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Science Fiction and Political Imagination: ELLs Co-constructing Critical Social Justice Narratives in the ELT Classroom

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Abstract

Engaging with social, political, and cultural topics can pose challenges in English language teaching classrooms. These sites represent linguistically diverse settings housing distinct ideologies. This article documents classroom interactions that began with exposure to a science fiction film and progressed to a discussion of contemporary sociopolitical concerns that resonated with ELLs. Drawing on this case study, the article explores how an instructor and her ELL students addressed sociopolitical topics in a science fiction–themed classroom. The author analyzes student–teacher and student–student interactions in the classroom and the instructor's subsequent self-reflection. Findings suggest that, when adopting intellectually stimulating materials that foster ELLs' agency in learning, teachers need scaffolding to meaningfully incorporate such tools into a critical pedagogical approach.

Keywords: English language learner, science fiction class, sociopolitical issues, critical literacies, critical pedagogy

Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) classrooms are cultural sites where languages underpinned by different ideologies collide. In an era of seemingly unrelenting tension around culture, race, and politics, discussing social, political, and cultural themes remains difficult but necessary in these classrooms. Instructors of English language teaching (ELT) often find it challenging to delve into topics raised by students and instead leave these subject areas unaddressed during class. Associated classroom discussions are contingent on critical pedagogy and meaningful curricula. Numerous studies have outlined pedagogy using diverse texts, such as science fiction, to enhance students' literacy (Author, 2019; Bland, 2020; Vrasidas et al., 2015). Intellectually stimulating science fiction can provide motivating content for English language learners (ELLs)— in terms of both language acquisition and greater awareness of being global citizens (Author, 2019; Bland, 2020; Yang, 2002). This type of instructional material can also prove useful for classroom teachers reluctant to discuss radical social issues. However, few scholars have analyzed the intricacies of related classroom conversation or how students and teachers respond. This article examines interactions that began with exposure to a science fiction film and progressed to a discussion of contemporary sociopolitical concerns that resonated with ELLs. In addition to adopting intellectually substantial tools that promote ELLs' agency in learning, it is suggested that teachers receive scaffolding on how to meaningfully integrate such materials in critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy in ELT classrooms

Teachers engaging ELLs in critical literacies via a critical pedagogical approach has been a topic of discussion in ELT studies (e.g., Janks, 2010; Lewison et al., 2004; Luke, 2018). As a theoretical framework, this approach is based on Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacies serve as a teaching orientation to

embed critical pedagogy and ELLs' literacy development; the term refers to developing students' ability to examine discrimination within a written text or multimodal media due to the presenter's social, political, or cultural background (Lewison et al., 2002). Put simply, the notion of critical literacies implies that students are learning English while coming to recognize how representations are created via language and text (e.g., how a text relates to institutional power, voice, and one's awareness of marginality and ethnicity) (Janks, 2012; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005). Different forms of critical literacy have been investigated based on teaching contexts and ELLs' needs. For instance, the critical global literacies framework (Johnston et al., 2021; Yol & Yoon, 2020; Yoon, 2016; Yoon et al., 2018) emphasizes a transformative process by nurturing ELLs' comprehension of their interconnectedness to the global community. This model indicates that people reside within a global world as opposed to localized, refined places. Critical global literacies therefore focus on ELLs developing a global vision by applying literacies to contemplate global challenges. This perspective bridges the global with the local, as well as numerous dimensions of teaching and learning, under the premise of promoting social action and transformation.

Other critical literacies stress a combination of approaches from the field of English language arts literacy. One example is critical composition pedagogy (Behizadeh et al., 2019), which borrows from theories of social justice education, critical pedagogy, and critical literacies. In this instance, the primary objectives of critical literacies include language acquisition, critical textual analysis, and the development of relevant literacies. The marrying of critical literacies, social justice education, and critical pedagogy is well-aligned with ELLs' language and content demands: these students can benefit from acquiring critical literacy perspectives regardless of language proficiency (Uliassi, 2019). The literature (e.g., Dooley, 2009; Lau, 2012, 2013) has shown that it is essential to teach ELLs beyond the aim of linguistic acquisition (i.e., merely gaining skills in grammar and vocabulary). Indeed, many ELLs have the capacity and need to move beyond cultivating language skills by confronting pertinent issues in the Western world.

