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# Revising identities as writers and readers through critical language awareness

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*ABSTRACT: This study investigated how the critical language awareness (CLA) framework can be implemented with an emphasis on writing and how English-language learners respond to CLA. The findings suggest that the students directed their attention away from the sole emphasis on reading for learning vocabulary and grammar to other dimensions of texts and identity possibilities as readers. In addition, the students responded favorably to the identity positions of writers made available through the writing implemented in this research. Furthermore, they were able to understand linguistic features as more than vocabularies and grammatical structures but also serve ideological purposes. However, the results also showed that the students considered the constructed nature of texts in relation to author intentionality and ignored how writers and readers both function within Discourse communities. These findings reveal the necessity for a more explicit discussion with students of the consequences of a critical awareness of texts for them as writers. The pedagogical implications from the research are discussed.*

*KEYWORDS: critical language awareness, critical writing, writer identities*

## INTRODUCTION

Language educators have, in recent years, increasingly incorporated critical perspectives in their classrooms. Various critical theories, such as critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness, have often been used interchangeably as referring to the critical framework. These critical perspectives are all concerned with the potential of language and education for social justice purposes, but are dissimilar in their theoretical tenets and therefore emphases (Huang, 2011a). The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of an implementation of the critical language awareness (CLA) framework for English-language learners.

The development of CLA drew from the traditions of Language Awareness and Critical Discourse Analysis. (See Clark & Ivanic, 1999 and Wallace, 1999 for an overview.) It emphasises reading and writing as social practices and texts as ideologically laden. In particular, CLA differs from other critical theories in its emphasis on linguistic features and their discoursal functions, that is, how power is exerted in texts through the purposeful use of linguistic features to construct particular world-views of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality (Fairclough, 1989). The advantages of possessing critical language awareness have been recognised for example, Alim, 2010; Bolitho, Carter, Hughes, Ivanic, Masuhara, & Tomlison, 2003; Reagan, 2006). Scholars have also continually recommended ways to conduct critical text analysis (for example, Case, Ndura & Righettini, 2005) as well as ways to promote CLA in second and foreign language classrooms (for example, Cots, 2006; Wallace, 1992, 1999; Wharton, 2011). However, few studies have documented students' learning as a result of actual classroom implementations of CLA.

Furthermore, most research concentrates on CLA in relation to reading and overlooks the possibility of writing to contribute to CLA. The few exceptions include Janks (1999), who explored CLA journals and their potential for the construction and reconstruction of identities, and Granville (2003), whose students engaged in multiple readings of texts from the CLA perspective and kept journals that documented the trajectories of their reflections. Janks and Ivanic (1992) recommend critical writing activities in which students consider the power relations inherent in various genres of texts as well as the power dynamics involved in diverse discourse conventions of writing and different varieties of English. They also suggest rewriting others' texts from a range of perspectives and positions to help students gain experience and reflection on their identities as writers. These activities, however, only draw attention to the macro level of language construction and not the micro level. The former, as Janks and Ivanic (1992) explain, includes "the selection of a particular language, a particular variety of that language, a particular genre or mixture of genres, and a particular register or mixture of registers" while the latter focuses on "the selection of specific linguistic items and linguistic structures in a selected order" (p. 325).

This research puts into practice a CLA component in the English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classroom and is concerned with the implementation of CLA from a writing perspective that focuses on the micro level of language construction. The purpose of this study is twofold. First, the study focuses on the role of writing in developing students' critical awareness of the constructed nature of texts. Second, the study examines how English-language learners understand reading and writing as a result of critical language awareness. The following questions guide this research:

- How can CLA be implemented with an emphasis on writing?
- How do English-language learners respond to CLA?

## CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

CLA is concerned with the awareness of language as social practice and how language is intricately tied to power relations. It also emphasises the role of linguistic features in the construction of texts of particular ideological positions. Janks (1991) relates CLA to the philosophical foundation of language education and argues:

> If the study of language is to empower students it should enable them to say what they mean in order that their voices might be heard. It should also enable them to hear what is said and what is hidden. (p. 191)

In order to discern "what is said and what is hidden", it is necessary to understand texts as constructed discourse and that readers can take up not just one but various subject positions with texts. Janks (2005a) also draws attention to the power relations among texts, writers and their readers. Texts, she states,

> are designed to convey particular meanings in particular ways and to have particular effects. Moreover, they are designed to be believed. Texts work to position their readers; and the ideal reader, from the point of view of the writer (or speaker), is the reader who buys into the text and its meanings. (p. 97).

CLA aims to tease apart a text's design through the focus on the linguistic features and their particular arrangement, that is, how the linguistic selections of a text reflect the purposeful decisions of an author to weave particular ideologies and world-views. Janks (1991) further elaborates that "oppositional reading is made easier, if readers are able to understand how the language of texts contributes to the construction of subject positions for them, the readers" (p. 191). Wallace (2003) explains the goal of oppositional reading as to "uncover the ideological leanings of texts…the manner in which discourses, ambivalent and contradictory as they frequently are, ultimately privilege the interests of certain social groups over others" (pp. 26-27). Thus, the analysis of linguistic features and their functions illuminates texts and their production as a social process, the purpose of which is intentional and ideological rather than natural and neutral, and through which some people benefit while others are disadvantaged.

