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# Critical Pedagogy for Foreign-Language Writing

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Despite the vast literature on critical pedagogy in general, a clear understanding of what critical pedagogy entails in foreign-language (FL) writing has not yet been articulated—perhaps due to the field’s pragmatic orientation. In this article, I propose four intertwined key elements of a critical pedagogy for FL writing: relationship, agency, identity, and power. I argue first, drawing on Freire’s theory of education and Bakhtinian philosophy, that the essence of applying critical pedagogy to FL writing lies in carving out a dialogical space in which FL learners can form new self-other **relationships** to disrupt their often-marginalized status. Second, inspired mainly by sociocultural approaches to language and literacy studies, I define **agency** as individuals’ goal-oriented capacity to act, which lies at the core of the effective application of critical pedagogy in the FL context. Depending on power dynamics, agency may take negative (e.g., resistance) or positive (e.g., investment) forms. Third, **identity**, defined from the perspective of poststructuralist and narrative practices as individuals’ multiple and evolving relationships with the world, is implicated in each literacy activity; as such, practitioners of critical pedagogy in FL writing should design ways both to validate learners’ existing identities and to expand their identity options. Fourth, **power**, defined from the perspective of literacies as unbalanced yet pervasive social relations, shapes all human interactions and individuals’ capacity to act as agents. These key elements influence each other, and the contextualized configurations of these interrelated elements provide flexible pathways to critical pedagogy in FL writing. A case study within a creative writing course illustrates all four elements and the effectiveness of such critical pedagogy in FL writing education in developing learners’ agency. It is hoped that this study will encourage further discussion and localized explorations of critical pedagogy in FL writing education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although there exists a vast literature on critical pedagogy in both education in general (e.g., Apple, 2013, 2019; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Gounari, 2009, 2014; McLaren, 2010) and TESOL in particular (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999, 2002, 2015, 2020; Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Luke & Dooley, 2011; Norton, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 1990, 2004), a clear articulation of critical pedagogy for foreign-language (FL) writing is still missing. This is because FL writing often takes a marginal position in the collegiate curriculum (Allen, 2018). Besides, FL writing classrooms are often constrained by local educational conditions such as large class sizes (Leki, 2001). Consequently, despite a recent call to elevate the status of FL writing education (Belcher, 2012), critical pedagogy, if considered at all, remains exploratory in FL contexts (e.g., Crookes, 2009; Kim, 2015, 2017; Kim & Pollard, 2017; Perveen, 2015; Suzani, 2018), with little discussion on FL writing (e.g., Ye & White, 2012). Thus, L2 studies still need further theorization and empirical studies to resituate the “US-centric” critical pedagogy (Kim, 2017, p. 53) in FL writing. In this article, I will first propose a poststructuralist-oriented critical pedagogy for FL writing. I will then use a

classroom-based study to illustrate the incorporation and impact of critical pedagogy in FL writing.

## A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY FOR FL WRITING

Crookes (2012) defines critical pedagogy as ways in which teachers engage in language education with a clear intention to eradicate social injustice. Similarly, some L2 writing scholars also contextualize writing from critical lenses such as identity, ideology and equality (Canagarajah, 2002, 2020; Hyland, 2002; Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012; You, 2018). In FL writing, contextualization can help to prevent essentializing learners and labeling them as deficient. It may expose literacy events and social practices where backgrounds of a dominant group may be valued while those of the minority groups are devalued, thus providing these learners with unequal learning conditions.

Yet critical pedagogy is not just about revealing social inequalities; it is also about transforming multilingual writers' subjectivity, particularly oppressive subjectivities. Critical writers should learn to scrutinize assumptions behind conventions, develop critical perspectives on knowledge and reality, and deploy the English language for their own voices (Canagarajah, 2002, 2020; Ye & White, 2012). Critical pedagogy is thus an intervention to disrupt learners' established and negative sense of self, which is grounded in the "banking" model of literacy education (Freire, 1970), which focuses on form, not meaning, and which is often sustained by high-stakes exams (Ye & White, 2012). Therefore, critical pedagogy for FL writing can refer to FL writing teachers' ways of designing and teaching writing that enable FL learners to achieve contextualized understandings about themselves and the world. Accordingly, I propose four intertwining key elements of a critical pedagogy for FL writing: relationship, agency, identity, and power. Addressing these four elements, critical pedagogy can help eradicate social injustice at the classroom and individual levels by reforming the learners' subjectivity as valued people and competent writers. I will now explain how each of the four components contributes to the overall pedagogy.

Relationship is foundational to a critical FL writing pedagogical design. In proposing a *problem-posing* pedagogy, Freire (1970) emphasizes "togetherness," and aims to remove oppressive relationships and restore humanity in both the oppressor and the oppressed. In an FL writing context, it is unfitting to consider the teacher and students as oppressor and oppressed, respectively. However, the teacher-student relationship may well mirror social relationships outside of the classroom. By adopting a banking model of literacy education, teachers may unwittingly act as accomplices of oppressive ideologies such as monolingualism and deficit-oriented ways of relating to language learners. Alternatively, teachers may embrace "togetherness" and embark on a shared quest for justice with their students. The quest may feature ethical issues (You, 2018) of knowing and representing language learners (Hanauer, 2010) or other marginalized social groups (Ye & White, 2012). Whatever the form of the quest, FL writers are treated as full humans with agency, who can address the world through their own written words as shaped by their experiences, emotions and imaginations (Hanauer, 2012). Granted, promoting humanity in this way may not challenge "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) directly. Nonetheless, it provides a counter-discourse to theories that treat learners as deficient and, in so doing, reorients L2 writing education to advance learners' own agendas (Leki, 2001).