Learner and practitioner beliefs

The goal of critical literacies and their sub-forms is to boost ELLs' awareness of world issues. Discussions on contemporary critical social justice topics are hence unavoidable. Therefore, researchers have focused on uncovering ELLs' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards critical pedagogy. Learners have mentioned that critical literacies help them develop critical consciousness and academic literacy (e.g., Huang, 2011), which contribute to their perceptions of literacy and language use in school and society (Bacon, 2017). Many learners are driven to engage with critical ways to learn English irrespective of proficiency. These approaches can resonate with learners' cultural and ethnic backgrounds; in other cases, they resonate with students who encountered initial marginalization during their educational experiences (Ko & Wang, 2013). Studies have pertained to educators as well. Most teachers believe ELLs are capable of practicing critical literacies while learning a new language (Alford, 2014). Generally, teachers who adopt a critical lens tend to apply their personal experiences with racial, cultural, and political marginalization in the classroom (Albers & Frederick, 2013).

Research further indicates that teachers may hold sophisticated attitudes and create complex scenarios for critical literacy implementation. Whereas some teachers are optimistic about adopting social justice education or critical literacies in the classroom, others hold more conservative or cynical perceptions (Bender-Slack, 2010; Dover, 2015; Ortega, 2019). For example, some teachers find critical literacies valuable for advanced

language learners (Yol & Yoon, 2020) but only as an "add-on" to the curriculum (e.g., Allison, 2011; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). Some first-time teachers of critical literacies may be less certain of how to implement particular practices without appearing "too political" (Bacon, 2017). Additionally, the literature has documented shifts in teachers' initial beliefs as they engage with critical pedagogy and critical literacies (e.g., Lee & Runyan, 2011). The above considerations allude to the inherent sensitivity of addressing these topics in the classroom for practitioners and learners alike. This situation complicates the already demanding task of adopting critical literacies in ESL classrooms. Despite studies investigating teachers' attitudes and prior experiences via interviews or focus groups, less emphasis has been placed on critical literacy practices in classroom settings. A teacher's knowledge of critical pedagogy influences their views of implementation; therefore, it is crucial to assess both their beliefs and corresponding changes as instructors become more involved in such practices.

Teaching practices and text materials

Besides initial resistance to adopting a critical lens in ESL classrooms, most teachers' hesitation stems from inexperience and a lack of confidence in which techniques to employ (Bacon, 2017). A practice-focused examination is therefore necessary. Two main areas have been profiled in much of the literature on critical literacies among ELLs: 1) pedagogical practices and curriculum design intended to develop ELLs' language acquisition and critical literacies; and 2) the selection of texts and other resources to facilitate these aims. The idea of language emphatic designs (Bacon, 2017) refers to incorporating linguistic knowledge and critical components into curriculum design. Some scholars have questioned whether critical literacy research has sufficiently assessed language learning outcomes while developing ELLs' critical literacies (Huang, 2011). Others have argued that language learning occurs prior to moving toward critical engagement with a text (e.g., Allison, 2011) and is thus only suited to advanced learners. Still others have contended that language learning and critical engagement can occur simultaneously (Dooley, 2009; Lau, 2012, 2013). Dooley (2009) found that ELLs, particularly historically marginalized populations such as refugees, can rapidly grasp critical literacy skills while learning English. Practices should accordingly integrate language and critical development.

