Encouraging Students to Develop Critical Literacy through Analysis of EFL Textbooks Used in Korean Secondary Schools

Nam, Ji-Hyun (Indiana University)

Nam, Jihyun. (2009). Encouraging students to develop critical literacy through analysis of EFL textbooks used in Korean secondary schools. Secondary English Education. 2(1), 41-56.

English textbooks used in Korean secondary schools deal mostly with the social and cultural issues and values of English-speaking countries, especially the U.S. Their content is intrinsically not neutral but ideological because it is based on unequal power relations between the target and native countries. Unless students are able to recognize such problematic content in English textbooks and restructure it in terms of social justice and equity, they might be affected by political and ideological domains outside the classroom. The purpose of the qualitative study reported here was to identify such problematic content in English textbooks through a critical theory lens and to explore the possibility of drawing on critical pedagogy in order to encourage students to develop critical literacy. English textbooks currently used in the 9th grade of Korean schools were analyzed to identify problematic content. Drawing on the identified content, critical literacy pedagogy was applied with three Korean secondary school students. Interviews and video-recordings were employed to gather students’ feedback on lessons. Findings suggest that English textbooks include politically or ideologically problematic content and that critical literacy can be an effective way for students to restructure it in terms of social justice and equity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The belief that North Korea was an enemy country which we must defeat or demolish, not a half of our own country with which we should try to be reconciled and achieve reunification, was an extreme view that I internalized from some of the textbooks which I read as an elementary school student. The example illustrates Auerbach’s (1995) suggestion that students are routinely exposed to politically or ideologically problematic content in learning materials without their awareness. The
content of EFL textbooks could be especially problematic because dealing mainly with social and cultural values of English-speaking countries, they often represent unequal power relations between the target and the native country. Therefore, it is important for students to analyze EFL textbooks through a critical lens in order to realize the extent to which the content may be politically or ideologically biased and thus unfair in terms of social justice.

Most studies on the content of Korean EFL textbooks, however, have focused on the ratio of Western to Korean culture (Hyun & Kim, 2002; Jo, 2001; Kwon, 2002; Pak, 1999). Missing are studies about the content itself, including whether it reflects issues of social justice and equity. The present study highlights the value of critical analysis of English textbooks used in Korea and students’ engagement in critical practices. I will begin by identifying critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Following this, I will analyze English textbooks currently used in the 9th grade of Korean schools to identify problematic content, drawing on Fairclough’s (1992, 1995) method of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I will then describe how I applied critical literacy pedagogy, using content identified in my analysis, with three Korean students studying in a US secondary school.

II. CRITICAL THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

According to Hinchey (1998), critical theory can clarify how a dominated group is taught to take for granted the inequalities of a hierarchy of power and cultural values. In line with this, EFL materials could be shaped by the dominant group to infuse their own cultural values. She illustrates how the dominated group unconsciously comes to take for granted a value system which perpetuates unequal power relationships. For example, students can assume that what they learn from teachers or texts is true although the content underpins the hegemony of a dominant group. English teachers themselves unconsciously transfer such knowledge believing it is valuable while accepting the role of a depositor and withdrawer of knowledge through teaching and testing (Freire, 1970).

Kincheloe (2004) argues that because critical pedagogy is based on a social vision of justice and equality, it locates schooling within a larger social, cultural, economic and political context. It is also based on the belief "Education is inherently political" (p. 8). He suggests that language in critical pedagogy is not a
neutral means to describe the world but "an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used" (p. 55). From these concepts, language used in English textbooks may ideologically mirror the hegemonic ideas of the dominant group.

III. CRITICAL LITERACY

Kempe (2001) maintains that while developing critical literacy, students can resist textual ideologies and recognize social meanings and further actively move their society toward social justice. Kramsch (1993) suggests three concrete roles of teachers in critical literacy practice: a principal in charge of the talk, an animator of students' utterances to bring them into the public sphere, and an author who can make substantive contributions to the overall scaffolding of discussion. Regarding teachers' roles, they could design critical literacy practices for students to employ with English textbooks. Following the procedure suggested by Wallace (2001), the teacher first presents a text which could be problematized. Next, the teacher and students discuss its genre. Then the students can scrutinize it, especially locating it within social, cultural, economic, and political domains. Of course, CDA can be used to enhance the students' critical analysis. Finally, they can share their interpretations with others, producing multiple perspectives.

