

EFL Students as Critics of Capitalism?

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Abstract

Grounded in the view that EFL literacy education, like all educational activity, is situated in a network of political, economic and social discourses and material conditions, this study explores how EFL students with low-language proficiency may evolve as social critics. It is a part of a broader research about how EFL students and their instructor in a Lebanese, Public high school engaged in one-year critical literacy instruction. The participants' responses demonstrate the complexity of developing a critical stance towards texts and discourses that normalize the practices and consequences of the multi-corporate order. They suggest that factors such as individual subjectivities and desires, social patterns, histories, and ideologies shape the students' critical analysis. Although a few resisted taking a critical stance, many students used their limited language resources to provide creative analyses of the mechanisms and consequences of hyper capitalism and imagined possibilities for a better world.

Keywords: critical literacy in EFL, EFL students as social critics, capitalism in an EFL class

INTRODUCTION

The different critical literacy orientations convincingly highlight the common assumption that texts should be questioned for their ideological interestedness (Janks, 2012; Luke, 2012; Luke, Luke, & Graham, 2007) and should be related to the real world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 2009). However, many scholars repeatedly voice their concern that the ideological constitutiveness of literacy in all its dimensions (texts, the processes of their production and consumption, readers, and writers) is still not considered in the educational systems of many countries, particularly in EFL education (e.g., Crookes, 2009; Huang, 2011; Stevens & Bean, 2007). In these countries, including Lebanon, language policy, curricula and instructional approaches still focus on market skills (Ko & Wang, 2012). This is accompanied by the teachers' fear that preparing EFL/ESL students for standardized tests and addressing their language needs do not allow time for critical literacy instruction (Cho, 2015), which, from this viewpoint, maybe particularly hard for low-language proficiency students. In response to these concerns, the present study was guided by the following questions:

- Do low-language proficiency high-school EFL students, living in the Middle East, which witnesses brutal wars, ironic dismantlement of states, discrimination of all

kinds, and a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, develop a questioning stance towards the textual representations of socioeconomic issues as well as critical analysis of such issues through a prolonged engagement in critical literacy?

- What affects those students' critical stances as they evolve during one-year critical literacy instruction?

Theoretical Background

The complementary views of education in general and of literacy education in particular that both the Freirian and the poststructuralist philosophies present (Aronowitz, 1993) foreground the present study. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain what both strands of thought share and the critiques each presents of the other (see Aronowitz, 1993; Luke, 2012; Morgan, 1997), the study capitalizes on some premises that either one or both of them assume: namely that education is a political human activity and that discourse simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by our ideologies and identities.

Education as Politics

Critical pedagogues believe that education is shaped by and shapes politics in many ways (e.g., Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007; Shor, 1993). Thus, it constitutes an essential form of intervention in the world with an "...aspiration for radical changes ... in such areas as economics, human relations, property, the right to employment, to land, to education, and to health ..." (Freire, 2001, p. 99). According to Freire, this intervention can be realized through problem-posing pedagogy, which initiates the participants in the educational process into critical reflection. Such reflection, which addresses subject matter, doctrines, learning processes, and society itself, brings about new perspectives or new knowledge that can transform life conditions to better serve humanity (Freire, 2001; Shor, 2009/1993). From this perspective, education should respond to the current social order, dominated by the discourses and economies of hyper capitalism (Giroux, 2007; Luke, Luke, & Graham, 2007), which escalate socioeconomic and sociopolitical hardships and conflicts at many levels. This social order puts the majority at a disadvantage while centering wealth in the hands of the half dozen 'lords of the global village' (Mclaren & Da Silva, 1993). This demands that education plays its role in reshaping the new social order to become more equitable. As Giroux (2007) notes: "We should not confuse education with training. Education should nurture a critical spirit in students in order to examine how the world can be freer, more just, and more democratic" (p. 195). "We could ... negotiate academic curricula responsive to urgent social, economic, and political issues, rather than serving one that is so narrowly focused on career preparation (Benesch, 1993, p. 714).

The political view of education conceives of literacy as a significant experience that helps in shaping the human condition (Crookes, 2009; Shor, 2009). This is grounded in Freire's problem-posing education, one principle of which is reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). According to Freire and Macedo (1987), reading and writing

classrooms should connect literacy practices and instruction to the students' experiences and to the various local and global conditions that shape them. In this sense, reading the word makes us rethink our lives and "rewrite" the world in order to promote justice in place of inequity (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009).