Resources are inseparable from critical literacy–focused teaching practices. Multiple modes of resource selection appear useful for critically analyzing texts. ELLs are especially interested in using multimodal texts (Ajayi, 2009), such as films (Lee, 2019) and panel discussion videos (Chun, 2019), to engage in critical pedagogy. In addition to modalities, specific genres of text containing critical perspectives may enable readers to more thoroughly understand sociopolitical worlds. Fiction helps ELLs participate in the global community: Bland (2020) proposed that *The Hunger Games* can aid teachers and ELLs in questioning certain perspectives and critiquing texts. Author (2019*)* pointed out that intellectually stimulating science fiction such as *Blade Runner* can foster ELLs' critical analytic and multiliteracy skills. Jenkins (1997, 2021) asserted that the unique literary genre of science fiction pushes the social, cultural, and political contexts of the future to extremes. Readers can then refer to futuristic imagery to challenge the contemporary world; for instance, readers can gain insight into impending technological advances and sociopolitical complexities to see themselves and their environment within works of science fiction. Relevant classroom materials can in turn heighten learners' awareness of social justice issues such as critical race marginalization, democracy promotion, political correctness, class, and gender (Colatrella, 1999). Teachers who incorporate science

fiction into their courses can prompt students to reflect on personal societal experiences as well. For example, a class may ponder how scientific developments shape social regulations and which moral values will remain salient in the future (Rea, 2010). Science fiction can essentially bring sociopolitical topics into ETL classrooms while avoiding politicized discussion.

Studies have extensively addressed teacher practices and pedagogy (e.g., Agarwal, 2011; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Johnston et al., 2021). Yet few have detailed how ELLs co-construct texts in the classroom. Research on how to critically engage with science fiction texts to integrate sociopolical issues while accounting for teachers' and students' contributions is also scarce. Similarly, little is known about how classes proceed while applying a critical pedagogical approach or how students respond moment by moment when critically discussing a text. To bridge these gaps, this article examines how a university instructor and her ELL students dealt with sociopolitical topics in a science fiction–themed class by analyzing student–teacher and student–student interactions as well as the instructor's self-reflection.

Methodology

Setting and participants

This research involved a case study (Stake, 2008) approach, taking the classroom as a bounded system for investigation. The moment of critical implementation, student and teacher interactions, and the instructor's reflection on pedagogical approaches were documented. The study was conducted at a university in an urban city in North America. The participating instructor was a lecturer of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, a prerequisite for students who must demonstrate language proficiency before enrolling in their respective academic programs. Five students were enrolled in the semester-long course; all were in their early to late twenties. Participants were majoring in fields such as finance, engineering, mathematics, and marketing. All were planning to pursue graduate degrees in English-speaking countries after completing the EAP course as a university entrance requirement. The instructor was a relative novice in critical pedagogy and critical literacies. She had reviewed materials on the teaching of critical literacies to ELLs, including work by Lewison et al. (2002) and Morgan and Ramanathan (2005). She was also interested in incorporating films into the ELT classroom.

She prepared the chosen film along with pertinent visual stimuli (pictures) and handouts for students. The lesson adhered to a student-centered approach that stressed students' contributions. Instructional content also included broader themes on science fiction and film. Participating students watched several clips from the film *I am Legend* and viewed a number of illustrations on science fiction topics. The class was subdivided into several sections; this study presents an analysis of the last lesson (i.e., the fourth lesson out of four), in which the focus began to shift from the film itself to broader social themes.

Data collection

Data were gathered through several modes: classroom observations, field notes, audio recordings of the lesson, an interview with the instructor after the unit class concluded, and curriculum materials for the delivered science fiction course. Observations focused on the process through which students, under their instructor's guidance, constructed the science fiction multimodal text (i.e., the film) and navigated its sociopolitical implications in personal and social spheres. The instructor was interviewed once the course ended; the interview pertained to the instructor's views on using critical pedagogy and critical

resources from outside the curriculum in the ESL classroom. For example, one interview prompt was "In what ways do you believe that critical pedagogy can or cannot support your classroom teaching?"

