFL learners. This is especially the case in East Asia where critical pedagogies have sometimes been dismissed as



culturally inappropriate and based on western values (Crooks, 2010).

2. Literature Review

The research is positioned in the field of critical applied linguistics (CALx) and critical pedagogy. This review will examine the theoretical framework of the research. Relevant literature related to critical pedagogy and the teaching of English as a second or foreign language to primary school learners will be discussed with reference to my context and the current practices used in EFL classrooms in Hong Kong.

2.1. Critical Applied Linguistics

CALx has come out of the view that ‘traditional’ applied linguistics is too conservative, ‘painting a rosy picture of the world’ and does not reflect or represent the learners’ own contexts.

Pennycook (2006) states that CALx “needs to be understood as far more than just a critique of normative applied linguistics” (p.784). Instead it raises a number of questions about identity, sexuality, power and performativity. It asks questions about what is normally taken for granted, the status quo, and problematizes it. It aims “[to draw] connections between classrooms, conversations, textbooks, tests, or translations and issues of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics” (Pennycook 2008, p.169).

CALx is closely related to critical theory. Critical theorists see the world as unjust and the education system representing those in power. They do not merely want to describe what they see. Instead, they set out to change the situation, emancipate the powerless and tackle inequalities (Crotty, 1998). Critical research is used as a tool to make people aware of injustices and encourage them to change it. Critical research is not value-free and is openly ideological (Lather, 1986).

2.2. Critical Pedagogy

Closely allied to CALx is critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogues argue that the classroom replicates the power relationships and inequalities outside in the social world (Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996). “The knowledge that now gets into schools ... often reflects the perspectives and beliefs of powerful segments of our social collectivity” (Apple, 1990, p.8). Formal education and schooling, therefore, “always represent an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life” (McLaren, 1988, p.160).

Although curriculum choices, pedagogical choices and language choices appear to be “apolitical professional considerations, are, in fact, inherently ideological in nature” (Auerbach, 1995, p.9) and have a significant impact on students’ social-economic roles. This is in contrast to the liberal view that education provides opportunities for all and students receive equal treatment (Pennycook, 2001). Therefore, critical pedagogy is more than “introducing a ‘critical element’ into a classroom, but rather involves an attitude, a way of thinking and teaching” (Pennycook, 1999, p.340). It is not a set of ideas, instead it a way of “doing” learning and teaching (Canagarajah, 2005, p.932).

I will now discuss three main elements of critical pedagogy:

1. Giving students a voice,
2. Relevance to students’ lived experiences and,
3. Raising student awareness of social injustice in the hope that they will seek change

2.2.1 Giving Students a Voice

Friere (1970) argues that teachers need to empower students by raising their critical consciousness through engaging in reciprocal dialogue and focusing on communication.

Hong Kong primary education has been described as being dominated by the “three T’s:” teacher-centered, textbook oriented and test-centered (Adamson, Kwan & Chan, 2000). The setting of most Hong Kong classrooms does not lend itself to dialogue or participation. The students tend to be seated in rows facing the blackboard and teacher while most dialogue is between the teacher and student rather than student-to-student. Hong Kong students are often labeled as being passive and “rote-learners” focusing on memorization, with the teacher being seen as the provider of knowledge (Watkins & Biggs, 2001, p.5). Therefore, students develop the idea that a good student should be quiet and passive. Furthermore, they are not given space to express themselves or explore their own views (Chandella & Troudi, 2013).

Critical pedagogy sees us move away from this model and towards one that is dialogic and involves greater participation. It accepts multiple perspectives with students being able to decide how and what issues are explored. Students and teachers become co-producers of knowledge. Thus, allowing students to “push ontological boundaries” (Smith & McLaren, 2010, p.334). Teachers critically explore students’ contexts rather than deciding, “what they need to know” (Pennycook, 2001, p.102). “Essentially, teachers using critical pedagogy models



must shift from being an expert and dispenser of information (traditional role) to a questioner and facilitator" (Chandella &, 2013, p.50). In dialogic education, no voice should be silenced and students should feel their views are valued.

