



Developing Critical Materials for a Mainstream EFL Textbook – a Disruptive Innovation?

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Abstract: This paper will outline the findings of a small-scale research project and will start by introducing the literature related to the theory of critical pedagogy as a means of developing textbook content. Such critical content can enable students to question the status quo and their role in society, potentially increasing their awareness of social issues that directly affect their lives. This will be contrasted with the Frontrunner series, a mainstream, commercial and aspirational textbook for teenage learners between 14 and 17 years of age. Arguments will be presented indicating such mainstream and aspirational content prevents the discussion of social issues within EFL classrooms, whereas there should be more of a union of L2 language development and awareness of current social issues. Consequently, a ‘critical issues supplement’ extending one of the mainstream Frontrunner units and discussing homelessness was developed in an attempt to provide such a union. The research questions were developed to determine the exiting knowledge of critical pedagogy as well as reaction to the critical issues supplement. This gave rise to the identification of various implications relating to critical pedagogy in contexts that may be seen as unfavourable to such a transformative methodology.

Keywords: Critical applied linguistics; Critical pedagogy; Critical action research; EFL; textbook development; disruptive innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

Applied linguistics has dominated the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry and there appears to be a strict adherence to its methods among those contexts that could be described as being more instructional in nature. Critical Applied Linguistics seeks to challenge the tenets of applied linguistics and hold it to account but it remains to be seen which will win this continuous tug of war.

This research project seeks to understand whether or not critical pedagogy can be successfully applied in a context focused on methodologies of applied linguistics, in particular creating classroom materials based on the ideas of critical pedagogy and piloting them to gauge reaction among students, teachers, school managers and senior managers within a private, multinational organization (referred to as ‘the company’) providing English language instruction. The opportunities, issues and implications of such content will be considered using a critical action research framework.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT PRACTICE

For over 10 years I have worked in the EFL industry in Japan, Spain, and currently the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as China). For the past four years I have worked for a multinational, privately owned company providing English language instruction to students of three years of age and over.

At present, I work in the product development division, creating textbook and online materials for students in the 3-17 year age range studying in China, Indonesia and Russia.

My work is specifically related to content development for both textbook and online materials. The publishing team produces materials that conform to the requirements of our Style Guide, a set of rules, regulations and good practice for writers and editors working on our products. For example, due to our young audience, all materials have a Parental Guidance (PG) rating and there should be no mention or depiction of smoking, alcohol, sex, drugs or violence. Religion,



politics and lifestyle choices are to be handled with extreme care, if at all, due to their sensitive nature. As a result, textbooks for early, young and teenage learners are considered by many within the company to be age and level appropriate and motivational.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

My work in China saw me initially involved in school management, prior to making the move into materials development within the same company. As a result, my research epistemology has moved from being situated in constructivism towards being more firmly located within constructionism.

Constructivism and its focus on the interpretive theoretical framework is appropriate for classroom research. It can be usefully applied to the multiple realities of classroom life with its “*meaning-making activity of the individual mind*” (Crotty, 1998, p.58). With interpretive research conducted within a school environment, the researcher is primarily interested in problem solving rather than replicating the research results in different contexts. In other words, there is no attempt at generalization within the interpretive framework (Denzin, 1983).

Due to constructivism being focused on individuality and multiple realities, it does not present an opportunity to critique or question those realities; to do so would be contradictory. This is a criticism of interpretive enquiry presented by Mack (2010). By contrast, constructionism concentrates its focus on culture as the driving force of human behaviour. As a result, this is something that Crotty (1998) believes can be subjected to critique and questioning in a way that can assist in the removal of what he describes as sedimented layers of constructed meaning. It is social constructionism with a critical theoretical perspective that my research into textbook development will take. As Habermas (1972) indicates that there is no neutrality or innocence in the way knowledge is selected, the positioning of this research within the critical theoretical framework is seen as very relevant to the context of textbook development. This is because I could be described as a knowledge gatekeeper within my department, deciding what topics do or do not make it into our in-house published textbooks. Nevertheless, the application of critical theory within my context may prove complex due to dependence on mainstream applied linguistics with its more interpretive focuses.

