

Students' Critical Consciousness Through Critical Literacy Awareness

Koo Yew Lie

kooyl@ukm.my

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Sosial Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

Wong Fook Fei

wff@ukm.my

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Sosial Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

Kemboja Ismail

oja@ukm.my

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Sosial Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

Abstract

To think critically is undeniably one of the major elements of “first class human capital” in a knowledge economy. It is most regrettable that Malaysian students, even at the tertiary level, tend to be uncritical due to socialisation processes in the educational and sociocultural environment. Responding to this identified need to raise the critical consciousness of students, this paper examines how a Higher Education teacher challenged her postgraduate students to be critical learners through the use of CLA (Critical literacy awareness) strategies in her *Language and Literacy* course. The paper suggests that the use of CLA strategies has increased student engagement and strengthened student voices. This paper concludes by proposing that CLA should be included in pedagogical practices in Higher Education given that active participation in knowledge economies is the vision of the Malaysian Higher Education Action Plan (MoHE 2007a, b).

Keywords: Critical Literacy Awareness, pluriliteracy, multiliteracies, postgraduate students' voices, classroom intervention.

Introduction

The *Malaysian Higher Education Action Plan* states that its key thrust is to develop “first class human capital”. One of the major elements of this first-class human capital is the ability to think critically and independently (MoHE 2007a, b). However, from our observation and experience teaching in a local institution of higher learning, we find that

a large number of undergraduate and even postgraduate students do not appear to be able to respond critically to the information that they are exposed to and to move on to create new ideas and new perspectives. They are reluctant to question the perceived authority of texts and lecturers and they have a tendency to accept ideas as they are presented. They seem to have problems in listening, thinking, speaking, reading and writing critically. And, it is not only the lecturers who are complaining. In her papers, Koo (2009, 2010) reports that her postgraduate students themselves felt that they were not critical. This state of affairs has also been reported in the local media. Studies by researchers such as Ambigathy Pandian (2007) and Koo (2003; 2008) have provided theoretical and empirical data that has indicated that our undergraduates are indeed lacking in their ability to think critically.

The main reason given for this problem is the powerful examination-oriented education system that encourages largely rote learning. Such a system creates an uncritical thinking culture in schools where students are taught to perform for the examination by memorizing formulaic answers to questions. Koo (2003; 2008) also attributes the situation to the structural set-up of dominant socio-cultural systems that is often top-down, hierarchical and dependent on patronage and compliance. Such a hegemonic setup tends to reproduce such a practice. The socio-political and cultural norms tend not to tolerate what may be seen as divergent or dissident views, and see being “critical” as being anti-establishment. The personal cost of being considered “critical” can indeed be high (as opposed to being compliant), as in the past Acts such as the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act and Official Secret Act have been used against individuals who have been critical of the government. So, self-censorship has become a habit. How is this going to engender creative paradigms, views or perspectives within a learning environment?

The layman’s understanding of literacy relates to the ability to read and write, and to count. However, these basic literacies of reading, writing and numeracy are no longer sufficient for an individual to function in the world of the 21st Century. UNESCO (2004) has in fact identified literacy as a social practice that requires the citizen of the 21st Century to operate in and adapt to the complex demands of plural and multicontextual environments where critical attitudes, dispositions and plural literacies have to be engaged in the search for new knowledge and innovation. Continued advances made in technology and sciences have made available new gadgets that have impacted our lives. They allow us to communicate in a variety of ways, and change the way we relate to and engage with people. They have also transformed the way we learn and our learning environment. Conversely, these advances have made many jobs that involve routine or repetitive tasks redundant and jobs that require creativity and abstract or symbolic analysis have emerged (Reich, 1992). These trends demand that learners be equipped with new literacies so that they can participate productively and meaningfully in the 21st Century. Learners have to be able to analyse information critically, examine arguments logically, relate new ideas and concepts to their previous knowledge and life experiences, develop, organize and integrate ideas and draw conclusion from evidence presented.

