

Utilizing critical thinking-based EFL lessons: A means to improve language skills and encourage student engagement in Thai EFL classes

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Abstract

This paper examines how and to what extents critical thinking-based EFL lessons helped facilitate Thai EFL students' language learning and their engagement in their fundamental English course at the tertiary level. To collect data, this qualitative study on the teaching practice of critical thinking-based EFL lessons employed classroom observations and collection of relevant documents—written assignments and tests. The findings show critical thinking-oriented EFL lessons, to a large extent, empowered the students' EFL learning. The observed classroom culture, coupled with written tasks discloses that they felt no longer disenfranchised. The teaching approach initiated access to the target language use and the personal “voice” development, resulting in full engagement and willingness to take extra steps in their language learning. However, the language gain over the year was marginally significant. The study contributes to our understanding and curriculum design in facilitating EFL students' language learning where critical thinking-related lessons can be incorporated.

Keywords: EFL, critical thinking, multiliteracies

1. Introduction

Advances in information technology and globalization has changed the 21st century far complex and become more interconnected. Global economic issues, to a large extent, have challenged and put urgent pressures for schools worldwide to redesign their curriculum and teaching practice in every subject at every level so as to improve students' learning as well as to prepare a global citizen. In order to encounter the changing world, the New London Group (1996) proposed that schools encourage “multiliteracies” pedagogy. This is because, in today's world, literacy involves both language and multiplicity of communication channels as well as cultural and linguistic diversity or what we called “textual multiplicity” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). In the meaning-making process, a text is expressed through different types of media and in different social contexts. Teachers and students, as part of active participants in the global world, should be able to encode, decode, and interpret multiple kinds of literacies which are embedded in multimodal texts.

These days, when breaking down the number of languages, English is considered as a global language and has become more socio-politically acceptable as a symbolic capital worldwide. Given that, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and classrooms should thus make spaces for students to construct and deconstruct multiliteracies in texts in responses to the globalized world. As contended by many researchers and scholars, the current educational model does not include components for people in the 21st century.

In this particular paper, the situation of critical thinking-oriented EFL classroom practice involving an approach to multiliteracies was explored. Specifically, the focal classroom practice refers to critical thinking-based EFL lessons as advocated by several researchers, claiming that an integration of critical thinking into instruction would lead EFL classes to become meaningful and, thus, train the student to become a lifelong learner. In other words, instead of a concentration on the basics of body of knowledge in English or what is so-called grammar, this study aims to make a critical thinking-oriented EFL class to have a meaning making process—a meaningful, not thoughtless learning.

2. Literature reviews

Critical thinking is a globally-disseminated educational ideal¹ for preparing students in a knowledge-based economy, where information technology leads the world to drastically shrink. Yet, the notion of critical thinking has been developed and emphasized varyingly (Jantrasakul, 2004). It should be noted that each approach does not reflect distinct historical periods or mutually exclusive theoretical paradigms. Rather, there is considerable chronological, conceptual, and practical overlap among the approaches which still carries a clear pedagogical purpose and area of core interest. In this study, two approaches were used and referred to, including critical thinking as a social practice and critical thinking as a social justice.

Advocates on critical thinking as a social practice argues that critical thinking is more socio-cultural practice, which is learned and practiced largely without consciousness or as Atkinson (1997) said, “through the pores” (p.73). Critical thinking is highly context-dependent and has physical and psychological embodiments of socio-cultural positions locally appropriate (through rearing and socialization, especially in childhood). To illustrate its application in the American ESL setting, several studies have shown that ESL students in the American educational setting are at disadvantage in academic writing due to the practice that they are not actively encouraged to express their “voice” like their American counterpart (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996).

While critical thinking as a social justice or what is widely known as critical literacy (Luke, 2000; Street, 1993, for example) represents a more progressive form of critical thinking where “students and teacher [...] together are in control of and actively engaged in shaping the pedagogy, in learning about themselves, their realities, the social world, in developing collective analyses, and in working towards structural transformation” (Walsh, 1991, p. 16). In this approach is a call for schools to question the status quo and of challenge social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and an orientation to transform students’ learning and society.

