

Exploring Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of critical reading in EFL classes

Jing Xu

This study explored teachers' perceptions of critical reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes through a teacher professional learning programme at a higher vocational college in southeast mainland China. The results showed that all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading, shifting from a pathway to cultivating critical thinking skills to an approach to constructing different ways of thinking, being, and doing. The findings indicated the possibility of integrating different views of the critical across cultural boundaries. The culturally relevant criticality practice thus contributes to the international literature on developments in critical literacy studies.

1. Introduction

Reading in an L2 (L2 refers to languages other than L1) enables us to see the world across languages and cultural differences in order to understand a wide range of perspectives in and on this world (Butler, 2013). We need to develop a critical eye in order to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and values of others so that we could better understand our positions in the globalising world (Freire, 1985; Wallace, 2012). This leads to what we might mean by being critical (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). From a review of the literature, I have made three observations. First, at a theoretical level, the dominant critical discourse in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts is cognitive-oriented, viewing criticality as critical thinking ability (e.g., Eunjeon, 2017, 2018). Within the cognitive trend, research tends to focus on the cultivation of critical thinking skills based on the American Philosophy Association (APA) Delphi Report (Facione, 1990) and/or Paul and Elder's (2006) model of critical thinking. The Americanisation of critical thinking, as Simpson (2020) argues, is problematic as it seems to exclude other ways of thinking about criticality. A multipolar vision for criticality is thus put forward to challenge the Anglo-centric and Americanised forms of critical discourses (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). However, this vision does not seem to be given sufficient attention in EFL contexts.

Second, at a professional level, an area of research on criticality development in EFL contexts has addressed teachers' practices of criticality from a literacy perspective (e.g., Huang, 2012; Ko, 2013; Kuo, 2013). The work has helped teacher educators, researchers and practitioners to enhance their understanding of the complexity of criticality development, given the diverse theoretical perspectives associated with criticality practice (Foley, 2017). Missing from the literature is enquiry into individual teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice rooted in the specific cultural and educational contexts.

Third, methodologically, questionnaire and interview are the main instruments to study EFL teachers' mental lives (Li, 2013). While these instruments are of value, they are insufficient to yield insights into teachers' stage-by-stage professional learning from their own classroom practices.

Evidence is needed to support approaches to teacher professional learning so that teachers are equipped with knowledge, experience and skills to assist learners in becoming critical readers (Li, 2016).

Addressing these gaps, the current paper presents the findings of a qualitative study which involved six Chinese higher vocational college teachers reporting on their evolving understandings of critical reading through a teacher professional learning programme, shifting from skill-based to a more sociocultural view of reading the word and the world. The study bears significance for challenging a singular perspective of criticality, for exploring culturally relevant criticality practice, and for implementing innovative research-based approaches to EFL teacher professional learning.

2. Context of the study

The exploration of teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice in this study is situated in China's vocational contexts. In mainland China, vocational education is provided at three levels: primary, secondary, and post-secondary vocational education (State Council, 2006; Zhao & Lu, 2007). The present study concentrates on post-secondary vocational education, namely the higher vocational education with the schooling lasting two or three years (MOE, 2006). At vocational education level, as is also the case at university education level, the acquisition of language knowledge and skills is a basic requirement for learning English in the curriculum (Basic Requirements for English Language Teaching at Higher Vocational Colleges, MOE, 1993, 2000, 2009; English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education, MOE, 2021; Xu & Fan, 2016; Wang & Luo, 2020). While skill-based learning is foundational, it may be insufficient to enable learners to reach their full potential, which can be developed through critical approaches to reading the word and the world. However, a widespread assumption is that a critical approach is largely absent from reading and teaching reading in English in China's vocational contexts (e.g., Xiao & Bao, 2011). The lack of knowledge and practice of critical reading raises a question on teacher cognition: what do teachers think and know about critical reading in EFL classes? Although a growing body of literature has examined L2 teacher cognition (Li, 2016), there is scant research on EFL teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice in China's vocational contexts. The present study explored this research area through a teacher professional learning programme.

Professional learning plays a central role in higher vocational college teacher professional development (e.g., Liu & Qi, 2013; Yuan & Zhang, 2018). However, many practitioners contended that there was a lack of access to professional learning opportunities and resources for Chinese teachers of English in vocational contexts (e.g., Han, 2014; Liu, 2012; Liu & Qi, 2013; Wang, 2015; Xu et al., 2012). The limited opportunities might be the ones that are provided and sponsored by the Ministry of Education at national, provincial and municipal levels. In some cases, only the *gu-gan* (leading, exemplary) teachers are selected to apply (e.g., Liu, 2019; Yang, 2011). The majority of teachers learn to improve their classroom practices through school-based teacher professional development (e.g., Hong & Tang, 2013; Li et al., 2011), and forms of professional learning include lectures, seminars, peer mentoring, peer observation, and participation in teaching contests (Li, 2014; Ruan, 2014). Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have looked into how these forms are undertaken to promote EFL teacher professional learning in vocational contexts (e.g., Cao, 2016; Ma & Li, 2021; Zheng, 2007). The present study contributes to the research area by designing and implementing a teacher professional learning programme through a systematic approach.