Also, according to Koo (2001, p. 2), it is crucial for the learners' growth to have the courage to "break away from the rules and find a voice and subject position that is in tune with their purposes and goals" interdisciplinarily, crossing a complex of cultural, institutional and national borders. In a knowledge economy and participatory democracy, we need our students at the tertiary level not only to acquire knowledge but to be able to resist and challenge certain fixed and static – even established or institutionalized – ways of talking about and presenting people, things, ideas and concepts, and to create dynamic new meanings. We believe that the best place to foster this is in the classroom. So, to inculcate this culture of thinking critically, Critical Literacy Awareness (CLA) instruction (Wallace, 1988; Kress, 2003; Koo, 2008) was adopted as the pedagogical approach by one of the researchers in the instruction of a postgraduate course. This approach draws from the pedagogy of multiliteracies developed by The New London Group (1996). The group came up with their teaching and learning pedagogical methods in response to the demands brought on by new world realities. The classroom methods that the Group recommends are:

Situated practice:

learners engaging in meaningful and authentic tasks that are related to their life worlds

Overt instruction:

the teacher and other experts scaffolding the learning experience by systematic, analytic, and conscious understanding and introducing explicit metalanguages

Critical framing:

learners viewing what they have learnt critically by standing back and interpreting it according to their context

Transformed practice:

learners reflecting upon and apply what they learned

(The New London Group, 1996)

In our CLA model (Table 1), there are two stages – teacher dialogues and student tasks. The teacher dialogue involves 2 steps. In the first step, the teacher frames the key concepts and arguments as constructed in the assigned readings (overt instruction). Second, the critical framing involves the teacher applying critical literacy principles and using them to problematize the ideas presented in Step 1, thereby bringing the students to a deeper and more critical level of understanding. Stage 2 involves getting the students to respond to the inputs given based on a wide range of materials on the same topic but from different ideological and theoretical positions. The students respond via group dialogues where they share their understanding of the issues raised and relate it to their "life worlds", that is their own experiences and contexts. This encourages students to examine multiple perspectives (situated practice). Lastly, the students reflect on their learning by recording their perspective on these positions in their reflective journal (transformed practice). Their response is not limited to the reflective journals where they record their voices; they are also encouraged to use other media to express their reaction.

Table 1: CLA model

Stage 1: Teacher dialogues	Stage 2: Student tasks
Step 1: Overt instruction	Step 1: Group dialogues
Step 2: Critical framing	Step 2: Transformed critical reading

Our focus in this paper is on the teacher, one of the principal agents in the learning process as s/he has tremendous influence on what the learners think and how they think. The choices that s/he makes about the language of the classrooms, the scaffolding and support given in relation to the reading, writing, speaking and other activities are important because they determine her classroom persona and its identity. At the tertiary level, the teacher actually has significant autonomy over what goes on in the classroom. S/he has complete freedom regarding the intervention and scaffolding that she wants to use, and over options about language particularly in a multilingual context. The paper recognizes that the students are the dialogic partners of classroom interaction; however, due to word limit constraints, the focus will be on the teacher.

Critical Literacy Practices

The concept of Critical Literacy practices has been attributed to Freire (1970), who conceived it as a means of empowering oppressed and marginalised populations against coercion and intimidation by entities such as corporations and/or government. Pedagogically, Freirean critical literacy involves examining, analyzing, and deconstructing texts. To him, critical teaching does not involve something done for students or to them for their own good. Rather, it is a process driven by mutuality, not something done by the clever teacher against defenseless students.

Freire (1970) and later Matthews (2006) argue that education should be concerned with “conscientization”. Translated into classroom pedagogy, Matthews (2006, p. 14) sees “conscientization” as an integral and holistic learning process “where one learns to perceive the social, political and economic contradictions in society and community and take action against oppressive elements and reality”. This would mean that serious attention is given to enlightening and empowering learners through critical reflection and the development of dialogue and voice concerning their perception of the world.