Agency is the core outcome toward which a critical pedagogy in FL writing should strive. It is implied in Freire's (1970) emphasis on freedom as an important pedagogical outcome—

a freedom shared by both the oppressor and the oppressed, a freedom from previously limiting and dehumanizing ways of relating to the self and the other. Inspired mainly by scholarship on poststructuralist approaches to language and literacy studies (Ahearn, 2001; Darwin & Norton, 2015; Duff, 2012; Norton, 2000) and narrative approaches to counseling (White, 2007), I define agency as individuals' goal-oriented and socioculturally-mediated capacity to imagine and act upon new possibilities. Foregrounding goal-setting in a critical pedagogy is consistent with narrative practices' emphasis on "intentional state" categories such as desire, hope, and commitment (White, 2007, p. 103). Although identity categories such as race, gender and age remain important, they are complemented and complicated by individuals' preferred storylines and imagined identities for themselves (e.g., Norton, 2000).

Identity is the connecting link between the other three elements in a critical pedagogy for FL writing. Identity refers to individuals' multiple and evolving relationships with the world. This notion extends a poststructuralist perspective on learner identity as "multiple, a site of struggle, and changing over time" (Peirce, 1995, p. 14) by integrating a narrative perspective. Amongst many possibilities, identity can be continued through narrative (Bruner, 1986; White, 2007) and / or through the performing of the same identity categories across contexts (Price, 1996). Further, this understanding also links to Ivanič's (1998) framework, which views writer identity as entailing three interacting dimensions: the *autobiographical self*, which features a writer's past and its impact on writing (p. 24), the *discoursal self*, which features a writer's textual representation of the self (p. 26), and the *self as author*, which features a writer as the owner of a text (p. 24). All three aspects are situated in *possibilities of selfhood*, which refer to sociocultural contexts such as a classroom and their affordances and constraints on writers' identity work (p. 27). In this article, *autobiographical self* and *possibilities of selfhood* are especially relevant as the former focuses on the writer's past and the latter on the immediate pedagogical context. Understood as multiple, evolving, and situated, identity shapes human relationships, which in turn may influence individuals' unique trajectories of identity development.

Power permeates the pedagogical space. Power is imbued in all language use and identity work, which makes it necessary for critical pedagogues to confront typical ways of representing powerless groups (Harklau, 2000) and their literacies (Street, 1995). Teachers should be mindful of how they exercise their power in class (Bizzell, 1991). Cummins et al. (2011) identify two contrasting ways of using power by teachers. A *coercive* use of power seeks to dominate and maintain the other's subordination. In contrast, a *collaborative* use of power seeks to empower the other, such as students, by valuing and validating their backgrounds and goals through co-constructing their identity-invested texts. In either case, FL writing teachers need to grasp how power and situated ways of being are intertwined.

In offering this framework, I am not suggesting that only these four elements described above are involved in any critical pedagogy for FL writing. Nor am I suggesting that these four are distinct entities from each other. Rather, they are different but intertwined, in constant interaction with each other, sometimes giving rise to other salient elements. Future explorations of critical pedagogy in FL writing may, for instance, consider issues of ideology as well.

## CONTEXT

The study in which I applied these principles took place in an 18-week elective creative writing course. The students were from two groups of freshmen majoring in English at a state university in southwest China. Each class had 30 registered students, and one class also had

an auditing student. They met with me once a week for 90 minutes. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old. Their first writing samples, stating what they were like when writing in English, revealed that most of them were struggling with English writing, due partly to their difficulties with English vocabulary, grammar, and content development:

- (1) When I write in English now, I feel like a homeless person because my words are not enough. (Yao – all names here are pseudonyms)
- (2) When I write in English now, I feel I don't know what topic to talk about and how to write it, because it is empty in my mind. (Tang)

This kind of negative sense of self associated with writing in English is most likely a result of the form-focused and exam-oriented English writing education to which most Chinese students have been exposed (Ye & White, 2012). This is also the kind of oppressive subjectivity that I seek to challenge through the adoption of critical pedagogy.

I took several measures to enrich students' learning experience and encourage their growth as writers. First, I created a low-anxiety learning environment, where students were expected to invest regularly in writing (Yang, 2013) without worrying about writing exams. The students' assessment was based on their e-portfolios, with 12 writing samples (30%), attendance (10%), a self-chosen best writing assignment of the semester (50%), and course reflection (10%). Second, students were encouraged to develop creative writing as a craft while drawing on the class writing ecology (Canagarajah, 2020), their own life experiences, and interactions with others outside of the writing class. For instance, they were required to have a conference with my two American university student interns to polish their best writing. They were also expected to revise their writing samples based on classroom discussions once every one or two weeks. Third, a resource perspective on students' multilingual and multicultural backgrounds was both demonstrated in my instruction and encouraged in students' own writing. Classroom interactions occurred around printed texts and images, both in English and Chinese, as well as phrases from some other local languages. In terms of the four aspects presented above, I practiced a critical pedagogy by reforming the teacher-student relationship, foregrounding students' agency, recognizing their multiple identities, and encouraging a collaborative use of power.