Linguistic features and their analysis also afford students a different identity in relation to the target language, that is, "the relatively high status role of language analysts who can critique and deconstruct a text, rather than language learners who are reading in order to understand a message" (Wharton, 2011, pp. 228-229). Such analysis is also relevant to language learners in that it puts grammar, a major component of EFL learning, in the context of the politics of language, enabling learners to see how syntax functions not only to serve communication purposes but also to position readers to align with an author's world-view. Kamler (1994) shows, using the example of a newspaper article, that lexical items, such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs can be used to construct specific gender relations. Wharton (2011), using the example of the Statement of Arrangements for Children, a legal form in the United Kingdom, illustrates how linguistic features reveal underlying assumptions and power relations in a text. Janks (1991, 2005a) provides the most informative demonstrations of ways to critically analyse texts for their ideological functions through linguistic features such as lexical items, modality, voice, article, tense and sequencing of information. However, she reminds us that

> De-construction is itself not a neutral or objective analysis. It is an interpretation which is inevitably affected by the position or positions of the person doing the de-constructing. It is however a process which enables readers to resist texts, to read *against* texts rather than *with* them. (Janks, 1991, p. 193)

While it is important to learn "how" to conduct linguistic analysis of texts, it is also crucial to make clear to students "why" such analysis needs to be conducted. Wharton (2011) reminds us that analysis of a text's linguistic choices should be coupled with the emphasis of its purpose, that is, to examine whose interests are served by a text and whose are silenced and marginalised. Cots (2006) also argues for the importance of examining linguistic features, not as an end in itself but in order to recognise how they "contribute to a global meaning representing a particular ideological position" (p. 338). Other scholars also note the need to recognise linguistic analysis in the context of its discourse functions. Kamler (1994) cautions against the deconstruction of texts in ways that "locate bias in the individual writer and obscur[e] the more important understanding that all texts are partial and socially produced" (p. 130). In the same vein, Wallace (2003) reminds one that writing is never accomplished in isolation but by members of various discourse communities, and as such, texts are "social and cultural artefacts" (p. 25). In turn, readers can only understand texts from the

perspectives of their multiple "interpretative communities" (p. 25). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind while conducting linguistic analysis that even though individual authors can and do purposefully design texts to construct particular positions of their readers, they are nevertheless influenced and sometimes even constrained by the Discourse communities, in Gee's (1990) sense of the word, in which they operate. The ideological nature of texts is both a function of authorial design as well as a result of discourse contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

### Context of research

This study is a qualitative teacher-inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; 2009) conducted in a university in Taiwan in a general English course for freshmen in which the researcher was the instructor. Based on a placement test, students were divided into four levels for the general English course, and this research was conducted in an advanced level course. Twenty-eight students (6 males and 22 females) were enrolled in the course. The study took place over an 18-week semester during which classes met weekly for a 2-hour period.

Per university guidelines, the general English courses, while focusing on reading, place equal emphasis on the other language skills. Although instructors design their own curriculum and assessment for the advanced level, these courses generally incorporate a commercial textbook and a traditional pen-and-paper examination format. I structured the other component of the course, based on which this study was conducted, to focus on critical language awareness.

To provide an overview of students' English proficiency, the university allows students who achieve a score of 6 on IELTS or a TOEFL-iBT score of 79-80 or equivalent scores on other proficiency tests to waive the freshman general English requirement. However, it is rare, even for students placed in the advanced level course, to attain such a level of proficiency.

English is the major hegemonic foreign language in Taiwan, and one that is promoted by the government and also by private language institutions as providing access to socio-economic and intercultural opportunities. University students in Taiwan undergo 6 years of formal EFL education in junior and senior high schools as well as at least three years, if not more, in elementary schools. In addition to formal education, affluent parents may enrol their children in bilingual Chinese and English or even English-only kindergartens.

In formal EFL education at the secondary level, the curriculum guidelines have been based on the communicative language approach for over a decade, although remnants of the grammar-translation method are still prevalent. In the teaching of grammar in Taiwan, the aspects most commonly emphasised are tense, voice, modality and the structure of clauses. Linguistic features are not discussed for their ideological implications.

## Data sources

Data for this study included students' exercise works compiled during the semester, an end-of-semester reflection paper, and my researcher journal. The researcher journal consisted of my documentation of the weekly plans for the course, notes after each class session of my observations and reflections, and notes of my preliminary thoughts on the students' work as I collected and read them throughout the semester. In the end-of-semester reflection paper, the students reflected on their experiences with CLA, as well as their consequent understanding of reading and writing. Below I provide a brief description of how CLA was implemented and the students' exercise works collected in order to explain the data sources.

I began by introducing the students to the CLA framework and the ideological nature of linguistic features using a variety of texts, including fairy tales, an article taken from *Time* Magazine, a passage from *Marie Claire* magazine as discussed by Wallace (2003), and a UNHCR poster as discussed by Janks (2005a, 2005b). Then, aspects of writing were included in the activities that centred on the following materials: A short passage entitled *Why I Fired My Secretary*, an interview article of the teen pop idol Selena Gomez in *Seventeen* Magazine, and one thread in an episode of the TV show *Modern Family*. Students' exercise works related to these three texts were collected as part of the data for this study. The ways in which writing was incorporated will be elaborated in the next section. The final exam exercise asked the students to deconstruct the linguistic features in a short passage from *You* magazine as discussed by Janks (1999). I describe it as an exercise because I provided students ample scaffolding to aid their analysis of this text. However, I included this exercise as a part of the final exam to differentiate it from the multiple activities that the students had worked on during the semester.

## Data analysis

In conducting the analysis, I considered the data from different directions in relation to the two research questions. First, in order to explore the ways in which CLA can be implemented with an emphasis on writing, I focused on my researcher journal and the students' exercise works. Using these sources of data, what emerged was not only a narrative of how aspects of writing were combined into the implementation, but insights were gleaned from how the students responded to and engaged with each of the exercises.