Shor (1992, p. 32) defines critical literacy as one of the four qualities to achieve ‘critical consciousness’ of Freirean education:

Analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context.

To Scriven and Paul (2003), critical thinking is a complex process that involves the process of “conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and /or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”. It is not confined to any subject or discipline.

Faccione (1990, p. 2) defines critical thinking as “a tool of inquiry”, “a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one’s personal and civic life”. He argues that,

The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit.

In the development of a critical learner, he feels that teachers need to work towards the ideal that he has described.

The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking in America (cited in Scriven & Paul, 2003) defines critical thinking as:

... the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and /or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

This means that critical thinking involves an examination of the thinking processes underlining all reasoning; the purpose of the text and issues being discussed; the assumptions, concepts and empirical grounding; reasoning that leads to the conclusions; implications and consequences; alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference.

The dominant models of critical thinking that have been discussed so far have viewed the thinking process as a discrete, separate and decontextualised entity that is individualistic and therefore removed from the social contexts. This position is promulgated by what is known as the autonomous view of literacy. One of the critics of the autonomous models is Street (1995), who feels that such models do not provide a resistance to the socio-political and economic assumptions inherent in all texts. To Street (1995) and other theorists like him, literacy is ideological. In other words, literacy exists in a sociopolitical and ideological context and literacy practices have to be cognizant of those settings.

Building onto the theories on the ideological notion of literacy, Koo (2008) argues that a situated critical literacy in education is needed in a multilingual and multicultural context like Malaysia so that students from diverse culture and linguistic backgrounds are equipped to cope with diversity and differences inherent in the intersections and

conjunctures of various cultures in any context. She argues that students situated in particular contexts need to negotiate and make meanings, between various similar and yet competing and/or contradictory cultural contexts such as those of school, home or family, work, community. For classroom practices, Koo (2008) feels that CLA would create greater consciousness of the possibilities, disjunctures and/or tensions between multilingual meaning-markers' life worlds, and those of dominant systems and institutions. Awareness of the values and beliefs which may underlie dominant literacy practices enables the student to take action as appropriate, with a fuller sense of the benefits, risks and consequences of a particular literacy practice. . In this regard, Koo (2009) calls for a situated CLA method and perspective to create awareness of the socio-political and cultural complexities that are often taken for granted when dominant literacy practices are normalized while others are marginalized or unrepresented.

Translated into practice, the principles of critical literacy focus on issues of power and ideology that may exist between the reader and the writer. To the critical theorist, when a reader understands a text, s/he is actually succumbing to the author's prerogative in selecting what to write and how s/he chooses to write it and the arguments that s/he wants to make. Similarly, it is the reader's prerogative to question the content of the text and the way of seeing and assumptions of the writer. The reader may reflect about the missing and marginalized voices of the text. And, s/he may come up with an alternative view, perhaps an enriched view of a dominant practice which may widen perspectives and/or lead to new knowledge and innovation. The critical reader would certainly be engaged in problematizing the concept, perspective or issue in a text. In this regard, the teacher of critical literacy would encourage students to raise questions and examine the problems from multiple perspectives and challenge students to expand their thinking and help them discover diverse beliefs and understandings (Allen et al., 2002). In short, this process of thinking focuses on the power relationship and promotes reflection, action and transformation. The dialogue is active and represents a cycle of reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Freire (1970) terms the process as "praxis".

In Higher Education in Malaysia, despite the need to raise the critical literacy levels of our students, not many lecturers are aware of critical literacy practices. One way of bridging this gap would be to examine classroom practices of critical literacy experts to find out how they operationalize these essentially abstract ideas. This study is an attempt to fill this gap. Its purpose is to extrapolate the principles of critical literacy practices from the teacher's classroom talk.

Context of the Study

Since this study is centred on the individual teacher, a description of her is necessary.