## METHOD

An ethnographic approach was adopted, focusing on the participants' own literacy experiences and writing processes within the classroom context. It facilitated close observations of the multimodal and multilingual classroom interactions while also considering larger cultural forces that shape classroom activities (Heath & Street, 2008).

Two broad questions guided my study: (1) How was critical pedagogy, as articulated above, incorporated in my own creative writing class? (2) How did the critical pedagogy shape student writers' engagement with EFL creative writing?

### Data Collection

Eight types of data were collected:

- teaching-related documents, such as lesson plans, slides and handouts for the class;

- ethnographic fieldnotes of significant classroom events and my own inter-pretations;
- students' weekly writing samples;
- written reflections from 58 of the 61 students on how the creative writing course has impacted them;
- interview data from three students and the two American writing tutors;
- two American tutors' weekly journals of their observations, interpretations, reflections, and decisions;
- recordings of selected classroom interactions;
- a questionnaire survey in Chinese on the students' own perceptions of how the course impacted them, administered ten months after the course. Thirty-three students responded and all responses were valid. All data were collected and used with the students' and tutors' written consent.

## Data Analysis

My fieldnotes (F) led the way in addressing the first question and students' course reflections (R) the second. I further attended closely to the "subject reality" resident in such autobiographical data (Pavlenko, 2007, pp. 165–166). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003) guided my interpretation of how I incorporated a critical pedagogy in my own classroom. I triangulated my reading with other data types such as interviews with students (I) and their written reflections (R) and writing samples (W). I also adopted ethnographic strategies of "constant comparison and co-occurrence" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 42) and subsequent happenings. The objective was to reveal how course-related events may influence students' ways of engaging in creative writing and changes within their multiple drafts.

To answer the second question, I coded students' written reflections and descriptions of the backgrounds of their best writing samples to identify changes in their subjectivity as a result of their participation in the course. In tracing the students' identity work, I followed other studies that treat identity as a discursive construction (Fernsten, 2008; Ivanič, 1998; Zhao, 2015). Micro discourse analysis of "I-statements" (Gee, 1999) was adopted to identify student writers' involvement with the course and its impact on them. The pronoun "I" is taken as indicative of the writer's personal engagement with writing (Zhao, 2015). I also include clauses with the first-person pronouns "my" and "me" as "I-statements" because they can also indicate implicitly students' experience with the course and their evolving understandings.

Following Zhao (2015, p. 58), two additional procedures were adopted:

- (1) breaking the written reflections into basic clauses, with each clause counted separately, and
- (2) reading the data heuristically, within context rather than literally. Consider the example below:

I also found the parts that I was interested in, like poetry and fiction. (Liu, R)

In Liu's reflection, "the parts" are taken to mean "genres" because of the phrase "like poetry and fiction." To avoid basing my interpretations solely on students' written claims, I also connected students' "I-statements" with interview data and students' writing samples (coded as 1W, 2W, etc., with the number indicating the sequence of transcript or sample).

## FINDINGS

### Incorporation of a Critical Pedagogy

I incorporated critical pedagogy by adopting a dialogical approach, tapping into students' local and personal knowledge as resources, and treating creative writing as a social practice.

#### *Teaching Dialogically*

A dialogical approach was adopted in the teaching of this creative writing course. This approach frees learners to take their own pace as they fashion their own texts within the classroom context (Canagarajah, 2015). More specifically, this approach treats knowing as both personal and social or as co-constructed by both teachers and students (Moraes, 1996). Accordingly, I frequently engaged my students to have conversations with me and with each other. These conversations facilitated students' exploration of new content and of writing and revision possibilities. One example is the use of a sentence-completion task that involved the generation of new metaphors about love, sharing between partners and recommending to the whole class a good metaphor. As I recorded in my field notes: one student's example "Love is an onion" energized the whole class, who requested him to explain why (3F). The use of a dialogical approach allowed both my students and me to explore multiple perspectives and diverse possibilities for creative expression.

My use of a dialogical approach also featured prompts for my students to focus first on the meaning and then on the form. Take Hao as an example. Early in the semester, Hao used the title "Fall Down Again" in response to my invitation for each student to design a book title and some chapter titles. I asked him about his use of the word "fall," and he explained that he did not literally fall down, but experienced a metaphorical fall into "bad behaviors" in his "earlier years" (2F). Based on this understanding, I suggested that he use "My First Fall" and "My Falling Again" instead.

This dialogical approach was effective in that my students would often integrate suggestions. All 33 students who responded to the survey reported that their creative writing integrated thoughts from the teacher, their classmates and themselves. A dialogical approach in this case thus served as a springboard for both content generation and language use.

#### *Local and Personal Knowledge as Resources for Creativity*

My teaching of EFL creative writing sought to reposition my students' local and personal knowledge as resources for creative expression. This was clear in the writing assignments for the course. One writing task, for instance, asked the students to reimagine a Chinese traditional folktale. The prompt read as follows:

We are expecting some American students to come to the School of Foreign Languages in a few weeks. To help them know about Chinese (ethnic) culture and your life, you are to develop a story of your earlier life, which integrates elements from some legends, whether they are the ones told in class or from other sources. Be sure to write in such a way that your readers from America, who may or may not have prior knowledge about Chinese (ethnic) legends, can understand and appreciate what you write. Be sure to also add your spices of creativity to make your story interesting to read.

This prompt positioned my students mainly as informants of personal life stories and Chinese or ethnic cultures. While drawing on the local and personal knowledge that they already possessed, the students were also expected to inject personal creativity, thus highlighting their identity as creative writers.