From the various critical perspectives, it is assumed that because English textbooks used in Korean secondary schools are affected by unequal power relations between Korean and Western countries, especially the US, the content reflecting social and cultural issues or values is intrinsically not neutral but ideological. Further, unless students are enabled to recognize such problematic content in English textbooks and restructure it in terms of social justice and equity, they might be affected by political and ideological domains outside the classroom. Because students are unconsciously located in a vulnerable position and teachers are responsible for transferring problematic knowledge and values to their students, I embarked upon the current study. The purpose of the study is to identify problematic content in English textbooks through a critical lens and to explore the possibility of drawing on critical pedagogy in order to encourage students to develop critical literacy. The research questions are as follows:
1. What problematic content reflecting unequal power relations between Korea and Western countries is identifiable in English textbooks used in Korean secondary schools?
2. How do the participants describe their experience of the critical literacy practice of analyzing English textbook passages for problematic content?
3. What long-term impact does critical literacy practice have on participants' responses to textbook content?

IV. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

Of six Korean students who had studied in Korean secondary schools and now attended the same US secondary school, three female students volunteered to participate in this study. Kain, Hana, and Jusun (all names are pseudonyms) were all in the 11th grade. Kain had lived in the US from age four to eight and currently six months for a total of five and a half years. Hana and Jusun had lived in the US for two and a half years and one year respectively. Whereas Kain and Jusun had attended 7th through 10th grades in Korea, Hana had left Korea right after the first semester of the 9th grade.

2. Procedure

The current study includes textbook analysis and action research. Through the lens of CDA, I analyzed the reading sections of eleven English textbooks used in the 9th grade of Korean schools. Six reading passages (see APPENDIX 1) were identified so that the participants would use them as reading materials in critical literacy practice. Table 1 shows titles of the six selected reading passages and what makes their content problematic in terms of CDA.
<Table 1> Selected Reading Passages and Their Problematic Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading passages #</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Problematic features</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Walt Disney</td>
<td>Genre: An advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Presidents’ day in the United States</td>
<td>Foregrounding: US dominance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The shepherd and the princess</td>
<td>Representation: Unequal gender relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Inho’s e-mail from London</td>
<td>Presupposition: Unequal relations between two groups of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Miri’s first trip abroad</td>
<td>Foregrounding and backgrounding: Unequal power relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drawing on the identified content, I undertook critical literacy pedagogy with the three participants, using the "instructional model of critical literacy" (p. 6) developed by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2007). According to the model, critical social practices consist of four interwoven dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, such as problematizing our common life through critical lenses; Interrogating multiple viewpoints, concerned with understanding issues from multiple perspectives including our own and others’ viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical, such as questioning unequal power relationships; and taking action to promote social justice, such as participating in social action or exercising power through language. The focus of critical literacy practice in this study was on the first two dimensions. The participants were encouraged to problematize their common thoughts about the content and to look at the content from multiple perspectives. We had three meetings, each organized around different reading passages and aims as shown in Table 2.