In order to address how learners responded to critical language awareness, I focused on the students' reflections papers, my researcher journal, and the students' exercise works. I analysed these data following holistic, detailed, and selective approaches (Van Manen, 1990). Data were first examined holistically. That is, I read all of the students' reflection papers and my researcher journal to gain a reflective understanding of the course as it was conducted in relation to students' final thoughts of their learning. I then read each of the students' exercise works in the order they were collected in comparison with their reflection papers to understand each students' trajectory of learning.

Next, the focus was narrowed down to the final reflection papers for further detailed analysis. First, the papers were organised into four piles. One was a compilation of

each of the students' papers intact. The other piles consisted of the papers as separated into the three sections of experiences, understanding of reading, and understanding of writing, following the three areas I had asked the students to reflect on. In other words, there was one pile of data that included all of the students' discussion of their experiences, one pile that included all of the students' discussions of their understanding of reading, and another pile on their understandings of writing. Each of these four piles was coded, after which I compared the codes from the latter three piles with the codes for the first pile. In addition, using the researcher journal, I reflected on whether these codes were consistent with my observations during the semester. The back and forth process during this comparison enabled deeper understanding of the data and allowed for patterns to emerge and the codes to be combined into themes. I then reread the students' exercise works and reflection papers again in relation to the themes to ensure that the themes encompassed the range of perspectives as reflected in all the data.

Finally, the selective approach enabled me to decide on examples from the students' work as illustrations of each of the themes. This process also allowed for the refinement of the themes so that they were able to represent the range of the students' responses to CLA.

## INCORPORATING WRITING INTO CLA PRACTICES

The purpose of this research was to explore an actual classroom implementation of CLA that highlighted the role of writing as well as how students responded to CLA. Thus, the discussion focuses on classroom practices and their consequences rather than providing examples of ways to analyse texts, as a number of scholars have already successfully demonstrated. In addition, the goal was not to force the students to become expert critical discourse analysts, but to help them develop a critical awareness of language that encompasses an understanding of texts as social and ideological practices, the nature of which can be deconstructed, in part, through their linguistic features. In order to achieve this goal, opportunities were designed for students to experience and experiment with multiple subject positions as writers.

I first discussed with the students the macro aspect of texts as Discourse (Gee, 1990) before proceeding to the micro aspect of textual choices on the part of the author, including linguistic features such as lexical items, tense, voice, modality, articles and sequencing of information. I heeded the reminder of Janks (1991), who pointed out that such an approach "is cumulative: students learn to use linguistic features one by one for de-constructing texts and the number of features that they can use accumulates" (p. 193). Several texts were used, beginning with a passage entitled *Why I Fired My Secretary*, which can be easily found online, followed by an interview article of Selena Gomez from the September 2009 issue of *Seventeen* magazine, and finally one segment from season 2 episode 1 of the TV show *Modern Family*.

### Writing for discussion

The first text, *Why I Fired My Secretary*, was used in order to explore with students the sociocultural assumptions that underlie shared understandings of a text, including, in this case, assumptions of birthdays, the role of a secretary, and the relationship

between a secretary and her male superior. The text was conducive to such a discussion because, even though not explicitly stated, readers can easily comprehend what was implied in the ending, including my students, who either laughed or smiled awkwardly. Through this text, I also introduced the concept of ideal readers and preferred readings as well as demonstrated what it means to read with and read against texts.

The students were each randomly assigned one of the roles of the secretary, the narrator and his wife, and were asked to write down how each of these roles would respond to the events described in the text. I then collected the students' responses, put up a few on the board in random order, and asked the students to identify which roles the responses belonged to. The students had no difficulty making correct identification, and the class discussed which aspects of the responses clued them in on which people made them.

Next, I asked the students to take up the role of the narrator and compose a short passage demonstrating how he would explain the events to his children and to his wife, respectively. I then collected the students' writing, put up a few on the board in random order, and asked them to identify to whom each example of explanation was directed. Again, the students had no difficulty, as those that reacted to the children mainly tried to explain the man's actions as resulting from an accident, such as spilling a drink on his clothes during lunch and was therefore changing into new clothes, while the reactions to the wife involved making excuses for his behaviour, such as being ignored on his birthday, and begging the wife for forgiveness after professing his love. Finally, the class discussed whose interests are served and whose are marginalised by such a text, the sociocultural assumptions of which (mostly relating to gender roles and also male-female superior-subordinate relationships) are so readily acknowledged and even accepted by readers who are presumably from a culture different from that of the intended readers.

The students' writings were similar when responding as different roles (that is, the secretary, the narrator and his wife) and reacting to different people (that is, his children and his wife). Based on this similarity, the class explored the ways in which sociocultural contexts influence what writers write and how readers read. In other words, the fact that the text can be written (in English) and comprehended in similar ways across cultures (by Taiwanese English-language learners) demonstrates that texts are "social and cultural artefacts" (Wallace, 2003, p. 25). Specifically, this text is an artefact of a period in history when particular gender relations are dominant, and that the author(s) and readers belong to similar global discourse communities, because what is implied in the ending of the text was never in question by this class of readers.

Making use of the students' writing (that is, responding as different roles and reacting to different people) for discussions of how Discourse conditions the types of texts written and the ways the texts are read served another purpose: to create a circumstance through which the students experienced writing as a writer rather than writing as correction. Generally, EFL writing is a long process that involves several stages of correction. That is, learners write essays, which they submit for peer-review (peer correction) and then teacher correction, mainly focusing on vocabulary and grammar usage as well as organisation, after which they make revisions (self-correction). Even when students' work is put up on the board for whole-class

discussion, they mostly serve as examples of common mistakes and samples of correction. In this research, using the texts the students composed to explore the sociocultural assumptions underlying another piece of text recognised the students as real writers whose writing serves communicative purposes rather than as student-writers whose sole purpose is to be corrected and graded.