My field notes from that week described the many possibilities that my students considered and that were facilitated by classroom interactions. Wang, for instance, asked me how to link “Love Story,” a Romeo-and-Juliet song by the American singer Taylor Swift, with the Chinese legend *Cowherd and Weaver Girl* (10F). The Chinese legend tells of a weaver girl from heaven falling in love with and marrying an honest and hardworking cowherd. This upsets the divine order, so the Heavenly Queen divides the couple by creating a huge river between them. Yet the couple’s strong love for each other inspires the magpies to form a bridge with their bodies once a year so the couple can meet again. Through our discussion, a potential solution emerged: “Lyrics can still be used, and the story that follows should relate to the lyrics” (10F).

At the end of the semester, after many revisions, Wang presented her “Chinese Love Story” as her masterpiece. As she first envisioned it, the story combined the Romeo and Juliet “Love Story” with the ancient Chinese story of *Cowherd and Weaver Girl*. The lyrics, adapted by Wang (below, in bold), featured Juliet’s words toward her Romeo, with the traditional story *Cowherd and Weaver Girl* providing a solution to their separation. Wang further used circled numbers to link to endnotes on culture-loaded terms:

**We were both young when I first saw you.**

A long time ago, the young Cowherd and the young Weaver Girl met in the Pantao party<sup>①</sup>. They fell in love at first sight.

**Her mother said, “Stay away from the Weaver Girl.”**

Their love was soon discovered by the Weaver Girl’s mother, the Mother Lady Queen<sup>②</sup>.

The student’s positioning as a cultural informant was thus foregrounded in her familiarity of the cultural lore and her use of endnotes to explain concepts such as “the Pantao party.”

Students’ imaginative pieces like this one highlight the importance of designing writing tasks that allow students to capitalize on their own personal and local knowledge in their writing processes. Their output contrasts with their initial struggles with content.

*Creative Writing as a Social Practice*

In line with the critical role played by relationships, I regard social interactions as a springboard for creativity. *A Sorrowful Story* by student Zhao provides an example. It tells of a painful tragedy between two student lovers. The female partner “is a beautiful, optimistic and lovely girl who likes laughing and talking to people around her.” The male, in contrast, “was extremely quiet” and just “took care of the girl silently.” They fell in love, “but he never expressed that directly.” Suspicion and jealousy began to rise in her heart when she saw him talking happily with another girl. She decided to quit the relationship as a way to test him, “She thought that if he did like her, he should have done something.” However, he did not. So, she concluded “that he didn’t like her at all.” The story ends with the girl realizing from both his words and his actions that he had always loved her, but only when it was all too late.



The girl was crossing the road when a car came to her. She was too scared to move. At that moment, the boy came out. He pushed her away. The boy died on the way to the hospital and she found a letter for her in his hand. He held it tightly. It said, "Since I saw you at the first time I have been deeply attracted by your smile. I can't stand with the life without your laughter any more. I just want to say that I really quite like you." (Sheng, W)

It is tempting to attribute the crafted tragedy solely to the student writer's ingenuity. However, just as the writer explains in the story background, social interactions actually contributed at least two ideas to the story's development.

When I was in high school, I liked the tragic story very much. *When we talked about the love theme at class*, I suddenly had a thought that I should write a tragic love story on my own. I thought that I would do well in it. This is a really sorrowful story. *The ending comes from my friends' advice.* (Sheng, writing background)

This explanation shows three main sources of the student's creativity: the autobiographical self with a preference for tragic stories, class discussion on "the love theme," and the writer's "friends' advice." The role of social interaction in creative writing is thus apparent. Importantly, by taking the form of a tragedy, this story challenges an established way of being a male in Chinese culture, who shows love only through action and not with words. Through its poignant ending, the creative piece provides a critical evaluation of this kind of cultural manhood.

Classroom interactions among students were designed to encourage writers to reconsider their own drafts from the readers' perspective. The following account is a typical example. The students had brought a copy of their writing to the class as required. After explaining the need for all writers to engage in revision based on readers' responses, I organized peer feedback sessions in groups of five to discuss questions like "If you are confused, where? If you are engaged, what did the writer do to make you engaged? If you are bored, why?" (10F)

My fieldnotes also recounted my observations of classroom interactions around Suo's story of "a magic bottle," which "can change nightmares into sweet dreams." The original draft begins with two unattributed quotes (D1). Within the writer's small group, readers commented that "[the story] is too long!", "It does not have an emphasis!", and "The really important part did not come until later in the passage!". They also suggested several lines of revision, such as "to start the story from the middle" (10F). Eventually, the writer made several major changes in response to her peer's suggestions. Unlike D1, D2 begins with a new extended dialogue that suggests a specific nightmare ("A huge dinosaur was going to eat me ... no one came to help me") that Luoluo, the protagonist, had. The second sentence, "No matter how hard I tried to run ...," was originally sentence nine in D1, thus responding to the suggestion to "start the story from the middle." A sentence was also added in D2 to create more tension and clarify the theme: "Luoluo woke up from a nightmare, trembling with fear." Thus, both the tension and the theme are clearer in D2 than in D1. Examples like this show the importance of social interactions within the classroom context. They offer new possibilities for the students' creative endeavor.