2.2.2 Students' Lived Experiences

Troudi (2005) points out the need for TESOL teachers to have a critical awareness. This requires an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of the students and "how these shape their approach to learning and attitudes to English as a second or foreign language" (p.1). Therefore, teachers need to have a greater understanding of the students' experiences in and outside the classroom and make lessons relevant to these experiences (Thornbury, 2012).

Many Hong Kong government schools base teaching and learning on government approved commercial textbooks (Lee, 2005).

Troudi (2014) states,

Many textbooks reflect a sanitized, safe and idealized version of social reality with no social problems, such as, crime, corruption, economic exploitation, racism, or modern slavery. These discursive practices in EFL textbooks are not neutral or apolitical and reflect reproductive agendas. (p.6)

This can be seen in the choice of topics in a popular Hong Kong textbook, *My Pals are Here! English for Hong Kong 6A and 6B* (Smith & Ling, 2005). Although it appears to include some critical issues, such as disabilities and saving the rainforest, these topics appear to be chosen to teach a grammar point and not to look at injustices or consider students' experiences or opinions about the topic. As Grady (1997) states, "ELT materials represent all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure" (p.9). Drawing on this, critical pedagogy is not just about the topics we choose but how we teach them.

This dependence on textbooks makes it challenging to personalise content, as they are designed for a large audience that includes students and teachers from many different backgrounds and views. This is in conflict with critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy aims "to develop critical thinking by presenting people's situations to them as a problem that they can perceive, reflect and act on" (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p.259). Educators need to create materials and approaches relevant to the social, political, and cultural conditions of the students.

Hawkins and Norton (2009) emphasize that, because critical practice is contextualized, "the pursuit of a one-size-fits-all model of critical language teacher education is inadequate" (p. 8). Therefore, the language teacher 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).

The need to focus on students' lived experiences means the topics need to be local: looking at issues in the students' school, environment, culture and society. Then, "the language classroom can be a place where students understand their own identities and their own society" (Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2012, p.23).

2.2.3 Raising Student Awareness

As mentioned earlier, many Hong Kong schools rely heavily on government-approved textbooks. These textbooks "function primarily to legitimate the interests of the dominant social order" (Giroux, 1997, p.87). The Hong Kong government has clearly stated that the school curriculum "defines the views of society about what is worth learning" (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, p.19). Critical pedagogues would challenge this view, arguing that we need to deliberately expose inequality in the classroom and society and make this part of everyday classroom life (Vasquez, 2004). Therefore, we should be constantly questioning our roles in society as "either agents of social and economic transformation" or as participants "in the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege" (Smith & McLaren, 2010, p.332).

This does not mean we have to take "a negative stance, instead it is about exploring a topic in different ways, and hopefully making suggestions for change or improvement" (Vasquez, 2004, p.30). Therefore, the teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator and create a safe place to engage in controversial issues (Chandella & Troudi, 2013).

Norton and Toohey (2004) suggest that,

Advocates of critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in relationships between language learning and social change. From this perspective, language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future. (p.1)

Therefore, critical pedagogy is not only used to make those who are oppressed aware of their situation, but also



teach those with power. Then, they can know how they got power and how they can help to redistribute it and make society a better and more equal place (Ooiwa-Yoshizawa, 2012).

Through the use of critical pedagogical approaches, students are encouraged to be aware of the status quo regarding issues that affect or concern them (Cowhey, 2006). Awareness of these issues can promote greater participation in society and empower them to seek change.

2.3 Critical Pedagogies with Young EFL Learners

Although the majority of reported research has been conducted on older ESL and EFL learners, critical pedagogical approaches have been used with young first language learners, particularly in North America. Vasquez (2004) and Cowhey (2006) have both written about the successful use of critical pedagogy with kindergarten and primary school students respectively. However, first language students do not have the added challenge of learning a language while tackling controversial topics and greater participation.