3. Literature review

3.1. Theoretical framework

In this study, Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice are explored from a sociocultural lens based on the work of Vygotsky, his colleagues and

students (Johnson, 2009; Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). A core principle of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning is that the human mind is social in nature. According to Vygotsky (1978), the human mind is situated in social contexts where it interacts with internal and external actors. During this interactive process, human perception is mediated by a set of psychological tools among which language is the most salient one (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). From this perspective, teacher cognition is seen as a dynamic and fluid practice situated in a specific context, and it can be studied using conversation (Li, 2016). The evidence-based, learning-focused and improvement-directed professional learning conversations are selected to facilitate teacher learning in this study because they would enable teachers to critically reflect on and in the practices of critical reading as well as to deeply engage in their classroom practices within the teacher professional learning programme (Earl & Timperley, 2009).

While there has been an increasing body of research that explores criticality practice from a sociocultural perspective within teacher professional learning programmes, it seems that most of these studies were conducted in the Global North (e.g., Janks et al., 2014; Luke, 2000; Rogers & Mosley Wetzell, 2014; Sangster et al., 2013). Relevant research is scarce from the Global South, and within the limited studies, the focus is on teacher cognition of critical thinking (e.g. Ma & Luo, 2021; Ma & Liu, 2022). Although these studies have enabled us to gain a better understanding of the localised criticality practices, it should be noted that the dominant critical thinking discourse is still Anglo- and American-centric (Simpson, 2020). In light of multiple ways of conceptualising, developing and practising criticality (Simpson & Dervin, 2020), it might be worth exploring a hybrid of critical approaches for use in teacher professional learning programmes (Foley, 2017). In this sense, it is necessary to broaden the knowledge base of teachers. The exploration of Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of critical reading in this study is expected to extend our knowledge about how EFL teachers achieve a better understanding of criticality and criticality practice through a teacher professional learning programme.

3.2. Interpretations of critical reading

While criticality has been a topic of much discussion in education research, the meaning of criticality is often assumed without questioning (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). Following a cognitive-oriented conception of criticality originated from Greek and Enlightenment philosophies (Tan, 2017), critical reading is conceptualised as a strategy for analysing texts for logic and credibility (Macknish, 2011). With the emergence of social theories, there has been a shift in understanding critical reading from cognitive processes to social practices (Wallace, 2003, 2012, 2018). Within this shift, broader interpretations of critical thinking have emerged (Macknish, 2011). For instance, in view of Ko's (2013) orientation to critical reading as engaging with the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts, Chen (2016) assumes that this orientation is intended to promote critical thinking in reading. From a social-practice perspective, two critical approaches to reading are notable. One approach is ideology critique derived from Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, and the other is a genre approach drawn from Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar (Luke & Dooley, 2011; Wallace, 2012). Both approaches recognise the link between language, power, and identity (Foley, 2017; Janks, 2010), and they are often discussed with reference to critical literacy in the international literature (e.g., Luke & Dooley, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016; Wallace, 2018).

The interchangeable use of these terms in the literature (critical thinking, critical reading, and critical literacy) seems to indicate that these processes share more similarities than differences. Macknish (2011) argues that it might be impossible to draw a firm line between them considering that "some processes overlap or are necessary for building others" (p. 446). In her view, critical reading involves a range of cognitive processes and social practices, depending on the context (Macknish, 2011, p. 446). This integrated view of critical reading bridges the gap between a cognitive- and a social-oriented conception of criticality. While sharing Macknish's (2011) integrated view of critical reading, Paran and Wallace (2016) take a step further, considering critical reading as a fluid construct, moving between "evaluating texts analytically (critical thinking)" and "considering texts from a power

perspective (critical literacy)” (p. 444). The continuum of critical reading processes distinguishes critical reading from critical thinking and critical literacy. Concurrently, it illustrates the interdependence between these processes. More significantly, it recognises the context-dependent interpretations of critical reading (Macknish, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016).

Within the Chinese context, critical reading is generally perceived as a higher order reading skill, encompassing comprehension and interpretation of text (Chen, 2016; Fan, 2008; He & Liu, 2003). Although social elements can be found in this perception of critical reading, the focus is on the cognitive implications of language choices (Wallace, 2018). In light of the continuum of critical reading processes (Paran & Wallace, 2016), it might be necessary to extend the current understanding of critical reading as processes of analysing texts for logic and credibility to practices of analysing texts from a power perspective in the Chinese context. Analysing texts from a power perspective, as Wallace (1999) argues, indicates a stronger sense of being critical in reading processes as it examines the ideology and power relations embedded within texts in everyday life (pp. 98-99). This orientation to critical reading, however, does not seem to be given sufficient attention in Chinese EFL classrooms. The present study addresses this issue in the teacher professional learning programme where teacher learners are guided to challenge and negotiate the normative ways of thinking, being, and doing by analysing the ideological bases of discourses within specific texts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research questions

The present study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are Chinese higher vocational college teachers’ perceptions of criticality?
2. What are Chinese higher vocational college teachers’ perceptions of critical reading in EFL classes?

4.2. Research site and participants

The teacher professional learning research reported here took place at a higher vocational college in southeast mainland China. With 71 faculty members, School of English Studies currently provides English for specific purposes courses for students majoring in Business English, Applied English, Tourism English, and Pre-school Education. The participants in this study are in-service teachers who have taught English for general academic purposes for many years and are keen to improve their classroom practices. Therefore, they volunteered to take part in a teacher professional learning programme over three months. From a six in-service teachers who attended the teacher professional learning workshop, two teachers contributed to the pilot conversation and four agreed to participate initially. At a preliminary stage, one teacher withdrew. Concurrently, three other teachers joined the team.