A. Applied Linguistics versus Critical Applied Linguistics

For many years, the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry has been dominated by applied linguistics with its focus, according to Pennycook (2001), on the

classroom, teaching methodology, communication and texts. This, however, is to the exclusion of social, cultural and political issues. According to Gee (1994, p.190) “*English teachers stand at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time.*” However, the fact that many large EFL organizations often recruit teachers who are relatively inexperienced results in a reliance on applied linguistics to bring such teachers up to a particular standard where they can enter the classroom and teach a lesson successfully. Consequently, they are likely to follow the tenets of applied linguistics, unaware as to any suitable alternatives.

While applied linguistics is focused on teaching methodology, critical applied linguistics (CALx) aims to hold applied linguistics “*politically accountable*” and provide a “*preferred vision of the future*” (Pennycook, 2001, p.7). Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999) state that the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry does not currently have a focus on CALx, perhaps due to English teachers being heavily focused on applied linguistics with its emphasis on “*formal and methodological issues*” (p.433). This is likely to remain so as any potential change is going to require a considerable restructuring of recruitment and teacher training within language organizations like mine.

CALx involves adopting a “*postmodern problematizing stance*” as indicated by Pennycook (2001, p.8). It necessitates the connection of the micro to the macro; examining what is happening in society – with its ideologies and hegemonies, its capitalistic and unequal nature – and linking that to the classroom with its texts and conversations. Nevertheless, CALx is fighting against an ELT industry that views its activities as neutral and even beneficial. Benesch (1993) adds to this by arguing that teaching is “*far from being aloof from ideology*” (p.706).

B. Critical Pedagogy

Closely linked to CALx is critical pedagogy, a concern with the knowledge that is provided for student consumption, and whose interests that particular knowledge is serving. Rashidi and Safari (2011, p.250) talk about education as a “*political enterprise*”, although Kanpol (1998) further distinguishes between schooling and education, schooling being the control mechanism that promotes what Freire (2005) describes as the banking concept of teaching and learning. Rashidi and Safari (2011) argue that critical pedagogy should raise students’ awareness of social or political issues, which can lead them to at least question the status quo “*because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation*” (Pennycook, 1990, p.23). This, I believe, is a significant point as it is not always realistic or practical to expect teachers to be revolutionaries in the classroom.



Johnston (1999) brings up this point in his discussion of critical pedagogy and the terminology it promotes. He believes that critical pedagogy should adopt a more moderate stance rather than continuing its promotion of empowerment, revolution and freedom from oppression. In contexts such as China, it is unlikely that teachers and students will be successfully participating in any revolutionary activities. This point is also discussed by Ellsworth (1989) who suggests that such language could actually make things worse in that they “*are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination*” (p.298). This is further argued by Pishghadam and Meidani (2012) who state that critical pedagogy may well become another form of receptive pedagogy, potentially reverting back to the banking style of education that was to be avoided in the first place.

It is perhaps more realistic to consider that teachers, those who are critically knowledgeable, will act more as facilitators, raising awareness of social issues with their students, and guiding them to question their own situation and decide as to whether change is necessary. This resonates with Kanpol's (1998) argument that education should challenge the control mechanisms of schooling. As a business, my organization exhibits such control mechanisms, typical of a large multinational. Not only would any textbook and associated classroom materials have to provide greater support to the critical language teacher, but would have to align with corporate strategy. This could potentially limit the sorts of methods and topics that could very well be used to challenge the control mechanisms outlined by Kanpol (1998).