Indeed, Shin & Crookes (2005) found in their study regarding the use of critical pedagogies in Korea with high school students, that the “biggest challenge for students was the ability to express their thoughts on difficult topics in English” (p.28). They also reported that students with a lower proficiency in English found the topics and English only environment challenging. However, they also found that students appreciated that they could use English in “real situations” (p.129) and knew why and how to use English.

It is therefore important to introduce topics and issues that are appropriate for students’ English abilities and age. Although this may be challenging for teachers, it should not be an excuse to avoid critical issues.

3. Methodology

The above review has highlighted two important points relevant to my context. First, it identified the lack of controversial issues being taught in Hong Kong primary schools. Second, it identified some of the benefits and strategies of using critical pedagogical approaches in the classroom. This research seeks to address the two points above by answering two research questions:

1) Through the use of critical pedagogies, is student awareness raised regarding marginalized groups in Hong Kong?

2) What challenges does a teacher face when implementing critical pedagogies with young EFL learners?

In order to answer these questions within a critical framework, I believe adopting a critical action research methodology is appropriate. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.162) regard critical action research as a form of “self-reflective enquiry” by participants in context, which is conducted in order to improve their understanding of their own practices with a view to maximizing social justice. Reflectivity is central to action research as the practitioner is also the researcher and it is situated in the social world that they are studying (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This research is participatory, transformative and reflective. It includes participants’ voices, aims to transform practice and includes self-reflection.

So as to stay faithful to the action research methodology, the “teacher-as-researcher movement” (Cohen et al, 2011, p.349) and its focus on praxis, I was involved in all aspects of the study. This allowed for self-reflection.

As this is a critical action research project it is not value-free. However, I will endeavour to make my assumptions transparent and give an accurate account of the research.

3.1 The Context

The study took place in the Hong Kong local government-aided primary school in which I taught. At the time of the study, I was the Native English Teacher (NET) in the school, hired under a government scheme that places one NET in each government-aided primary school in Hong Kong. I did not have my own English class. Instead, I supported local English teachers and predominantly co-taught reading and writing lessons.

Students at the school come from various different backgrounds with most coming from working class families who live near the school.

3.2 The Sessions

Due to the pressures of assessment and demands of the curriculum (that had already been set at the beginning of the academic year), it was difficult to add a critical unit to the mainstream curriculum. Therefore, a selected group of ten students were given extra sessions after school. There were five one-hour sessions once a week conducted over a six-week period from 4th March, 2014 to 8th April, 2014. A unit was developed around the topic of marginalized groups within Hong Kong society and the concept of the Hong Kong identity (Hongkonger). A



dialogic approach was adopted with students having opportunities to discuss their own views and the views of others through group-work and class discussions.

Each session followed a similar format where students were given the opportunity to discuss the critical issue and brainstorm their views about the topics. Then we would share these ideas as a whole-class before engaging with multimodal materials, such as, YouTube clips, teacher-made materials, and magazine articles. The materials were selected because they presented a critical view of the issue. This would be followed by further discussion to explore whether views, feelings, assumptions had changed. There were slight differences in the format of each lesson based on the topic, materials and my reflections from previous sessions.

3.3 The Participants

The participants were in their last year of primary school (11-12 years old). I invited students to attend the course, based on their interest in joining (they were informed of the nature of the lessons), English proficiency (students that could manage English only instruction), and availability at the time of the class. The course was optional. There were five boys and five girls in the group.

3.4 The Critical Issues

Smith & McLaren (2010) and Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas (2012) argue that students should be involved in deciding what issues to explore. However, due to the limited scale of this research and issues of time, I chose to focus on the Hong Kong identity and marginalized groups within Hong Kong. According to Pennycook (1999) class, race, and gender are classic topics in which relations of power and inequality are often at their most obvious in cultures and societies.