4.3. Data collection: teacher professional learning programme

Comprising teacher professional learning workshop, professional learning conversation, classroom observation, and reflective practice, the teacher professional learning programme implemented in this study created the space for the researcher to explore participants’ evolving understandings of criticality and criticality practice in relation to language and literacy education. In brief, it was a process of gathering data to inform the research and a collaborative journey to evidence learning.

To begin with, a one-hour teacher professional learning workshop was organised with an intention of providing attendees with a broader sense of reading and critical reading in English. Preceding the workshop, all participants were provided with the teaching material – an electronic copy of the novel *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne, 2006). The workshop was divided into two sections: one was a discussion surrounding different understandings of reading and critical reading in

English. In the second part, I introduced the four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Luke, 2000) to participants and shared my ideas on how to practise critical reading in English through micro-teaching.

Following the workshop, teacher professional learning conversation was selected as the primary method for data collection in this study. Additionally, classroom observation and reflective practice were employed for the purpose of data triangulation. Specifically, I split the processes of professional learning conversation into three stages: pre-, while-, and post-learning conversation. The pre-learning conversations with nine participants began with each reflecting on their own understanding of reading and critical reading in English after the workshop. Next, while-learning conversations with six participants (two participants for the pilot decided not to continue with this journey and one participant recruited for the main study withdrew after three conversations) were held before and after my classroom observations. Before observing their lessons, I aided each participant to analyse texts from the textbook and supplementary materials based on a set of questions in relation to identity and power (Pratt & Foley, 2012). Therefore, I was able to explore their perceptions of critical reading and how these perceptions shifted over time. After each lesson, participants verbally reflected on how they engaged their students in the practices of coding, meaning-making, text-using, and text-analysing based on Freebody and Luke's (1990, 1999, 2000) four resources model. Moreover, they wrote a reflection after teaching. With my assistance, participants were able to interrogate their classroom practices and to conceive ideas for improving their lessons. The post-learning conversations enabled participants to critically engage with their perceptions of critical reading and how these perceptions influenced their own classroom practices over the three months.

4.4. Data analysis

With participants' written consent, the qualitative data were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. When transcribing the textual data, I was mindful of the issues surrounding transcription in the research literature (Green et al., 1997; Ross, 2010; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Hence, initial analysis of the data involved the researcher and participants during the research process in order to increase its rigour and trustworthiness (Saldaña, 2011). Concurrently, I listened to each recording numerous times, read and re-read through the transcripts, and returned to the recordings to ground my interpretations (Miles et al., 2014; Tilley & Powick, 2004). Thematic analysis through deductive and inductive reasoning was employed to analyse data in this study (Saldaña, 2011). Adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding framework, I identified a set of key themes as a result of thematic analysis.

5. Findings

5.1. Criticality as a dialectical discourse

The word criticality has a negative connotation in the Chinese language due to its historical and cultural implications (e.g. China's Cultural Revolution 1966-1976, Wen, 2008). This is probably why participants felt uncomfortable with the term. Two participants questioned the translation of critical/criticality in the Chinese language:

Why use pi-pan-xing (criticality)? The ideology of pi-pan (criticise/critique) in the Chinese language is too strong...how about bian-zheng yue-du (dialectical reading)? (Teacher D)

Would it be better to change the name of critical reading to critical thinking? (Teacher H)

Obviously, critical/criticality has a strong ideology in the Chinese language and thus both participants would like to re-design the discourse to make them feel more comfortable. A dialectical view of criticality happened to be the result of this redesign, which was clearly reflected by Teacher D:

The author's perspective is not always true so it can be questioned. We can have a new perspective based on a dialectical view. The word pi-pan (critique) feels like right and wrong literally, bian-zheng (dialectic) feels better.

From a dialectical point of view, Teacher C described criticality as reflection at an early stage and enlightenment at a later stage of the teacher professional learning programme. It seemed to me that both were referred to the ways of thinking. For instance, Teacher C raised a question in relation to the content of reflection:

What is there to reflect, to reflect on one's behaviour, moral, worldview, and value?

By the same token, other participants associated criticality with inspiration (Teacher F), diversity (Teacher D, Teacher F & Teacher G), and extension (Teacher H & Teacher I) at a later stage of the teacher professional learning programme. Criticality was perceived as a positive discourse when it was associated with critical thinking mainly because participants took a dialectical view of it. In other words, participants viewed critical thinking as thinking from different perspectives, which was compatible with Chinese dialectics. Correspondingly, the participants tended to translate critical thinking to si-bian (dialectical thinking) in the Chinese language.

5.2. Critical reading as the ways of thinking, being, and doing

There was a clear indication that all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading as a result of the teacher professional learning programme in this study. The key to this broader understanding lay in their conceptualisation of criticality, shifting from a dichotomous to a dialectical view. Accordingly, there was an extension in participants' perceptions of critical reading, moving from the ways of thinking to the ways of being and doing. This extension seemed to suggest a holistic view of critical reading, encompassing the ways of thinking, being, and doing. To start with, critical reading as the ways of thinking was perceived by all six participants before and after their classroom practices. In regard to the ways of thinking, I recognised a dialectical thinking pattern, which was neatly captured by Teacher C at different stages of the programme:

Actually we don't have to critique a text, we can think about it from different perspectives. Are we following the author to view this issue? Or can we get something different from the author's thought? Do you agree or disagree with the author? What is your reason if you disagree with the author? What action will you take if you agree with the author? How does it affect you?
(1/2)

Now it's about constructing one's own opinion when I read an article. I have my own thought. I can support or refute you. Yet all the ideas have to come from me. I used to follow the author and to agree with him/her no matter what he/she said. Now I can support the article. If I disagree with it, I can hold onto my position. Now it's about independence of viewpoint. (2/2)