The teacher

The teacher teaches a course entitled 'Language and Literacies', to students pursuing a Master's degree in English Language Studies. She is generally regarded as an expert in literacy issues and she has researched and published widely in the area. She has over 25

years of experience teaching at the tertiary level. She is known among colleagues for her knowledge of her discipline and her ability to bring concepts and ideas to a higher level of abstraction. As a teacher, she uses her wealth of knowledge to inform, explain and inspires her students to fire up their thinking. In class, she normally takes a no-nonsense approach – not wasting time and getting straight to the business of teaching. The teacher is known for her ability to inform as well as to engage students in discussion, to problemize issues and to challenge thinking. By the end of her course, students generally leave her class with a good grounding in the theories and principles of language and literacies, with an ability to problemize issues and to come up with their own response to the learning, and with heightened critical consciousness. In short, the teacher not only theorizes about critical literacy, she also “walks the talk” in her class and in the process empowers her students.

The course

The course that she teaches and is the focus of this study is Language and Literacies. It is an elective 14-week course and comprises of a 3-hour session every week. Readings are assigned each week for discussion. The class is designed based on critical literacy principles in that the teacher-students dialogues are centred on issues of power, promotes reflection, action and transformation (see Table 1).

The Postgraduate Guidebook (*Buku Panduan Siswazah*, Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan, 2008, pp. 134-135) describes the course as follows:

This course is primarily concerned with language and literacy studies focusing on the meaning-making discourses and representations of individuals and communities through language and other semiotic modalities. The course will attempt to ground the study of language and literacies within cross-disciplinary interests including linguistic, anthropological, sociological and critical theory perspectives. Forming an important strand of this course is a consideration of what is seen to be the variable and contested meanings, uses and consequences of situated literacies within particular sociocultural spaces. The course is committed to engaging the voices of multicultural/lingual peoples including Malaysians or those interested in Malaysia as a site of multiple and intercultural literacies located within a complex of changed and changing contexts.

The students

There were five students in the course. All the students have a basic degree. There are three Malaysian students and two international students, an Iranian and an Iraqi. Four of the students were school teachers with a minimum of five years teaching experience. One of the Malaysian students had taught in Singapore while the other two have taught

for a number of years in Malaysia. One of the international students had taught in an international setting while the other has no teaching background.

Research Design

This study draws from a critical post-modern framework to interpret the complexity of teaching and learning. The underlying assumption of this study is that the challenges posed by teaching and learning are complex, layered and inter-penetrating. These layers are related to each other and to social, cultural and political issues in which the learner and the teacher are stakeholders, together with entities such as employers, government, political parties and global institutions. These stakeholders of literacy, particularly critical literacy, tend to contest the discourse of ‘standards’ and ‘benchmarks’, and are possibly unaware of the unjust practices embedded in the hegemony of oppressive normalized ‘standards’. Within the institution of Higher Education, the learner tends to be held mainly responsible for problems of learning, his/her language problems being seen as key to his ‘failure’ or inability to excel academically.

The current study suggests that larger structural and institutional issues are involved. For an equitable and sustainable Higher Education policy and pedagogy, the vexed question of what language should be used for academic meaning-making must be unpacked. The paper suggests that whilst immediate learning of skills are important, they should be taught as far as possible, alongside literacy as social practice. Recent thinking in participatory education is moving away from a behavioural, cognitive view (Lemke, 1990; Gee, 2004) and is looking towards an educational paradigm that is more inclusive of the diversity that exists in plural and diverse life-worlds. Postmodern teaching approaches take into account the learner’s cultural and linguistic bearings. The classroom is increasingly seen as an interactive and multidiscursive space, on that allows the teacher and students to work together in creating knowledge.

The Data

The data are audio-recordings of teacher-student interactions (20 hours running time) that took place during the 3-hour class. These audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim using simple transcription techniques. The overt instruction in the forms of mini-lecture sessions were not transcribed as it was the intention of the study to look at the teacher’s critical framing. The class session, that is the subject of discussion here, took place on 4th August 2009.