**Writing as equals**

Discussion of the Selena Gomez interview article first centred on the ideological nature of texts, specifically, how texts and their authors position readers, and later, focused on the effect and consequences of linguistic features. The article consists of two sections: a two-paragraph introduction and then a question and answer segment where Gomez answers the interviewer's questions. Before distributing the text, I removed Gomez's answers to the questions, as the focus of the activity was on author intentionality. I also removed the final sentence in the introduction as this sentence served as a bridge between the introductory paragraphs and the interview questions, which presented very disparate emphases. I then cut up and made copies of the two sections and gave each randomly to students in one half of the class.

The students who received only the two-paragraph introduction were asked to write their own follow-up interview questions, while the students who received only the questions were asked to write a one-to-two paragraph introduction. Then, the students each paired up with a classmate who worked on a different task so that they could combine their two sections into a coherent article. However, the students found a discontinuity between their two sections. In other words, while the students' introduction focused solely on relationship issues, their interview questions were more broadly structured to include the three dimensions of her family life, her career and her relationship issues.

To explore this inconsistency, the class referred to the source article and discovered that the introduction painted a portrait of Gomez as a teenager who deals with parental restrictions (that is, getting yelled at by her mother for spending too much money on clothes), family problems (that is, her parents' divorce), relationship drama (that is, a public break-up with her boyfriend) and career plans (that is, embarking on a singing career after a successful start with acting), implying to the readers that these issues would be addressed in the interview. However, the final sentence in the introduction made a sharp turn and foreshadowed the interview questions as only focusing on her relationship experiences, essentially rendering the other parts of Gomez's life irrelevant.

The activity served to draw students' attention to the discrepancy between the introduction to the interview and the actual interview questions. The purpose was to consider the author's intentions and assumptions in her structuring of the article. The class discussed the intentions in the author's organisation of the introduction as to present a girl-next-door type of pop idol, whose life teenage girls can readily relate to, as well as the author's assumptions of the readers of this teen magazine as only having interest in boy drama, as evidenced by the focus of the interview questions. This then led to a conversation of the ideal readers of this particular text and the possible consequences of the text for teenage girls who are different from the image of the teenager as constructed by this text.

We also explored whose interests were served by such an article. The issue of benefit and disadvantage is more complicated in this text, and therefore required a more extensive discussion than in an article such as *Why I Fired My Secretary*, a text from which men benefit more than women. Briefly, even though the article marginalises teenage girls who are not concerned with pop idols or who are not solely interested in the relationship status of their idols, those teenage girls who fit into the author's intended readership are also victims of a culture that often constructs women as shallow or lacking in intelligence. Finally, I directed the students' attention to the linguistic features, focusing particularly on authorial voice and especially the linguistic features that set the author up as having enough authority on this teen idol to interview and write about her.

In addition to facilitating the discussion of author intentionality, there was another purpose in asking the students to compose the introduction and the interview questions. By comparing how the students composed (half) the text to how the author composed the text, the students were positioned on equal footing with the text's author. In other words, not only was the purpose to explore how the intentions of an author affect how texts are written, but also, to explore how different authors approach their works differently. For example, the students' writing revealed that they were authors whose intention was to ensure that their article was organised logically, while the text's author was likely more concerned with attracting readers to the article and establishing her authority. By comparing how the students as authors composed (half) the text with how the author of the article composed the text, the students were very much positioned as real authors, on an equal footing with the author of this text.

**Writing with conscious choices**

Finally, it is also important for the students to experience the intentional construction of texts in the way that other writers have. This was the backdrop to the TV show watched and the subsequent exercise. In this episode, one of the characters, Phil, a salesman by profession, tries to sell his family car. He believes himself to be a master salesman and lets the audience in on the secret to his success, which is that "the art of the sale is all about what you leave out". Based on this guiding principle, he advertises the car as having the following three desirable attributes: "'83 classic wagon; they don't make 'em like this anymore; enjoyed for many years by one happy family." The statement suggests the car to still be in good condition and with high value. However, the true condition of the car was what he neglected to reveal in his advertisement. Here is the comparison as Phil explained: "'83 classic wagon → tough to find parts; they don't make 'em like this anymore → for legal reasons; enjoyed for many years by one happy family → of raccoons." The ensuing activity was based on the example of Phil's revelation.

I asked the students to emulate Phil and compose a chart in which they list in one column 5 negative attributes of a person they know and then, in the other column, positive descriptions for the 5 negative attributes. The goal was to draw the students' attention to the intentional use of vocabulary and grammatical structures in order to better understand and relate to what other authors do when the students analyse others' texts. In other words, the purpose of this writing was to allow the students an

experience with making informed decisions about which words and grammar to use or not to use in order to highlight particular ideas.

An additional objective with this exercise was to offer the students another subject position as writers. In addition to being text analysts who deconstruct what other authors have written, the exercise positions the students as writers who have the ability to write in the same way as how they are taught real authors write, that is, making conscious choices with words and grammar in relation to their varying purposes with a text.