Kress (1996) contended that both schools and the government around the world should, for the 21st century world, play proactive roles in designing relevant and productive curricula which teach beyond static forms. Like the 2001 English language syllabus of Singapore (Kramer-Dahl, 2008), critical thinking-based EFL lessons in this study is a response to “the effects and pressures of the heteroglossia, hybridity, multilingualism and plurality of semiotic forms that characterize a global era” (p. 86). The EFL lessons hold less on predictable lines and the achievement of predetermined ends. Thus, students’ reactions to the “new communicative order” (Street, 1999) and their language performance would illuminate our understanding of EFL learning where the dichotomy between the student’s cultural world of the national identity and that of the globalized one has blurred in the globalization era (Kachru & Nelson, 2006).

For this particular study, the term “critical thinking” is used as a neutral term. By that, it refers to processes of teaching and learning that aims to develop a set of skills and dispositions conducive to the promotion of creative teaching and active learning in their prerequisite English course. The students are expected to develop their reading comprehension, think critically about the topics taught in the class, and become actively engaged in learning while the teacher is supposed to constantly seek out ways to help students learn how to learn and assess whether learning has occurred. In other words, it is the case that the teacher, by means of EFL, attempted to promote their understanding on the value of their education as well as the target language during their EFL classes. In order to create a reciprocal relationship in communication with students, the teacher’s role is a mentor or facilitator in the teaching-and-learning process.

3. Methodology

The two EFL courses are part of general education course requirement for every undergraduate in the university being under investigation.

3.1 Context of study

Being a qualitative study, the study took place in a medium sized science-oriented university, where the majority of the student population is male students from outside of the capital city. Most of them are

¹ The term describes efforts UNESCO aims to achieve the goal of universal basic education.

male graduates from vocational schools. The students are assigned to a section in accordance with their major, not a placement test. The language proficiency of the students is varied in a class.

The classroom was fully equipped with a full set of multimedia teaching equipment—a smart board, a computer with the internet connection operated by the teacher only, a visualizer and an audio set. Desks and chairs were arranged in a row as a typical Thai classroom. In general, not more than 40 students were in one class for the English course. The objective of the two fundamental English courses—English 1 and English 2, is to provide and refresh the fundamental English grammar before taking other elective English courses. 90% of the course grade came from three objective tests, that is, a mid-term test (40%), a final test (40%) and a listening test (10%). The other 10% was subjective and varied for each teacher, where 6 % was for the laboratory attendance. In this study, 4% was allocated by the researcher for critical thinking-based assignment. Grammar, vocabulary, and decoding skills are part of things to be mainly assessed in these two English courses. The nature of the course involves general English with a focus on contextualized practice at the sentence level. Communication-directed EFL lessons are highly encouraged. The teaching of functional grammar was delivered to help students to understand how meanings are made in texts relating to its functions and the contexts within which the texts are produced. The researcher was the teacher of the course.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 37 first-year students. The majority of them had known each other for at least 3 years prior to studying at the current university. A few students left the program to another university. These students have a varying proficiency level in the target language. Some had a vocational educational background while the others, but very few, had a general education. Their motivation in studying English is very low, compared with their content subjects such as physics and mathematics. The number of hours in English courses and the course orientation, namely, that between general and vocational English, are challenges in the delivery of critical thinking-based EFL lessons. With their previous educational background in vocational education, their English courses were principally geared toward technical vocabularies and reading passages.

3.3 Data collection

To understand how and to what extent critical thinking-based EFL lessons facilitated EFL learning and student learning, a qualitative research methodology approach was used; classroom observation of one class over two semesters, together with and collection of relevant documents including task sheets, written assignments, and both mid-term and final exam tests was conducted. The researcher also took a journal at the end of each lesson. The study lasted two semesters for one academic year so as to explore the development of the student's language learning and proficiency. The students were taught by the same teacher for the whole academic year. This is a special request for this particular study only.

As shown in Table 1, topics included in the textbook were central to the class and also served as a launching point for the critical thinking-based EFL classes. The students were asked to read the text, express their ideas, and make some comments verbally or in a written form. The role of the teacher is to offer leading questions, unobtrusively guide the conversations, and provide instructions on what is expected in their oral and written assignments.