C. Applications for textbook development

Within my company, a series of textbooks and online materials for 14-17 year olds has been produced for in-house classroom use. The Fronrunner series covers Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels A1 to C1. They are conservative in nature in that they have a strict PG rating and are considered aspirational by many who have worked on their production. Troudi (2005) confirms that ELT is still largely conservative and mainstream in nature, with there being “*a perceived lack of intellectual content in TESOL education*” (p.119). The aspirational nature of the Fronrunner series is considered within the company as positive and motivating for students attending our schools since it can show them what their lives could be like in the future (Gray, 2012); university and career success, cosmopolitan lifestyles and the potential to travel being some of the topics included in Fronrunner. Students attending classes at our schools are from affluent families and this may well be reality for them in the future. Nevertheless, Simon (1987, p.372) states that such topics “*are never neutral; they are always someone's dream and to the degree that they are*

implicated in organizing the future for others, they always have a moral and political dimension.” The result is what Wajnryb (in Gray, 2010, p.716) describes as “*a manageable and marketable product*” or “*a discrete item on a shop shelf.*”

Pennycook (2001) believes that current materials produced for ELT classrooms are shielded from the ongoing social problems of the outside world, thus deliberately keeping such topics out of the classroom. In many situations, including contexts such as my own, the textbook is formed from the syllabus with teachers being expected to follow it more or less religiously. With textbooks having a strong influence on the classroom and publishers being somewhat averse to major change, it is clear that the division between classroom and the outside social world is not going to be an easy one to negotiate. Nevertheless, Rashidi and Safari (2011) argue that ELT materials should enable students to use their linguistic L2 resources to critically question the world within which they operate and in ways that are relevant to them. In other words, there should be a “*joint goal*” (Rashidi & Safari, 2011, p.254) comprising the development of students' L2 linguistic competence in conjunction with an increasing social awareness and ability to question issues and topics of a critical nature.

Pennycook (2001) believes that ELT education concentrates on western teaching methods and that some classrooms, and certain textbooks by implication, instead promote an American Dream style of life that, for some, may not actually be all that realistic. Thornbury (2013) believes that current textbook materials do not reflect the lives of the students for which they are written although the opposite could also be argued; that affluent students could well experience events such as those portrayed in such textbooks. He argues that guideline writers represent the world in the way that publishers want it to be represented, with a prohibition on the inclusion of any controversial topics. It is true that representation is very powerful and political (Azimova & Johnston, 2012) but publishing guidelines are also used to protect – both the publisher and end user. For example, Indonesia is one country for which my company provides textbooks and our guidelines ensure its culture and religion are not offended. This may be seen as a protection of the status quo and Benesch (2010) considers critical pedagogy to promote controversial topics and to encourage teaching “*beyond the safe and comfortable terrain of abstract ideas, definitions and testable fact(oid)s*” (pp.114-115) Thornbury (2012) agrees and calls for materials that offer transformative potential in that they can enable discussion of, for example, social justice issues.

While the Fronrunner series certainly has strict publishing guidelines and includes topics that are considered more positive in nature, it has not always shied away from more controversial subject matter. For



example, in Fronrunner Book 12 (CEFR B2) there is discussion of the suppression of the Luddite movement and Book 13 (CEFR C1) discusses the global spread of English as well as discrimination, prejudice and genocide. These are not “*benign versions of a globalizing world*” (Gray, 2010, p.716). Indeed, Rajagopalan (2000) suggests that examining the global spread of English would be a useful starting point for a critical lesson. Fronrunner certainly has its generic ‘safe’ topics like travel and tourism, and the materials are, to an extent, “*sanitized for commercial reasons*” (Gray, 2002, p.159). However, there would appear to be greater opportunities, especially in the higher-level Fronrunner textbooks, for students to engage with critical social issues. For example, Book 9 (CEFR B2) involves discussion of unemployment and other family issues. It was this topic that was extended into a critical issues supplement to determine whether critical issues can be successfully incorporated into the Fronrunner series. However, as this project is based in China, there are issues related to the implementation of critical research.

The implementation of critical pedagogy is something also addressed by Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999). They and Pishghadam and Meidani (2012), believe that teachers in contexts of instructionalism and receptive pedagogy would not necessarily be aware of critical pedagogy or how it could be applied in their classrooms. Teacher training would have to be restructured for a wider scale implementation of critical pedagogy. Nevertheless, although Crookes (2009) suggests that large publishers will unlikely include any potentially controversial issues in their textbooks, he continues by stating that contexts such as Korea and other Asian nations can successfully implement critical projects, despite being considered unfavourable. However, rather than aiming for large-scale textbook publication, it may be more appropriate to consider supplementary materials instead. Consequently, a critical issues supplement would be an appropriate consideration.