### Summary

The goal of this research was to develop a critical awareness of language that enables the students to approach texts with the understanding that writing is not just about grammar, vocabularies and organisation, as is often stressed in composition courses and emphasised in rubrics in writing sections of English proficiency tests. Rather, authors have ideological intentions with texts that they can actualise through purposeful construction of linguistic features. The activities were designed based on the assumption that the most effective way to understand author intentionality, in addition to analysing others' texts, was to experience it from the standpoint of a writer how textual construction involves more than considerations for correct grammar, range of vocabularies and logical organisation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Revising identity positions as writers

The lens of writer identities (Ivanic, 1994) allows for the understanding of how students relate to the class discussion of a critical awareness of language. As Park (2013) also argues:

> Providing all writers, whether they consider themselves native, non-native, bilingual, or even multilingual, with opportunities to witness and experience writing as a form of identity (re)construction can become a critical tool in the academy to continue to nurture themselves as legitimate writers and authors. (p. 339)

The identity positions offered to the students through the three writing exercises presented a view of the students, not as learners of the English language but practitioners of the language who are able to employ and control it for their own purposes. To briefly summarise, in the first activity, while exploring texts as "social and cultural artefacts" (Wallace, 2003, p. 25) which need to be understood in the context of Discourse communities, the students were offered the identity position of writing for purposes of communication and discussion rather than for correction and grading. In the second activity, while exploring author intentionality and linguistic features, the students were offered the identity position of a writer whose work is compared to and thus is on equal footing with the writer whose text was being discussed. In the third activity, while experimenting with making conscious choices in relation to words and grammar, the students were offered the subject position of writing in the same way as the writers whose texts are being used to explore critical language awareness.

***Investing in the constructed nature of writing***

The students' reflections[1] were important in understanding the power of the writing exercises on them. In particular, the third activity turned out to have made the greatest impact on the students. They responded positively to this activity, and shared that while they found the exercise to be extremely difficult, it was the most effective in helping them to understand author intentionality and the effect of linguistic features. Five of the students' works are listed as examples in Table 1 below.

| | **Negative** | **Positive** |
|---|---|---|
| **S7** | He is nosy. | He cares much about others. |
| **S8** | He is not so clever. | You can get along with him without pressure. |
| **S13** | He is extremely manipulative. | He has a good leadership. |
| **S22** | He is selfish. | He is good at prioritizing. |
| **S17** | She seldom listens to others' suggestions. | She is quite confident about her own opinions. |

**Table 1. Negative to positive portrayals**

The students found the exercise difficult, most likely because it involved a number of steps. The most direct way for the students to have described an attribute in English is to use the "be" verb with an adjective, as students 7, 8, 13, and 22 have done for the negative portrayal. In the process of finding positive illustrations, the students not only had to first think about how to describe positively an attribute that is negative, but also find the proper vocabulary in English, and then think about ways to phrase it in a grammatically correct sentence. For example, in the positive column, students 7, 8, 13 used general verbs "cares about", "get along", and "has leadership", rather than the most direct form of a "be" verb with an adjective. S17's process seems to have been reversed.

In addition, what students 8 and 17 may not have recognised was that they have probably already euphemised their negative portrayals. That is, by using "is not so clever", S8 has refrained from using "is stupid", and by saying "seldom listens to others", S17 has already euphemised the person's negative traits, which was most likely "stubborn" or "inflexible". Having to come up with a positive portrayal for an already euphemized description added to the difficulty the students experienced.

Although challenged, the students showed investment in this identity position by making connections between this writing and their own experiences. For example, S17 shared:

> The use of words and language is really a kind of art and knowledge. I think that it is important at a certain level in our daily lives to write or talk purposefully. When I am annoyed at someone, it's just about us. Even though I want to complain about that to some person, I don't have to let everybody know what happened between us. Thus, writing or talking purposefully can serve as a solution to this problem. And it can also prove that I am better than the person I don't like because I won't gossip about that in public like he or she does!

[1] For ease of identification, each of the students was assigned a number. For example, S1 denotes the student who was assigned the number one.

As Ivanic (1994) explains, "writing in a particular way means appearing to be a certain type of person," (p. 13), and this is recognised by S17, who suggested that such a perspective of writing is not only an art form, but actually enables her to be the better person in situations of conflict.

While S17 implied that she would actively choose this identity position as a writer, S24's reflection demonstrated that without an explicit discussion of CLA, which "involves the critical discussion of discoursal choices and particularly the way in which they position language users" (Ivanic, 1994, p. 13), learners can be at a disadvantage, not only as writers but also as readers. He revealed:

> I think it is not only interesting but also surprising. I have never thought about this when I was shopping online once. The product that delivered to me is totally different from the description. The only thing I could say is the seller is really good at writing with purpose.

Indeed, discoursal choices, as Ivanic (1994) observes, "is not a matter of free choice among a freely available set of alternative identity-creating discourses" (p. 5); one reason is that "not all discourses are available to all writers" (p. 5). Ivanic discusses the "availability" of discourses in relation to discourses of privilege and also the discourses that are more frequently preferred. In this case, however, S24 showed that at a more fundamental level, especially for EFL students, some discourses may not be "available", merely because they have been kept hidden from the students, such as the discourses of textual ideologies and author intentionality in relation to the English-language, resulting in S24's "surprise".

Several students also shared how difficult the exercise was for them but also how effective it was in demonstrating to them the impact of linguistic features. For example, S8 reflected:

> It was not easy. When I was writing the positive portrayal, it took a lot of time to figure out proper words. However, I finished finally. This work helped me realise that writers can manipulate words, sentences and even grammar to impact our thoughts.

The juxtaposition of the difficulty with the effectiveness of this exercise reveals what has been explained by Ivanic (1994) as the often overlooked relationship between the discoursal construction of writer identities and the technicality of writing:

> The fact that writers are being positioned by their participation in discourses is often, I suggest, a cause of difficulty with writing. When writers feel "stuck", they tend to assume it is something to do with the content of what they are writing. In fact, it may well be that they feel, without always being able to analyse it, uncomfortable with the self which they are projecting as they write. They often find themselves positioned, privately to themselves during the drafting process and then publicly in front of readers, in ways in which they would not wish. (p. 6)

Thus, S8's reflection implies that she may have experienced a certain level of unfamiliarity with or even resistance to the new subject position presented through the exercise, which resulted in her struggle to "figure out proper words". However, she was eventually able to appreciate the new subject position offered, which allowed her to "finally" complete this work and gain a new perspective of what writing involves and what writers can do. In sum, the results have shown that the students were able to

envision themselves as writers in relation to subject positions that require them to compose in ways that are progressively demanding.