Data analysis

Participants were assigned pseudonyms as transcripts were compiled. The author reviewed the audio-recorded lesson several times. Preliminary analyses of classroom interactions began during transcript editing. The author identified early patterns which inspired further analysis. Inductive thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Thomas, 2006) was carried out to discern the themes most pertinent to students' engagement with critical literacies. Several units of analysis were considered: classroom interactions; students' engagement with science fiction video clips and pictures presented during lectures; and the processes through which students negotiated, reconstructed, and recontextualized sociopolitical topics arising from their discussion of the genre. Classroom observations generated a number of initial themes, namely *students' comprehension of socially constructed texts*, *the processes of meaning making and knowledge construction*, *students' involvement in critical literacy development*, *cultural identity investigation*, and *alternative interpretation of sociopolitical issues.* Thematic categories were subsequently refined through triangulation with the instructor interview. The final themes were as follows: *engagement with sociopolitical issues*, *cultural identification and belonging*, and *co-construction of alternative voices*.

Findings

Results were primarily derived from classroom observations of student–teacher interaction and post-interview teacher reflections on classroom instruction. Classroom observations revealed a handful of themes: (a) engagement with sociopolitical issues; (b) cultural identification and belonging; and (c) ELLs' co-construction of alternative voices. The instructor's reflection illustrated the complexity of and flexibility required when managing classroom engagement and discussions on critical sociopolitical topics.

Classroom observations

1. Engagement with sociopolitical issues

During the session, the instructor supported student-led conversations on a range of critical sociopolitical issues, shifting from the focus of the film itself. Numerous real-world topics were connected to the film, such as liberal versus conservative ideas, immigration and othering discourses of immigrants, and social media surveillance. After addressing the film's ending, the instructor moved on to other works of science fiction by displaying a series of film posters. Several of these images resonated with students, and the associated themes piqued participants' interest in linking the images with actual events. A billboard for George Orwell's novel *1984*, featuring a large television screen and the slogan "Big brother is watching you", especially drew students' attention. Ze (pseudonym) connected current events to the class's previous discussion of science fiction content: he was concerned about social media surveillance in his native country and in the United States. He provided the following plot summary for the novel (in the following dialogue, "T" denotes the instructor's comments):

> Ze: ...it's talking about the future, well, standing at [that time] ...they're using modern technologies. They had this – what they call the screen. Everybody has one at home... they can see what you're doing as a surveillance device. They control your thoughts and monitor everything. Look at our modern society. It's the same now.

T: Did you mean the surveillance?

Ze: Well, you know, on the internet, someone is watching you. And there's always something –freedom of speech, what you can and cannot say, right?

In this instance, Ze drew a parallel between *1984* and the contemporary world in terms of modern technology and online surveillance. His remarks alluded to anxiety in relation to a common dichotomy in science fiction: individual independence versus societal control (Rea, 2010). ELL students are familiar with the issue of surveillance given routine news coverage of such systems in their home countries and the controversy around social media surveillance in Western society. Study participants appeared eager to explore these topics. Throughout the classroom discussion, they debated what it would be like to live in a democratic nation with more freedom but an inconsistent sociopolitical system compared to a well-established, controlled society with less individual freedom (Rea, 2010). These topics apply to ELLs' everyday lives; many of these students may have lived in societies with different cultural and political norms. A new visual representation of a science fiction theme consistently inspired an analogy to contemporary sociopolicial issues throughout participants' conversations. The students demonstrated growing awareness of local issues in Western society in addition to considering their home countries. They particularly addressed topics that were both personally salient and relevant to the North American context, such as cultural disputes and mutual understanding. For instance, Sara noted the Moon Landing and the subject of space colonization when the instructor presented a photograph of the moon's surface and future human settlers. Sara and Ze later started to discuss colonialism, a topic with which ELLs tend to be familiar due to their sometimes historically marginalized identities. Colonialism became a major source of classroom engagement as evidenced by the following theme.

