Introduction

As Gee (2001) indicates, whenever we speak, we are actually using a sub-language that is a component of a natural language. In other words, instructors should pay attention to the "social languages" (p. 714) used among their own students outside the classroom. In the twenty-first century, not only do students use distinctive forms of language, they also often draw on new media for some of these sub-languages. Accordingly, as Short, Schroeder, Kauffman, and Kaser (2004) state: "While educators tend to focus on books, texts such as video games, movies, Web sites, television programs, and music often carry the most meaning for students" (p. 9). Teachers can no longer expose students only to textbooks. They should engage their students in a learning process that accommodates students' own language tastes and preferences.

The call for a new literacy teaching is also echoed by Luke (1998): "[T]here are troubling reports from teachers that many of their students continue to struggle with literacy, and they appear to be having difficulty engaging with the cultures and texts of schooling" (p. 305). The decisions that teachers make are culturally and socially crucial because these decisions influence the way that students access education as a consequence of their diverse cultural and social backgrounds, discourses, linguistic resources, and general knowledge. Teachers should acknowledge that literacies will construct and influence students' values, ideologies, and identities, shaping language learning as a social practice. Alternative instructional approaches are needed, especially approaches that are "profoundly local, culturally appropriate and negotiable" (p. 312).

To respond to these concerns, I decided to incorporate critical literacy into a General English course for first-year college students in Taiwan and to make language learning a contextualized social practice. The concept of critical literacy highlighted in the course was used not only as a learning activity but also to stimulate social practices related to students' lives. Three activities offered in the class were designed with the four critical dimensions proposed by Lewison, Leland, and Van Sluys (2002) in mind: disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice. These activities drew on multimodal texts (e.g. comic books and popular songs in English) in an attempt to help students "confront social issues glossed over or avoided by traditional texts" (Behrman, 2006, p. 492).

The activity discussed in the present study was the first of the three activities mentioned

above. Together with other learning sources, the film *Billy Elliot* was used to lead students to interact with gender-related topics, as prompted by Wallowitz's (2004) finding that print and visual texts shape our concepts of gender. Finally, this study is intended to provide further evidence for the use of critical literacy in an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) setting where the practice of such an approach to English teaching and learning is still limited (Huang, 2012).

Literature Review

The concept of critical literacy is quite broad and sometimes alternates with such terms as critical thinking, critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, critical language awareness, or critical whole language practice (Edelsky, 1999; Fairclough, 1992; Freire, 2000; Pennycook, 2004). Critical literacy has been debated and reformulated as language scholars and practitioners have employed different theoretical frameworks. Thus the term does not stand for a unitary approach because different theoretical perspectives underpin various definitions of critical literacy and its pedagogic concerns.

Despite these differing theoretical assumptions, the guiding principle of critical literacy is that we should regard literacy as a social practice. Theorists such as Gee (2008) and Mellor and Patterson (2004) have indicated that language is not only a tool for expression and communication; it is also a social act that "constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future" (Norton & Toohey, 2004, p. 1). In Bayham's (1995) words. language learning involves human interaction, "not just what people do with literacy, but also what they make of what they do, how they construct its value, the ideologies that surround it" (p. 39). Therefore, we should see literacy as a social practice in which students are able to recognize and evaluate latent messages in texts, to explore their relationships with society and culture, and finally to better understand themselves.

If educators intend to devise critical curricula based on the notion of literacy as a social practice, they should connect classroom learning with the broader society. Many empirical research studies (e.g. Comber & Nixon, 2014; Leland, Harste, & Kuonen, 2008) have corroborated that Freire's (2000) problem-posing pedagogy is effective in helping students participate in classroom activities that draw on their real-life experiences. Such an approach suggests a learning process based on students' interests and needs—a process in which

questions are asked and problems solved mostly through group work (Ciardiello, 2003). The final goal of such learning is to lead students to new understanding and new questions about themselves and their lives. Such an educational stance involves the recognition of students' interests and interactions with their social milieu.