<Table 2> An Outline of Three Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meetings</th>
<th>Reading Passages</th>
<th>Aims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td># 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>• To introduce critical literacy through the lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• To receive the participants’ feedback on critical literacy practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td># 3 &amp; 4</td>
<td>• To examine to what extent the participants can critically approach other reading passages by themselves based on the previous lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td># 5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>• To examine critical literacy practice has a long-term impact on the participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the first meeting, I obtained information on the participants’ ideas about English textbooks that they used in Korean secondary schools through a written questionnaire (see APPENDIX 2). I then had them read passages 1 and 2 and interviewed the participants individually to gather their evaluations of the content of the passages. The whole interview process was tape recorded. Next, I introduced critical literacy practice to the participants, problematizing the content and providing multiple perspectives. For example, concerning reading passage 1, I showed the participants a web site of introducing aggressive marketing strategies of the Walt Disney, and we discussed the genre. Because reading passage 2 exaggeratedly deals with only the bright side of New York, I also drew on some web sites to keep a balance between the bright and dark sides. Finally, I interviewed the participants individually to receive their feedback on the lesson given in the first meeting video and tape recording the process. At the second and third meetings, the participants read two passages and provided evaluations of the content through the interview while being tape recorded, in the same fashion as at the first meeting. At the end of the third meeting, I interviewed participants to explore what effects the previous experiences of critical literacy practices had had on their literacy during the five-month period between the second and third meetings.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire results showed that while reading English textbooks in their Korean secondary schools, the participants had focused on whether the content is interesting rather than whether it is problematic. Taking into account that the goal of critical literacy is social justice and equity (Janks, 2000) and that it provides individuals with a powerful tool for discourse analysis (Gee, 2001), I looked at each participant individually.

1. Hana

Before experiencing critical literacy practice, Hana dealt with reading passages 1 and 2 on a personal, not on a social level. Regarding the two passages, she stated respectively, "I don’t feel like I read a textbook. It’s more like a research paper."
and "Not interesting facts to everyone!" Critical literacy practice, however, strongly impacted her ideas about the content of English textbooks as described in the following:

First time, I read these two reading passages...Uh, uh...I wasn’t paying attention to the content of Walt Disney and New York. And...After I learned I learned the lesson about the real purpose of this reading passages, and I thought that it’s really sad for people who’s learning in Korea...They don’t know about the negative side, they only know good side.

She viewed reading passage 3 from others' perspectives, not just her own, considering her evaluation of it "When students read this passage, it will effectively give them both differences and similarities between two presidents." Further, she problematized the presupposition of reading passage 4 that royalty ensures female beauty: "Such an old-fashioned story that talks about a beautiful princess and a man with wisdom gives people wrong idea that all the princesses are beautiful." At the third meeting, she used a critical lens to analyze negative implications of a passage as shown in the following:

For the first paragraph, Korean people are treated unequally because British people don’t care about bringing umbrella whether raining or not but Korean people use umbrella. For the second paragraph, it also makes me think of bad images of people who get money from parents. In the very competitive Korean education, Korean students are not allowed to work because they don’t have time. Korean situation is different from British situation.

2. Kain

Kain's feedback on her experience of critical literacy practice described the current problematic situation of English education in Korea, not only indicating the need for prudent selection of the content but also recognizing the importance of critical approaches to it as follows:
Most of teachers in Korea don’t really care about what their students think and what the content is about. They only focus on structures, questions, grades so today’s lesson was very different from other lessons. And about what was showed us was the other side of the two passages about the low wages and Walt Disney and the other one was about New York, the dark side of New York. I thought that the person who is in charge of the passages is so lame...

She actively gave her own voice in evaluating passages 3 and 4, saying “I felt like being rich is not that important” and “It seems ok.” respectively. Her change from a passive reader to an active analyst was obvious in her evaluations of reading passages 5 and 6: “I don’t understand what the sentence I think this kind of environment has made British people strong means. Also I don’t understand what made British people strong. Why using umbrellas is related to being strong.” As an active analyst, she problematized and resisted the description of British people.

3. Jusun

“This time is very interesting to me, because I never thought about content of English books. Also I’m surprised about Korean education. I never thought about that” was Jusun’s feedback on the first critical literacy practice that she engaged in. Whereas she evaluated reading passage 3 on a personal level in the same vein as passages 1 and 2, she problematized passage 4 as shown in her statement, “When I read this passage, it was easy for me to understand, because I many times heard similar stories as this story. So I like this passage I mean when we learn English, somebody can have wrong idea on the folklore but I like it.” The last sentence, including “wrong idea on the folklore,” showed that she tried to link the personal with the social level. At the same time, she showed a conflict between looking at the content in terms of social justice and her personal interest. Regarding passage 5, she said, “I think this is not like real mail to person. I mean, in our reality we didn’t explain that much in mail. Inho is not like Sora’s friend because the content is not good and real for mail between friends.” By pointing out that the content was inappropriate for friends in authentic communication, she
problemazted unrealistic content on a social level. On the other hand, she showed her preference for passage 6, saying “I like this reading more than the first. The story is very hopeful, and I like Miri’s story of experience.”