Nevertheless, while China may be a potentially unfavourable context, my project will investigate whether a critical issues supplement can be incorporated into an existing Fronrunner textbook series for teenagers. Despite its small scale, a critical issues project such as this could still yield transformative benefits in that it may well break down what Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe as ignorance and false impressions. Furthermore, an important aspect of CALx is problematization, which is what is driving this research. It is hoped that the results from this project will help determine the amount of action that is required and, therefore, the extent of the transformation that is possible.

4. METHODOLOGY

The above literature review has identified two points that are of particular relevance to my context; first, if critical pedagogy is not widely practiced in the EFL world, is this also true of my company and, second, could the textbooks produced by my department, while being more mainstream according to our publishing guidelines, potentially include more critical social topics. Consequently, I have focused my research project on the development of a critical issues supplement based on a unit from Fronrunner to determine how it would be viewed and received throughout the company’s hierarchy of senior managers, Directors of Studies and product users such as teachers and students. This is referred to as the product trajectory. This has led to the development of two research questions that this research will endeavor to answer:

1. What is the current level of awareness of critical pedagogy throughout the company’s product trajectory and what issues or opportunities result from this?
2. How would a critical issues supplement, based on the ideas of critical pedagogy, be received throughout the company’s product trajectory and what are the implications of such reactions?

As this project will adopt a critical theoretical framework, it is necessary to consider an appropriate methodology from which methods of data collection can be considered. According to Crotty (1998) critical theory involves cycles of action and reflection, action being very much in line with Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) requirements for transformation. This is mirrored in action research methodology, which Burns (2005) has outlined as a process of planning, intervention and action, and reflection, with the possibility of further planning and action at a later stage.

Burns (2005) defines action research as a means of “*creating meaning and understanding in problematic social situations and improving the quality of human interactions and practices within those situations*” (p.57). Social constructionism influences action research, as has the critical works of Foucault and Habermas. It involves intervention in order to reach resolutions to previously identified problems.

It is critical action research that is seen as being methodologically appropriate for this project as it centres on the social issues of the world and their improvement; improvements in social justice as well as enabling members of society to have greater control over their social circumstances (Kemmis, 1986). Burns’s (2005) definition of action research as problematizing social situations and improving human interactions resonates



with Rashidi and Safari's (2011) belief that there is a need for many ELT students to be more socially aware and for ELT materials to help them achieve that. Nevertheless, participants should have the opportunity to decide for themselves rather than having something forced on them (Kemmis, 1986).

Kemmis (1986) discusses improvement to knowledge as being an important aspect of critical action research and to critical pedagogy. This is of particular relevance to this project since the extent to which critical pedagogy is known or practiced within our schools needs to be determined as does whether textbook content developed with a mainstream applied linguistics focus can support topics of a critical nature. Consequently, both issues have a focus on improving knowledge.

In addition to the idea of improvement, involvement is another important aspect of critical action research. As an action research project develops, so too must participation. Although this particular project is small in scope and is starting with a small number of participants, it is hoped that in the future there will be an opportunity to expand participation through subsequent action research.

The final requirement for action research considers the cyclical nature of action research, with this being "*systematically and self-critically implemented*" (Kemmis, 1986, p.165). This research project has adopted a cyclical approach to action research, which cycles through the stages outlined below:

- Problem identification – literature review and development of the intervention
- Preliminary investigation – development of the semi-structured interviews
- Critical reflection – building the interview responses into the intervention
- Intervention planning – finalization of the critical issues supplement, teacher's notes and lesson plan
- Action – conduct the lesson and student focus group, collection of observational data
- Further critical reflection

While the literature review above formed the problem identification stage, it is the methods of data collection that make up the intervention planning and action stages.

5. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The Critical Issues Supplement (CIS) formed the principal part of the action research intervention planning stage in that it was key to the action stage that followed – the critical issues lesson and focus group. It was developed as an extension to an existing Frontrunner lesson unit – Frontrunner Book 9, Unit 5 (CEFR B2). Book 9 was selected because it currently has the highest

student population throughout the three markets of China, Russia and Indonesia. The unit discusses family and, in part, issues such as unemployed family members as well as other problems common to family life. Consequently, the critical issues supplement extends this to consider homelessness; firstly looking at the importance of the home and what would happen if that were lost. This attempts to raise students' awareness of a common and visible social issue in China that they will likely be aware of but may not have had the opportunity to discuss previously either at our school or within their regular school.

The completion of the intervention planning stage allowed for the action stage to commence. The main source of data collected during this stage was a series of interviews conducted with staff making up the product trajectory. The idea of the product trajectory is adapted from Criddle et al. (2004) who used a hierarchical policy trajectory to determine reaction to a new citizenship curriculum in Queensland, Australia. Criddle et al.'s (2004) policy cycle is seen as continuous, an idea that is consistent with the cyclical nature of action research. Furthermore, the separation of the product trajectory into macro, meso and micro levels, as was also the case in Criddle et al.'s (2004) study, aligns with CALx and its consideration of the macro and micro worlds. Also, as a result of the interviews at each of those levels, there was the possibility of differentiating opinions of participants at each of these levels since they inhabit different worlds and have opinions with different situated meanings (Criddle et al., 2004).

The interviews that were conducted were of a semi-structured nature and, although time consuming, allowed for the collection of data specific to the two research questions while also being flexible enough insofar as follow-up questions and further probing were possible. This semi-structured format also allowed for consistent coding using Nvivo across all six interviews. Following transcription of the audio recorded interviews, the transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo for coding analysis. The structured nature of the interview questions helped to break down the data into nodes for coding, such as the benefits and disadvantages of critical pedagogy, implementing critical pedagogy and reaction to the critical issues supplement.

The second part of the action stage involved teaching the CIS to a small group of students. There were six students in the class and they had recently started studying Frontrunner Book 9. Each student was given a copy of the CIS to use in class, this being retained afterwards to provide evidence for the second research question. The regular class teacher, who was also one of the product trajectory participants, taught the lesson. This allowed me, as researcher, to observe exactly how the teacher and students reacted to and dealt with the



materials. The video data that was collected during the lesson and the student focus group provided data regarding the second research question.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research question 1

The first research question concentrates on the current level of awareness of critical pedagogy throughout the company's product trajectory and what issues or opportunities result from that.

Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999) suggest that there may be very little knowledge of critical pedagogy in contexts of instructionalism, such as within my context, because the focus would be primarily on applied linguistics. While it is true that my company has built its business around teaching practices and methodologies that adhere more to applied linguistics than CALx, it was clear from the interview data that there was a variation of awareness. Interviewees 1 (meso level) and 4 (micro level) both displayed a good knowledge of the concepts of critical pedagogy, having studied it previously, with interviewees 3 (micro level) and 6 (meso level) displaying very little knowledge. Indeed, interviewee 1 considered critical pedagogy "to have students unlearn, maybe relearn", an "anti-establishment" philosophy that would involve "challenging accepted norms." Interviewee 4 discussed critical pedagogy as thinking about different perspectives and "not just accepting what you're told and thinking more for yourself." Although interviewees 3 and 6 had no initial experience of critical pedagogy, they very quickly gained understanding following on from a brief explanation.

What proved interesting at this stage was the fact that interviewees 1 and 4 were from the same school, and interviewees 3 and 6 were from another school. Not only was there a variation in knowledge among the micro level of teaching staff, which one may expect, but there was also a variation at the meso level, among the Directors of Studies. Consequently, there was variation horizontally as well as vertically within the product trajectory.

The macro level interviewees 2 and 5, those who are in senior management positions, displayed some uncertainty at first although made reasonable initial attempts at defining the concept. Interviewee 2 considered it related to dealing with unexpected topics that arose during the course of a class and how to deal with that. Interviewee 5 defined critical pedagogy as "exposing students to content and topics that help a student develop their thought processes, the way they think, the way they view the world."