Critical literacy invites students to explore the language used in their daily lives. Students can take advantage of many opportunities to bring into the classroom their own values, perceptions, and ideas with the goal of a deeper understanding of their roles in a specific society. For example, Vasquez (2003) employed everyday issues through the reading device of "text sets" (p. 33) in which students were exposed to multiple texts on the same topic. By encountering and discussing a set of different texts (e.g. print/nonprint materials) relevant to a particular theme, genre, or issue, students develop their ability to recognize multiple viewpoints on a question. The use of text sets involves the New London Group's notion of multiliteracies, which emphasizes recent developments in literacy such as "the multiplicity of communications channels and media" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). As Stein (2004) suggests, meaning-making involves multimodal texts, i.e. "the use of several semiotic modes as resources, all working in conjunction to create particular communicative effects" (p. 105).

According to Shin and Crookes (2005), critical literacy should offer students opportunities to engage in critical dialogue; such classroom interaction stimulates students not only to "clarify others' comments, ask questions, and reveal disagreements" (p. 122) but also to "engage students in sophisticated dialogue using discussing and writing as vehicles for thinking" (p. 123). As for Wallace (1999), she proposes two types of classroom reaction to critical literacy: "the macro awareness of literacy practices in social settings and, at the micro level, the awareness of effects in specific texts" (pp. 104-105). While the former society-oriented responses focus on students' new understanding of language learning in different social/cultural settings, the latter text-oriented responses pay attention to "the processes at play in the production and reception of the meanings embedded within texts" (p. 105).

With regard to relevant research conducted in Taiwan, Ko and Wang's (2012) study shows how 36 third-year college students were encouraged to enhance their writing ability in a required course, one based on a writing model that began with the teacher's critical instruction, was followed by learner group discussions, and ended with students' compositions

that reflected various social issues. This mixed method research revealed that critical literacy enabled students at different levels to articulate meaningful opinions on social topics.

Unlike the above study related to a course with a focus on reading and writing abilities, the present research reports on an activity that engaged students in multimodal texts. The study also examines students' reactions to the learning process. Critical literacy in the study is used to encourage students not only to improve their four skills but also to develop their critical competence. Critical literacy in this study is seen as an instructional approach and, above all, as the theoretical framework for this study: it encourages students to use language to question their everyday world. Students analyze messages conveyed by popular culture and media, especially through multimodal texts, in order to explore the relation of these texts to gender-related issues.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

This study is qualitative because it triangulates various data such as students' written work and interviews. In qualitative studies, researchers play the main role in collecting, documenting and interpreting multiple data gathered during the research process (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Accordingly, the current project is reported from my own perspective in an attempt to elucidate how students interacted with me and their classmates, various multimodal texts, and classroom exercises.

The informants in the study were college freshmen in a General English class offered during the 2012 fall semester at a university in Taiwan. There were 16 males and 18 females from the College of Social Sciences. The class met 4 hours per week, 2 hours each on Tuesday and Thursday. All freshmen at the university who are not majoring in English have to take an English-proficiency placement test as soon as they matriculate. According to their performance on the placement test, students from the same college are assigned to a class of fewer than 35 students at the same level. English levels include high, high-mid, and low. The level of the students discussed was high-mid.

Data for this study included discussion sheets, team process writing assignments, students' reflection papers, and interviews with 10 students. First, students used discussion sheets to help them formulate and exchange ideas with their partners and then with the class after they had seen a role-play between two classmates. Second, after making sense of the

story of the film Billy Elliot,1 students formed 11 groups of three; each group worked together to complete a process writing assignment related to things that a Taiwanese teenager would not be allowed to do because of his/her gender. Nine group works were collected for data analysis, while the other 2 works were not used in the study because they were related more to a story of success than to a narrative about gender awareness.

Third, after the activity was completed, students wrote a reflection paper about what they had learned from the activity. Their reflections were written in Chinese, so that they were able to express their opinions with more in-depth details. Fourth, 5 male and 5 female students were randomly chosen to be interviewed either individually or in small groups. These interviews were open-ended but focused on what critical literacy meant to the students, whether or not they had explored multiple perspectives and social issues, what action they had completed for social justice, etc. They were conducted in Mandarin in order to accumulate detailed information about what students thought of the activity. The opinions from students' reflection papers and the interviews were later translated into idiomatic English.