2. Cultural identification and belonging.

The instructor screened the ending portion of *I am Legend*, pausing the clip periodically to conduct comprehension checks. The film has two endings—an on-screen ending and a director's cut ending—and the instructor led students through a conversation about the effects of these endings and the target audiences for both (a remark on the film's endings: the on-screen finale displays the protagonist Neville's sacrifice to save the human race; the director's cut shows Neville releasing the mutants and accompanying the female protagonist to the human reserves camp, implying humans' ensuing co-existence with mutants). Students' preferences were captured through exchanges such as the following:

T: So what do you think the movie is trying to say by showing two different versions?

Sara: I feel like the first one is more for, like, normal people – like they will think that humans will survive. We survived and we are always the most intelligent people on Earth. There's no one [who] can beat us. So at the end we win the battle, we survive.

Ze: … I even think [it's] Christianity and atheism, for Americans. Because they like superhero movies. One person against nature – against all enemies – and playing the savior. At the end he might have sacrificed himself but humanity won't.

T: Right.

Sara: … The second [ending] means the normal humans and Darkseekers [the mutants] can find a way to live together... Maybe in the future...It's different people, different race groups on Earth. I don't think a lot of people will understand what the second one is really saying here.

Tan: … The second one, the director just wanted to share [with] you the idea [that] the Darkseeker is another creature. No matter [whether] it is made by the human mistake or God's plan, this is another creature. The humans and Darkseekers share the same world: one is in the daytime, one is nighttime. No matter how they share this world, they're co-exist[ing]. They have their, like, the culture – they have their stuff. People cannot destroy them or, like, help them or save them. They don't need others' help or saving.

T: Okay, so they're kind of from a different culture.

Tim: Well, I thought the second ending is more for people who are more liberal because this is actually – you know, like, it's two [different] things, right? The first ending is more for people who are more conservative, they want to be keen on their own values: "This is who we are. This is how human beings are and no matter how tough it is, even though I'm the last one on Earth, I'm still going to do the same thing. I'm going to save the human species."

T: Can you tell me more about that?

Tim: So, like the immigrants here. Some of the people who live here don't like the new immigrants because they are different from them.

Ze: … For example, when in the film [they] said, "You're sick, I can cure you." This is exactly like what the Muslims might be told in Western countries about their religion.

Sara's statement that the first ending was for "normal people" corresponds to Tim's assertion that the second ending would be difficult for most people to comprehend. No longer fictitious, the "Darkseekers" in this narrative serve as a metaphor for members of minority groups. This exchange reflected a key sociopolitical issue: cohabitation and ideological othering in the current political atmosphere. Ze and Tim cited the issue of othering the Muslim religion and people in North America. By analogizing humans and mutants in the film to different ethnic groups in modern society, coupled with the issue of co-existence, Tim compared characters in the film to people with opposing political stances. These classroom occurences demonstrate that ELLs actively made sense of the Western society in which they were immersed and were interested in discussion beyond the film itself. Sara's belief that many viewers might not understand the second ending suggests that she thought much remains to be done to achieve mutual understanding and cultural integration.

The above classroom examples also tie to the notion of assimilation, especially how ELLs view their own identities in Western society. Participants' discussions of social structure and belonging indicated their social and political consciousness within a relocated society. When the instructor showed illustrations of science fiction content, Tan homed in on a picture depicting tube babies being assigned societal duties at birth:

Tan: It's like a real human society, isn't it?

T: Hmm, why is that?

Tan: Kind of like, think of how human can cross a hierarchy. It's hard [to explain]…

Ze: Yes, the social hierarchy.

Tan: Yeah. [It] also is based on where you were born... this is more direct. [It is] invisible in reality but still the same ideology. Humans are always on that path. But this way is more fun. It's like depend[ing] on one score, like [based on] an IQ [test], you can place in a class…in reality [it] is based on where you're born, right? Maybe this [is] better than right now.