## Impact of Critical Pedagogy

### *Increased Confidence*

In their questionnaire responses, all but one student reported that they had become more confident writers. As one student, Mei, a member of the Lisu ethnic minority, wrote:

- (1) My writing has improved and I am more and more confident.
- (2) I know more about sentence structure and my vocabulary has been expanded.
- (3) Especially in terms of imagination and creativity, I think I have made great progress and my thinking has been expanded to some extent, which is no longer so limited.
- (4) Because I got a lot of help from my teachers and classmates in this process [sic].
- (5) In particular, the teacher let me know the importance of self-confidence.
- (6) The way the teacher taught the class made me feel that I learned a lot of things relaxed.
- (7) I really appreciate the teacher's care. In this process, students share and communicate with each other, which greatly expands my horizon.

Microanalysis of lines 1-7 shows Mei's construction of an emergent and a more competent writer identity within the classroom context, featuring her growing confidence. She has grown in her capacity to produce better writing (line 1) and her knowledge about writing (line 2). She has grown in her "imagination and creativity," as well as her "thinking" (line 3). She recognizes the importance of confidence (line 5) and her growth in the area (line 1).

Mei links her improvements closely with the positive relationships she enjoyed within the class (lines 4-6). Both her teacher and classmates offered "a lot of help" (line 4) and peer communication "[expanded her] horizon" (line 7). She also felt "the teacher's care" (line 7) and "learned a lot of things relaxed" (line 6).

The questionnaire survey confirmed that most of the class shared these experiences. The majority reported that they could freely express their opinions in class (91.9% on Q20), and that they had received much help from the teacher, classmates and the American interns (100% on Q21, Q22, Q23). All students described the class relationships in positive words such as: "朋友" (friend), "和谐" (harmonious), "平等" (equal), "启蒙者, 学习者, 帮助者" (enlightener, learner, helper), and "轻松、无话不谈、快乐融洽" (relaxing, saying everything under the sky, happy and harmonious). Mei's confidence also emerged as she interacted with one of the two American interns, whom she called "the intern sister": "It was the intern sister who gave me the feeling of being confident and outgoing." Within such an encouraging relational space, students like Mei can discover new ways of writing and new possibilities for themselves as creative writers.

### *Agency as Fostered*

As an ethnic Lisu student, Mei had not been a confident writer in either Chinese, her second language, or English, her third language (L). Her first writing sample in the creative writing course (Figure 1) revealed her initial lack of personal agency as a writer in English.

*When I write in English now, I feel very difficult, because I don't know how to write, what to write, my brain is blank.*

Figure 1. Mei's First Writing

At that point, Mei was limited in both her writing proficiency and ability to generate content (“I don’t know how to write, what to write”), as summarized by her statement “My brain is blank.” In contrast, her increased agency is visually represented in her two drawings at the end of the creative writing course (Figure 2).

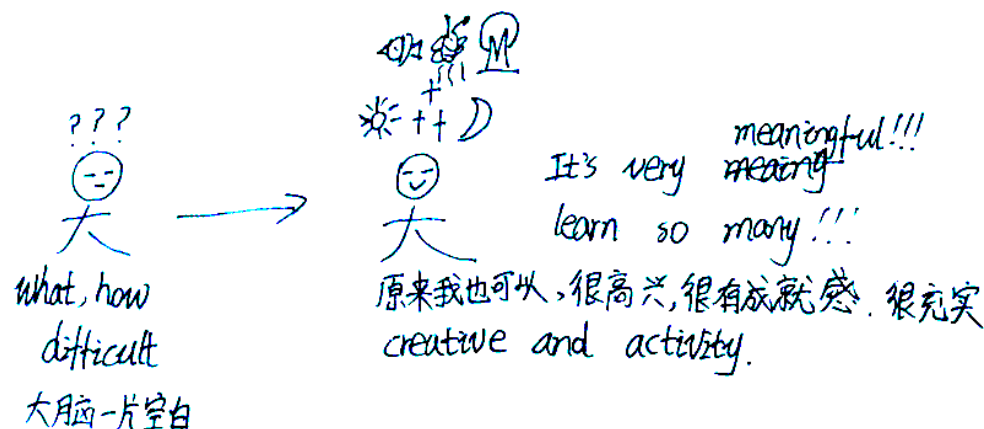


Figure 2. Mei’s Reflective Drawings and Written Explanations

In the first image, a despondent face appears, with three question marks above it; in the second image, a smiling face is shown. In place of the question marks, we now see a range of objects from nature—sun, moon, trees, etc.—indicating an enriched content. Especially worth noting is Mei’s sentence “原来我也可以, 很高兴, 很有成就感, 很充实” (So it was even possible with me. I feel happy. I have a strong sense of accomplishment. I feel satisfied). These reflective remarks highlight an actualized possibility of herself as a creative writer. This was a surprise to Mei partly because her agency was socioculturally-mediated by the creative writing course. The survey results showed that, like Mei, 96.9% of the students felt surprised that they were able to write creatively in English (Q14).

Of the 33 students who answered the questionnaire survey, most regarded the course as helping them gain greater mastery over English writing. The students reported that they became more fluent in writing (100%), more able to present vivid descriptions (100%), more able to use English sentences properly (96.9%), more able to use English punctuation marks properly (96.9%), and more deliberate in word choice (96.9%). Their growing agency in written English should be understood as fostered. Consider the following excerpt from a transcript where Mei (M) received tutoring from the American intern (T) on her draft:

- (1) T: General things, mm, when you do a title, uh, everything is capitalized, everything is capitalized.
- (2) T: So I use this as an example right here [writing on paper], because every word will be capitalized, except for words like *is*, *a*, *an*, *and*, *but*, *to*, preposition and helping words like that.
- (3) T: But any title, any name, uh, place in the title needs to be capitalized. So “Approach the Barracks.”