Data were analyzed following qualitative content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014). Because the activity was designed according to an instructional model, the data analysis was to identify overlapping codes/texts and categorize recurring themes rather than to generate substantive theory through constant comparison of multiple data sources. The research analysis included three core steps: selecting the unit of analysis, creating categories, and establishing a theme. In the analysis, each of the four data resources was examined as a single unit and all the data units were then organized and coded into three categories: (1) students' interactions in the classroom and during interviews, (2) text-oriented and society-oriented responses, and (3) reflections on the entire learning process. After these three categories were further read and analyzed, four major themes emerged: (1) critical dialogue, (2) within-text critical responses, (3) outside-classroom responses, and (4) active inquiry by learners. For the second theme, three subordinate themes were established; for the fourth theme, two subordinate themes were identified (see below).

The identity of each student as author of his/her reflection paper will be given as R1F and R2M, indicating the female student with class number 1 and the male student with class

[1] *Billy Elliot* (舞動人生) is a 2000 British film set in north-eastern England during the 1984-5 coal miners' strike. The film is about the talented 11-year-old boy Billy who is torn between his unexpected love of dance and the disintegration of his family. While striving to be a professional dancer, he struggles with the negative stereotype of the male ballet dancer.

number 2, etc. The identity of each student in the other data sources (e.g. discussion sheets and the interview) will be given as S1F and S2M, indicating the female student with class number 1 and the male student with class number 2, and so on.

Dances with Billy Elliot

As mentioned above, this activity was mapped on the basis of the four dimensions of critical social practice (Lewison et al., 2002).

Disrupting the Commonplace *(Week 2 / Thursday / Session 1)*

At the beginning of the first class session, students were required to read, first individually and then together, a list of actions based on the text to the picture book *William's Doll*.[2] Afterwards, S10M and S15F were randomly chosen for the following performance. I gave each of them a doll and a bottle, along with a set of prompts for actions that were described in the list (hugging the doll, cradling it, giving it the bottle, etc.) and had them pretend to be William and perform the series of actions. These two students performed each of the actions right after I read it aloud.

Considering Multiple Perspectives (*Week 2 / Thursday / Sessions 1-2)*

This phase involved a pre-reading technique, i.e., encouraging different opinions through completing and discussing students' discussion sheets. Specifically, each student in the class was asked to work on the first part of the discussion sheet that he/she had just been given. Students needed to list at least three things that Taiwanese male or female teenagers are allowed or not allowed to do. Afterwards, students worked in pairs and shared their opinions in English. There were 16 pairs consisting of a male and a female student and one pair of female students. The second class session began with a class discussion about what students had just learned from the pair discussion.

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues *(Weeks 2-4)*

During Weeks 2 to 4, students needed to finish reading the simplified book *Billy Elliot*

[2] *William's Doll* is a 1972 children's picture book by Charlotte Zolotow (1972). In the story, the boy William wants a doll. However, his father regards dolls as only for girls and tries giving William toys that the father considers more gender-appropriate, such as a basketball and a train set. While William enjoys these toys, he continues to ask for a doll. Eventually, the boy's grandmother fulfills the request, explaining to the father that William will use the doll to practice being a good father.

(Melvin, 2005), based on the film of the same title. In addition, I played sound recordings of chapters of the book (12 chapters in all) from Week 2 through Week 4. The first class session of Week 4 was devoted to having students complete the self-study activities at the end of the book. Finally, I showed the film in the classroom during the last two class sessions in Week 4.

Taking Action to Promote Social Justice *(Weeks 5-6)*

Students were required to complete a process writing task. They were divided into groups of 3 and each group needed to create a story of at least three paragraphs. Each group member needed to write one paragraph exceeding 250 words. Each group's work should describe a situation similar to Billy Elliot's that Taiwanese teenagers could possibly encounter. In Week 5, each student brought the first draft of his/her group work to the classroom. In this phase, each student needed to discuss his/her paragraph(s) with two or three classmates other than his/her own group members. After these two sessions, students were asked to edit and proofread their paragraph in accordance with the peer reviewers' suggestions. In Week 6, each student needed to come to the class with the revised draft of his/her paragraph(s). During the period, each student needed to have one or two classmates re-check his/her paragraph(s). After the session was finished, students needed to revise the individual paragraph(s) and to put together all the revised paragraphs as the third draft. Then each group had to submit a copy of its final draft on Tuesday of Week 7.