The issues were chosen as there have been a number public examples of discrimination and xenophobia in Hong Kong in the last few years. These include the rights of domestic helpers and examples of abuse (Chan, 2013) and Mainland Chinese being depicted as locusts in popular press (Chow, 2013). There has also been a rise in the Hong Kong identity and those identifying themselves as 'Hongkongers' (Cheung, 2013).

Being from the dominant social and cultural group, Hong Kong born Chinese (Hong Kong being 95% Chinese), my students would most likely be aware of these issues due to extensive coverage in local press. However, I thought they might not be aware of their own biases, role in society and ability to enact change. The fact that I myself am a white male (a group that is often perceived

to receive preferential treatment in Hong Kong), I felt also added an interesting angle for discussion. Furthermore, I felt the topics were age appropriate, whereas other issues such as sexuality, might not be.

Themes for discussion

Session 1	The Hong Kong identity (Hongkonger)
Session 2	Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong
Session 3	Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong
Session 4	Poverty in Hong Kong
Session 5	Reflections and questionnaire

4. Methods

The study is "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and relies heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple datasources" (Merriam, 1988, p.16). It explores the classroom experience for the teacher and students, giving equal voices to all participants. The methods were informed by the critical action research methodology.

Qualitative data was collected during each session through the use of video recordings, the collection of students' work (Including photos of different groups' mind-maps and worksheets they completed in the sessions) and teacher's reflective notes written after each session. After the course, a session was held for students to reflect on their learning by creating a group mind-map of what they had learnt and complete a short open-ended questionnaire. The video recordings of each session were transcribed. Data was then analyzed using a constant comparative approach with different sources compared and triangulated (Wallace, 1998).

5. Findings

5.1 Research Question 1

In the first research question, I asked whether student's awareness would be raised by the use of critical pedagogies. I believe their awareness was raised. I will now present my findings, with regard to raising students' critical conscience, challenging stereotypes and students as agents of change.

5.1.1 Raising Students' Critical Consciences

Students' critical conscience regarding current social issues was raised by the course. In the questionnaire, when asked if they thought Hong Kong was a fair society before and after the course, there was a noticeable



difference - half the students stated that they thought Hong Kong was fair before the course and all students stating 'no' after the course. They also clearly identified injustices that we had discussed to justify their responses. For example, S8 said that before the course she thought Hong Kong was fair because "Hong Kong is a place where east meets the west." Whereas after the course she thought Hong Kong was unfair because "some Hongkongers look down some of people..." Likewise, S4, although stating that he felt Hong Kong was unfair before, he emphasized the reason he felt it was unfair afterwards was directly due to the course, "Really no, because I learn many things in this class which are not fair in HK." (See table 1 below)

Table 1: Students' responses to question 1 and 2 of the questionnaire.

Student	1) Before the course, did you think Hong Kong is a fair society? Why? / Why not?	2) After the course, do you think Hong Kong is a fair society? Why? Why not?
S1	No, the poor people were very poor and the rich people are very rich.	No, although there are many rich people, they don't need to help them (poor people).
S3	Yes, because we can have the government money	No, because the gap between rich and poor is so big.
S4	No, because the gap between pors and rich are very big...	really no, because I learn many things in this class which are not fair in HK.
S5, S2	Yes, because Hong Kong always co-operate with other countries	No because Hongkongers is (are) not fair with their helpers from Indonesia and Philippines.
S6	Fair, because there was many law can protect our HK people	Not fair because there was many poor people but the government donot (doesn't) help them, the poor people need to live in the case (cage) house.
S8	Yes, Hong Kong is a place where east meets the west	No, some Hongkongers look down some of people. (identity not clear, foreigners...)