By these accounts, we can see that reading from different perspectives and reading to construct one's own viewpoint remained in the cognitive domain. Nevertheless, there was an orientation to social practice in the participant's perception of critical reading. This orientation was also manifest in participants' perception of critical reading as the ways of being, moving from outsiders to insiders. This was best reflected in the following extracts:

Initially it stayed at the thinking level. Later it involved practice and ideology. Now I might situate myself in the particular context, to understand the text from the perspectives of the people in that context and from their power relations. (Teacher D)

Critical reading is not about right or wrong. It's about understanding one thing from different perspectives on the one hand. On the other I have never thought about reading a text from other identities. I used to read from a reader's perspective. Now I think critical reading is, I can't always put myself in the position of a reader. I can also read a text from the author's or the third party's position. (Teacher G)

Reading from other identities was performed by participants who considered themselves as insiders situated within that particular context. This perception of critical reading as the ways of being transformed participants' ways of thinking about and doing reading.

Within the trend of social practice, I identified a continuous extension to the ways of doing in participants' perceptions of critical reading. The ways of doing were embedded within the ways of being while practising critical reading. In regard to the ways of doing, two types of social practices were included: practices within and beyond texts. With respect to social practices within texts, it was mainly referred to the critical practices of reading based on Freebody and Luke's (1990, 1999, 2000) four resources model, involving text analysis and text transformation. Through the teacher professional learning programme, participants gained a broader understanding of text analysis, evolving from decoding and comprehension to interpretation. Teacher G captured this change in the following extract:

Before the teacher professional learning programme, I thought text analysis was to understand sentence structure and meaning. Now I know that isn't text analysis but decoding and comprehension. Text analysis is situated in the social forms, such as the background of writing, the intention of writing, and the target of writing. This is text analysis.

Apart from text analysis, text transformation was another type of social practice perceived by participants in this study. At an early stage of the teacher professional learning programme, Teacher D had a reservation on the feasibility of text transformation. At a later stage of the programme, however, Teacher D acknowledged that it was viable to transform texts in textbooks. This acknowledgment emerged as Teacher D and I were comparing a TED Talk *Why 30 is Not the New 20* (TED, 2013) with the text *Is 30 the New 20 for Young Adults* from the textbook (Unit 4, Book 3, Li et al., 2017). In our conversation, Teacher D recalled how the TED Talk influenced her understanding of text transformation:

This text, the video I presented in class, conveyed a perspective that is opposed to that of the text in the textbook. It has re-designed the text completely. That is, to interpret the author's viewpoint in a completely different way. It seems that the author's perspective can be critiqued so the whole text can be re-designed.

As the extract suggests, there was a shift in Teacher D's perception of texts in textbooks. That is, the texts in textbooks could be questioned and critiqued. This shift could not have happened if alternative texts had not been provided. With this provided text, Teacher D was able to see the possibility of re-designing texts in textbooks.

When I asked her if transforming a text was important, Teacher D made the following comment without hesitation:

Yes. The transformation of texts means a qualitative change. The text producers do not always tell the truth, thereby, what do you think? How would you re-design it? Isn't this sheng-hua (a qualitative change)?

In line with her previous comment, Teacher D seemed to acknowledge that the textbook authority could be challenged. By challenging the existing view, it signified a transformative change of the text. Subsequently, Teacher D was able to define the concept in her own words:

To transform a text is to redesign it, including the perspectives. I might disagree with the author's perspective, but I might agree with part of it. This is the redesign of the text.

In her definition, the desire to transform a text stemmed from her suspicion of the text. The result of this suspicion might lead to support and refute the author's perspective, perhaps indicating a dialectical view of text transformation.

In summary, all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading through the teacher professional learning programme, starting with the perception of criticality. Criticality is associated with a negative attitude and stance in the Chinese language. Not surprisingly, all six participants expressed negative feelings for the use of criticality. During the teacher professional learning programme, there was a shift in their perception from a dichotomous to a dialectical view of criticality. Within the trend of dialectics, the participants conceived of critical reading as an approach to developing the ways of thinking. As situated in social and cultural contexts, participants were able to extend their view of critical reading from the ways of thinking to the ways of being and doing. While the ways of thinking seemed to be a dominant discourse, participants' awareness of critical reading as a series of social practices was heightened during the teacher professional learning programme. As a result of further data analysis, I realised that the ways of thinking, being, and doing were interwoven, perhaps indicating the unity of the three.

6. Discussion

The results of the present study revealed fluidity and dynamics in participants' perceptions of critical reading. On the one hand, the findings supported the mainstream understanding of critical reading as a pathway to critical thinking development within the Chinese context (Chen, 2016). On the other hand, they implied a broader understanding of critical thinking in participants' perceptions of critical reading. That is, critical thinking involves cognitive, affective and sociocultural dimensions. The cognitive and affective dimensions are included in the definitions of critical thinking in the American Philosophy Association (APA) Delphi Report (Facione, 1990), in Paul and Elder's (2006) model of critical thinking, and in Wen et al.'s (2009) critical thinking framework. Although research has to some extent recognised the sociocultural dimension in the conceptualisation of critical thinking (Chen, 2016; Li, 2016), it fails to understand that such dimension cannot be easily measured in terms of identity construction and value formation (Butler, 2013).