- (4) T: [Reading from the student's essay] "Today, I interviewed a friend" and another thing, when you are typing, I think this may be a typing mistake. But you do a period and a space, between a period and the next word.
- (5) T: Mm, cool! "Today, I interviewed a friend of mine from lijiang ..."
- (6) T: So lijiang is a place?
- (7) M: Yes.
- (8) T: So there we need?
- (9) M: Capitalized [sic].

In these short exchanges on Mei's draft, several points were made about English writing conventions. Note the introduction of a general rule: "Everything is capitalized [in a title]" (line 1). Then, a more specific rule is added: no capitalization of words like *a* (line 2) but "any name, place in the title needs to be capitalized," with Mei's title "Approach the Barracks" used as an example (line 3). The intern continued reading aloud Mei's writing. Commenting lightly on a "typing mistake," she introduced another rule: "But you do a period and a space" (line 4). Her question "so, lijiang is a place?" (line 6) and an invitation to complete her sentence, presented with the words "so there we need ..." (line 8), facilitated Mei's application of the capitalization rule (line 9). Mei's growing agency over standard written English is thus mediated by interactions like this one. She can now write partly because she has learned how to write through the mediation of the classroom writing ecology.

#### *New Dispositions Toward Writing*

The survey results further showed that the students had developed a new orientation toward writing through the creative writing course. Of the 33 students who responded, 87.9% reported that they no longer just wrote for exams (Q8) and that they were no longer afraid of writing in English (Q13). Students' written reflections provided more detail. For instance, Rong commented that she had become a more "flexible" writer, who was no longer constrained by "a fixed pattern of writing" that she had developed before college "to get a better score in exams" (R). In one piece, she reimagined the story of Zhuang Heng, a diligent Chinese scholar from a poor family who, according to legend, chiseled through a neighbor's wall to get some light to read by at night. But in Rong's new story, Zhuang chiseled through the wall only to find that he had traveled in time to modern China and became a high-school student preparing for the College Entrance Exam. The story was thus the writer's own in disguise.

Besides moving beyond writing mechanically, 96.9% of the students also reported in the survey that they had learned the joy of creative writing with others, 75.8% said they had developed a habit of writing regularly, and 76.9% now enjoyed writing in English. Some students' written reflections also revealed their new orientation toward writing such as "continue to write regularly" and "communicate more with others in the writing process" (Ying, R). These reflections reveal the students' planned investment in regular writing, revision, and expanded use of written English, as well as interactions with others during the writing process. Importantly, all these practices were introduced in the creative writing course. Although it is impossible to conclude that this student will actually achieve what she imagines, the vision has been established.

### *Literacy Tied to Identity*

The emergence of these new dispositions should be understood in light of students' agentic identity work. First, students' backgrounds, particularly their non-language learner identities, became foregrounded in their writing, especially when it came to their self-chosen "best writing." In Mei's case, she drafted and revised a story based on an interview with a soldier friend, which was eventually titled "*Approach the Barracks*." On the surface, on the surface, one could conclude that Mei was only motivated to complete the assignment, but, with closer analysis, we can see that her imagined identity as a soldier since childhood served as an important driving force behind her writing process. As she shared about the background of this story (12W):

- (1) Because I admire soldiers very much and want to be a soldier when I was young, so I chose this theme.
- (2) Besides, I have been taken care of by the brother I interviewed since I was young.
- (3) He is really my mentor in life and an irreplaceable presence besides my family, so I choose him as my interview object.
- (4) In fact, this is also an opportunity for me to get close to my childhood dream, to understand their lives, and also to let people understand the life of soldiers.

Here, Mei revealed her childhood dream as one reason for choosing a topic related to soldiers (lines 1 and 4). The other reason, with similar importance, is a cherished relationship. It helps Mei to decide to interview a "brother" and "mentor" figure in her life (lines 2 and 3). The text of "*Approach the Barracks*" is thus closely rooted in the writer's biographical context. It provides a textual home for Mei's unfulfilled childhood dream as well as an important social relation. Her agentic movement from not knowing "what to write" (Figure 1) to having rich content to write about was mediated by her background and personalized act of interviewing her friend in Chinese on social media.

Second, classroom power relations also contributed to the students' new dispositions. Consider the following excerpt from Yan's reflection:

- (1) Thank you for *your guidance and education* in the writing class.
- (2) *You were patient* in every class, and *kindly*.
- (3) Therefore, I was interested in this class, and then created many interesting stories and got much knowledge.
- (4) At first, I didn't know how to write anything, and I was puzzled.
- (5) Actually, I kind of didn't want to go to the class, because I didn't want to face difficulties.
- (6) However, you *encouraged* me, and you gave me confidence to face the reality.
- (7) You always made the course design interesting, and in every class, we practiced writing or wrote a story.
- (8) I thought your methods were useful.