***Constructing ideal readers and preferred readings***

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of writing in developing critical language awareness, that is, an awareness of "reading against the text to counterbalance reading with the text" (Janks, 1997, p. 331) and approaching texts with the understanding that much more is involved in textual construction than grammar, vocabularies and organisation. Thus, the activities were designed so that the students experienced, from the perspective a writer, that intentions with texts can be realised through purposeful choices of linguistic features. As the study was focused on developing a critical awareness of the ideological and constructed nature of texts, I did not explore with the students how such an awareness should be translated into their own writing. However, the students came away with the understanding that it is their prerogative as writers to construct preferred readings for their readers and actively mould them into ideal readers.

S5 addressed the importance of subtlety in constructing her readers:

> If I'm an author who is trying to show something to others, I may think about the purpose of my writing and imagine my readers. I think the purpose can't be conspicuous sometimes because the readers may resist the subjective thought. The purpose should be hidden behind the lines and influence the readers quietly.

S27 cautioned of being alert to lexical items, when composing a text for readers of a different stance:

> [Writing] it's to express author's thought into audiences' mind. Basic on this, the one who writes must think twice before determine what word will be shown to the readers; there's especially necessity if you are about writing to people in dissimilar environment.

Similarly, S25 talked of the need to moderate a controversial issue:

> Writing is to convey ideas the writer wants people to know. To achieve this purpose, writers need to pick the words he or she use for the readers carefully. If the topic is sharp, the writer need to make more effort to make the criticism looked tender.

To summarise, these students not only focused their attention on readers who have different assumptions and world-views from those of the author but also considered the subject matter of a text as making a difference in how authors should position themselves and their writing.

Furthermore, S14 understood linguistic features as contributing to the "trap" that authors set up:

> The act of writing involves the use of tense, subject and words. Each of these element all has great effect in persuading the readers…. I must put myself in my readers' own shoes to persuade them in trusting what I want them to trust. Then I will lead them to the trap I set in my article, step by step, they will buy what I want them to without question.

S12 focused on the power of words as a function to "trick" and "force" some readers into submission, although at the same time conceding a limitation with critically aware readers:

> I can trick the readers with the words I use (except those who had ever spent time learning how to read between the lines). Readers may not notice that they are forced to accept my viewpoint while reading the articles.

These two students' indication of "trapping" and "tricking" readers suggests that it may be problematic not to explicitly discuss with the students the implications of critical language awareness for their writing in terms of the privileges and obligations of authors. A later section on pedagogical implications will discuss what these findings signify for classroom practices. In addition, the comment by S12 also illustrates how the students understood reading and writing as two sides of a coin. She implied that familiarity with the CLA framework means not only to write but also to read differently. As a writer, she can "trick" with her words while, as a critical reader, she cannot be tricked by others' words. Norton (2010) explains that "when a learner engages in textual practices, both the comprehension and construction of the text is mediated by the learner's investment in the activity and the learner's identity" (p. 358). That is, understanding of text construction influences text comprehension and vice versa. The next section discusses how the students related to text comprehension as a result of CLA.

**Shifting identity positions as readers**

The students reflected on themselves as venturing into a new identity as critical readers in English. The multifaceted nature of their subject positions echoes Wallace's (2003) observation that "L2 readers do not simply approach texts as foreigners. As with all readers, their identities are complex and interwoven. They come to texts with different identities and different reader roles which shift in the course of reading" (p. 18).

***Critical reading as intellectually desirable***

The students considered the consequences of previously failing to incorporate a critical perspective into their literacy practices. For example, even though the course did not focus on textbooks as sources of material about which to be critical, S2 questioned her previous rapport with them:

> I have never read through an article in the "positive and professional" way that teacher taught us before I entered college. In fact, I was totally controlled by any of the authors in the textbooks during my high school. But I don't think it is too late for me to learn the ability now.

S16 presented a more antagonist view of herself as a reader prior to the course:

> Before I know the concept…I am used to be a stupid reader. I don't know that there might be some mistakes in the books or what the author say might not be true. It seems that I [was] likely to be deceived and get confused.

It is interesting that S16 considered a lack of critical awareness as "a stupid reader", while S2 characterised critical reading to be "professional", implying their belief in

critical awareness as not only indicating intelligence but also a higher-order skill possessed only by a privileged group of people.

S28 reflected on his understanding of texts in English in comparison with Chinese:

> I have never thought that English essays could be written in this way. I do know that authors writing in Chinese would do this, but before this experience, I only focus on the [English] grammar and the meaning of the words, ignoring the true meaning that authors want to express. After this practice, I realise that we are always influenced by the use of different words, tense and voices.

These students demonstrate their desire to construct an identity of themselves as critical English readers. The identity may not be completely novel, as some already relate to it in the Chinese language. However, the subject position is one that portrays them in a better light as intellectuals and professionals.

***Critical reading as responsibility***

The concept of the ideal reader and preferred reading also enabled the students to consider the relationship and dynamics between texts, authors and readers. The students understood that ideal readers are those whose world-views are assumed by the authors and who are able to not only comprehend but also accept the author's propositions. And in turn, the manner through which the ideal readers interpret and accept texts are the preferred readings favoured by authors. The students also pointed out that these are positions of reading detrimental to the readers. For example, S3 explained the types of behaviour that make a reader "ideal" for a text's author and why this might not be the optimal situation for a reader. She stated that the ideal reader

> can totally understand the article, no matter what kind it is. He/she can laugh or cry with the plot of article just as author's original plan. Nevertheless, he/she will never know why author would like to write in this style. It is very dangerous, for we will gradually be a unconscious reader, we read like puppet, let others control our mind.