Another view of criticality is associated with power and ideology, as reflected in the participants' perceptions of pi-ping (criticism) and pi-pan (critique) in the Chinese language. The act of expressing disapproval of somebody or something did not seem to find participants comfortable in this study. This is probably because criticality is perceived as a negative discourse in the Chinese language. This perception was confirmed by Wen (2008) when she attributed it to misuse of the expression in China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). A psychological study indicated that Chinese people were very sensitive to criticism (People's Daily Online, 2010). In China where the cultural emphasis is put on unity and harmony, being criticised is considered a shame rather than a form of guidance and suggestion in the Western culture (People's Daily Online, 2010). This might explain why participants in this study would request the change of naming, from pi-pan-de (critical) to bian-zheng-de (dialectical) reading in the Chinese language. The struggle with the conception and translation of criticality was implied by some Chinese researchers. For instance, Wen (2008) posited that caution should be taken in the use of critical in the Chinese context. With the term critical thinking, she

suggested translating it to higher-order thinking or reflective thinking. In the current Chinese literature, critical thinking is translated to pi-pan-de (critical) thinking and bian-zheng-de (dialectical) thinking.

In the international literature, the discussion of criticism and critique is often related to ideology and power in the study of society. Reading through the lens of power, as Wallace (2012) points out, is an alternative view of critical reading which is associated with Janks' (2010) work of literacy and power. According to Janks (2010), a critical approach to reading focuses on the identification and negotiation of power that is hidden in the text. Reading from a perspective of power was a new approach to most participants in this study. One of the participants, Teacher H, reflected this view when she said:

With the chapter from the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, for example, I can see power relations in the text. Maybe I rarely pay attention to the ideology in the text, but I've realised the power, status, and identity. When I read the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, I discovered the differences between the U.S. and China, including the power and identity. However, I'm not sensitive to the ideology in the text, perhaps.

By this account, Teacher H's consciousness of power seemed to be fostered through imagining herself in the situation of characters from texts so that she could understand their perspectives. The switch in perspective seems to suggest a sense of "doubling and 'othering' of the self from dominant text and discourse" as posited by Luke (2004, p. 26).

Within the Chinese context, the otherness constitutes the wholeness. Dealing with the self-othering, therefore, is driven by a dialectical rather than a dichotomous view of thinking, being, and doing. However, this sense of being beside oneself was not always invoked in the practices of critical reading in this study. While teaching the text *All Grown Up and Still in Tow* (Unit 2, Book 1, Li et al., 2017), Teacher G asked students to consider the author's attitude from the use of word "humiliating" in the following sentence: "How humiliating in a university registrar's office with your father taking charge" (Paragraph 1). Most students inferred the author's attitude from decoding the word "humiliating", as I observed, and they were able to link this event to their own experiences with the teacher's assistance. While making a connection between the two worlds, students disagreed with the author, arguing that it was normal for Chinese parents to take charge of children's registration on their first day at university. In response, teacher G seemed to acknowledge the phenomenon but she did not guide students to challenge the normalised discourse or to consider the power dynamics in parent-child relationships within the Chinese context. Instead, she questioned the discourse within the text by offering a different perspective: "Starting university is an important milestone. Don't you think it is important to have senior family members be witness?" The teacher's response to the phenomenon was probably given on the basis of the internalisation of the power hierarchy in Chinese families. Hence, it did not occur to her that patriarchy should or could be questioned. This assumption seems to find support in Hofstede and Hofstede's (2004) cultural dimensions theory.

According to Hofstede Insights (n. d.), China scores 80 out of 100 on the Power Distance scale, indicating it is a large-power-distance nation (<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/china/>). In this situation, as Hofstede and Hofstede (2004) posit, people tend to "accept and appreciate inequality but feel that the use of power should be moderated by a sense of obligation" (p. 64). Within this cultural norm, it is not surprising that children are expected to show respect for and obedience towards their parents and other elders (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004, p. 51). In Confucian traditions, this is a manifestation of harmony as the core value of Chinese culture (Zhang, 2013). The value of harmony, as suggested in previous research, was a determining factor of Chinese conflict management and resolution (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Due to the emphasis on harmony, Chinese people tend to avoid confrontation in social interaction (Chen & Starosta, 1997). The maintenance of a harmonious balance appears to counteract the experience of being othered, which

might explain why some participants in this study were insensitive to power relations in their practices of critical reading.

For those who choose to maintain harmony, is it possible for them to practise criticality? In this study, participants' engagement in critical reading indicated an integrated view of criticality emerged across cultural boundaries. Therefore, criticality practice is not only possible but also necessary in terms of how to establish the self in relation to others. Having the experience of being othered might cause a cultural mismatch leading to potential confrontation and conflict. As a result of navigating across different cultural realities, this sense of mismatch might also be an opportunity for the self to reconnect with others. Nevertheless, the engagement in "disruptive, sceptical and 'other' social and discourse relations" (Luke, 2004, p. 26) appears to be missing in vocational contexts. Recognising this gap, the teacher professional learning programme in this study created the space for teachers to critically engage with normalised social and cultural discourses through professional learning conversations.

Evidence shows that professional support is a key factor for the implementation of culturally relevant practices in classroom settings (Ladson-Billings, 2013), as also reflected in the present study. Given the limited opportunity for EFL teacher professional learning in the situated context, more support should be provided to enable teachers to continuously explore criticality practices that are relevant to their own contexts. Considering that there has been little research on EFL teacher professional learning in vocational contexts, the research procedures demonstrated in this study might be of some use to researchers in similar contexts.