The Qualitative Data and the Discussion of Findings

For the class, the students had been assigned to read two articles: “Globalization literacy and curriculum practices” by Allan Luke and “Theoretical thinking about literacy – the theory of children meaning making” by Gunther Kress. The teacher’s *modus operandi* is:

(1) a short lecture (or overt instruction) on the key concepts and arguments as presented in the articles to help students understand the articles (2) a discussion of the key issues or concepts (critical framing). In the latter phase, the teacher draws examples from her personal experiences and knowledge for illustration. She might internationalize the issue or/and Malaysianize it, or/and she might personalize it.

First, internationalization or generalization of the issue is explained. In the extract below, the teacher uses generic or common examples to make the point that our way of thinking is dominated by our system of education. The “We” that she refers to are “all of us”, everyone. The experiences that she described here are global and common to all human beings and she is trying to make the students think about society, and to get them to question the status quo.

Excerpt 1:

And I think part of the reason for it is because... we have lost, many of us have lost our rights... our human rights. And we have let a few people in the world to dominate us... to dominate our thinking. And they tell us what to do and we are led for example by bankers... uh we are led by economists... and many of us have not been critically challenged ... to think through uhm... what some... uh a few people decide for us... and our lives. And that is why uhm... I think part of the reason, one of the basic reason as to why... education has become mainly... to me, reproductive and not transformative.

To illustrate the notion that beauty depends on perception that changes over time, she gives examples from the sixteenth century and from the Tang Dynasty of China that considered plump women as being beautiful, unlike now.

Excerpt 2:

*Exactly. I said if you look at the woman of the portrait in the sixth century The women were all... very... plump.
In Tang Dynasty...women uh were plump. And they were nicely plump. And there was nothing wrong with it.*

In this example, the teacher gives banking as an example of a culture that is “reproductive and not transformative”. She continues with evidence of the ways in which high stakes are involved to reproduce the order of the banking industry.

Excerpt 3:

I think banking is another system that is reproductive and not transformative.... Asset where there are opportunities to make money, right?... Right? Bankers are very conservative people

The second strategy that the teacher uses is to Malaysianize the concept by drawing on local examples. For instance, she names the late, Yasmin Yusof, a controversial Malaysian advertisement and film maker, as an example of someone who is “very reproductive and yet transformative “of systems and institutions.

Excerpt 4:

Yasmin was a fantastic example of uh... someone who can work within a... system that is...she is both very reproductive and transformative of systems, yet within herself... her commitment her poetry. Her single-mindedness towards her poetry in media was... to me... well above, beyond her time... That is quite marvelous. But she paid the price for it. She has been a..... bright person.

This leads to a discussion of Yasmin's contribution. Some snippets from the teacher's input on the issue illustrate the train of thought that follows.

Excerpt 5:

*Actually I quoted her extensively uh... about her marginalization because she was seen to be antinational, in her inclusive perspectives. She was seen to be she was branded as an antinational you know?
And there are still some people who are very sceptical of her. They think that she was not fighting as a... as a Malay, for the Malay cause. So... And for the Muslim.
Ya. Ya. But there are some conservative ones who think that, she is challenging... she is deconstructing the system. But I think which... and she pays the price*

Another technique that the teacher uses is to draw on her life experiences. Here are some narrations of personal encounters.

Excerpt 6:

*For example someone said to me, she came to Malaysia and she said... oh I expected it to be more exotic. But you all are too westernized. I said yes, you expect us to be... still climbing trees? (laugh) So that is the notion of... they wanted to come to K.L. and Malaysia to see us climbing trees. (laugh)
I have a lot of artist friends who tell me that, if you get sucked into the marketplace of art... you will become... you generally you are reproductive of the system .the market system .. And I have one or two friends who actually have to step out of the marketplace to become transformative.*

Next, the teacher engages her students in consciousness raising discussions concerning key issues. She challenges students to think about their world in a critical way and not to accept unthinkingly the values embedded in ANY text.