Discourse as a Shaping Power

Any text is permeated with the ideological discourses circulating at the time of its production (Missen & Morgan, 2006). "Particular uses of language (as discourses) do not just arise out of an ideology or social practice but help to constitute it. Thus, people's thinking, (both their ideologies and their argumentation), their social actions and attitudes and even their very sense of self are shaped by discourses" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Currently, the discourses of neo-liberals and of the multinational corporations dominate all kinds of media and produce texts in all areas that serve their interests. "Neo-liberal economics constitutes a planetary "newspeak" that lines the pages of newspapers, blogs, and screens with the language of "the market," and with its images and discourses of competitive and possessive individualism " (Luke, Luke, & Graham, 2007, p. 4). These discourses, according to Luke, Luke, & Graham (2007), do not only help in realizing and rationalizing the ideology and practices of the new corporate order as well as its structural and material consequences, but they also render these practices and consequences "inaccessible and incomprehensible to the lay literate reader, viewer, and blogger" (p. 2). Despite the different theoretical positions of the scholars who theorize about discourse, they share the view that discourses or texts are situated in social, economic and political power relations, hence advancing the interests of those groups who have more power. These scholars also share the view that critical literacy should enable students to question any discourse and analyze its purposes and consequences. From a poststructuralist perspective, "literacy education is ultimately concerned with giving students an understanding of textuality, i.e., of the ways texts work" (Missen & Morgan, 2006) and of how they can be deconstructed and reconstructed in order to reveal their interested versions of reality (Janks, 2010; Steavens & Bean, 2007).

SITUATING THE STUDY

Only a few studies have explored critical literacy in a few EFL contexts in the last two decades (e.g., Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Huang, 2011; Ibrahim, 2015b; Ko, 2013; Ko & Wang, 2012; Shin & Crookes, 2005). This highlights the need to research it in multiple EFL settings. In addition, the responsiveness of critical literacy to the students' experiences and to the material conditions of their lives makes it necessary to continuously explore its practices in various contexts. With this in mind, the present study roots itself in the assumption that critical literacy, as a constitutive component of critical applied linguistics, should espouse a clear political vision of the preferred future that helps us shape possible alternatives to the status quo as well as possible means of working towards the realization of a more equitable and peaceful world (Crookes, 2010; Ibrahim, 2015b; Luke, 2012; Pennycook, 2001). It goes beyond language rights to engage high school EFL students in the politics and the discourses of the time (Luke, Luke, & Graham, 2007).

Janks (2012) distinguishes between the (small p politics) and the (big P Politics), arguing, "Politics with a capital P is about government and world trade agreements; ... ethnic or religious genocide and world tribunals; ... global capitalism... (,and) the inequities between the political North and the political South. ... Little p politics, on the other hand, is about the micro-politics of everyday life; ... the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are (,and) ... whether or not we ... recycle our own garbage ..." (p. 151). This interesting distinction, however, does not mean that we can separate politics from Politics, for the daily decisions and behaviors are shaped by the discursive, social, political and economic systems that dominate at a particular time. Thus, to challenge these systems and reveal their inequities, critical literacy practices should help students analyze and critique systemic forces that shape our individual experiences and choices. As Bigelow (1999) maintains, it would be reductive of the inequities resulting from global capitalism and its discourses to conduct a micro-analysis of one of its aspects. Rather, students should recognize how the larger system operates and how the different oppressive conditions at almost all levels are interrelated and connected to its complex mechanisms. To make this possible in settings where EFL teachers do not have much control in terms of instructional materials, we need to work with school-sanctioned textbooks and supplement them with other material when possible and needed.

Contrary to the common wisdom, school-textbooks are ideologically laden and hold authority by presenting a particular view of the world (Behrman, 2006; Stevens & Bean, 2007), and EFL textbooks specifically often represent some aspects of the Western culture and promote the liberal-free market economy (Huang, 2011). Actually, the textbook used in the Lebanese public schools, *Themes*, serves these functions in addition to its promotion of a romantic view of selected aspects of the Lebanese culture. Hence in the present study, eight texts were selected from *Themes* and were supplemented with three texts from newspapers and blogs.

Context and Participants

This article reports a part of a broader study that took place in the academic year 2013-2014, and the twenty four male participants from a Lebanese public high school, most of whom belong to the same religious community, were the same in Ibrahim (2015b). The period of the study witnessed political, social and economic troubles in the Middle-East and in Lebanon the sectarian composition of which causes continuous and shifting conflicts (see Ibrahim, 2015a; 2015b). Many demonstrations and strikes were organized in Lebanon during that period, putting forth some economic and social demands and protesting some laws like the new rent law, which was the focus of the last instructional sequence. Most participants demonstrated a low-language proficiency in their various tasks, and this is evident in the excerpts from their responses used in the "results and analysis" part.

Instruction

Eight instructional sequences were implemented in a one-year-EFL course, four 50-minute-sessions per week. They consisted of various reading, writing, listening, speaking

and drawing tasks about social, economic, and political issues, in addition to some vocabulary and grammar activities. This article presents an analysis of the participants' responses to three written tasks, each performed in a different instructional sequence, as the table below shows. The three sequences illustrate the instructional approach adopted in the study, based on a critical literacy model that consists of four stages: accessing the text, direct instruction, problematizing the text, and going beyond the text (Ibrahim, 2015a).