Table 1: Critical thinking-based EFL lessons

| Unit | Reading topics for critical thinking-oriented lessons | Activities |
|------|---|--|
| 1 | What's in a name? | Oral activity: Self-introduction |
| 2 | A dream holiday | Oral activity: Place to visit and Activities to do there |
| 3 | Stages of relationship | Writing activity: Story completion |
| 4 | The real price of fashion | Oral activity: Your own clothes |
| 5 | Being fit | NO ACTIVITY |
| 6 | Job | Oral activity: Your future job |
| 7 | Eco | Illustration activity: Save your planet |
| 8 | Three generations | Oral activity: Attitudes toward education and relationship |
| 9 | Smile | Oral activity: Describing your physical appearance and personality |
| 10 | Lifestyle | Writing activity: Your future car with certain budget |
| 11 | Animals | Oral activity: If you were an animal, what would you like to be? |
| 12 | Incredible | NO ACTIVITY |

In this study, critical thinking-based EFL lessons were designed to trigger students' awareness of possible meaning-making in the commercial English textbook *New Inside Out* (2008) written by Sue Kay and Vaughan Jones. Every lesson, except Unit 5 and Unit 12 was designed for a critical thinking lesson. The two were excluded due to the time limit and the topic did not seem conducive for critical thinking activities. In each lesson was stressed the technique of posing thought-provoking questions regarding topics in reading materials. The student was asked to complete different types of assignments for each selected reading topic. A video tape was put on since the second class. The students were a bit curious about this at the beginning. As time passed by, the presence of the camcorder was no longer their focus. It should be noted that a critical thinking-oriented EFL lesson did not last for the whole 3-hour class period. Instead, the researcher decided to allocate 45 minutes to 1.5 hours for this activity as an attempt to have a well-integrated class where the main objective of the class set by the university test and of the study were not in a clash against any stakeholder's interest.

3.4 Data analysis

Working with these 37 first-year students enrolling in a fundamental English course at a science-oriented university, the researcher aimed to train students to become aware of textual multiplicity and competent in English with critical minds. In addition, as Moore & McGill (2005/2006) contended, "the first year of university is a time of academic and social transition for students. Students' early experiences are critical to their ultimate success and perseverance. Early enculturation into university expectations and student obligations would seem to play an essential role in ensuring ease of transition into university study and culture by demystifying what is expected (p.65)."

To understand how critical thinking-based EFL lessons would facilitate students' language learning, the task sheets and writing assignments of the informants were analyzed in conjunction with classroom observation, personal communication, course evaluation administered by the school and a written journal. Data obtained were used to explore the two following research questions:

- 1) How do EFL students react to critical thinking-based EFL lessons?
- 2) How do critical thinking-based EFL lessons facilitate their language learning and thinking development?

In order to capture this phenomenon holistically, the Bakhtinian framework (Bakhtin, 1981)—the notions of heteroglossia and dialogism is used for data analysis. That is to say, an individual's discourse constitutes multiple and intertextual voices; it is not ideologically neutral. Rather, the production of any prose text consists of the selection and organization of different idioms and voices. There is no original voice in discourse; human beings borrow and/or appropriate elements from the various vocabularies and idioms to which they have been exposed (Kamberelis & Scott, 1992; Knoeller, 1998). That each discourse is never neutral, rather carries ideology each individual believes in, by and large, according to a set of norms and values inherent in his/her community is mainly emphasized. The multiple voices are largely grounded on sets of socio-cognitive resources drawn from the various discursive contexts of which individuals are a part. Therefore, cultural models-- including the internalized social structures, norms, beliefs, and conventions, to name a few-- serves as the storylines or scripts that individuals hold in their minds as they participate in situated meaning-making activities for pedagogical assumptions and practices. Thus, the students' discourse should not be considered as coherent and single-voiced.

4. Findings & Discussion

To understand the instructional practices, the pages to follow describe how critical thinking-based EFL lessons helped facilitate language learning of the first year university students'. Each lesson was designed to be as naturalistic as possible in order to gain a holistic picture of genuine classroom after the delivery. The class integrated language skills and kept language as a whole so as to provide students the opportunities to activate their already learned knowledge and use the newly learned materials in a contextualized situation where they could relate to their daily life experience. Isolated language skill-based and decoding tasks were still provided to serve the best interest of both parties—the researcher and the students who had to get good scores for their grammar-oriented mid-term and final test. Meanwhile, this isolated language practice was served as a platform for language use later. The researcher encouraged the students to the concept of indefinite answers in each activity. The focal point of the lesson was to express ideas or thinking as much as the participants could, even in the broken language of the target language and/or in a combination between their mother tongue language and the target language.