Findings

All of the students showed a positive attitude toward this activity because it connected their learning to the world outside the classroom. As discussed previously, a closer look at the data reveals that four major themes emerged.

Critical Dialogue

Critical dialogue as the first theme was related to how students interacted with their classroom learning and with me during the interview. As various data have shown, students were invited to think critically during the learning process, which was, as R9F suggested, "an ongoing meaningful interaction with others through thinking."

Many students indicated that the role-play cast them into a state of both perplexity and curiosity. First, students felt perplexed because they were not certain about the purpose of this

15-minute performance. Second, curiosity arose when they attempted to relate this unfamiliar learning situation to the follow-up discussion. Both R23M and R29F wrote that the skit drew their undivided attention but left them puzzled for a while. However, as they participated in the other exercises related to the activity, they became increasingly aware of the role-play as an initial statement of the theme of gender issues. Such a progressive learning experience led them to repeatedly examine their thoughts, beliefs, and values. To borrow Freire's (2000) words, students became "conscious beings" (p. 99) because they were in constant dialogue with themselves.

Critical dialogue could also be found when I interviewed two female students about the role-play. During the interview, the students and I worked together to discern a tentative new meaning for the performance. At first, S20F questioned S15F about why S15F was unable to understand the performance. However, S15F immediately interrupted S20F by using the story of Billy Elliot to explain the notion of gender inequality. Then S15 mentioned her discussion partner's opinion about empathy; this was followed by some further explanation by me. Finally, both students nodded their heads to suggest that they had understood the purpose of the role-play. Afterwards, they remarked on the scene of a male bottle-feeding a baby. This interview proves that critical dialogue can occur between teacher and students; it can also confirm Shin and Crooke's (2005) notion of critical dialogue: students became capable not only of interrogating others' opinions but also of engaging in discussion as a mode of creative thinking.

Another example of critical dialogue can be seen in pair and class discussions. In some students' opinion, the discussions were a mode of thought-provoking learning that helped them gain a new understanding of themselves and their society through multiple perspectives. As R26F said, she was quiet most of the time in class and was unable to come up with many ideas in a short time. However, she liked listening to other people sharing their thoughts and experiences, which helped her think critically and realize in what ways she resembled or differed from other teenagers. Interestingly, S12M told me that his discussion partner (R26F) was reserved and not enthusiastic: ". . . But I still liked this type of communication because it was based on the viewpoints of a male and a female student and then of the whole class." S12M further indicated that that he was surprised by some responses from his female classmates. For example, one girl said that her family did not like to see her eat too much because it was not proper for girls. Another girl shared her life with the class; her grandfather

did not allow her to speak too loudly because she needed to be ladylike. S12M said that such restrictions had never occurred to him since he was the only child in his family. Then he continued, "However, since I was a little boy, my father has told me not to cry. I guess that he considers crying a sign of weakness. But I think it depends on what situations you encounter."

Multiple perspectives, which are essential to critical dialogue, can arise either from texts or from classroom participants themselves. Pre-reading discussion sheets helped students to focus their thoughts and articulate their positions prior to interaction with their partner and classmates. This dialogic exchange also encouraged constant evolution of students' views on the social issues under discussion. Below are some meaningful direct quotes in English from students' discussion sheets:

(1) Most parents in Taiwan do not allow their son to be a nurse.
(2) Teenage boys in Taiwan are not allowed to go shopping with hand in hand.
(3) Boys in Taiwan are not allowed to wear a skirt, use too much pink, be too timid.
(4) A boy kisses a boy is now allowed in Taiwan.
(5) Teenage boys in Taiwan are not allowed to be a home sexual [homosexual].
(6) Teenage girls in Taiwan are not allowed to wear what they want.
(7) The adj "strong" is for a boy and "beautiful" is for a girl.

Some may think that the students' responses to the discussions are somewhat superficial. However, we should understand that these students were only 18 years old. Their life experience was limited, but they were beginning to express individual viewpoints on meaningful issues—from the first of three critical literacy activities. As Freire (2000) suggests, critical scholars should respect students' perspectives and experiences—"take into account their [students'] behavior, their view of the world, and their ethics" (p. 55). In conclusion, critical dialogue occurs when students can reconsider their lives through reflection and interaction with others.