While this variation in awareness throughout the product trajectory could be seen as an opportunity within a context of instructionalism, it in no way can be

generalized across a network of some 250 schools in three different countries. However, some of the interviewees may have considered the level of awareness to be towards the lower end of the scale as interviewees 1, 2 and 3 specifically mentioned the need for teacher training, although interviewee 1 was the only one who saw that as an opportunity.

Interviewee 1 believed that through training whereby the teachers could see and understand the reasoning behind teaching critically, teachers, "would really be on board with that." Interviewees 2 and 3 were more skeptical suggesting that the training would be "extensive", suggesting that the gulf of knowledge is potentially quite large. Both mentioned that care would need to be taken in selecting teachers for such classes and that teachers would need to be willing participants, reflective of the "attitude" that Pennycook (1999, p.340) mentions regarding the introduction of critical pedagogy into the classroom. The interviewees indicated that the training be aimed at the teaching staff, likely focused on facilitation of critical pedagogy rather than "being an expert and dispenser of information" (Chandella & Troudi, 2013, p.50). However, it is clear that even at the meso level there would be a requirement for some sort of training in critical pedagogy.

Although it is positive that there is some awareness of critical pedagogy within the product trajectory, it is not surprising that this knowledge has not filtered down into the classroom. The focus throughout our schools is on the methodologies of applied linguistics and, as a business, the company cannot lose sight of that. This is a point strongly made by interviewees 2 and 5, both from the macro level of the product trajectory. Interviewee 2 indicated that moving onto critical issues in the classroom rather than teaching the grammar points presented in the lesson plan could be detrimental in that, "it's not what these people have paid for and it's not what they want and it's not what the teacher was hired to do or told they would be doing." This would appear to reject Rashidi and Safari's (2011, p.254) idea of a "joint goal" between linguistic competence and increased social awareness. Instead, interviewee 2 suggests having the critical issues supplement as a stand-alone course for study abroad preparation and not incorporated into the main Fronrunner series, preserving the focus on applied linguistics.

Interviewee 4 considers the social aspect of the critical issues supplement by stating, "I don't think the goal of [the company] is to bring about social change" despite the fact that its mission statement at the time was to 'break down the barriers of language, culture and geography.' This created a dilemma for interviewee 4 (and also interviewee 5) in that she had also seen an opportunity to raise awareness among students by virtue of the fact that they are in privileged positions. Since they



are from affluent families, the Fronrunner course's concentration on academics through content that is "*more interesting, more appealing and more motivating*" is more likely to be a reality for our students. It is interviewees 2 and 5's hold on applied linguistics that interviewee 4 seems to challenge by having the privileged understand "*what their privilege or what their disadvantage is*", the oppressor's perspective rather than the oppressed. Interviewee 3 would agree when she asked of our students, "*who are the oppressed?*" This resonates with Ooiwa-Yoshizawa (2012, pp.24-25) who states that critical pedagogy can be used to help these "*elite bilinguals*", "*understand how they came to possess societal power, how to shift that power to the less-powerful, and how to exercise their influence in a right manner to make the world a better and more equal place.*"

Interviewee 2 suggested that Fronrunner was less of a "*bog standard English textbook*" since the "*sanitized*" and "*pedestrian content*" often apparent in global textbooks was something Fronrunner tried to avoid. Interviewees 1 to 5 agreed that Fronrunner exhibited examples of critical pedagogy although in a less controversial, milder way; "*nothing massively heavy or massively controversial*" (Interviewee 1). This suggests that the existing content tries to raise student awareness of social issues albeit only to an extent. Nevertheless, it is something that can be built upon assuming the stranglehold of applied linguistics can be released, if even only slightly.

Consequently, throughout the product trajectory, there was some existing knowledge of critical pedagogy and those that were initially uncertain were quickly able to grasp the concept, indicating a small improvement in knowledge. Training would appear to offer an opportunity to spread knowledge of critical pedagogy throughout our school community although the main issue is the extent to which that would be required as well as how closely that would fit with the company's existing business strategy. Nevertheless, it was positive that the existing Fronrunner content provides a small springboard from which to consider a critical issues supplement since "*we do try, we want to go there with it*" (Interviewee 1).