7. Conclusion

It should be noted that the present study had limitations in the aspects of the researcher's subjectivity and the small sample size (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Yet, the implementation of a three-month teacher professional learning programme in this study was testimony to what could be achieved from teacher professional learning within a short period of time when close attention was given to the process of change in teacher perception. Participants in this study reported a high level of satisfaction with the teacher professional learning programme and found it transformative as it challenged their existing knowledge about criticality and critical reading and thus informed their subsequent classroom practices. The professional learning conversation facilitated teacher professional learning in this study, indicating that it might be a useful tool for the professional development of teachers in similar contexts.

The present study responds to a call for multipolar versions of criticality and criticality practice in education research (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). While critical reading as a strategy to develop critical thinking was reflected in this study, alternative ways of understanding critical reading emerged as a result of interactive meaning-making of texts from a power perspective through the teacher professional learning programme (Macknish, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016). The emergence of an integrated view of critical reading in this study challenges the mainstream perspective on critical reading in the Chinese literature and adds insights into the international literature on developments in critical literacy studies. The culturally relevant practices of critical reading confirmed Morgan and Ramanathan's (2005) assumption that non-Western versions of critical literacy do occur and Crooke's (2010) statement that not all critical education derives from the Western Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School. This study has thus made significant contributions to the field of critical literacy on an international basis.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my PhD supervisors Yvonne Foley and Jill Northcott for their inspiration, wisdom and support. I also appreciate the ELTED editors and anonymous reviewers for

their insightful comments on improving this article. Special thanks must be extended to all the teachers for their time and participation.

References

- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2008). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226613>
- Boyne, J. (2006). *The Boy in the striped pyjamas*. Definitions.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Butler, J. (2013, May 31). *McGill 2013 Honorary Doctorate Address* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFIGS56iOAg>
- Cao, J. (2016). Zai fansi zhong chengzhang de gaozhi qingnian yingyu jiaoshi: Yixiang xushi yanjiu [A narrative study of the growth of a young higher vocational college English language teacher's reflection on teaching]. *Zhiye jishu jiaoyu*, 37(8), 42-45.
- Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. (1997). Chinese conflict management and resolution: Overview and implications. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 7, 1-16. https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=com_facpubs
- Chen, Z.-H. (2016). Yingyu yudu jiaoxue yu yanjiu [English Reading Teaching and Research]. *Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe*.
- Crookes, G. V. (2010). The practicality and relevance of second language critical pedagogy. *Language Teaching*, 43(3), 333-348.
- Earl, L. M., & Timperley, H. (2009). *Professional learning conversations challenges in using evidence for improvement*. Springer.
- Eunjeo, K. (2017). Fostering criticality in English presentation class for EFL learners. *The Journal of Studies in Language*, 33(1), 45-70.
- Eunjeo, K. (2018). Criticality enhancement through critical discourse. *The Journal of Studies in Language*, 34(2), 179-195.
- Facione, P. A. (1990). *Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction* (The Delphi Report). <https://philarchive.org/rec/FACCTA>
- Fan, L. (2008). Waiyu yuedu de xin siwei: pipanshi yuedu moshi [A new way of thinking about reading in foreign languages: critical reading]. *Yingyu yanjiu*, 4, 81-85.
- Foley Y. (2017). Critical literacy. In B. Street & S. May (Eds.), *Literacies and language education* (pp. 109-120). Springer.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect: Australian Journal of TESOL*, 5(7), 7-16.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1985). Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire. *Language Arts*, 62(1), 15-21.
- Green, J., Franquiz, M., & Dixon, C. (1997). The myth of the objective transcript: Transcribing as a situated act. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 172-176.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). Edward Arnold.
- Han, B. (2014). Gaozhi yingyu shizi duiwu de xianzhuang ji jianshe tuijin [The current state of and pathways to building English language teaching faculty at higher vocational colleges]. *Jiaoyu yu zhiye*, 20, 82-83.