Data from 10 critical thinking-based EFL lessons over one academic year show that the students were highly motivated to attend the class and fully active during the critical thinking-related classroom activities. None of them fell asleep. Both the teacher and the students formed an educational landscape with different configurations of student-teacher relations. Both parties appeared to share ownership of the classroom culture and attempted to become active in establishing, maintaining and changing its conventions. This positively affected the environment for language learning in a significant fashion. These EFL participants exhibited great engagement and cognitive attempts during their activities.

From the data analysis, it can be said that the lessons were sites for the students to practice English based on their experience and interests. Data from their course grade suggest an improvement in the language learning. However, the gain was marginally significant; the students were able to gain good scores and correctly complete each blank in the vocabulary part of the reading part only. Below are the findings of the two research questions in details.

4.1 Research Question 1: How do EFL students react to critical thinking-based EFL lessons?

From data analysis, it can be said that the students, in this study, seemed to find comfort with critical thinking-related tasks in their English course. They did not seem to be challenged by this teaching approach. The learning atmosphere turned lively where noise and collaboration among students, attentively seeking assistance on vocabularies and sentence structure, and looking at their classmates' work, were prevalent. Data from classroom observation show that the students, mostly male counterpart, spontaneously intermingled their speech both in Thai and English so as to connect the story under discussion with their daily life experience and media information in a jovial fashion most of the time.

In addition, during classroom discussions when they were asked to comment a given issue, some, mostly male, students, without any hesitance, uttered a combination of Thai and English vocabularies corresponding to the issue being discussed topically. Frustration at no definite answers took place at the beginning in the first semester. But as time passed by, the students no longer felt uncomfortable.

Overall, instances of their active participation during the class suggest the students' positive attitudes and reaction to the teaching practice of critical thinking-related EFL lessons. This could be a case where the students started to take an active role in their own language learning.

It should also be noted that the students' willingness to contribute in the critical thinking-oriented EFL lessons may be largely attributable to the fact that they could use their mother tongue in a combination of their English. In addition, realizing that their responses and comments were not determined by the target language proficiency freed the class. More specifically, the power of scores is not of paramount importance for their EFL course. The critical thinking-related lessons were not designed to put any imposition on the students regarding the scores. That is, the task would not be graded based on the grammar, but rather on the originality of the ideas and/or comments toward the topics being discussed in each assignment. The assignment accounted for 4 % of the course grade. This piece of information was explicitly stated at the beginning of the course. Therefore, the class, for some students, was simply a matter of language practice while the critical thinking-based EFL classroom activities, for others, were an opportunity to open and connect their worldviews from their cultural perspectives.

In the session of isolated grammar lessons, data from classroom observations show that the students being investigated were disinclined to be inclusive in the learning process. It appears that they distanced themselves from the salience of grammar in their EFL class though it was the main orientation for their mid-term and final exam test. The majority showed less cooperation and blank facial expression when they were asked to put their grammar into practice without a contextualized setting. Only few capable and hard-working students displayed their continuous engagement for the whole class and did not feel "weird" when being called upon for isolated language skill activities.

For their oral tasks, data from classroom observation reveal the students' eagerness to an interactional contribution even though they got stumbled to find correct word choices intermittently. The enthusiasm to meaning making with the text and the world around them may stem from the factor that no concerns about any "tangible" and "utilitarian" objective, namely, scores, in the course of their language learning. They were simply invited to make the connection to the text being read into the target language without grading.

Data from their written journal on their attitudes toward the course reveal that they all were positive and fully welcome this particular teaching approach—critical thinking-oriented EFL lessons. They did not feel against or weird. They were aware that they had to do more assignments than their school mates, but the assignments did not appear to be their burden. They all simply submitted the assignments on the due date. The students' positive response as well as their active participation in the activities is well reflected in one of the outspoken students' written journal.

"Teacher, I like your class. Not as serious as my previous classes in the vocational school. I like it. You are excellent and kind! Good! Good! I don't feel sleepy and feel forced to attend your class. I am very stressful and have enough stress in my content subject classes. So I want my English class to be relaxing and fun, not serious. I mean, I also want a fun class and I can learn how to use English in the class too—able to read, know more vocabularies, can write a sentence to tell me ideas, and speak. Thank you! The class is really fun! I think I learn some. ..."