S9	No, because the people lived 7 years also haven't have ID card.	No, because the people lived for 7 years also haven't have ID card.
S10	No, because I always see some poor people on the streets	No, because I know already

This awareness was also evident in the students' final mind-maps where students used words, such as, 'before' and 'after' and gave suggestions on how to improve the situation in Hong Kong, such as, increasing the minimum wage. This shows an awareness of the issues and that situations can be changed.

However this was not evident in all groups and stereotypes of some groups such as Mainland Chinese still remained.

Students' critical conscience being raised was also evident in the whole-class discussions. In the first session, when discussing the Hong Kong identity, students showed an awareness of the complexity of the issues. S4 said, "I think if to decide if people are Hongkonger, I think we need to look at many sides ... if we look at different sides we will have different answers...all of them can be Hongkongers." S8 showed a similar awareness in session 5, she said, "... some people identity is not clear for example someone born in other countries but live in Hong Kong for more than seven years or born in Hong Kong and live in other countries for many years ..." In session 4, after watching a video about poverty in Hong Kong (Could you live in a zoo? Hong Kong's cage dwellers) S2 said, "I think they (poor people) are innocent, they have no choice to be poor." These students' understood the complexity of the situations and showed empathy towards marginalized groups.

5.1.2 Challenging Stereotypes

When responding to the questionnaire, all students with the exception of S8 and S10 felt their opinions about the topics had changed with the main reason being their attitude towards Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong, S5 and S2 wrote "Yes, before I thing (think) Mainland China people is all rude. But now, I thing (think) only some of them are rude." This topic was by far the most controversial that we discussed in the sessions. The students had strong opinions, with one student describing Mainland Chinese people as "our enemy" and all students mentioning examples of negative stereotypes in their mind-maps and follow-up discussions, such as, they "poo and pee in swimming pools," "they are rude and



don't follow instructions," "they are not people," and they "talk loudly."

However, after students read and presented case studies I found in a local magazine of the experiences of Mainland Chinese people in Hong Kong, entitled 'View from the Mainland' (Chan, 2014), the students' views seemed to change. S1 said about the person in the article, "I think she is not the kind of Mainlander which is rude and talk loudly." We then went on to discuss Mainland Chinese they knew, such as, teachers and visitors to the school. At the end of the session, a clear change of opinion was evident. Students were able to reflect on what they had learned and changed their opinion (See transcription 1).

Partial Transcription 1 from session 3	
T	So who can tell me something you learned today?
S9	The mainland Chinese, what they do in HK
T	Ok
S9	The bad things and good things
T	Anything else we learnt?
S10	They're not as bad as we think
T	They're not as bad as we think, good anything else we learned?
S10	They are poor in HK
S2	We learned some special things about mainlanders
T	Good
S8	Not all Mainlanders are bad
S1	Some are really poor
S8	Mainland Chinese people maybe sometimes is not stereotype
T	Don't stereotype
S5	Not all Mainland Chinese people is rude and some of them are helpful and kind.
S7	Don't only judge the bad things

6.1.3 Agents of Change

After the first three sessions, I reflected that although students' awareness's were being raised and they were able to make suggestions to improve the situation in Hong Kong, students might not be able to see the differences they can make themselves. I thought it was important that in session 4, while discussing the issue of poverty, that we explore what we could do. It was my hope that students would show interest in conducting a food drive or other event to help the poor. This allowed me to show the students that we can make a difference and become actively involved in supporting marginalized groups. Students were able to mention problems those in poverty face, for example, S1 stated, "They are sad because they do not get help from the government and

the man live in the cage for 30 years and the cage is very small and need to pay \$800 per month." S5 said, "They do not have enough nutritious food." They also mentioned problems in society, for example, S10 said, "Some rich people live in the public house (housing) so poor people can't live inside."