Table 1. The three instructional sequences

Session Number	Sequence	Instruction
S1	Sequence 1 Bringing homeless out of the cold (BBC news)	A vocabulary game to familiarize students with the new words. A class discussion of the topic. Dividing students into groups with the following roles for a talk show: journalists, charity workers, psychologists and homeless individuals. Silent reading and note-taking in preparation for the talk show. A whole-class discussion of the students' understanding of the text
S2	The text describes the work of an NGO helping homeless individuals in Britain and explains the financial and work challenges that the NGO faces.	Modeling the roles of a journalist and a homeless individual by the teacher to initiate students into the activity. Performing the talk show.
S3		Using ideas from the texts and the notes from the talk show session in writing an essay about: the effectiveness of the NGO described in the text in tackling the homelessness problem; the consequences of depending on NGOs in working with the homeless; Better alternatives for the NGOs work and reasons for not implementing these alternatives
S10		Using ideas from the text in writing a biography about Mother Teresa, illustrating it with drawings of the scenes described in the text. A class discussion of what made Mother Teresa famous.
S11	Sequence 5 Woman of the world (Themes) The text describes the work of Mother Teresa and her life	Writing a report about a simulated interview with people receiving Mother Teresa's help, with the following foci: The interviewees' descriptions of their situations, their understanding of their relationship with Mother Teresa, their opinion about the text's presentation of the woman, and their suggestions to solve their problems
S17	Sequence 11	A vocabulary activity.

	Lebanese Parliament votes on new rent law (Blog)	Silent reading. A class discussion of the text.
S18	The text supports the new rent law that was approved by the Lebanese Parliament in 2014. "In Lebanon, rental contracts had been made on an old law before 1992, under the terms of which tenants used to have life-long contracts and owners could not raise rents. Apartments rented after this year are governed by a law legislated in 1992, under the terms of which contracts should be renewed every three years and the owner can raise the rents as much as he wishes" (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 345).	Discussing the fairness of the new Lebanese rental law by students who were divided into four groups, assuming the roles of house owners, tenants, government representatives, and representatives of human rights organizations. Taking notes of each other's ideas during role playing.
S19		Writing an essay to respond to the following textual claims: the new law is fair to everyone; the new law will lead to lower rents and lower house prices; The new law will boost the economy. The students were told that they can either support or oppose these claims, on the condition that they take into consideration the views of the people the text marginalizes, based on their understanding of the text and on their notes from the previous session.

The three instructional sequences aimed to help students do the following:

Analyze how the author's language choices manipulate the readers so that they take their assumptions for granted;

Question textual claims as well as the ways social problems are currently tackled;

Read from multiple perspectives and see celebrities from a variety of angles;

Imagine possible alternatives to the status quo.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The three tasks used in data analysis are the essay written during session 3, the report about a simulated interview written in session 11 and the essay written during session 19 (see the table above). A structured interview with three participants sought a deeper understanding of their responses to these three tasks. Several themes emerged from these data. These themes were revised several times, and the data were rearranged accordingly. These data were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The participants' responses to the three tasks at the beginning, middle and end of the year-long critical literacy instruction reflected various dimensions of their critical stances, which evolved in complex ways. While many participants were strongly critical of the effectiveness of the NGOs' and individuals' work in handling social hardships in their first analysis task, performed in session 3, most of them demonstrated a weak critical position in exploring the reasons of these hardships in that same task. However, this weak position developed over time, and many demonstrated a coherent vision of

justice in their final task. This was accompanied by a discourse that fluctuated between the rights approach and the philanthropy approach, as evident in some responses. Only four participants maintained an unquestioning stance in their tasks until the end of the treatment. The language challenges that most participants faced did not seem to hinder their involvement in critical literacy tasks.

Exploring Causes: An Evolving Stance

In their first analysis activity about homelessness, many students started questioning how things go in the world, but only a few of them examined the causes of homelessness critically. Although some participants recognized major differences between “rich and poor (or) civilized and uncivilized countries” in handling social problems, it shocked many of them that “most (countries, rich or poor,) suffer from (homelessness),” as Fadel said. This shock is entailed in Khalid’s exclamation: “It’s not possible in the 21st century, could find people living without protection, (without) stability and (with a lot of) suffering.” This indicates a questioning attitude which did not reach the analysis stage. Only Saeed referred it to the occupation of the governments in political issues, and Naeem explained: “Governments thinks that homelessness is not that wide and important problem to deal with.” These two students revealed an understanding of an important reason of marginalization, namely that attention to troubles faced by minority groups is weak (Huang, 2009) and the focus of authorities is on macro political matters. The rest did not go beyond being surprised at the presence of the problem in developed countries.

A critique of unequal power distribution

In their reports from sequence five on a simulated interview with individuals receiving Mother Teresa’s help, many participants exhibited a more developed analysis than in Sequence 1, as the following excerpts illustrate:

(The poor) can’t find a job ... because they aren’t educated, and can’t afford to send their children into a government’s school, or because they are suffering from a bad disease due to poverty. This shows that the majority of people receive less profits than rich people who are controlling the society (Tabajah).