VI. CONCLUSION

One limitation lies in the small number of participants in this study. Moreover, critical literacy encourages participants to view an issue from multiple perspectives and this study produced fairly similar, though sometimes different, perspectives among the participants. Although it seems risky to generalize ideas from the study, some ideas could be drawn as implications for the EFL class. First, as demonstrated through three meetings, critical literacy is not a tool to critically look at something but rather to build up the participants’ critical stance, which finally enables them to do so. Next, it was evident that the impact of critical literacy practice on the participants was not just strong so that the participants could practice critical literacy by themselves but also long-term so that they might keep the critical stance for a long time. Finally, as observed in the study, critical literacy by its nature encourages multiple perspectives and one participant could therefore take a different critical stance from others toward the same issue. While engaging in critical literacy practice, the participants could create, share, negotiate, and restructure various perspectives in a democratic way.

REFERENCES


Nam, Ji-Hyun

Newark: International Reading Association.


APPENDIX 1

(Reading Passage 1)

Walt Disney

Walt Disney was born in Chicago on December 5, 1901. Walt was one of five children, four boys and a girl. When he was five years old, his family moved to Missouri, where he spent most of his childhood.

From his early childhood, he showed a strong interest in reading and art. He liked to read Mark Twain’s and Charles Dickens’ books. He especially showed a great gift for drawing. At the age of 11, he met a friend, who shared an interest in plays with him. His friend’s father, who was nice and kind, often took them to plays and movies. Charlie Chaplin in the movies became his model, who greatly influenced his life. While he was working late every night, a mouse became his friend. Suddenly he had a great idea: a mouse in a cartoon. His wife suggested the mouse should be called 'Mickey,' which later appeared in many of his cartoon’s and movies. On December 21, 1937, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was shown in Los Angeles. It was one of the greatest movies in movie history. During the next five years, Walt Disney completed other famous movies such as Dumbo, Bambi, Fantasia, and Pinocchio. When Walt opened Disney land in 1955, his dream of a fun park for children came true.

(Excerpted from Lesson 7 of the Cheongsæk)

(Reading Passage 2)

New York! New York!

New York! What do you know about New York? What’s so special about it? New York is the city that never sleeps, where life moves faster than anywhere else in the U.S. More than twenty million people visit New York every year. Most of them say it is the most exciting city in the world.

New York! New York is the city that offers you the best of everything whether it is theaters, music or sport. Many New Yorkers say that you can buy
everything you want in New York. Take food for an example. There are 17,000 or more restaurants, cafes, and fast food shops in New York. You could eat out in New York every night for fifty years and never visit the same cafe or restaurant twice! And you can find food from every country in the world.

(Excerpted from Lesson 3 of the Kyohaksa B)

(Reading Passage 3)

Presidents’ Day in the United States

George Washington, who is commonly called the father of the United States, was born in 1732. The son of a rich planter, he was privately educated and trained to be a surveyor. But as an officer in the French and Indian Wars, he became interested in military leadership. His military career during the wars was not outstanding. In fact, he was twice responsible for making serious mistakes.

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809 in a log cabin in Kentucky. His parents were uneducated and poor. Although Lincoln eventually became a lawyer, he had very little formal education. But he did have a great mind and great moral strength. He had the courage to do what he felt was right.

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln lived during important periods in American history. Both met the challenge of their times with great courage and wisdom. Washington fought the British army to win independence from England. Less than 100 years later, Lincoln declared war on the southern states to keep the nation from dividing in two. Both Washington and Lincoln are American heroes who represent the ideals which are much admired by the nation.