The above excerpt illustrated what most of the students perceived and reacted to the critical thinking-based EFL lessons. Their less hesitation shows no instances for zone of the discomfort in their academic rigorousness when encountering with unfamiliar words or terms and expressing their ideas in the classroom. The students simply said things out either in the mother tongue language or English as much as they could think of. In general, classroom interaction appears engaging and lively. This may be partly because Thai, a mother language, was mainly allowed in combination with English. Meanwhile, the students were encouraged to share their opinions and/or come up with questions arising from the text or a list of relevant vocabulary. Specifically, high proficient English learners appeared to get engaged with the activities longer than low limited-English proficient learners. Nonetheless, since no grade or evaluation involved, the higher proficient helped the limited language learner to co-construct their language learning and handle their learning struggles. An instance of reticence mostly occurred when the isolated language skills lessons were delivered. Limited knowledge in English and lack of dispositions as an active language learner does not exist in this class.

4. 2: *How do critical thinking-based EFL lessons facilitate their language learning?*

Data from classroom observation, coupled with written tasks suggest that the use of critical thinking-oriented approach in EFL classes had initiated the student involvement and language use, and, to a certain extent, facilitated language learning and empowered their language learning. In a meaningful and contextualized fashion, the students were provided opportunities to put their language into practice, namely, spelling, word choices and sentence formation. As presented in the earlier pages, the critical thinking-related activities caught the students' attention and made them stay focused to carry out the tasks.

However, after two semesters in one academic year, no significant gain was found in the students' language learning path. Data from the course grade of the first semester with that of the second semester disclose insignificant language improvement. Almost all got the same grade. When examining the mid-term and the final test of both semesters, data reveal the language improvement in the vocabulary part. The students gained higher scores in the part where the critical thinking-oriented EFL lessons were delivered. It should be noted that the students under investigation were terrible at spelling at the beginning. Misspelling was made less during the mid-term and final tests of both semesters.

Despite the fact that no significant language gain was found, this particular teaching innovation appeared to form different conventions of students-teacher relations from the typical, traditional Thai EFL classrooms where the students are supposed to reap the body of knowledge in grammar on their seat. That how critical thinking-based EFL lessons facilitated their language learning and improved their classroom environment as discussed earlier includes two main emerging issues as follows:

4.2.1 Spaces for contextualized language practice within a cultural context

Data from classroom observations show evidence of how this particular teaching practice provided spaces for students to engage in discussions and reflective thoughts based on their current knowledge, skills and experiences with the texts in English. Critical thinking-related EFL lessons appeared to serve as concomitant implications for general education and learning skills. That the lessons were designed to ignite the students' self-expression is evident in class activities and assignments such as reflection-related assignments and oral presentations, regardless of the language used in their participation.

Through their self-exploration in EFL, students were trained to appropriate knowledge about the target language and its culture in accordance with Thai cultural constructs. The excerpts reveal the students co-constructed the meaning of the text with their real worlds, commenting on their hometown and the capital city of their country.

One example of this issue lies in a writing assignment regarding the topic of "relationship". Several instances indicate the "voice" of the participants'. It is a sensitive issue which is rarely explicitly taught in schools. In this activity, the participants were questioned their point of views and values around Thai cultural norms and traditions. Under the category of critical thinking as a social practice, the responses reveal the importance of Thai values—the concepts of Thai family and the respect to parents—in dealing with a relationship problem as shown below. The forum did not only create conviviality to attract the students to communicate in the target language but also enable them to negotiate and rethink their cultural stance regarding the "relationship" in the Thai context.

"Jake's mother talked with them [Fiona and Jake] to understood about married life. Jake and Fiona stopped hav[ing] a row. They came back to love again.
(Sarat, 2008)

"I want to call her Nicky and Fiona wanted to called her Rosie. This was the big problem for us. One day my parent knew about the problem and they gave her granddaughter's name "Luise". I and Fiona accept this."
(Kaka, 2008)

The above two excerpts reflect the Thai traditional practice of having parents as the mediator for their marriage life. These young students still kept viewing this tradition as being highly respected in their generation. Yet, the activity also made spaces for unconventional opinions to the Thai context. Some

students decided to have the characters in their story to end their marriage life after several arguments. In some instances is an illustration of the real world, suggesting students' awareness of the world.