They told me that they went to have a job, but no one look at them. (This is because) they didn’t go to school and universities and have qualification and good education. That is due to social inequality where the minority of the people governs the profits of the national wealth leaving the majority suffering from terrible life conditions (Jameel).

The lack of education deprives them from better job opportunities and consequently from enjoying better life conditions (Zaher).

In our days, the rich people take all the profit” (Shahab).

These selections denote that despite the low-language proficiency of most participants, evident in their responses, many of them developed some language resources to dissect the reasons of systemic inequality, including lack of access to material resources and

unequal power distribution. They could use whatever language they possessed to analyze the socioeconomic, class differences and the ways with which the powerful, rich minority manipulates various resources. Some responses indicate that some participants' critical analysis evolved significantly, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of how the unfair distribution of wealth, lack of access to education, lack of access to employment, and lack of access to health services are interrelated and form a vicious cycle that maintains poverty. Some participants could interpret the social and psychological consequences of this cycle, in which inequality leads to poverty; poverty leads to social problems like theft and lack of education, which in turn leads to poverty and so on and so forth. This is exemplified in Morad's story about "...a guy ... known as a spoiled person ... (who) says that he always do bad things like stealing to earn some money to his parents." Some participants also positioned the hard-working poor as victims of the social order.

Complex discourses of marginalization

In the last sequence of instruction about the Lebanese New Rent Law, the language of marginalization and discrimination permeated the analyses of many participants. For instance, Saeed explained that the law "marginalizes ... the tenants ...by putting the power in the owners' hands and leaving the tenants without any civil rights. Tabajah stated: "(the law) gives a lot of advantages to the owners... more than they actually deserve, and it ignores tenants' rights to at least remain at their houses." According to Tabajah, "(The owners' right to return their houses back without paying a penny" accorded by the new law illustrates the excessive power in their hands. These insights exemplify how the weak critical analysis of the reasons of socioeconomic hardships, demonstrated by many participants in sequence 1, developed in subtle ways in sequence 11. They reflect the participants' ability to dissect how laws, in case of being biased, constitute powerful legal mechanisms that may lead to unbalanced social, economic, and political power, and consequently to marginalization. Bassem, Awad, Jameel and Zaher foresaw the social consequences of this unequal power distribution when they stated that the law will throw the tenants out "as if they are not present," as Bassem put it. Kazem theorized that "it will be hard for (the marginalized) tenants to provide (their basic) life needs... (because they) will be under the power of the owners."

It seems that, through a prolonged engagement in critical analysis, some students have acquired a deep understanding of how exclusionary legal mechanisms come about through the alliance between political authorities and the capitalists in order to advance the interests of both. This is illustrated in the assertion of Zaher, Bassem, Tamer, and Awad that the government served the interests of "the powerful rich" at the expense of the less fortunate groups. Awad stated: "Tenants are outside this law and the government (does not) think about them if they would go on and continue their life normally depending on themselves." Tamer also asked: "How come a law looks and feel sympathy towards one side which is owners?" Some responses show analytical depth in interpreting the rationale behind this alliance. For example, Zaher stated that "Owners as well as government don't think logically, they just think in way that enrich their business." These insights into the various multilayered dimensions of market economy embody a

solid reasoning about how the alliance between the government and a few rich individuals creates unfavorable socioeconomic conditions that disempower many socioeconomic groups, particularly the most vulnerable, from the social processes necessary to enjoy a respectable life.

Analysis extended: Motives and consequences in context

Despite the serious language difficulties of many participants, the one-year-critical literacy course seems to have enabled some of them to critically analyze important aspects of their lives, like the complex motives of capitalism and its consequential compromise in the ability of certain socioeconomic groups to satisfy their basic needs. For example, Tamer asked: “How come a rich person be selfish and nostalgic towards poor people. They don’t think about the miserable way they will ...live ... because they have lack of financial support.” Awad also emphasized “selfish owners who want to fill their pockets” and “don’t care about the person if he is old or young,” as Jameel mentioned. Jameel added: “The owner will fire the tenant out from the building...if he did not pay... and don’t give him a chance to collect and pay the money.” A comparison between these responses and the weak exploration of the causes of poverty demonstrated in task 1 suggests that some students have developed a coherent view of the capitalist system, in which the whole occupation of a small minority is to increase its wealth regardless of any economic, social, or political circumstances and consequences. One of these consequences that the students considered was the discrepancy between market prices and income. For example, Kazem explained: “The salary is too small: less than for the need of the home (food, clothes)”. Zaher phrased it as follows: “Wages are not given equally according to the expensive environment.” This, Awad and Saeed argued, makes tenants unable to pay the expensive house rents which are “not available to the poor, (who) don’t have money to accommodate with,” as Tamer said, and to meet their various other responsibilities, as Hazem and Tabajah stressed. This analysis of systemic inequality and of the multidimensionality of poverty that has progressively evolved from being very weak in the first critical analysis task to being so deep in the last task shows the possibility of engaging language learners of all levels in critical literacy. It illustrates the assertions of Comber and Nixon (2011), Huang (2009), Oberman, O’Shea, Hickey, and Joyce (2014), and Shor (2009) that helping students develop a sophisticated critical interpretative approach to texts and to social, political and economic issues demands an extended involvement with critical literacy practices that engage them in questioning the root causes of injustice. This involvement during an EFL course seems to make a few participants capable of dissecting subtle consequences of free market-economy: Hidden poverty. For instance, Hazem stated since “The rent law will be higher than ever, the people will be in two roads: either with home without money and this will lead to be like poor people but with home, or without home and will sit on streets and they can only buy food.” Kazem explained: “Tenants will not be able ...to help their children... join their friends in the school.” In the follow up interview, Zaher clarified that the 1992 Lebanese rent law “is a crime” because of its partiality.” He asked, if a person earns five hundred dollars at times when the rent is four hundred dollars, how can he afford the life expenses of his family? Does he steal or cheat? These responses indicate that at the end of