Within-text Critical Responses

With regard to within-text critical responses as the second major theme, students interpreted the story of Billy Elliot as a coming-of-age story, a transitional phase in which Billy Elliot underwent valuable but painful experiences and became "more sophisticated at

the end of the story" (R8M). Some students pointed out that reading a simplified version of the story helped them gain a basic idea of it, so that they engaged with the movie more fully and also vicariously experienced some of the character's lived situations. At this point students were responding to the situations and conflicts within the text but had not yet related the text to their own contexts. Subsequently, the three subthemes mentioned above emerged from students' engagement with the written, audio, and visual texts.

First, some students focused on the friendship between Billy and his friend Michael; this storyline interested students because they could easily relate it to their own experiences as students. During the interview, S3M and S12M both said that the interaction between Billy and Michael was a great part of the movie and reminded them of their best friends from senior high school. S3M felt moved by the scenes in which Billy shared secrets (e.g. learning to dance) with Michael. S12M was touched when he saw Billy and Michael walking home together after school—"That is exactly what I did with my best friend in senior high school." Likewise, the story made R14F reflect on her new identity and define true friendship: "All freshmen have to live in the school dormitory. Away from home, I think of my high school friends and look forward to making some really good friends here. I mean just like Billy and Michael supporting each other." In brief, students connected the theme of friendship in the story with their high school experiences and their new life in college.

Second, some students considered the story meaningful because it involved a process of self-exploration similar to what they themselves had been experiencing. For example, R19M found that Billy's father changed "from a father who considered ballet a girl thing to a father who understood what ballet truly meant for Billy." As for Billy's development, R10F, a quiet student in the class, offered an insightful comment:

> At first, Billy didn't know what he really liked and was sometimes confused by his best friend, Michael. For example, when Michael dressed in women's clothes or rubbed Billy's hands to keep him warm. However, when Billy kissed Michael good-bye, at that moment Billy really understood Michael as a good friend different from Billy. As for what ballet meant for Billy, he didn't find the true passion for it until the time he confronted his father in the gym.

Regardless of how students specifically interpreted it, most students considered it a story with a theme of self-discovery that related to their own self-exploration.

Third, some students emphasized Billy's relationship with others such as his family. R17F wrote that although her grandmother had died before she was born, this movie still made her understand how precious it could be to spend time with one's grandmother. R5M believed that Billy's father really loved him even though he yelled at Billy and at first did not allow him to dance. As he explained during the interview, "Billy's father sacrificed himself when he broke the strike and became a scab." Some students discussed how Billy interacted with others such as Billy's ballet teacher and his brother. S20F and S21M both pointed out that these two characters were reserved in expressing their true feelings for Billy. S20F explained, "Tony didn't show his softer side until he said 'I'll miss you' to his younger brother."

Many students identified with Billy's relationships with others. However, students seemed to have some difficulty projecting themselves into the life of a 12-year-old boy in England in 1984. Specifically, students did not reflect on the story from a larger socio-cultural perspective, i.e. the context involving a mining town with many miners on strike; many data sources did not mention this aspect of the story. Some interviewed students indicated that they could not fully understand why Billy's father and brother yelled or shouted at him so often; as S21M and S12M concurred, that was "a type of interaction that they [students] could not relate to their real lives."

The above discussion suggests that a thought-provoking film along with relevant texts can simulate students to examine their lives if they are able to relate to the characters and to respond to various themes in the text. Students' within-text critical responses indicate that the current activity became student-centered because students ceased "to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher" (Freire, 2000, p. 80). As for the next theme, it is related to gender awareness in social settings. It emerged when I attempted to help students develop a critical stance through the team writing task.

Outside-classroom Critical Responses

In order to transform students' classroom learning into an experience that could acknowledge and give value to students' thoughts/lives, I used the team writing assignment to move social practice beyond the classroom. Such collaboration helped students initiate

society-oriented responses, i.e. the interpretations of Taiwanese young adults in their group narratives. The main characters in students' group compositions all attempt to develop an alternative identity. The first type of alternative self involves characters challenging customary social roles. For example, the main (male) characters in Group 1's and Group 5's works both plan to be nurses, an identity unacceptable to their family. Some interviewed students could still recall that many discussion pairs had mentioned parents' likely objection to their son's becoming a nurse. S27M said that he and his group members discussed the possibility of using this storyline and agreed that some traditional families in Taiwan still have a problem in seeing their son become a nurse because they consider nursing an exclusively female profession.