Tim: So this is like a lucky draw. If you take a better draw, then you are just lucky.

Ze: The same as if you are born to a wealthier family. Then you are lucky. But what about what people can do? Here they value that more than they do in some societies, right?

Tim: But even so, some jobs are still only open to local people, not foreigners. Like the lawyers, the doctors.

Ze: It's better. I mean, if you have the certificates then it's better and easier.

This science fiction illustration apparently compelled students to ponder sociopolitical problems based on the denaturalization of dominant and real cultures. Tan inferred that social class division in science fiction could exist in today's society, albeit in a more covert manner. However, he also stated that a person's abilities— rather than the circumstances of their birth—should determine their social status. In this excerpt, Ze seemingly suggests that Western society favors ability over birth and thus seems more socially just than elsewhere. His perceptions of the hypothetical social hierarchy further involved acknowledging one's social belongingness in Western society. The students contemplated social belongingness and integration later in the dialogue. Although some participants had lived in North America for five years, they considered themselves outsiders instead of locals. They expressed complex feelings about assimilation along with a desire for their skills to be truly valued on a local level.

3. ELLs' co-construction of alternative voices

An array of voices were amplified throughout class discussions of science fiction and sociopolitical issues. Many of these voices conveyed students' distinct interpretations of their lived experiences and observations at home and in their relocated Western society. A few questions regarding sociopolitical governance arose at the conclusion of the general conversation. The theme moved from societal surveillance to widespread institutional power in contemporary society. Following Tan's explanation of social hierarchy and class, the following exchange occurred:

Tan: People at the bottom of the social ladder find it hard to move up.

Clora: I just have this question: who will be controlling this? Who has the power to decide who's going to be doing what, to decide your own future?

Sara: Is the government making up a concept so everybody … believe[s] in that theory, and then we do the same thing as what they want?

Clora remained reticent throughout the talk but remained highly attentive to all points of view. The above interjection was Clora's first contribution to the conversation; most participants provided brief replies or remained silent given the topic's complexity. Clora's and Sara's questions were partially directed at their classmates, instructors, and possibly their home nation's government. Despite the lack of further discussion, the awareness generated by these questions is central to critical literacies. Put simply, learners should understand the dominant discourses that circulate within society and that are embedded in daily life. Powerful societal forces must also be recognized. These participants' critical questions reveal that ELLs are cognizant of power dynamics in the social environment. As opposed to passively accepting social norms, ELLs co-construct alternative voices regarding social issues and dominant discourses.

Instructor's self-reflection

After the initial series of lessons on incorporating critical literacies and science fiction into ESL classrooms, the instructor took part in an interview in which she shared her

thoughts on critical discussions that occurred as students learned the language through *I am Legend* and additional images. Her classroom observations revealed several issues. First, she explained her rationale for choosing certain science fiction works and how students began to draw parallels to real-world events:

> T: At first, I was hoping to demonstrate to my students that it makes sense to watch science fiction movies while learning a language. But it turns out that [*I am Legend*] is so long that I had to split it up into several classes if we were going to watch it all in class time. But I found that students had more to say when I made a list of the many science fiction posters they had started to use as metaphors for real-life social and political problems. But the movie was needed as a good place to start. For example, they talked about liberal and conservative ideas after talking about the two different endings of the movie. And they also talked about the saviors script, which is kind of a "superhero saving the world" plot. I think they might be able to say more about that if time allows.