instruction, many participants have developed the intellectual skill and have capitalized on their language resources to explain the social impact of the political and economic mechanisms operating in their society.

Some participants could even draw a complex picture of how unfair laws lead to “a big social problem in the future,” as Saeed wrote. Issam asked: “What can people do” when they are treated unfairly? This rhetorical question hints at Issam’s ability to refer some sociopolitical turmoil to the feeling of helplessness that people may experience because of their inability to live with dignity. Issam called on “the government (to) be weary of (this turmoil) ... (because in the current problematic political and social situations), Lebanon can’t carry this problem.” Tamer gave examples of these troubles: strikes and demonstrations will not stop until fair laws are passed. This reflects an understanding of the interrelatedness and historical situatedness of the political, social, and economic hardships and of the idea that this is not destiny, but rather the outcome of a complex systemic problem that reproduces injustice.

Human Rights: A Pattern of Fluctuation

In addition to the weak pattern in examining the reasons of poverty at the beginning of the study, the discourse of most participants fluctuated between rights and charity in both sequence 1 and sequence 5. Actually, many participants mixed the call for a permanent solution of the homelessness problem with a demand for a persistent role for charity work. For instance, despite his suggestion for full financial governmental support of NGOs to solve the homelessness problem, Naeem could not see that charity work would stop. He explained: “...Money, clothes, materials could be collected by special charities by the volunteers all over the country.” This discourse that fluctuates between equity and charity persisted in some reports about Mother Teresa, as the following excerpts indicate:

...the government must ... create association ... that care about poor people and find jobs for them; also rich people should ... support the associations (Khalil).

Helping the poor people is the government job, and social association is also their job’s (Abdallah).

After my interview with the tormented poor people ... (among whom) mother Teresa spreads awareness about civil rights to let them know the negligence of governments towards them, I have realized that nothing in life goes as organized earlier. Government should build ...charity...organizations that give out food to the needy, (spend) a certain sum of money to create jobs for the unemployed ...set up charity foundation, and guide those who are on the brink of collapse. (Through this,) poverty will be eliminated and human’ rights would be respected (Zaher).

This fluctuation indicates a contradiction; when governments take full social responsibility, there will be no need for charity, which is not based on the idea of rights. For instance, Zaher’s belief “that nothing goes as organized earlier” implies that systemic inequality is man-made and violates the nature of life, which grants human beings equal

rights. Meanwhile, the student calls for creating charity organizations to take care of the problem. This contradiction in some participants' rhetoric may be the result of their disappointment with governmental work. This disappointment is embodied in Saeed's question: "But will the government take in to consideration these solutions", "...Or it will ignore it?", as Jamil also asked. Zaher speculated that "it's a remote dream that wouldn't achieve unless the world is destroyed." Thus, it is possible that the students' experiences with governmental work in handling social problems led some of them to maintain the discourse of charity. Moreover, both religious and non-religious groups in Lebanon and in other parts of the world appreciate charity, normalize its discourses, and reinforce them. This, alongside the strong presence of charity work in the participants' communities, may partially explain the fluctuation in some participants' rhetoric. Although other participants have not revealed a critical stance towards the discourses that normalize charity, they have distinguished between the idea of charity and the idea of rights. Actually, it is significant that the participants, most of whom belong to religious communities, possessed a vision of social equity although the dominant religious rhetoric normalizes socioeconomic problems.

Imagined Ideal Maternalism

Although many participants were critical of the effectiveness of the efforts of small groups and individuals in handling systemic social hardships, as the next section shows, their responses included unrealistic idealization of Mother Teresa. This seems to result from the moving descriptions of the imagined situations provided in the reports about simulated interviews with the people whom Mother Teresa helped--descriptions that may not allow for any critique of the providers of assistance, as the following selections indicate:

Abdallah was "shocked...when (the poor) told (him) about their situation--...no money, no food, no house and no security. They always hungry and live in the street. They work to people who are so mean to them just to get a little food."