Washington’s birthday is an official holiday in the U.S.A. It is celebrated on the third Monday in February. In some states, this date is called Presidents’ Day and honors both Washington and Lincoln. In about 30 states, Lincoln’s birthday is an official holiday, celebrated on February 12 or on the first or third Monday in February.

(Excerpted from Lesson 12 of the Kyohaksa A)
(Reading Passage 4)

The Shepherd and the Princess

Once upon a time there was a king who had a very beautiful daughter. Her daughter was so beautiful that everyone was busy singing about her beauty. No one asked for her hand in marriage, for they were greatly afraid of the king. One day, the king said that the princess would marry the one who would bring him three things: a glass of all the waters, a bouquet of all kinds of flowers, and a basket of Ay-ay nuts.

Many men traveled far and wide to strange lands. However, nowhere could they find the things the king wanted. Now among those who sang the beauty of the princess was a shepherd who lived in the country. One day the shepherd heard of the king’s promise and decided to try his luck.

He walked and walked, and far in the distance he saw a light. The shepherd soon had everything he wanted. He arrived at the palace where the king lived. The king called the princess and met the shepherd. “Give me the first one,” ordered the king. “Here is a glass of all waters. It has all the waters, from the rain, the mountains, and the rivers. It comes from the sea, where all the waters come.” The princess laughed long and loudly. Seeing her so happy, the king gave the shepherd the princess’s hand in marriage right then and there.

(Excerpted from Lesson 9 of the Jihaksa)

(Reading Passage 5)

Inho’s E-mails from London

Hi, Sora.

How have you been? How’s the weather there in Korea? Spring’s here now and the weather changes a lot. It didn’t rain this morning. So I didn’t bring an umbrella. But it began to rain in the afternoon. I was worried about how I should return home, but my friends here didn’t seem to care about it. Usually they don’t mind going around in the rain. Of course, there are some students who bring umbrellas with them, but usually they manage without one. It’s probably because
they’ve had to put up with such bad weather since they were children. I think this kind of environment has made British people strong.

I got to learn an important lesson here. Do you know how students here get their pocket money? Some students deliver newspapers early in the morning. I was impressed as these students come from middle-class families. They seem to work hard to make pocket money. I think this makes them spend money wisely. I’m kind of ashamed of myself. I always receive money from my parents. From now on, I think I’ll have to make my own money and learn how to spend money wisely.

Take care. Bye.

Inho

(Excerpted from Lesson 2 of the Joongang)

(Reading Passage 6)

Miri’s First Trip Abroad

My uncle took me to Santa Clara Valley, south of San Francisco. It took three hours to get to the valley, which is also known as Silicon Valley. I was told that in 1939, two young engineers went to work in a garage in the valley. They were the thirty-niners of the 20th century. They developed electronic tools. Santa Clara Valley is the most important center of America’s computer industry. I entered the company where my uncle worked. The company seemed like a college campus. My uncle told me that he usually went jogging at lunchtime. My uncle and other engineers were encouraged to spend their time thinking of new ideas.

I live in a wonderful and challenging world! Tomorrow, I will go back to Korea. I’m dreaming of setting up a new center of computer industry near my hometown. I will be called a twenty-niner a century later! It will be my second trip to an unknown world.

(Excerpted from Lesson 6 of the Kyohaksa A)
APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire

Name:

What do you think about your English textbooks that you learned in Korean middle or high schools? Do you think that they are reliable?

What do you think about the content in the English textbooks?

What kind of content do they remember?

What content was impressive? Why?

What content was good or bad? Why?

Did you try to focus on the content in the English textbooks? Or only on functions or skills?

Key words: Critical literacy, Critical theory, Critical pedagogy, EFL textbook analysis, Social justice, Equity, Power relations
Nam, Ji-Hyun
Indiana University
800 N. Union St. Apt 301,
Bloomington, IN47408, U.S.A.
Phone: 1–812–320–6632
E-mail: jinam@indiana.edu

Submitted: October 2008
Revised: January 2009
Accepted: February 2009