S9 explained what a preferred reading consists of and the contradictions of the writer-reader relationships, in that the best circumstance for the former is dependent on the worst situation for the latter:

> If an absent-minded reader just casually browses the essay, following the surface article clues, his or her thoughts will be misleading by the author unconsciously. However, this is the perfect condition that most of the authors want their readers to maintain.

Thus, the students described the dynamics between authors and their readers as oppositional, and texts can become a means through which authors achieve the end of dictating to their readers if the readers are not vigilant.

Furthermore, S2 not only considered authors' roles with texts but also readers', acknowledging author intentionality on the one hand while also proclaiming that it is the readers who are responsible for resisting an author's misdirection:

> Authors write skilfully and purposely to make readers identify with their opinion. This behaviour cannot be considered cunning; after all it is reader themselves that fall into the trap and volunteer to believe in authors.

The students also believed in a reader's responsibility in resisting author constructions of the ideal reader and preferred readings of texts, and reflected on their understanding of the specific ways to read against texts. S20 shared a possible method to "enjoy reading without being dominated by writer", including the following stages:

> Before reading an article, we can first notice the title to think what words an author chose and why he/she chose those words. After pondering on the title, we can also aware of linguistic features in the paragraphs such as tense, definite article and voice. When finishing the reading, we can reflect on what are consequences of the information the author gave.

While I did not emphasise the role of the title in class discussions, this student independently arrived at the connection between the pre-reading strategy of focusing on the title as providing clues and eliciting background information often taught to EFL students with the critical awareness of reading as emphasised in this study. She suggested comparing and contrasting the clues provided in the title to the linguistic features found in the main text before considering consequences of the perspectives the author proposed. Her aim was to become "sensible and rational readers, not easily swayed by authors". The student's own association of the reading strategies taught to EFL readers with the focus on linguistic features demonstrates that she had internalised what it means to be a critically aware reader rather than merely regurgitating her instructor's emphasis.

Finally, a few other students divulged their understanding of the function of linguistic features in resisting textual constructions of them as readers. For example, S28 delineated readers' duties:

> Pay attention to the tenses, the voices, and the different words the authors use. Different usage of them often makes different meanings, and authors only choose those which support their argument….but they can be arranged in a way that makes us obviously influenced.

He also accentuated authors' linguistic choices as relating to their purposes, including the formation of a convincing argument as well as the effective persuasion of readers.

These students' views of authors' intentions and reader responsibilities are representative of those of the class. In contrast, only S17 discussed an author's role in making explicit any ideological biases: "I think it is an author's responsibility to write honestly except writing novels….Write carefully and honestly to tell the readers about the author's perspectives, it's not only an author's job but also an author's obligation." The significance of these findings for practice will be further addressed in the section that discusses the pedagogical implications of this research.

**Summary of discussion**

This study investigated how CLA could be implemented with an emphasis on writing and how English-language learners responded to critical language awareness. The nature of the writing implemented in this study provided the students with alternative

writer identities from the subject positions usually made available to learners in EFL classrooms. Of particular significance was the third activity, which enabled the students to experience and experiment with writing as writers who make conscious choices with words and grammar to attain particular purposes. It would be unrealistic to expect that these EFL learners, who were introduced to CLA for the first time, to have become experts at conducting linguistic analysis and de-constructing textual ideologies. Nevertheless, the students were able to understand linguistic features as more than vocabularies and grammatical structures and also serving ideological purposes, even if they still might not be able to readily identify or analyse their functions independently. They were also able to direct their attention away from the sole emphasis on reading for learning vocabulary and grammar to other dimensions of texts and identity possibilities as readers. However, what is problematic is the students' understanding of the ideological nature of texts centered on author intentionality while ignoring how both writers and readers compose and interpret texts in relation to their Discourses communities. Also deserving further exploration is the students' declaration of their purpose in writing as to "trick" and "trap" readers into their own world-views through intentional choices of linguistic features.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

This section addresses the pedagogical implications of the findings. First, the impact of different approaches to CLA is discussed. Then, ways to achieve a balance between the privileges and obligations for EFL learner-writers is considered.

### Two versions of one text

The students' responses suggest that the writing exercise, which required the students to rephrase negative portrayals of a person in positive terms, had the greatest bearing on their understanding of texts. This activity was significant in two ways.

First, the exercise forced the students to think about the effect of their choices of vocabulary and grammatical structures. In other words, it allowed them to experience from a writer's perspective rather than a reader's perspective what Janks and Ivanic (1992) explain in relation to deconstructing texts:

> It is useful to consider the range of options from which a linguistic feature has been selected, thus highlighting what might have been selected but was not. Attention to what was and was not selected is a useful starting point for resistance. The constructedness of texts becomes apparent and this de-naturalises them. (pp. 325-326)

Second, the example given by the salesman, Phil, provides another dimension through which the students were able to consider what Janks and Ivanic (1992) explain as the two sides of a writer's options, specifically, that "choice of one option necessarily implies rejection of other options" (p. 325). In other words, rather than being allowed to only see one side of "options" in published texts that are finished products, and having to make guesses, albeit informed ones, about what the other "options" may be and their hidden intentions, which is what the students are asked to do when analysing published texts, in this instance, the students were able to witness what the concealed "options" were. Phil's example revealed the inner workings of an author's intentions and how they construct texts based on these intentions. Particularly, in this example,

the students were able to experience and consider the effect of the two sets of phrasings on them as viewers, as Phil first shared the published advertisement and then later disclosed the real conditions of the car.