Naeem wrote: When you ask a person living with his whole family in a plastic shelter about his situation, you will feel sorry about his answer before hearing his sound, it would be harmful to ask about the situation of a man who works daily to feed his children whom are ignored by the government, suffering from diseases and deprived from schools.

Hameed reported: "A man ... spend three days in the street under rain without eating. He drink from the water rain. A woman ... (sold) her son to a rich person because he will die if still with her."

Mother Teresa's efforts to relieve those poor people from ... the worst "life conditions that could be given to anyone," as Tabajah explained, made the participants idealize the Woman. According to Jameel, "Mother Teresa ... works hard ... from her heart ... in order to relieve poverty and ... spread the smile and the joy in their hearts, instead of the government that don't care about them. ... She was helpful and hopeful that God will help them." Morad pondered: "(She) gave (them) a new life and revive their hopes. What

future this people will face without Mother Teresa?" These imagined but sincere feelings made any critical view of the idealization of this woman by the media unlikely. A strong support for this conclusion comes from Saeed who theorized: "All these efforts that she had done made her an ideal to the poor and needy people, (with whom she had a) very intimate and maternal (relationship)." "(This) relationship of love and caring" (Abdallah) which "they ...had touched, made them feel that the Woman was our second Mother in the world and (we) love her very much" (Firas). It maybe difficult to help students challenge this elevation to the status of motherhood while many believe that Mother Teresa provided all the needed assistance (shelter, financial support, clothes, food, toys for the kids, and medical treatment, for which the poor "were thankful, grateful and admiring," as Shahab reported. The following response from an interview with Jameel that aimed to challenge this image confirms these observations:

Mother Teresa was like a mother for the people where she works; when ... she will help them and love them like her family. They will love her and be grateful for all what she did for them. If I were poor and she sacrificed her life to help me ..., I will appreciate and admire her. She is a great woman.

The simulated interview in Sequence 5 aimed to involve students in deconstructing and reconstructing Mother Teresa's image depicted by the textbook and the media. However, many students seem affected by highlighting Mother Teresa as a celebrity. Their rhetoric indicates that they did not think of the following possibilities:

- Mother Teresa does not necessarily have positive feelings, let aside the maternal ones, towards the people receiving her help;
- Mother Teresa was part of an institution, the support of which was crucial in her work;
- Other possible philanthropists or organizations may be helping the same group because one source of support is not enough;
- The imagined maternal relationship between Mother Teresa and the poor entails a humiliating view that the poor are like children, in constant dependency on others.

In their study about engaging children in issues related to global citizenship, Oberman, O'Shea, Hickey, and Joyce (2014) found that children could not challenge the view that their nations were helping other countries and that these countries became dependent on this help. In the present study, it seems that the social discourse that reinforces benevolence made questioning its assumptions difficult for many participants. It may have constituted cultural models that guided their rationales and behaviors (Laman, 2006). These cultural models students brought with them to class seem to inform their understanding of their experiences and to be evoked when thinking about ideas such as poverty, philanthropy, rights, etc. In addition, the imagined maternal relationship indicates not only the social tendency to idealize celebrities, but also an exaggerated

respect for religious figures. This respect, observed in Morad's thought that Mother Teresa was the angel and savior who rescued the poor from "their...miserable...lives...full of sadness," may be attributed to the influence of the social and religious discourses dominant in the students' social milieus. It also may be referred to the sensitivity implicated in critiquing figures from other religions or sects since the participants are Moslems.

The Limited Role of NGOs: A More Developed Analysis

Unlike the weak analytical pattern exhibited at the beginning of the instructional period and the fluctuating discourses between charity and rights throughout the study, many participants started with a fairly developed analysis of the NGOs' work in sequence 1. Only a few responses did not examine the limitations of this work. The following excerpt by Hazem illustrates these few responses:

(NGOs) are working very good, not in helping homeless persons only, but also in everything they see it in the society. They donate themselves to solve these problems. They provide them jobs to work and take money to rent a house and to live in a good way.

This sincere appreciation of charity work that made a few participants unable to think of its limitations did not overshadow the ability of the others to analyze the factors that negatively impact the NGOs work. The following excerpts make evident some participants' analysis of the conditions and consequences of depending on NGOs:

These NGOs provide small part of solution by taking homeless people to shelters, (but) taking some homeless people to a shelter where they could be treated well is not enough. These organizations can't handle the whole disaster that is spread all over the country." there should be some support to these organizations to play a bigger role" (Saeed).

They can provide for some homelessness people ... not all... food, clothes, job and shelter, but not permanent ones. We still witness many situations in our daily life, as we see in London about 150 person still homelessness. As John who suffers homelessness and his situation still not solved (Jameel).

Depending on the non-governmental organizations in (solving) this problem will not change anything (Abdallah).

A few participants could even analyze subtle constraints to the NGOs' work. For example, Zaher pointed out that "(NGOs might be) not professional enough" to deal with the homeless.