Here, the writer links her "interest in this class" and ability to write "many interesting stories" in a causal manner (line 3) with both the teacher's qualities ("patient" and "kindly") (line 2) and his positive ways of exercising his power or authority as a writing teacher to guide and to educate her (line 1). In addition, the teacher also "encouraged" her (line 6), a feature also reported by her classmates; 96.9% of the survey respondents said that they received much

encouragement from the class (Q16). Last, the teacher “made the course design interesting” and involved the whole class in writing together “in every class” (line 7). The student found the teacher’s ways of teaching as “useful” (line 8), so she invested in, rather than resistant to, writing in English. The students’ creative writing was more like a collaborative feat than a solo achievement.

## DISCUSSION

This study has attempted to process the broad literature on critical pedagogy into a practical theory to serve FL writing education. It provides a framework that features four intertwining and interacting elements: relationship, identity, power, and agency. The empirical study in a foreign-language creative writing class shows the framework to be both relevant and productive in the reforming of students’ writing processes and writer identity.

The first recommended application of this observational study is to pay attention to the importance of relationships. From a dialogical perspective (Bakhtin, 1981; Canagarajah, 2015; Prior, 2001), EFL student writers bring with them a myriad of relationships. These include interpersonal relationships with their families, former teachers, friends outside the classroom, their current writing teacher, classmates, and international visitors like the two American writing tutors. There are also extended relationships with non-human entities like the writing textbook, along with aspects of the world (e.g., ideas, cultures and writing tasks) that these material objects represent. To use Ivanič’s (1998) term, these relationships, entailing both direct and mediated interactions with others, form the basis of each writer’s unique *autobiographical self*. The background descriptions of students’ creative writing show the autobiographical origins of their works; the students’ subjectivity—or, more accurately, intersubjectivity—breathes through each word in their writing (Ivanič, 1998; Zhao, 2015). Tapping into FL writers’ relationships is a practical way to make literacy critical to the extent that it may, as Giroux (1987) commented over three decades ago, confirm students’ experiences while also revealing the “school as a site of tension that silences certain voices and marginalizes certain backgrounds” (p. 177). Critical pedagogy as practiced in this creative writing course was deliberate in carving out a dialogical space for learners to engage in identity work as mediated by their creative writing. For these students, this pedagogy promoted relationships defined mainly by a deep appreciation of important human qualities such as creativity, courage, and confidence and that also nurtured critical engagement with others’ views.

Second, agency was manifested in the present study in multiple forms. It was shown through one student’s choice of the creative writing course for the purpose of breaking away from her former fixed ways of writing. It was expressed in another student’s venturing into a formerly little-explored subject. It was also apparent in a student’s initial attempt, as she sought suggestions from the teacher and eventually succeeded in merging her favorite English song lyrics with a Chinese legend. Put in simpler terms, attending to students’ agency calls for attention to their desires (Benesch, 2012) for their own betterment.

Sociocultural mediation, in contrast, points to the “possibilities of selfhood” (Ivanič, 1998) within a particular writing class. It considers how the classroom writing ecology (Canagarajah, 2020), which entails factors such as material resources and use of different languages and modalities, constrains or affords identity options for the learners. Therefore, the students’ growing agency, as articulated in their course reflections, needs to be understood in terms of their personal intentions, social shaping effects, and cultural mediations. It is thus

important to remember not only students' own desires for improvement and their actual investment, but also their frequent mentions of "teacher's help," "help of the lessons," help from classmates, and "friends", and the two American writing tutors. Additionally, we should bear in mind students' acknowledgement of images and conversations that inspired or informed their creative works. This study reminds us that no agentive writers are islands.

Third, consider the central role played by identity in a critical pedagogy. Identity is multiple (Norton, 2000) in the sense that diverse social roles and identity categories are implicated by students' various social connections through family, school, and community. It is also changeable (Norton, 2000) in the sense that the student writers may explore and expand their identity options to include themselves as creative writers, or to draw a different conclusion about themselves as people or writers in English (Yang, 2013). But identity can also be sustained or continued. In the students' own reflections, one common theme is that they seem to seek or follow their preferred sense of self when engaging in creative writing tasks. Recall, for instance, how one student linked "Love Story" with the ancient Chinese story of Cowherd and Weaver Girl. Thus, her likes and interests became a springboard for creative writing. Similarly, Mei wrote about her interview with her soldier friend because writing about this friend helped her to reconnect with her childhood dream of joining the army.

Conscious that such identity work is involved in creative writing processes, the writing teacher is less tempted to judge student writers solely based on their linguistic deviations. Instead, the awareness repositions the writing teacher as a co-explorer and facilitator of the students' less-known, perhaps formerly-marginalized, life experiences, emotions, and imaginations in literacy learning. Identity as a key component of critical pedagogy thus makes at least two major contributions to the framework. First, it makes creative writing or other types of FL writing a meaningful literacy project (Hanauer, 2012). As student writers develop their writing as a craft, they also fashion and refashion who they were, are, and are becoming, including their sense of self as a writer, as mediated by their crafted texts. Second, student identities and identity work also become the powerhouse that drives their investment in literacy activities (Yang & Nong, 2019). For some, like the student who wrote a fiction about a girl seeing ghosts, it is an investment in personal emotions and imaginations ("I came up with this topic because I am a timid and imaginative person," Fu). For others, like the student who wrote about a magical book, it also invites an intellectual adventure into a personally unfamiliar area (Zheng, background):

I've written a lot about this topic [a special person or a special thing]. However, I always wrote something about people in the past, so I wrote about an object this time. In addition, the class that day referred to something like pens, so I wanted to write about my special notebook.