Students were also eager to share things that they could do, suggesting they could donate clothes, leftover food from the school lunch and food to a food bank. This led to further discussions about the issues of holding a food drive in school, which included issues like whether we should give prizes, have a party or issue certificates to donors or not. Students were able to look at different perspectives, arguing that giving prizes would "wash the brain" that "some of the classmates are poor," that without a prize "students will not join." In the end, we decided to conduct a food drive without prizes but would instead have an assembly to tell the whole school about poverty in Hong Kong and inform the parents, but without telling them that they must give. S4 responded to the idea of giving a notice to parents, by saying "And do not use the, you must do that, you must do that." He was arguing that giving to the food drive should be optional. They were able to think about others' perspectives and look at multiple viewpoints before we collectively made a decision.

5.2 Research Question 2

The second research question asked about the challenges the teacher faced when using critical pedagogies. There were both challenges and benefits that I identified.

In response to the question in the questionnaire, "What did you like about the course?" All students responded positively, for example, S10 stated, "I like this course because we have freedom, but we can still learn." S6 wrote, "I can learn more about the Mainland China and helpers and Hongkongers." S8 stated, "... have good way to train our creativity." S3 stated, "We learn more about H.K. and something we have to know." Students all stated that they would like to use these topics to learn in English in their general English (GE) or regular English lessons. Although students may have written positive response to please me, their engagement and motivation in the lessons and their desire to continue with the food drive after the course suggests they enjoyed it and found it meaningful.

I will now present the key challenges I faced, regarding, finding suitable resources, students' previous knowledge, students' English ability and ensuring every student a voice.



5.2.1 Suitable Resources

In almost every session, I had difficulty finding appropriate resources. Although some critical resources are available for EFL classrooms, the topics were not relevant to my students and were not relevant to what we were discussing. It was also a challenge to find resources at the students' English level. Authentic resources such as newspaper articles and news reports discussing the issues tend to be written for first language adults. In the first session, I decided to make my own text, giving case studies of different people for students to discuss whether they are Hongkongers or not. I found this effective. However, in the other sessions, I did not want to simplify the issues by simplifying the text and therefore chose authentic texts, such as, a documentary and magazine article. Although it was time consuming to find these resources, students seemed to enjoy using them.

5.2.2 Students' Previous Knowledge

It was challenging to predict what the students already knew about a topic and I was often surprised with their existing knowledge. Students often knew a great deal about the issues, such as, the minimum wage, and Hong Kong's residency laws. When students had personal experiences of the issues, they were keen to discuss them. When talking about domestic helpers, S10 was able to share about her domestic helper who had just left after working for her family for 11 years. When talking about Mainland Chinese, students were eager to share the experiences they had, for example, S5 said, "When I go to Ocean Park they step on my foot," and S3 said, "I saw talking very loudly." They were also eager to discuss my experiences and other teachers' in the school. In the first session, they were motivated when I discussed my own residence status and feelings of identity in Hong Kong. They were also eager to talk about a colleague's 'Hongkongness' whose mother is Caucasian and father is Chinese (See transcription 2 below).

Partial transcription 2 of Session 1: Discussion of a teacher's 'Hongkongness'	
T	Stop here, I want to ask. I hear a good question. What did you say about Mr Lee?
S8	Mr Lee has black hair, black eyes but he is not a HKer.
T	Why not?
S3 +S4	He is
S3	He has 3 star ID card
T	So you think he is not a HKer (Point to S8) and you think he is (point to s3)
S4	Now, he is

T	So he can become a HKer?
S2	Mr Lee is American
T	Who can say Mr Lee is a HKer or not?
S3	Mr Lee / the basic law
T	Can Mr Lee decide? Do you think Mr Lee can choose?
S4	If Mr Lee give up American then he can get the HK ID card
T	What do you think?
S5	But many people have different country ID card

However, it was difficult to predict the students' previous knowledge for each session, as each session was a different topic. I overcame this issue by starting the sessions with a brainstorming exercise, where students worked together to make a mind-map showing what they knew and felt about the issue. In the second session, a student mentioned that we wasted paper, so in the third session I used large whiteboards. This was more effective as everyone could see each other's responses and this made discussions easier. Therefore, commonalities, differences and stereotypes could easily be identified for discussion.