“...Five years ago they not happy. They have a row and they split up.” (Itti, 2008)

“But married life is not only happiness. Jake and Fiona have a row every day. They decided to divorce that better way than they have a row every day.”
(Sumet, 2008)

“Jake and Fiona family have row because Jake having an affair. So he service his new wife very happy and Fiona have to her son very hard continue.
(Thak, 2008)

These three excerpts reveal how these young EFL learner perceived and would solve this kind of family problem. The problem solving approach echoes the appropriation of themselves with the current world.

Another example is when the participants were asked to reflect their opinions about the city in comparison with another country or the capital city of Thailand, Bangkok. A certain set of adjectives for a city description was taught before the critical thinking-oriented activity.

“Songkhla, the town's in south east of Thailand. Songkhla's paradise of traveler because is silent town. **The town for rest.** I prefer to relax. Bangkok, Bangkok's capital city of Thailand. Bangkok's **civilized town but have disorder and very hot** because many crowd. In the morning and evening have **traffic jam. That's terrible.**”
(Natty, 2008)

“I live in Bangkok. It is a **capital [of] the pollution.** [It] is good. Because the Bangkok is beautiful and discover. The Bangkok have cute girl etc. **I'm think about [it as] is capital.** It not capital is best in the world. Because the **Bangkok is best in to area important way history place.**”

(Woody, 2008)

“**I was born at Uttaradit province.** The weather is very good. People very friendly the streets aren't crowded. **Uttaradit is never exciting because it is quiet town.** At night nobody go to the outside. **If you love the natural and good air you should go to Uttaradit.**”

(Siwa, 2008)

The above excerpts display how the students questioned and connected the texts with themselves and the world around them. The highlighted words and phrases suggest the critical inquiry, where the students put comments about the hometown in relation with Bangkok, the capital city where the school is located.

Furthermore, evidence from classroom interaction also shows the prominence of teaching materials as an indispensable guide for the students to build their standpoint. With long familiarity with the concept of teacher as the ultimate authority in teaching/learning and an orientation toward functional goals in schooling, the findings suggest that opportunities for critical reflection in Thai EFL classrooms are needed in an attempt to improve the student language learning and, to certain degree, the pedagogical dilemmas created by the imposition of the skills-oriented tests in EFL curriculum even at the tertiary level.

To summarize, critical thinking-related EFL lessons turned to be didactic, enabling the students to rethink about their cultural standpoints. The lessons serve as a space for contextualized language practice within a cultural context, where the students were provided with opportunities to share their opinions in public and through written modes. In terms of verbal communication, the students were given chances to realize their English proficiency and viewpoints of the target reading texts.

4.2.2 Empowering the students' language learning

Through spaces for self-expression, the students appeared to become empowered. The personal voices of theirs, as the beneficiaries of this teaching practice, were heard. With the notion of multiplicity of positions of all participants, the teacher and the students played different roles to direct, facilitate and challenge their language learning. Having tried to keep the researcher's role as a classroom facilitator, the classroom culture of "power with" students took place. Data from classroom observation reveal that this may have caused them to practice more ownership on their task, thus staying more focused to carry out their assignment. The concept of audience also legitimated their voices in the EFL lessons.

In one task, a poster task of individual's personality, the students had to post the A4 paper of their face drawing with a description on the wall for a week and, later, their classmates walked around to make comments on which one was best described. Five students were called on to have an oral presentation of their personality in the class. They were all nervous and excited to describe themselves in front of their classmates and posting a tangible drawing on the wall. A list of adjectives was taught before the activity. The conception of a real audience existed in this activity. As a consequence, the students were fully engaged and stayed focused on the task. There would be not only their teacher but also their classmates in several sections seeing their work. This concept seems to push them to realize their authentic audience while undertaking a task, not just getting it done rather making it meaningful.