It seems that many students had the potential to read the word and rewrite the world (Crookes, 2010; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Peterson, 2009) in examining the socioeconomic responsibilities of non-governmental institutions and of governments. Saeed asserted that "the government should find free time for these marginalized people, even if it got international problems. Since these people are related to the country even if it is a developed country or a non-developed country." Khalid thought that effective

intervention encompasses creating job opportunities, raising the salaries, making house rents accessible to everyone, and maintaining housing fund facilities. Thus, although the participants' analyses vary in their depth and in the dimensions they address, they all show good potential in examining the different roles that can be played by the stakeholders in solving a social problem like homelessness. Some students presented an interesting vision of social work in which governmental and the non-governmental organizations cooperate, as Abdallah and Naeem demanded. Naeem specified this cooperation in that "organized teams (should be) funded by the government and given ... unlimited capacity ... time and materials."

In sequence 5, many participants further developed the strong reasoning demonstrated in Sequence 1 about the inability of individuals and small groups to handle economic hardships, which are entrenched in the economic system of the world. For instance, Naeem stated: with all due respect, Teresa cannot provide a permanent solution for poverty ... (because) one hand cannot clap." Shahab asserted: "(although she) was a good person and helped the poor people a lot, (her efforts) are not enough (to) soothe all the problems." Morad explained: "(The) situation became better after the help of Mother Teresa and God, But ... this people will stay poor since they haven't went to school and many disease will spread among them since they haven't wash and shower. Thus, the participants' solid critical view of NGOs work that appeared in sequence one was enhanced in sequence 5 through gaining more insights into the multidimensionality of poverty, intricately and systemically bound to other issues like education and health.

In a study about EFL critical literacy course by Huang (2009), many participants questioned the effectiveness of programs intended to help the poor. In the present study, the participants went beyond just questioning this point; they seem to have systematically reasoned about the importance of sustainability in social work, because solving social problems "takes long time", as Zaher affirmed, and cannot be maintained without a clear social policy and support by the official institutions. But why did many students exhibit strong analysis of the limitations of small groups and individuals in handling social problems in the first sequence of instruction, while their analysis of the reasons of social hardships was weak at this stage? Why did their discourse fluctuate between the charity approach and the rights approach throughout the study while it was consistent and clear in tackling the role of NGOs? The participants' direct experiences with the work of NGOs during the disastrous wars that broke for long periods in their country may explain this. They particularly had first hand experience with this work after the Israeli 2006 aggression against Lebanon, which specifically targeted the students' communities. These experiences may have formed the background against which the participants shaped their analyses. Thus, the various experiences that students bring with them seem to explain the variations in their critical stances.

An Alternative Discourse and Imagined Possibilities

Creating space for intellectual explorations of texts that tackle complex but meaningful matters has given rise to an alternative discourse that depicts a more just world (Giroux, 2007), in which empathy, solidarity, and fairness prevail. For instance, Fadel asked: "Will

every one be like Mother Teresa... (so that we have) a society full of people who care to each other?" Jameel dreamt of "...a safe and beautiful world full of happiness and awareness (which requires that) all our new generation should be like Mother Teresa (who) was a Symbol of love and care." These responses in sequence 5 indicate that some participants imagined a just social order based on a culture of empathy. Actually, Kazem described the current social order as unfair and called for a system in which everyone will be able to afford acceptable life standards. Shahab imagined "a social balance" in which "profit (is) distributed fairly." Jameel presented a coherent and comprehensive vision of a just "community (which maintains) a balance of ... rights, (with no) discrimination or difference between the rich and poor class," proposing a solution of two parallel tracks: (a) short-term and (b) long-term. The former lies in the provision of "shelter, clothes and food" which, according to his classmate Saeed, makes the poor "more comfortable and safe." The latter is "to provide for them works to earn money without pleading rich people to give them money," and to protect the rights of all social groups so that there is no "discrimination or differences between (different socioeconomic) classes." It appears that the lengthy engagement in critical literacy brought about a systematic critical reasoning about social issues as well as alternative discourses that represented imagined possibilities for a better world.

Some participants' imagined possibilities included sophisticated ideas and subtle details about a just social order, which means "to spread the human resources equally," as explained by Tabajah, and to enable "all the people, poor or rich, attend the same schools, have the same living shelters etc..." as maintained by Saeed. Issam depicted this dream beautifully: "All these poor people ...should reach this spread phenomena to live like all people in all over the world." In order to realize this dream, Saeed emphasized that "the society should make it come true to give each human being their full rights." These responses indicate the potential of developing the students' global ethics (Hull, Zacher and Hibbert, 2009) and of adding global citizenship to the students' multiple identities (Oberman, O'Shea, Hickey, and Joyce, 2014).