This lack of awareness, did make it difficult to plan tasks - in the second session I planned a task called 'Step into their shoes' as I wanted students to imagine what life is like for a domestic helper. However, they had already shown during the initial discussion that they knew the problems domestic helpers faced. When I went through the task, they were not so engaged, giving only yes/no answers, with myself doing most of the talking.

5.2.3 Students' English Abilities

In the questionnaire, all students mentioned that there were words they did not know and they could not understand some of the difficult words. Although the students had a good command of English, many of the topics we discussed had vocabulary that they had not been exposed to before. It was difficult to predict what words they knew and what words they would need in the lesson. I therefore tried to explain a term during the discussions and tried to support them. However, this was hard and sometimes I felt my explanations were unclear (See transcriptions 3 and 4 below).



Partial transcription 3 of Session 3	
S8	I have a question, what is this? (pointing to the word stereotype)
T	Stereotype is when we think someone is like this because of where they are from or what they look like so Mainlander Chinese must be rich because they always by LV bags or white people must not speak Chinese because they are white, this is a stereotype.

Partial transcription 4 of Session 4	
S3	What is poverty?
T	Poverty is people who are poor. If you live in poverty you are poor.

For the majority of the time, students were able to manage the English only environment and the difficulty seemed appropriate.

5.2.4 Students' Voices

Throughout the sessions I aimed to encourage and accept multiple viewpoints and different voices. Particularly during the early discussions in the classes, we would explore students' knowledge of the issues and even if I did not agree with these points I would accept them and would not challenge them (See transcription 5 for example). I did not require students to raise hands and allowed them to voice their ideas freely.

Partial transcription 5 of Session 3	
T	So S1, S9 and S7 can you come and share what your ideas are.
S1	They do many bad things
T	Can you give some ideas?
S1	They make Hong Kong Dirty
S9	and they go to the toilet in the swimming pool. They don't respect
S1	They are rude and don't follow instructions
T	Ok, they are rude and don't follow the instructions
S9	They buy the things in HK and sell the things in Mainland China.
T	That's an interesting one, so they buy things here and go back to china and sell them there. Ok good, excellent. You have different ideas, lots of things to talk about.

However, there were times when I did not allow students to have a voice or dismissed their ideas. On a few occasions, students would give unexpected responses, that, I did not know how to respond to. In session 1 when referring to whether someone can be a Hongkonger or not, S9 asked, "I want to live in Canada, May I live in

Canada?" I responded, "If you are there already." I felt I dismissed his argument. Then, in session 4, when discussing how we could help poor people, S2 suggested having a rebellion. My response was to ensure other students were aware what a rebellion is, but then I changed the topic, as I did not know how to deal with it (See transcription 6 below).

Partial transcription 6 of Session 4	
S2	Have some rebellion
T	Rebellion?
S2	Yeah
T	Ok, rebellion means we rise up and overthrow the government. We don't this government anymore. We throw them away. But I think it will be hard for us to do that as students. What do you think?
S2	Ask the adults to help us to have that rebellion
T	Alright, this is an interesting idea
S2	I think many people will join
T	I think a rebellion might not make poor people rich, we don't know what will happen after the rebellion
S2	I think it will
T	You think so?
S2	Yeah
S4	No
T	What do you think? (Gesturing to S4)
S10	I think it is fine already
T	Ah ok, good idea though. Anything else. They don't just have problem with money

Although, I wanted to encourage more participation and interaction, in the whole class setting, I still found most of the discussions were 'teacher-student-teacher.' When reflecting and transcribing the sessions, I noticed that I took the most turns in the lessons and 'controlled' the discussions.

6. Discussion

I was incredibly encouraged to see the students engage with the social issues and see their consciences raised. I was also pleased to see that they enjoyed the course and found it meaningful. I could see that they were able to discuss and explore the controversial issues successfully and valued the opportunity to share their ideas and opinions. To continue the reflective nature of this research, I will now discuss what I learned and make suggestions on how to successfully implement critical pedagogy in the EFL classroom.