The author's observations and field notes mirrored the instructor's comment that some class discussion initially featured short and performative responses from students. Later, however, the many social, cultural, and political themes participants addressed at length showed that these issues were personally relevant. The instructor also stated that teaching about and exploring social justice issues greatly depends on the instructor's knowledge and experience. She recalled her early reaction to using critical pedagogy in ESL classrooms:

> T: When I first heard about critical pedagogy, I was very excited because I think there are a lot of things that are important to [the students]. But then I [wasn't sure] – what if the students do not like these topics? They are here to learn English. So I thought, "Oh, maybe I should try movies, the science fiction movies." It's one of the things I love to do, and they also like it. You can see that a lot of the movies are a direct reflection of the world we live in now. But when I think back on how I taught this course, I think I should have talked more about how people from different backgrounds live together in a city, especially here [with] the large number of Muslims who live along with white and Chinese people.

The instructor's comments echo the literature on teachers' attitudes toward critical pedagogy in ELT settings. The concept likely appealed to her based on her own experiences with marginalization as a racialized person in North America (Albers & Frederick, 2013). She also noted the limits of her understanding of critical pedagogy, critical literacies, and topic selection:

> T: There were pauses or conversations that I think I ignored by accident, but I should have [talked] more about them in class. For example, when Clora was asking "Why and who controlled this?…", I didn't know the answer, so it was hard for me to [contribute]. I think I said something, but I don't think I answered the question. In fact, the students asked very good questions that, to be honest, I can't answer. But now I think that instead of skipping this question, I could have switched to let the students answer it.

In relation to this, when asked whether she had considered why she did not address certain topics, she admitted that she would have trouble examining them and the topic went beyond her knowledge. So she did not feel confident continuing the conversation in class. This issue reflects that facilitating meaningful class discussion is hence contingent

on a teacher's social and lived experiences. The direction of conversations also depends on a teacher's inclination to broach ideas with which they may not be comfortable or that are controversial. The instructor in this study additionally recommended granting students more autonomy in these discussions, given that they are the experts to some extent. Her suggestion reflected classroom observations: students could comprehend content, develop alternative voices and knowledge about a particular subject, and produce knowledge through co-construction and meaning making. Meanwhile, teachers serve as facilitators as opposed to authoritative judges of knowledge.

Discussion

Specific genres of text (e.g., science fiction) may promote the integration of critical literacies in ELT lessons. In the focal classroom, science fiction clearly supported critical literacies: students made connections nearly automatically between the imaginative science fiction world and technological developments in the present world (Vrasidas et al., 2015). These spontaneous linkages lead critical literacies to evoke deeper learning than traditional classroom participation. Such engagement can also be useful for students struggling with ideological conflicts in English-speaking societies dominated by Western ideologies. Classroom discussions in this study described an extreme future in which the dominant culture and languages were denaturalized. Students were thus given a chance to establish "an awareness of how, why, and in whose interests a particular text might work" (Bredella, 2012, p. 1) and to recognize politicized classroom materials, thereby exhibiting agency as readers. These interactions ignited participants' awareness of new possibilities. Students could then more readily critique sociopolitical reality and develop authentic perceptions in the future (Bland, 2020). Participant exchanges additionally supported the notion of interculturality (Bland, 2020): these conversations can act as social commentary and shed light on societal issues through science fiction's satire. Students can accordingly critique contemporary conditions by posing questions such as "What responsibility does a person have to the society in which they live?" (Rea, 2010) and "How can new members of a culture be integrated in a society where unbalanced power relations exist due to cultural differences?" (Dervin, 2017). Moreover, science fiction films often tackle sociopolitical topics in a fictitious future that can be complicated to discuss in terms of society today. These films are therefore especially useful for instructors hesitant to discuss radical social issues. Some ELT teachers prefer a neutral literacy classroom devoid of political topics for fear of seeming overly political. Introducing science fiction based on students' interests fosters investigation of subjects such as social justice, multiculturalism, and decolonization—without the instructor needing to initiate these sensitive discussions.