- He, Q.-S. & Liu, X.-L. (2003). Pipanxing yuedu jiqi celue [Critical reading and relevant strategies]. *Dangdai jiaoyu kexue*, 19, 54-55.
- Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (2004). *Cultures and organizations*. McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Hofstede Insights (n. d.). *What about China?* <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/china/>
- Hong, X., & Tang, X.-H. (2013). Xiaoben peixun cujin gaozhi qingnian jiaoshi zhuan yehua fazhan yanjiu [Research on school-based training promoting young teachers' professional development at higher vocational colleges]. *Zhongguo zhiye jishu jiaoyu*, 7, 83-86.
- Huang, S.-Y. (2012). The integration of "critical" and "literacy" education in the EFL curriculum: expanding the possibilities of critical writing practices. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*, 25(3), 283-298.
- Janks, H. (2010). Critical reading in language education. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 31(6), 587-589.
- Janks, H., Dixon, K., Ferreira, A., & Granville, S. (2014). *Doing critical literacy: Texts and activities for students and teachers*. Routledge.
- TED. (2013, May 13). *Why 30 is not the new 20? / Meg Jay* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhhgl4tSMwc>
- Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. Routledge.
- Ko, M.-Y. (2013). A case study of an EFL teacher's critical literacy teaching in a reading class in Taiwan. *Language Teaching Research*, 17(1), 91-108.
- Kuo, J.-M. (2013). Implementing critical literacy for university freshmen in Taiwan through self-discovery texts. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 22(4), 549-557.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Lapadat, J. C., & Lindsay, A. C. (1999). Transcription in research and practice: From standardization of technique to interpretive positionings. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), 64-86.
- Li, L. (2013). The complexity of language teachers' beliefs and practice: One EFL teacher's theories. *Language Learning Journal*, 41(2), 175-191.
- Li, L. (2016). Integrating thinking skills in foreign language learning: What can we learn from teachers' perspectives? *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 22, 273-288.
- Li, L.-X., Xia, F.-Q., & Li, G. (2011). Gaozhi gaozhuan yuanxiao xiaoben shizi peixun jizhi tansuo [Exploring the mechanism of school-based teacher training at higher vocational colleges]. *Zhiye jishu jiaoyu*, 32(5), 56-58.
- Li, P. (2014). Gaozhi yuanxiao xin jiaoshi zhuan yehua chengzhang tanxi [Exploring the growth of newly qualified teachers at higher vocational colleges]. *Chengren jiaoyu*, 34(6), 111-112.
- Li, Y.-H., Ji, P.-Y., & Feng, Y. (2017). *New progressive college English integrated course*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Liu, C.-X. (2012). Henan sheng gaozhi yingyu jiaoshi zhuan yehua fazhan zhuangkuang diaocha yanjiu [An investigation into the professional development of higher vocational college English language teachers in Henan Province]. *Henan nongye*, 4, 9-10.
- Liu, H.-Y. (2019). Canjia 'quanguo zhiye yuanxiao gagan jiaoshi jiaoxue nengli tisheng ban' dui gaozhi yingyu jiaoxue de qishi [Implications for teaching English at higher vocational colleges from attending the national teaching ability development seminar for vocational college gu-gan teachers]. *Xiaoyuan yingyu*, 30, 47-48.
- Liu, X.-H., & Qi, Y.-Y. (2013). Hebei sheng gaozhi yingyu jiaoshi xianzhuang yu kechixu fazhan celue yanjiu [The current state of higher vocational college English language teachers and their sustainable development in Hebei Province]. *Jiaoyu yu zhiye*, 35, 85-87.

- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999). A map of possible practices: Further notes on the four resources model. *Practically Primary*, 4(2), 5-8.
- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 448-461.
- Luke, A. (2004). Two takes on the critical. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 21-29). Cambridge University Press.
- Luke, A., & Dooley, K. (2011). Critical literacy and second language learning. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 856-868). Routledge.
- Ma, L.-H., & Luo, H.-F. (2021). Chinese pre-service teachers' cognitions about cultivating critical thinking in teaching English as a foreign language. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 41(3), 543-557.
- Ma, L.-H., & Liu, N. (2022). Teacher belief about integrating critical thinking in English teaching in China. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 1-16.
- Ma, Y., & Li, X.-X. (2021). "Xue-yan-jiao" moshi xia gaozhi yuanxiao waiyu jiaoshi xuexi gongtongti de shizheng yanjiu [An empirical study of the learning community of higher vocational college English language teachers based on the learning-research-teaching model]. *Jiangsu gaojiao*, 5, 80-84.
- Macknish, C. J. (2011). Understanding critical reading in an ESL class in Singapore. *TESOL Journal*, 2(4), 444-472.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- MOE-Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (1993). *Putong gaodeng zhuanke yingyu kecheng jiaoxue jiben yaoqiu* [Basic Requirements for English Language Teaching at Higher Vocational Colleges]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- MOE-Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2000). *Gaozhi gaozhuan jiaoyu yingyu kecheng jiaoxue jiben yaoqiu shixing* [Basic Requirements for English Language Teaching at Higher Vocational Colleges, trial]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- MOE-Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2006, October 20). *Vocational Education in China*. China Internet Information Centre.
<http://www.china.org.cn/english/LivinginChina/185280.htm>
- MOE-Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2009). *Gaozhi yingyu kecheng jiaoxue jiben yaoqiu* [Basic Requirements for English Language Teaching at Higher Vocational Colleges]. http://moewygz.zhihuishu.com/policy_world.html
- MOE-Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021, April 9). *Jiaoyubu bangongting guanyu yinfa gaodeng zhiye jiaoyu zhuanke yingyu xinxi jishu kecheng biao zhun (2021nian ban)* [Notice of the issue of *English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education* and of *Information Technology Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education* (2021 edition)].
http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_737/s3876_qt/202104/t20210409_525482.html
- Morgan, B., & Ramanathan, V. (2005). Critical literacies and language education: Global and local perspectives. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 25, 151-169.
- Paran, A., & Wallace, C. (2016). Teaching literacy. In G. Hall (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 441-455). Routledge.
- Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2006). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life*. Pearson Prentice Hall.
- People's Daily Online (2010, March 12). *Do Chinese people like praise and hate criticism?*
<http://en.people.cn/90001/90782/6916849.html>