Another example involves the task where the students were asked to draw a before-and-after picture of a place they wanted to do a campaign against global warming, together with a list of actions. The selection of the place they live, that is, a bedroom, a house, and a school, suggests that the lessons empowered their personal connection with the texts being read and the world around them. None of the students copied this assignment and, from our personal communication, they enjoyed doing this drawing and making a list of what-to-do things against global warming in their own environment. In a class, a few were asked to say something about their work. Outspoken students, later, helped to prompt their quiet and shy classmates to speak after the turn. Later on, the shy student asked about the possibility to hear another shy student's campaign. This incidence provides evidence of the classroom culture of empowerment. It shows that the students under investigation started to develop the empathy and desire not to dominate the class and discredit others' voice through their encouragement or indirect communication with the teacher.

The discovery of a personal voice was well accepted in another task where the students were asked to make a decision on a new family car after they got a job. The budget was 1,000,000 baht for the new family car which the students drove to work, but would be reserved for the family on weekends. The students did an excellent job for this project. They did great research on the car and rationalized their decision in details. When they had a presentation in front of the class, they appeared to be very proud of their work and their English. A personal follow-up talk with their classmates was made apparent in the class. There was an exchange of their car poster with comments going on. This suggests that they had become comfortable enough with one another and they were willing to take a more active role in the co-construction of their language learning and the power structure of the class. It is fair to say that the task triggered their personal involvement and promoted the expression of their voice.

Nonetheless, when the topic was far beyond their experience, namely, their future job, they were inclined to distance and disconnect themselves from the class. Their blank eye contacts with the researcher were very obvious. Likewise, some disruptive behaviors including walking to the toilet, lying down on the desk, and looking at their cell phone were quite common phenomenon signaling their disconnection with the delivered lesson. Some students, low-ability ones in particular, felt stigmatized and had lowering motivation for learning.

In sum, it can be said that the teaching approach of critical thinking-based EFL lessons was not far from the practical orientation. It appears to give rise to the values and habits required for all students who are not the same, but should be treated with the same opportunities.

5. Conclusion

It seems fair to claim that critical thinking-based activities have, to certain extents, helped trigger and reinforce the students' language use of vocabularies. The higher participation and spontaneity of the students in each task suggest that they felt that they were disenfranchised less. The discourse of students-teacher relations in this study reveals both perception of and response to a Western-adopted

conception of critical thinking in EFL classrooms. Overall, critical thinking-oriented approach in EFL classes, be it critical thinking as a social practice or critical thinking as a social justice, has proved its viability for the fundamental English class. The student seems favorable in their course of learning. Critical thinking-based EFL lessons helped expand access to language use and practice for the university students being investigated. Nonetheless, the students' development in language learning was marginally significant.

Part of the students' positive reaction and active contribution in these 10 critical thinking-based EFL lessons may stem from the conceptualization of power (Kreisburg, 1992) and self-concept as a teacher (Cooper and Simonds, 1999). According to Kreisburg, "who we are as teachers and students in school is mediated by our culture of domination and by our social identities and lived experiences that have been forged within them" (p. 198). The recognition of power structures, together with the realization of teacher's concept, referring to "how we perceive ourselves intellectually, socially, and physically; how we would like to be, how we believe others perceive you and how others actually perceive us (p. 31)" played a significant role in the classroom structure of this particular study. The researcher and the students in this investigation shared the construction of power instead. The researcher as their teacher held the minimum role as the ultimate authority and the arbiter of decision. Undertaking the role of a language learning facilitator led to the organizational structure of "power with" student, resulting in the emergence of empowering the students both in and out of the classroom setting.

As several scholars stated, changes in cultural processes cannot be achieved quickly. This is congruent with changes in learning and teaching. To change traditional schools by whatever curricular innovation teaching practitioners and teacher educators rhetorically advocate is, by nature, transformative and requires a long-term perspective and persistence. As Levison and Holland (1996, cited in Hoffman, 1999, p. 475) note the significance of culture, "situatedness of identities at the interface of structure and agency with schools plays[ing] a vital (yet underrecognized) role as sites wherein cultural models of "the educated person" are enacted and contested." Given that, schools are considered as a cultural institution. Therefore, investigating teaching innovation—an integration of critical thinking-based lessons into EFL course-- as a socio-cultural process is more explainable for what is culturally responsive and appropriate. It enables the researcher to understand and reposition how to design EFL classes to accommodate the life in the "New Times" of the twenty-first century where education becomes a global enterprise (Hall, 1996).

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