Therefore, without witnessing both the "before and after" products of an author's intentions, merely conducting analyses based on a published text may not be the most effective method for EFL students to learn about the constructed nature of textual practices. Instead, providing two or more possible versions of a text and their effect and consequences on readers may be a more powerful way to introduce the ideological nature of writing.

**Emphasis on texts as discourse**

The findings have shown that the students focused their attention on author intentionality and mostly disregarded the important role of Discourse in considering the constructedness of texts, even though this was highlighted. These results demonstrate the necessity to rethink not only how CLA is introduced to students but also how students are allowed to engage and experience with the different aspects of critical awareness.

In this research, even though texts were approached first from the macro perspective of the sociocultural assumptions embedded in them and then moving to the micro perspectives of linguistic features, the students shared responses similar to the students in Zinkgraf's (2003) study, which did not include an explicit examination of Discourses as contributing to or even determining how people can think and what can be written. Perhaps it was the lack of an exercise such as turning negative portrayals into positive ones based on a "real-life" example as shown in an episode of a popular TV show that impacted the students to the extent that impressed upon and affected their understanding. It is necessary for future research to explore ways to address the nature of discourse communities in relation to the development of a critical awareness of language.

**Rights and responsibilities as writers**

The study found that providing students with alternative identity positions in relation to writing had more impact than merely supporting the students' analysis of texts. The results have shown that the students were eager to move beyond the identity of language analysts and take on identities as writers who are able to write in the ways that authors of the texts they analyse do. Therefore, the students actively took up the subject position of themselves as English-language practitioners, who have at their disposable the ability to decide the ways in which they express their content.

However, it is disconcerting that the students suggested that their goal of writing was to manipulate (for example, trap and trick) readers into submission to their own world-views. Norton's (2010) notions of investment, imagined communities, and identities are helpful in understanding the students' responses. She argues that learners only invest in particular language practices "with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (p. 353). She further explains that learners aspire to "a community of the imagination – a desired community that offers

possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (p. 355) and emphasises that "an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (p. 356). In other words, learners invest in particular language practices, because these practices offer the potential for increased cultural capital and serve as an avenue to an imagined community, which allows the possibility of desired and desirable identity options.

The concept of imagined communities illuminates why, when the students learn about how authors of published texts design linguistic features to effectively conscript their readers into particular world-views, they would logically want to emulate these powerful textual practices, that is, to invest in this identity position as writers, because these are the practices that offer a status of authority and advantage. After all, what could be more liberating for EFL students than to learn how to become writers who effectively persuade and convince their readers in ways that they themselves have been constructed as readers? Thus, as a result of the critical awareness of texts, the students assumed a role that allows them membership of a powerful community of published authors whose texts they try to read, learn from, and now also analyse, often with painstaking effort.

Language educators who draw from on a critical framework are, on the one hand, concerned with providing subject positions that enable students to become conscious language-learners and critical text participants. As Norton (2010) argues:

> If we agree that diverse identity positions offer learners a range of positions from which to speak, listen, read or write, the challenge for language educators is to explore which identity positions offer the greatest opportunity for social engagement and interaction. Conversely, if there are identity positions that silence students, then teachers need to investigate and address marginalising classroom practices. (p. 362)

On the other hand, critical educators are also devoted to promoting practices and discourses that contribute to a more just and equal society. However, could there be contradictions between what benefits EFL learner-writers and what benefits other readers? In other words, could there be a situation in which "the greatest opportunity for social engagement and interaction" for EFL learners as writers is also an identity position that "silences" other readers? This brings to mind a dilemma pointed out by Brown (1999), who raised the following two questions regarding writing pedagogy:

- Do we encourage learners to use what they know to position the reader as they want to and to convey meanings in the way that suits their purposes – just as other writer do?
- Do we encourage learners not to make certain ideological assumptions when they construct text – about gender, race and class and so on? (p. 37)

Although Brown (1999) favours the latter of her two options, I wondered if an ideologically free and neutral piece of text is possible, and proposed the possibility of teaching students to make explicit their ideological leanings in their texts as perhaps more practical (Huang, 2011b). However, based on the results of this study in which the students themselves logically understood the first of the two options raised by Brown as providing cultural capital and a subject position with more power, I doubt whether Brown's suggestion for an ideologically free text or my proposition for an

ideologically transparent text would be accepted by students when recommended by their instructors. As stated earlier, if ideological construction of a text allocates power to the author, then why would English-language learners relinquish that power when they have finally found a way to it?

Or, rather than encouraging EFL learners "not to make certain ideological assumptions" in their texts and thus take away power from them as authors, is it possible to offer examples of texts that promote social justice for marginalised groups even though these texts do not make their ideologies apparent? That is, would it be more feasible to encourage students to always write for social justice purposes, even if they do not choose to make clear their ideological assumptions but employ linguistic features with the aim to constructing ideal readers and preferred readings? Findings from this study cannot offer solutions to this paradox, but they do point out that further research in this area is necessary to explore the implications of CLA for the practice of teaching writing. The results also suggest that especially in EFL contexts but also in general, language educators should approach CLA, not only as a method through which to analyse and engage with a text's ideological underpinnings, but also place emphasis on exploring with students what a critical awareness of language means in terms of an author's obligations.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how writing can contribute to the development of a critical awareness of the ideological nature of texts and the constructed nature of writing. The study is also valuable in that it points out the need to explicitly address the consequences of CLA for how students should approach their own writing. Most importantly, this study has shown that incorporating a CLA framework is significant beyond how the perspective affects what it means to read and write. Rather, it impacts upon students' identity positions. That is, the development of critical language awareness needs to be situated in discussions of identities and should take into account the ways in which students position themselves in relation to the new/critical identity that is offered them.

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