In Group 2's writing, Vicky shows interest in traveling around the world by bike when she is in college. Out of safety concerns, her mother does not like this plan. When Vicky starts working at a company, she tells her boss about her dream; her boss thinks Vicky is out of her mind because he believes that the task will require a lot of physical energy. Group 11's work describes Annie, a girl who has been thinking of becoming a kickboxer since she saw a match on TV when she was eight. However, her parents stereotype this sport as only for men. In short, these two narratives describe how female protagonists struggle against the traditional notion of women as weaker than men.

The second type of alternative self is about characters with a psychological desire to become a different person. In Group 3's work, at the age of 22, Andy undergoes gender reassignment surgery and becomes a woman called Cindy. Group 4's work focuses on a teenager, John, who is called a "beautiful flower boy" (花美男)[3] because he cares a lot about his appearance and likes to dress up as a girl. Group 8 deals with a teenager, Tommy, who liked to collect dolls and to play with them while he was growing up. He wants to be a make-up artist. As for Group 10's work, it is a story about a pale and skinny boy called Armani; he wants to become a girl in the near future. Such alternative selves stress gender issues in contemporary society.

This writing assignment led students to discuss meaningful issues, observe their surroundings, and negotiate ideas. Students incorporated realities in Taiwan into their work. These team narratives represented specific gender-oriented social phenomena and became

[3] Flower beautiful boys are a type of metrosexual man in Taiwan. They refer to young men who care a lot about their appearance and whose skin is even fairer than that of young girls. They dress well and often look like girls.

"social and cultural artifacts" (Wallace, 2003, p. 25). For example, students in Group 3 incorporated the image of the first Taiwanese transsexual TV hostess into their team writing. The psychological and social dilemmas of their story are resolved by gender reassignment surgery as had happened with the TV hostess. The story begins with two young boys in love with each other. One of them is often teased by people around him because of his effeminate features; their families are not willing to accept their relationship. The effeminate boy then undergoes gender surgery, becomes a girl, and marries the other boy. As S30F said, she and the other two female students used this celebrity's life in their work, coupled with a storyline of school bullying. She explained: "Another class member suggested adding to our work a commonly seen but ignored issue in Taiwan, i.e. boys being teased at school because of being too sissy. He knew very well from his educational background [sociology] that gender stereotypes exist not only in fairy tales but also in our lives."

Students' team narratives confirm Vasquez et al.'s (2013) notion that critical literacy is not merely an academic subject but also "a call to position oneself differently in the world" (p. 18). In this writing exercise, students became positioned as conscious writers stimulated to observe their surroundings and interrogate gender issues. For example, Group 2's students used a social phenomenon well known among young adults in Taiwan—so-called beautiful flower boys. Their work deliberately compares varying responses to this situation from different social groups. Specifically, Andy, the flower boy in Group 2's work, has no problem about his identity with classmates in school. After he starts working, he has a difficult time with his boss and colleagues who consider a flower boy too effeminate. Finally, students' works became social and cultural artifacts allowing students to re-examine the world and question the status quo of their lives.

These team projects suggest that students examined different gender roles and gained a new understanding of the world, in Freire's (2000) terms, a world "to be transformed and humanized" (p. 89). Students' group narratives displayed a transformative vision; 5 groups solved their main characters' gender-related problems/situations by having them study or work abroad. Such utopian solutions manifest students' world view and their observations of Taiwan. As pointed out by S3M (a law student) during the interview, "Taiwan has become a friendlier place for alternative gender roles than before, but it is still not good enough if we look at the current law and the controversies caused by issues like same-sex marriage." In brief, students' team compositions represent a type of reflection and action that stems from

students' knowledge of the world. These outside-classroom critical responses suggest that students began to take a critical stance toward different gender roles.