Excerpt 7:

*And that's why most of us... including me we are very docile ... We accept what 'fate' has given us... because we are basically not critical of it or afraid to be critical.
That's why there's uh certain notion of guilty isn't it?
... like when they talk about Malaysian culture. You always ask which version, whose version?
I get really frustrated when I hear people saying... this person is attractive whereas this person is ugly. And I always said by which criteria DO YOU USE IT? Which media? Is it*

a media from the West that says that a lady has to be angular and of a certain weight and of a certain shape... you know.

So this is cultural politics. So only when you use a certain... criteria and then they say oh everybody knows that this woman is attractive and that woman is not attractive... Again by whose criteria? Is it the fashion magazine? The Vogue magazine? Who uh which notion that you've got... that a woman with high nose is beautiful and...

Whose?... Which version, is it the official version? Is it the TDC version? Is it the Tourist Development Cooperation version? Which version? So we need to be uh... to be uh to not to have what we call an essentialist notion of culture. Because it has to be deconstructed... which version... how was it built up. And how was how is this version built up?

She also encourages the students to give their feedback, giving them the opportunity to talk about their life experiences in relation to the experiences privileged in the text that they are reading and indirectly telling them their voices need to be articulated.

Excerpt 8:

Right. I will move over to you all. Can you all uh each one of you take turns...to see how much you have got out f it.

... Like someone said generally teachers are boring because they actually uh they preserve the social order... What do you all think?

Uh... tell me why.

Okay. Who wants to take on the next bit?

Okay. Alright. Uh... SI you want to put in something there?

Finally, the teacher also suggests that students take action and transform knowledge, as this extract illustrates:

Ya. You can actually put a little clip of the Dead Poets Society if you like in your....(student) reflection.

This encourages the students to consider different types of medium as their response to represent their thinking so that the print media is not unduly advantaged. The representations of meanings in diverse forms may allow for perspectives that the printed word may not capture as well.

What we would like to emphasize here is that CLA pedagogy does not treat literacy events, such as classroom practices as isolated events “that are disconnected from critical knowledge production. Critical moments in classroom interactions and practices are moments where “possibilities ‘of creating new knowledges and new ways of interacting’ with texts” (Koo & Kalminderjit, 2009, p. 348) are captured, reflected, and negotiated between learners and teachers. Teachers may relate and explore a broader out of text issue in classroom teaching by engaging students with critical moments, which may lead them towards self actualization of “readers’ personal and social, cultural and economic

goals” (Koo, 2007, p.11). Critical moments from teacher talk are to help scaffold student’s

critical thinking to take up further along the journey. Some of these ideas are taken up during discussion in subsequent sessions and/or are given comments afterwards. The teacher emphasizes the need to build a greater literate awareness of language choice around one’s meaning-making. In exploring the idea that language as a precondition and outcome of cultural processes (Lankshear et al., 1997), Zee a student in the classroom interrogates the inter-relationship among language, meaning and self-awareness. She comments that it is “*not a chicken/egg first issue*”. She is uncertain about the idea that suggests that language is a precondition for a meaning-maker to experience and create “*meaning*” and have the “*awareness of life*”. However, she seems to agree with this idea when she relates this to her own observation, where she finds “*people who do not feel anything about their language or culture so zombified*”. Here, Zee’s active engagement with her own life experiences and values in relation to the ‘new’ ideas that are being discussed by the writers of the references and the teacher indicates how scaffolding can be built upon where teacher stretches the student’s knowledge further without necessarily providing all the answers as no teachers would have ‘all’ the answers and solutions.