B. Research question 2

The second research question focused on how would a critical issues supplement, based on the ideas of critical pedagogy, be received throughout the company's product trajectory and what are the implications of such reactions.

The critical issues supplement was taught to a small group of Fronrunner students. Furthermore, field notes – written during and after the lesson, including examples of student writing, and responses to the focus group

questions – helped provide further data for research question 2.

Initial reaction to the critical issues supplement was positive with it being described as "*powerful*" (Interviewee 1), "*not offensive*" but "*something that they [the students] don't talk about much but maybe they should*" (Interviewee 2) and a "*juicy topic [...] a little bit controversial, it's shocking*" but "*just on the right side of the dividing line between being controversial and being acceptable*" (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 4 initially felt the content was depressing but liked the fact that it offered hope. Interviewee 6 thought it was very different from what was normally discussed in class but that students would really appreciate the opportunity to discuss it. During the short focus group at the end of the critical issues lesson, all students indicated they enjoyed talking about the homeless topic, with student 1 indicating that she was able to identify with the topic. Consequently, content that is "*juicy*", controversial and would be an enjoyable discussion opportunity for students would have a range of implications within my context.

The main and primarily positive implication would be that students are questioning more. All interviewees mentioned this as being a benefit to more critical content – it is enriching (Interviewee 4), it ends ignorance (Interviewee 2), not just accepting what is said to you (Interviewee 5) and moving to a better place as a result of questioning (Interviewee 6). These all relate to the transformation that critical theory should attempt to effect and it is ignorance that Guba and Lincoln (1994) in particular wish to see eliminated. The critical issues lesson provided examples of ignorance, for example during the reading section about a homeless child. Some students considered the passage to be set in Guizhou in China or in Africa (Fig. 1), whereas it was, in fact, New York City. Through discussion and further reading, these students are now aware that homelessness is a desperate situation in many major first world cities.

Further discussion revealed that some of the students would not know how to interact with a homeless person since their worlds are so different. Student 5 mentioned not knowing what to say to them. This was a key moment as critical pedagogy tries to provide students with the ability to deal with such situations. Benesch (2010) discusses this in her account of students trying to deal with military recruiters on campus and structured her lessons around enabling her students to communicate with those individuals. In my lesson, this discussion was to lead into a role-play where students could recreate their experiences and build on them. Unfortunately, the teacher did not complete this part of the lesson as she had previously indicated she was not comfortable doing so and did not believe the students would take it seriously. This was a missed opportunity since it could have further



increased student awareness potentially leading to a different reaction to the content and, perhaps, future experiences.

The students' attempts to question the status quo was evident in the project work stage of the lesson where students collaborated to create a homeless charity. One student mentioned that they would write an article to raise awareness generally and another would write to the government. Furthermore, when the students were

<p>a. What do you think the story is about? A poor family.</p> <p>b. Which city is this? A city in Africa. New York</p> <p>c. When do you think the story takes place? At present.</p>
<p>a. What do you think the story is about? About a poor girl's poor life.</p> <p>b. Which city is this? In Gui Zhou; YunNan.</p> <p>c. When do you think the story takes place? Now.</p>

Figure 1. Examples from Students 2 and 6

creating their own charities there was inclusion of language such as "love", "warmness", "warmth of society" and "harvest" (Fig. 2).

This struck me as almost being religious in nature although the teacher indicated none of the students came from religious families. While this does show greater awareness of the roots of the problem and what could be done to help, it is also moving into more dangerous territory, particularly if students chose to question from a religious perspective. According to Interviewee 2, there is a "cost to all knowledge" and it is quite possible that the government would not want students to be learning in this manner; it does not want to change (Interviewee 4). There would certainly be a need for caution in developing and presenting materials for critical issues lessons since as teachers we would not want our students to get into trouble. Since the government in China "shuts that sort of thing down really fast" (Interviewee 4) there could be feelings of frustration and hopelessness when things never change (Interviewees 3 and 4).