Active Inquiry by Learners

The fourth theme "active inquiry by learners" emerged when students reflected on the activity; they had become active learners as a result of the learning process. Students described this activity with different words such as "interactive," "meaningful and reflective," "brain-racking," "challenging," etc. A further analysis of different data indicates that the current theme involved two subordinate themes: multimodal texts and problem-posing pedagogy.

First, this activity included a multimodal experience, i.e. making sense of the story of Billy Elliot as presented in different media. From the students' perspective, watching a movie in class was not new since they had had similar experiences in senior high school. However, it was new for them to approach different types of input based on the same story. In the reflection paper or the interview, the majority of students enjoyed the combination of a movie, a simplified book version, and selected recordings as materials for studying English because the story was related to popular culture. Moreover, some students expanded this multimodal-text learning by including the role-play and pair/class discussions. As R19M stated, "The more I participated in the activity, the more I understood that these alternative materials were thematically interrelated. I was constantly motivated to reflect on real-life situations." The above discussion indicates that it was meaningful to expose students to multiple texts on the same topic, a type of instruction based on Vasquez's (2003) notion of text sets. In addition, the multimodal experience mentioned above was engaging to most students.

Second, the students' reflections on their current and prior learning experiences suggested that now they were constantly challenged with different learning tasks and their understanding of gender images was generated by the combined interests of all classroom participants. These concerns led to an investigation of the activity from the viewpoint of problem-posing pedagogy (Freire, 2000). Learner-centeredness is the prerequisite for critical literacy with a focus on problem-posing education. This does not mean that teachers lose authority; instead, teachers should use their authority to create a collaborative learning environment rather than to develop a domineering relationship with students. As many

students reflected on their current learning, this activity was initially teacher-oriented, but student-centered exercises quickly emerged and students were engaged in more discussions, responses, and interactions with the teacher or among students themselves: "We did most of the talking" (S3M); "It would be rare to see English teachers in senior high school allow students to become leading characters in class" (S12M).

This activity represented a type of problem-posing pedagogy because its content was related to the lives of the learners "here and now" (Freire, 2000, p. 85). According to Raja (2005), "[t]he first words for any person learning to read and write must be their words, words from their world" (p. 3). Interviewed students all concurred that they had opportunities in senior high school to discuss specific topics, but their interactions happened "mostly in a short time without too much thinking" (S6F). Such classroom discourse derived from a communicative approach that stressed "giving the student language that can be put to quick use in a specific context" (Holme, 2003, p. 18). In contrast, this activity had students constantly reflect on thought-provoking topics associated with students as young adults in Taiwan.

The third principle of problem-posing pedagogy is that the issues raised during the learning process should be challenging. As Freire (2000) argues, students' responses to the challenge entail "new challenges, followed by new understandings" (p. 81). Take the current activity as an example. Students made use of their culture and lived experiences every time they were required to complete a gender-oriented exercise. Each task involved some difficulty and led to new perceptions of gender roles. In response to why he described the activity as a game in the reflection paper, S21M illustrated as follows:

> The activity is similar to a computer game. Both have engaging, interactive, and challenging tasks. Each task was more difficult than the previous one. During each exercise in the activity, students needed to think carefully how to overcome the new challenges following the current one. Students had no other choice but to reconsider various gender roles during the whole learning process.

Multimodal texts and problem-posing pedagogy helped me introduce subject matter as various tasks for students to tackle and as many meaningful issues for reflection. With their

own values, thoughts, and experiences, students were challenged to go beyond themselves to a new understanding of gender roles. This activity made students co-investigators in a dialogue with the teacher. Ultimately, it sparked reflection and action and led students to become active learners with inquiring minds "embarking upon a quest for the essence of humanity" (Kress, 2011, p. 262).

Discussion and Conclusion

As an attempt to breach the gap related to critical literacy in Taiwan, this study (1) discussed an English learning activity that used multimodal texts to highlight gender issues and (2) explored the responses of 34 college freshmen to the activity. The current research was data-driven using qualitative content analysis, a research method that allows researchers to use established categories and frameworks for further analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014). Ultimately, four major themes were identified.