When we assume students know nothing about a topic as with a banking model of education, it is easy to plan and implement lessons, you tell students what you want them to know. However, participatory lessons are far more challenging to plan. In order to facilitate the sessions successfully, the teacher needs to explore the students lived experiences and find out what they know. Often, I was surprised by my students' previous knowledge and I was not always flexible enough to change my plans. I did however find 'mind-mapping' an effective task in getting students to think and compare their views with their classmates.

I had great difficulty finding suitable resources. Critical textbooks are available, such as, 'Impact Issues' (Day, Shaules & Yamanaka, 2009). However, most of them are designed for adults or have topics that are not relevant or meaningful to students. Teachers using critical pedagogy need to put a lot of effort to look for resources and plan lessons. However, I found the greatest resources are the students themselves. They can help co-produce knowledge together (Smith & McLaren, 2010).

The topic choice is also very important; indeed the most lively and engaging session was the session on Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong. Students were able to share personal experiences about the topic. Discussing poverty was also effective as we could look at practical ways the students could help and take action. I agree with Crawford-Lange (1981) who sees taking action as a primary goal of critical pedagogy. Involving students in the choice of topics could ensure students engagement and that the topic is related to their lives. If I conduct this course again, I would involve students in the choice of topics.

It is important to create space for students to discuss with one another in an open forum. However, this can also be hard to achieve. Both the students and myself were used to the teacher 'leading' the lessons. The teacher needs to find a way to facilitate discussion between students and act as a participant or facilitator depending on the discussion. The teacher needs to step back and be less assertive to ensure students have an equal voice and create a safe place to engage in controversial topics. I think changing this expectation takes time, and this unit was too short. However, the course demonstrated that Hong Kong students are not passive. They all had opinions and wanted to share.

Although students' consciences were raised, I think the course was too short and covered too many different topics. I could see in the final session, that stereotypes still remained. I agree with Crookes and Lehner (1998) who suggest that we cannot expect too much from the

first experience with a critical approach, as change takes time. Next time, I would focus on one issue over a longer period. This would enable us to explore an issue in more depth and consider different perspectives. Introducing a critical unit to the mainstream English curriculum could be one way to do this.

7. Conclusion

This research suggests that critical pedagogy can be used successfully with young EFL learners to raise their awareness. It also highlighted some of the challenges of implementing critical pedagogies with young EFL learners and made suggestions.

Although it may be challenging to use these approaches, I feel it is worthwhile. As practitioners, we need to be flexible, open and look carefully at our students' lives and the society they live in. They, like us, are interested and worried about the world around them. If we do not discuss these issues and worries, then we neglect an important resource that can help motivate our students. By including them, English lessons can be more than just learning skills and memorization.

It is perhaps too early to tell whether my students will see the world more critically. However, I feel they are on the path and are more likely to question the status quo and their own beliefs now. I hope I have empowered them to help those marginalized by society. Although developing my student's awareness alone may not be enough to change the injustices in the world, it is a start. As Pennycook (2007) states, "consciousness is the first step towards emancipation" (p.23).

This research was limited by its scale, length and the homogeneity of the participants. I hope room can be made in the already crowded text-oriented curriculum in Hong Kong for teachers to consider students lived experiences, give students a voice and discuss critical issues. Ideally, more research needs to be carried out in the use of critical pedagogy with students of different language proficiencies and with larger EFL classes over a longer period.

8. End Note

After the course, the students and I organised a food drive in the school from 30th April to 7th May, 2014. The students promoted the drive in assembly and through announcements. They also helped collect the donations. It was very successful and we managed to raise seventy-four kilos of food for a local Hong Kong food bank - Feeding Hong Kong. It was a meaningful and memorable way to end the course.

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