The critical issues supplement was an attempt to expose at least one of our classrooms to the ongoing social problems that Pennycook (2001) mentions are often excluded by applied linguistics. The topic of homelessness was one that the students enjoyed talking about but there would be some major implications as

regards implementing subject matter such as this (or more controversial topics) throughout our school network. According to interviewee 5, the government in China has an interest in withholding certain information from its population and this would also extend to our textbooks and class lessons. Furthermore, anything that could jeopardize the company's ability to conduct business in China should be carefully considered (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 6 goes further by saying "the issue is we cannot do it of course, we don't want to upset the government." While Crookes (2009) mentions

<p>3 ▶ In small groups, use this information to create a charity and complete the information below.</p> <p>Charity name: L. A. H</p> <p>Mission statement: Build shelter for homeless people. Collect money to majority to them. Help them feel the warmth of the society again.</p> <p>Slogan: Love and hope drive away the darkness.</p> <p>Targets to achieve: Build ²⁰⁰⁰ shelters for homeless people in 2 years.</p>

Figure 2. Example from Student 6 working with Student 5 during the project work stage

that introducing critical issues would be a challenge in Asian countries, China presents the additional challenges of state censorship and zero tolerance when it comes to challenging authority. Furthermore, Interviewee 2 states that a topic like homophobia would not be tolerated at the present time in Russia, one of the company's markets. Therefore, it is not just China that is problematic when it comes to the selection of content for a critical issues lesson. Ironically, according to Interviewee 5, "it's those countries [...] that need it most are those where you're going to have difficulty doing it."

Finally, as a result of students discussing social issues that they would not normally have the opportunity to discuss in regular school they may stand out among their peers (Interviewee 1) and this would potentially cause conflict. During the critical issues lesson, students mentioned that they wanted to help homeless people by giving money but were prevented from doing so by their parents who said that the homeless person was cheating them or was just pretending to be homeless. While this happened prior to the lesson, it was clear that the opinions of the students and that of their parents were already different. Interviewee 4 says there may be resistance from friends or family who have not learned to question in this way or, would a foreign teacher be taken



seriously when parents, friends and state-school teachers all say something different (Interviewee 2).

What is apparent from these implications is that the concept of a critical issues supplement has the power to be very disruptive for my company as a business (a potential “*business killer*” according to Interviewee 2), for the students and for the status quo. As an innovation, this supplement would be a disruptive innovation, one that at present is not able to compete with more sustaining innovations (in the company’s case the existing and well established classroom materials) and would be more likely to serve a specific and potentially niche market segment (Christensen, 2012). As a result, it may be ignored by the company, which instead views applied linguistics methods as contributing to the sustaining innovations in terms of profitability and stability. The caution is, however, that disruptive innovations are transformative and have the potential to continue growing until a business has to adapt. Viewing the supplement as a disruptive innovation fits very well with the idea of CALx and transformation, but when any transformation is likely to take place is currently unknown.

7. CONCLUSION

It would appear that there is a continuous and relentless tug of war between applied linguistics on the one side and CALx/critical pedagogy on the other. While the first research question showed that there was at least some level of awareness of critical pedagogy within the product trajectory, potentially extensive training would be required to raise that level of awareness throughout the company, quite an onerous task. The existing Frontrunner materials and even the company’s former mission statement would seem to suggest that there was a desire to have more topics of a critical nature within the classroom. However, there continues to be resistance, particularly at the macro level within the trajectory, an unwillingness to combine linguistic goals with topics of a critical and social nature. Despite that, the very fact that there is some awareness is a positive step in a context that is predominantly instructional.

The critical issues supplement was well received by those in the product trajectory and all understood the potential benefits of a lesson based around the ideas of critical pedagogy – primarily questioning the status quo. However, with the company’s business being based in China, Russia and Indonesia, questioning could be an extremely difficult and dangerous thing to do, particularly in China and Russia. Even if the political climates within those countries were to change and become more accepting of the idea of change and transformation, there is still the issue of the company and its culture of instructionalism. Would it be able to change so as to take advantage of this disruptive innovation?

Would this be at all feasible or valuable? These questions show a potential reformulation of the research problem, which would encourage a further cycle of action research in the future. This would necessarily involve more participants at higher levels within the company.

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