First, critical dialogue took place during the entire activity. Students engaged in a form of language learning that stressed reflection and interaction and that helped them reconsider gender roles. Second, within-text critical responses occurred when students interpreted the story of Billy Elliot on an individual level. Three subordinate themes were found: friendship, self-exploration, and relationships with others. Third, outside-classroom critical responses were expressed in students' group compositions in which the main (male) characters all attempted to form an alternative identity. These team narratives were social and cultural artifacts because they represented particular ways of being in the world, i.e. text expressions of young adults' gender images. Fourth, the theme of active inquiry by learners was identified as a consequence of the learning process. Two subordinate themes emerged as two key components of the basis of the activity, i.e. multimodal texts and problem-posing pedagogy.

Critical literacy involves a dialogic approach that calls for mutual reflection and change on the part of all classroom participants (Bartlett, 2005; Salazar, 2015). From the perspective of the instructor-researcher, I examined the discussed activity with Lewison et al.'s (2002) four orientations of critical social practice as a model. First, the instructor disrupted the commonplace using multimodal texts such as a role-play at the beginning of the activity. In the opinion of students, these alternative texts positioned them to encounter meaningful issues as active and reflective EFL learners. Second, the activity had students examine diverse topics from multiple perspectives. The entire learning project offered students ample opportunity to

discuss, negotiate, and construct the meaning of relevant gender-related texts. Then they arrived at alternative understandings of the gender representations that they had been exploring together. Third, the activity stressed sociopolitical issues when students in groups were working on a gender-stereotype writing assignment that involved them in language learning that moved from the personal to the social.

Fourth, I was not positive whether the element of taking action and promoting social justice had been found in the activity. It might not be sufficiently critical to have each group describe a situation in Taiwan similar to that of Billy Elliot. Some students' responses in the critical dialogue section seemed somewhat superficial, such as "A boy kisses a boy is not allowed in Taiwan" and "Most parents in Taiwan do not allow their son to be a nurse". However, following the idea of Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013), I thought that as long as students had gained a new understanding of some specific issue and had taken a stance on it, they had positioned themselves differently, which was a step in the direction of social justice.

The present study attempts to capture a glimpse, rather than a full picture, of critical literacy; the activity discussed can be seen as an example for advocates of critical literacy, especially for EFL critical practitioners. On the theoretical level, this activity showed that social reality is embedded in language. Exposure to critical literacy motivated students to explore issues, frame problems, reshape concepts, draw on their own and others' experiences, and provide solutions. In Gee's (2004) words, students developed their own social language, a way of speaking or writing in order to construct a particular identity. On the practical level, critical literacy helped students rethink various gender representations. Multimodal texts on a specific issue invited students to be in constant dialogue with various realities outside the classroom. In addition, students' active and reflective engagement confirmed that critical literacy is not "a spectator sport" (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 63) in which knowledge is transmitted in a top-down fashion. It is a language competence that enables learners to cope with different ideologies embedded in discourses in society (Luke, 2014; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

Due to space limitations, this study has focused on how the activity was implemented and how students reacted to it from a critical perspective. Another concern that can be addressed in the future might be the relationships among connection, engagement, and language development. As some researchers (Huang, 2011; Kim, 2004; Thomas, 2000; Wiseman, 2007) suggest, when students are encouraged to connect their learning experience

with meaningful topics and real-life situations, they can enhance their learning motivation and their comprehension of texts. In addition, this study does not intend to ignore the limitations of critical literacy. In response to a suggestion of one more critical literacy activity during the semester, most interviewed students agreed, except S20M, because he thought "it would be tiring to study English." According to Beck (2005), one difficulty in implementing critical literacy is that such instruction requires students to assume various responsibilities such as scrutinizing texts and thinking critically. As S30F explained, "I was not used to proposing questions. I didn't have too much experience of having discussions with other people in senior high school." Critical literacy can be challenging to Taiwanese college freshmen who have mostly studied English in classrooms that highlight transmission pedagogy and exams. As S30F responded, "it takes time for students to become accustomed to this kind of English learning"—critical literacy.

We should understand, as Shor (1999) points out, "coming to critical literacy is a rather unpredictable and even contentious process filled with surprises, resistances, breakthroughs, and reversals. It's no easy or open road . . ." (p. 11). The metaphor of a road suggests the dynamic unpredictability in the implementation of critical literacy. Critical researchers and educators, as well as students as shown in the present study, are constantly challenged to develop, modify, and re-evaluate their own definition of critical literacy.

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