Although science fiction can provide excellent learning materials for ELLs in the ELT classroom, it is essential to select material that is relevant to students' lived experiences in their home countries and North America. Students' language proficiency must be considered as well to encourage language acquisition and critical awareness. This includes multimodal texts (e.g., films, videos, and graphics) that will ideally captivate students and align with their cultural norms. As evidenced by the instructor's self-reflection on her text choices, additional materials (e.g., those that are more directly related to the authentic world) could reinforce the benefits of employing science fiction in ELT classrooms. For instance, an essay regarding cultural marginalization or assimilation would be suitable in this context.

Classroom observations and the instructor interview indicated that navigating learners' interactions and implementing a critical pedagogical approach are equally

challenging. Excerpts from classroom discussions showed that most participants instinctively tied their interest in science fiction to personally salient contemporary issues. Several societal topics emerged spontaneously. This flexibility in classroom interaction may not have been possible with larger classes (vs. this study's five students). An instructor working with more students could employ alternative methods to spark conversation, such as group projects or online discussion boards. Encouraging critical literacies and analyzing science fiction in relation to ideology call for sustained effort: instructors should aim to address moment-by-moment interactions in an ELT lesson and scaffold the development of ELLs' critical capacity.

The adoption of a critical pedagogical approach and the flexibility of classroom management in order to promote students' critical awareness and language learning are paramount to critical literacies. The alternative voices a classroom discussion produces can reflect students' experiences, expertise, and passion about what matters to them. Some voices may challenge prevalent societal assumptions (e.g., regarding immigration, non-Western discourses, and societal power and institutions). Moreover, in order to determine how best to support ELLs, instructors must take into account learners' identities as linguistically and culturally minoritized students who have resettled in a new nation. Articulations on individuals' experiences with migration experiences, language learning experiences, and knowledge from their home countries can jointly combat the hegemonic assumptions that prevail in Western society.

The instructor's use of critical approaches and the selection of alternative texts to facilitate classroom learning carry key implications. First, the instructor in this study stated that she would more effectively guide discussion in subsequent classes. Doing so would serve as a starting point in engaging students to develop their English literacy around social justice. The instructor's reflection and the classroom observations depicted a novice teacher's keenness to embrace a critical view in teaching ELLs despite the obstacles she faced on the path to critical pedagogy. This angle requires additional research. Second, this study underlines the utility of introducing certain genres (e.g., science fiction) to highlight students' lived experiences. Chosen texts and the teacher's enthusiasm jointly allowed students to articulate knowledge, questions, and concerns. Finally, instructors' beliefs about critical literacies will likely grow as teachers become more adept at handling critical approaches. That is, learning to engage students critically may enable instructors to advocate for critical pedagogy more effectively.

Conclusion

This study was intended to enhance critical literacy pedagogy in ELT classrooms through the use of multimodal text, namely a science fiction film. Discussions in which participants and the teacher co-constructed meaning related to students' lived experiences—together with the instructor's reflection on her critical pedagogical approach—revealed two phenomena: 1) the promise of adopting a critical approach in ELT classrooms; and 2) the complexities of employing it based on teachers' perspectives and experiences. From an instructional standpoint, teachers' beliefs are crucial. If a teacher is willing to deploy critical approaches, whether due to personal marginalization experiences or mere interest, then their students will probably have opportunities to develop critical literacies. Teachers must then apply pedagogical strategies tailored to students' language learning requirements and needs to make sense of sociopolitical issues in learners' relocated country.

This research has several limitations that open avenues for future work. The study was based on a small sample and lacked in-depth follow-up with participants and the

instructor. Subsequent efforts should involve an ethnographic longititudinal method that follows one class and instructor for a longer period. This approach could be extended to other literacy and social studies classes with different student populations. Critical pedagogy should inspire students and teachers to challenge the status quo and prevailing social views. Lastly, classroom discourse affords ELLs and their instructors rich opportunities: to co-construct text; to contemplate the meaning of being socially conscious, responsible global citizens; and to resist hegemonic ideologies. These aspects warrant more intensive exploration.

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