Throughout this process, Zee becomes conscious of what critical theorists termed the ‘third’ space of meaning, conjunction and contestation (Gee, 1996). She realizes that she belongs to the space that is arguably, in-between diverse cultures, variously positioned by gatekeepers, and yet choosing to decide where she wishes to stand, with its attendant benefits, risks and consequences. Perhaps this increased consciousness will help Zee become more sensitive to the ambiguity and challenges of being multilingual and pluricultural, a non-essentialized position which challenges easy description when it comes to political meaning-making and the writing of texts. Refer to Fig. 1 for an illustration of Zee’s critical meaning-making.

The image shows a handwritten student reading log titled "Language & Literacy: Reflective Log" dated 3/8/09. The student is Zee, and the log is for a reading by Lankshear, C. et al. (1997) from "Changing Literacies". The log is divided into two columns: "Main arguments:" and "At once reminds me of the definition of lang, cult & comm fr. prev. Sem: → lang & culture & comm r inextricably linked, linked in multivays. BUT the 'broker' concept is new." The student has written several notes and reflections, including "value of culture DrK: not self-evident, not essential: How was the dominant view imposed?", "The human creation. Radical shift fr. common assumptn, where cult is what one is born into (ethnic, way of life) or what one has to acquire (cult of studying, academic, high cult)", "seen thru 'a keyhole' how about multiple keyholes?", "VERY HARD TO DEFINE", "Cult = what? Discourses = how of human life?...", "ways we produce & interact w/ cult?", "包就是空, 空就是包", and "unemployability (Dr K)". The log is annotated with pink and purple lines and boxes. Callouts point to various parts of the log: "Student extracting main arguments from the assigned reading" points to the "Main arguments:" column; "Student's engagement of her primary life world" points to the top right; "Highlighting teacher's input" points to the "value of culture" note; "Expressing ambivalence" points to the "VERY HARD TO DEFINE" note; and "Connecting with vernacular life-world" points to the Chinese proverb "包就是空, 空就是包".

Figure 1: Example of student Zee's summary and critical reflections in her reading log

Conclusion

What is apparent from the focus of the analysis of the teacher talk with a comparatively smaller extract of student reflections is the teacher's knowledge base (from knowledge of the discipline to her world view and her understanding of the local contexts), her vast experience, the eloquence of her speech and how passionately she shares with the students this knowledge and experience.

In the context of Higher Education, to encourage critical awareness among students, what is apparent is that knowledge in the content features of the discipline is not enough; the teacher needs to be able to relate the world of theories to the global and local contexts, to help students question the conventionalities of the world at large and their immediate world. The challenge for lecturers is not simply to be knowledgeable in the content area but also to be able to make CLA a part of his/her pedagogic purpose so that students may

be empowered to make meanings as they learn to inhabit a critical space of learning which may lead to a better and inclusive world for all.

Indeed, according to Lankshear and McLaren (1993, p. xviii), to be able to “read” the world one must “rewrite the world”:

In addressing critical literacy we are concerned with the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices and conceptions of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order. Among other things, critical literacy makes possible a more adequate and accurate “reading” of the world, on the basis of which, as Freire and others put it, people can enter into “rewriting” the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally.

Acknowledgement

This study is one of three related studies on critical literacy undertaken through Strategic Plan Research (Pelan Tindakan Strategik) funding provided generously by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

References

- Allen, J., Fabergas, V., Hankins, K., Hull, G., Labbo, L. & Lawson, H. (2002). PhOLKS lore: Learning from photographs, families, and children. *Language Arts*, 79(4), 312-322.
- Ambigapathy Pandian. (2007). Literacy skills in higher education: A comparative study between public and private university students. In Sarjit Kaur, Morshidi Sirat & Norzaini Azman. (Eds.), *Globalisation and internationalisation of Higher Education in Malaysia*. Penang: University of Science Malaysia Press.
- Facione, A. (1990). *The Delphi report. Executive summary. Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes and educational assessment and instruction*. CA: The California Academic Press.
- Freire P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies*. London: The Falmer Press.

- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning A critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Koo Y. L., Kalminderjit Kaur & Siti Hamin Stapa. (2010). Critical literacy: Teacher reflections on reading practices in Malaysian classrooms. In Ambigapathy Pandian, Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail & Sunny Tan Siew Bek (Eds.), *Forging unity amidst diversity: From classroom to beyond*. Pulau Pinang: University of Science Malaysia Press.
- Koo Y. L. & Kalminderjit Kaur. (2009). Critical literacy: Teacher reflections on reading practices in Malaysian classrooms. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Literacy, LITCON 2009*. Literacy: Forging pathways to unity, 348-357. Berjaya Georgetown Hotel, Penang, Malaysia.
- Koo Y. L. (2008). The politics of cultural production and meaning-making in ELT: exploring a reflexive pedagogy of pluriliteracy in higher education (HE). In Z. Moris, H. Abdul Rahim, & S. Abd. Manan (Eds.), *Higher Education in the Asia Pacific: Emerging trends in teaching and learning* (pp. 234-257). Penang, Malaysia: IPPTN/ National Higher Education Research Institute (NAHERI) and University of Science Malaysia Press.
- Koo Y. L. (2003). Socioculturally-oriented critical reading in the learning space: empowering multicultural/lingual voices. In Ambigapathy Pandian, Gita Chakravarthy & Kell, P. (Eds.), *New literacies, new practices, new times* (pp. 128-138). Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press.
- Koo Y. L. (2001). Reading as social practice. In Marlyna Maros & Quah C. K. (Eds.), *Writings in applied linguistics*, Festschrift in Honour of Associate Professor Dr. Abdul Aziz Idris (pp. 53-64). School of Language studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. New York: Routledge.
- Lanshear, C., Gee, J. P., Knobel, M., & Searle, C. (1997). *Changing literacies*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Lankshear, C. & McLaren, P. (1993). *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis, and the postmodern*. Washington: SUNY Press.
- Lemke, J. (1990). *Talking science: Language, learning and values*. NJ: Ablex.
- Matthews, B. (2006). *Engaging education: Developing emotional literacy, equity and co-education*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

- Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE). (2007a). *National higher education action plan 2007-2010: Triggering higher education transformation*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.
- Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE). (2007b). *Pelan strategik pengajian tinggi negara melangkaui tahun 2020 (National higher education strategic plan)*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Reich, R. B. (1992). *The work of nations: Preparing ourselves for 21st century capitalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Scriven, M. & Paul, R. (2003). Defining critical thinking. National Council for excellence in critical thinking instruction. Foundation for Critical Thinking. Dillon Beach, CA. (Online) Retrieved 12 October 2009, from <http://www.criticalthinking.org/page.cfm?PageID=410&CategoryID=51>
- Shor, I. (1992). Education is politics: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. In McLaren, P. & Leonard, P. (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter* (pp. 25-36). New York: Routledge.
- Street, B. (1998). New literacies in theory and practice: What are the implications for language in education? *Linguistics and Education*, 10(1), 1-24.
- Street, B. V. (1995). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Postgraduate Guidebook (*Buku Panduan Siswazah*, Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan). (2008). Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- UNESCO Education Sector, Position Paper. (2004a). The plurality of literacy and its implication for policies and programmes. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (Online) Retrieved 4 April 2012, from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>
- Wallace, C. (1988). *Learning to read in a multicultural society*. Cambridge: Prentice Hall International.

About the authors

Koo Yew Lie (Ph.D) is Professor of language, culture and literacy in multilingual contexts at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Recent publications include *A Cross-country Study on Research Students' Perceptions of the Role of Supervision and Cultural Knowledge in Thesis Development* (with Sue McGinty & Mahnaz Saedi, 2010), Routledge.

Wong Fook Fei is a senior lecturer at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics. She has researched and published in the areas of language literacy, TESL and language testing.

Kemboja Ismail (Dr.) is a senior lecturer at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She teaches English language courses and Academic Writing at undergraduate and post-graduate level. Her research areas include academic writing, portfolio for assessment, reflective learning, and technology in teaching and learning.