- Pratt, L., & Foley, Y. (2012). Using critical literacy to 'do' gender. In R. Arshad, L. Pratt, & T. Wrigley (Eds.), *Social justice re-examined: Dilemmas and solutions for the classroom* (pp. 72-91). Trentham Books.
- Rogers, R., & Mosley Wetzel, M. (2014). *Designing critical literacy education through critical discourse analysis: Pedagogical and research tools for teacher researchers*. Routledge.
- Ross, J. (2010). Was that infinity or affinity? Applying insights from translation studies to qualitative research transcription. *Forum, Qualitative Social Research, 11*(2), 1-16.
- Ruan, C.-X. (2014). Gaozhi yuanxiao kaizhan qingnian jiaoshi xiaoben peixun de yanjiu [Research on school-based training for young teachers at higher vocational colleges]. *Jiaoyu yu zhiye, 12*, 76-78.
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Sangster, P., Stone, K., & Anderson, C. (2013). Transformative professional learning: embedding critical literacies in the classroom. *Professional Development in Education, 39*(5), 615-637.
- Simpson, A. (2020). Introduction: Beyond impotent criticality in education research? In A. Simpson & F. Dervin (Eds.), *The meaning of criticality in education research* (pp. 1-19). Springer International Publishing.
- Simpson, A., & Dervin, F. (Eds.). (2020). *The meaning of criticality in education research: Reflecting on critical pedagogy*. Springer.
- State Council of People's Republic of China (2006, August 27). *Zhiye jiaoyu tixi jianshe* [Construction of Vocational Education System]. <http://www.gov.cn/ztlz/txjs.htm>
- Tan, C. (2017). A Confucian conception of critical thinking. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 51*(1), 331-343.
- Tilley, S. A., & Powick, K. D. (2004). Distanced data: Transcribing other people's research tapes. *Canadian Journal of Education, 27*(2/3), 291-310.
- Vasileva, O., & Balyasnikova, N. (2019). (Re)introducing Vygotsky's thought: From historical overview to contemporary psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 1515-1515.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.
- Wallace, C. (1999). Critical language awareness: Key principles for a course in critical reading. *Language Awareness, 8*(2), 98-110.
- Wallace, C. (2003). *Critical reading in language education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wallace, C. (2012). Principles and practices for teaching English as an international language: Teaching critical reading. In W. A. Renandya, L. Alsagoff, S. L. Mckay, & G.W. Hu (Eds.), *Principles and practices for teaching English as an international language* (pp. 267-287). Routledge.
- Wallace, C. (2018). Teaching critical literacy and language awareness. In P. Garrett, & J. M. Cots (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language awareness* (pp. 124-140). Routledge.
- Wang, Q. (2015). Cong zonghe yuyan yunyong nengli dao yingyu xueke hexin suyang: gaozhong yingyu kecheng gaige de xin tiaozhan [Shifting from integrated language ability to English subject key competencies]. *Yingyu jiaoshi, 15*(16), 6-7.
- Wang, Q., & Luo, S. (2020) Shifting from teaching the subject to developing core competencies through the subject: The revised senior middle school English curriculum standards (2017 Edition) in China. In X.S. Gao (Ed.), *Second handbook of English language teaching*. Springer.
- Wen, Q.-F. (2008). Lun waiyu zhuanke yanjiusheng gaocengci siwei nengli de peiyang [Cultivation of higher-order thinking ability in postgraduate students of foreign language majors]. *Xuwei yu yanjiusheng jiaoyu, 10*, 29-34.

- Wen, Q.-F., Wang, J.-Q., Zhao, C.-R., Liu, Y.-P., & Wang, H.-M. (2009). Goujian woguo waiyu lei daxuesheng siwei nengli liangjv de lilun kuangjia [Proposing a conceptual framework for assessing Chinese college students' critical thinking]. *Waiyu jie*, 1, 37-43.
- Xiao, Y., & Bao, Y.-J. (2011). Gaozhi gaozhuan yingzhuan xuesheng pipanxing yuedu diaocha [An investigation into higher vocational college English language learners' critical reading]. *Jiannan wenxue*, 7, 206.
- Xu, J.-F., & Fan, Y.-M. (2016). The evolution of the college English curriculum in China (1985-2015): Changes, trends and conflicts. *Language Policy*, 16(3), 267-289.
- Xu, Z.-J., Zhang, Y., & Xu, L. (2012). Zaizhi yingyu jiaoshi peixun xianzhuang de diaocha yu qishi [An investigation into the current state of in-service English language teacher training and implications]. *Zhijiao luntan*, 16, 54-58.
- Yang, J.-X. (2011). Gaozhi yingyu jiaoxue tuandui jianshe tansuo: Jiaoyubu gaodeng xuexiao waiyu zhuan ye zhongqingnian guban jiaoshi gaoji yanxiuban xuexi tihui [Exploration on the construction of English teaching team at higher vocational colleges]. *Shaanxi guofang gongye zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, 31(14), 269-270.
- Yuan, J.-E., & Zhang, H.-Y. (2018). Gaozhi yingyu jiaoshi zhuan ye fazhan xuqiu diaocha yu fenxi: yi Beijing wei li [An investigation and analysis of professional development needs of higher vocational college English language teachers]. *Kejiao wenhui*, 25, 23-24.
- Zhang, L.-H. (2013, November 21). *China's Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/21/china-s-traditional-cultural-values-and-national-identity-pub-53613>
- Zhao, Z.-Q., & Lu, L.-W. (2007) China's TVET teachers and their professionalization. In P. Grollmann & F. Rauner (Eds.), *International perspectives on teachers and lecturers in technical and vocational education* (pp. 55-76). Springer.
- Zheng, H.-M. (2007). Gaozhi yuanxiao yingyu jiaoshi xuexi qunti huodong de shijian yanjiu [Higher vocational college English language teachers' group study practice]. *Zhongguo zhiye jishu jiaoyu*, 24, 39-40.

About the author

Jing Xu has worked as an EFL teacher in mainland China for many years and developed research interests in the areas of language, literacy and teacher education. She is particularly interested in exploring the ways in which culturally relevant critical approaches to reading can be implemented in EFL classrooms. She enjoys collaborating with other teachers to develop professional identities and agency in professional learning programmes, as well as to explore innovative pedagogical strategies for empowering learners in EFL classrooms.