In the last instructional sequence about rental law, many participants furthered their intricate critical analysis and consequential discourses to encompass subtle mechanisms of maintaining justice. This is indicated in some participants' specifications of how to maintain a just social order through a balance between the income and the life expenses of all social groups. For instance, Zaher suggested: "(Any solution should take) into consideration how the market rent price is expensive and not available for all, so prices should be raised gradually according to the payment's ability of tenants." In the follow up interview, Zaher recommended some measures like determining the housing cost and providing payment facilities, which suggests that the government should regulate the market in order to ensure every person his/her right to affordable housing. Such "... solutions protect the rights (of both the owners and the tenants)," as Awad maintained. Kazem concluded that "when the owner decreases the rent, (tenants will) afford the raise of fee, and (this) ... improves the standards of living ..." These evolving symbolic resources that depicted the complexities of a fair social order, as the students viewed it, suggest that discourse is not destiny (Shor, 2009) and that it can be reconstituted through the realm

of “the imaginary” (Crookes, 2010). They imply that planned interpretive conversations around significant matters (Comber & Nixon, 2011) may give rise to discourses that are more inclusive of the common interests of human beings and representative of a more just world. More significantly, despite the language difficulties that the participants faced, they expressed intricate thoughts about complex matters. These thoughts are indicative of the participants’ authentic voices and of their ability to critique in creative ways. The issues of voice and of the relationship between language development and critical literacy warrant a thorough discussion, which is not possible in this article.

Resistance to a Critical Stance

While many developed their interpretative skills throughout the course, four participants seem to resist reading texts from different perspectives and examining them in terms of whose interests they serve. The responses of Farhat, Firass, Haitham, and Imad to the new rent law show their submissiveness to the author’s line of reasoning, either because of their lack of interest in critical literacy or because of their appreciation of the current social order. While the four participants presented a reasonable explanation of the injustice done to the property owners by the old rental law, they adopted the author’s arguments about the fairness of the new law. Some of these arguments were:

1. The new rent law is fair enough for both sides because it gives the owners the right to reclaim and invest in their properties without compensating the tenant. It will contribute to the boost in economy, where many apartments and properties will be available at the market price, which is at its highest.
2. I do realize that a lot of families will suffer from the new rent law and will be displaced, but a lot of owners as well were suffering as they were unable to profit from their apartments to help out their families.
3. The temporary financial support allocated to the tenants by the new law helps them in paying their rents.

These textual claims that the four participants adopted reveal their weak questioning of the writer’s discourse. They do not seem to analyze how the new rent law is fair for both the owners and the tenants. While they could challenge the constraints that the old law places on property owners, they do not seem to raise questions about the new law and the logic of the market economy, which include:

- It is fair to have one law that governs all rental contracts. However, does this law by itself protect the rights of both the tenants and the owners?
- How would paying high rent prices boost the economy?
- What does the author’s definition of economy comprise?
- Is it fair to cause displacement and suffering to many families in order to alleviate the suffering of owners of apartments on old contracts?

- Who is able to afford market prices to replace the old tenants?

This implies that the four participants did not think of whose interests the textual claims serve. They also seem unable or unwilling to do critical policy analysis. For instance, they did not consider the consequences of the temporary financial support allocated by the law to the tenants, particularly after this support is removed.

The four participants were not responsive to the various tasks throughout the year of instruction. This may refer to their lack of interest in learning English or to their weak language. It may also be attributed to their unfamiliarity with critical literacy or to their appreciation of capitalism. Unfortunately, the four participants did not agree to be interviewed in order to seek more data so that any interpretation is supported. In all cases, critical literacy instruction does not seem to have affected all students the same way.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the present study, EFL students with low language proficiency, living amidst socioeconomic troubles and constant, increasingly dangerous political and security threats, were engaged in reading the word and the world, in deconstructing and reconstructing texts, and in interpretive conversations around significant local and global matters. The following patterns could be noted in the results:

First, many students' analysis of the reasons and consequences of systemic socioeconomic problems evolved gradually over an extended period of time and became fairly developed at the end of instruction.

Second, some students' discourses fluctuated between the rights approach and the philanthropy approach throughout the study.

Third, the participants demonstrated a strong critical stance towards the effectiveness of individuals and NGOs in handling systemic problems from the beginning of instruction, which became deeper as the course progressed.

Fourth, a few participants maintained their resistance to a critical stance towards text until the end of instruction.

The results suggest that the variation in the participants' stances seems to result from their desires, their multiple identifications, the social discourses of their communities, and their socioeconomic/sociopolitical contexts. This indicates the need to take these factors into consideration in evaluating the students' progress during their critical literacy journey.

More importantly, although the low-language proficiency has certainly affected the participants' performance in this critical EFL language course, a few preliminary conclusions emerged from this study: critical literacy tasks stimulate the students' desires to use the target language in expressing their authentic ideas and feelings. Hence, their distinct voices may be shaped during this kind of instruction. Furthermore, critical

literacy instruction may provide a significant platform for both teachers and students to work on language-related issues in meaningful ways. Thus, the following research questions may guide future studies:

- How may language instruction and critical literacy instruction be integrated, given the constraints of schooling in a specific context, the Lebanese for instance?
- What progress does the integration of critical literacy instruction and language instruction lead to in terms of language proficiency and how is this different from non-critical literacy classes?
- How does critical literacy instruction help students shape their distinct voices?

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