Attending to identity issues in critical FL writing thus resonates with a growing body of scholarship (Canagarajah, 2015, 2020; Lam, 2000; Norton, 2000; Zhao, 2015) that challenges thin, partial, and negative positionings of language learners.

Finally, the present study shows that power relationships can be challenged within the classroom context through power-conscious pedagogical practices. For instance, by adopting a dialogical approach, I positioned myself as a guide and co-explorer of the students' life experiences, emotions, and imagined stories while facilitating their learning of standard written English conventions such as sentence formations. Also, by adopting a process-oriented and formative assessment measure, I exercised my power not by punishing students for their

written errors along the path of learning, but by encouraging the students' gradual application of knowledge about English writing. Such a relationship exemplifies a *collaborative* use of power through which both the teacher and the learners are empowered (Cummins et al., 2011).

Furthermore, through designing writing tasks that encouraged students to tap into their personal, local, and cultural knowledge, student writers were repositioned as the informing party or the more powerful individuals relative to the teacher. Learning became a multiple-way process, with the teacher and the students learning from each other and the students learning among themselves. Furthermore, "translanguaging" practice, or the fluid use of one's multilingual and multimodal communicative resources (Li, 2011), also allowed the student writers to express their voice with both enriched content and unique combinations. Eventually, the student writers were able to stand confidently as creative writers both in their own eyes (Sheng, R: "I can write more creative[ly]") and in the eyes of witnessing others, as shown in a journal entry by one of the two American tutors on students' collected works: "The overall creativity and personable stories the students wrote are so inspiring." Here, the performing of self as creative writers shifted the interracial and inter-linguistic relations, giving favor not to the ideology of white superiority, nor to that of English as a global language, but to the student writers' "overall creativity and personal stories."

As for connections between the present study's findings and the literature on critical literacy, first we should note that critical literacy goes beyond seeing literacy merely as a cognitive skill. Instead, literacy is understood as a social and situated practice, intertwined with issues such as power, identity, ideology, and modality (Ivanic, 1998; Luke & Dooley, 2011; New London Group, 1996). Recognizing the multiplicity of literacy and the common tendency to reproduce literacy of dominant social groups through schooling, critical literacy scholars advocate pedagogical practices that provide alternative visions and representations of the world and the self, as well as what it means to be literate for multilingual speakers (Canagarajah, 2020; Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero, 2015; Darwin, 2019; Norton, 2013). The learners in this study grew in confidence and proficiency and developed new dispositions in writing, at least partially, because the creative writing course adopted a critical pedagogy that allowed them to tap into their life experiences and emotions as resources. Such engagement with literacy treats the students as knowledgeable individuals, reconfiguring the power relations between the teacher and the students (Freire, 1970; Luke & Dooley, 2011). Further, the learners were scaffolded through a dialogical approach to teaching writing, which promoted "collaborative use of power" and production of new and positive "identity texts" within and beyond the classroom (Cummins et al., 2015). Within such relational spaces, the learners developed alternative views of themselves as informed by their sustained investment in creative writing and their interactions surrounding these new texts. Finally, a focus on modality provides a more holistic understanding of learner writers, not only through the completed texts in English, but also through the "translanguaging" and "remediation" effects (Darwin, 2019) of non-print resources, such as speaking in multiple languages and images, within a classroom writing ecology. Critical literacy thus provides a lens to view learner writers' changes as shaped by both their agency and contextual affordances.

## CONCLUSION

This article has presented a framework of critical pedagogy for FL writing that entails four interacting elements: relationship, identity, power, and agency. Its use in an EFL creative writing course is described to illustrate the framework's applicability and positive impact.



Although this framework does not provide an exhaustive list of all factors involved in shifting FL writers' subjectivity and approaches to writing, it points to a new direction for critical pedagogues. It embodies an ongoing search for an alternative space in which learners' formerly restricting literacy experiences and associated subjectivities are challenged, both because the learners have experienced literacy differently in a critical pedagogy-informed writing course and because they have been invited to reflect on their evolving sense of self as writers. This is an important contribution of critical pedagogy. In teaching FL writing, be it creative writing or academic writing, the passing on of writing knowledge is not the ultimate goal. Rather, while teaching particular writing conventions, teachers should be conscious of and reflect on the kind of identity work facilitated by their teaching practices and classroom writing ecology. Such mindful and careful interventions may not directly address social inequalities outside the classroom. Nonetheless, they may promote equality at a local scale by providing equal opportunities for all students to grow as writers. By extension, they also provide each student writer with self-enabling experiential knowledge about writing to expand on their former writing experiences and to overturn, in some cases, self-depressing autobiographical selves.

I believe that this vision about FL writing is consistent with Freire's (1970) call to restore humanity, through critical practices, to both the oppressor and the oppressed. In this case, however, both the teacher and the students are agents who are actively involved in freeing themselves from oppressive views of FL writing as merely a tool for "Western science and technology" (see You, 2010, p. 105, for a critique), of learners as deficient (see Alford, 2014, for a critique), and of mechanical ways of teaching and learning writing that critical pedagogues seek to disrupt (Ye & White, 2012). Here, both the teacher and the students embark on a shared journey from a deficit mindset toward embracing a resource perspective. They learn to treat both self and other, past and present, and texts and other modalities—local and global alike—as important tributaries of a nurturing writing ecology. Thanks to such a writing ecology, all FL student writers can have the hope of developing their confident voices, as informed by their own experiences, emotions, and imaginations, to represent, re-envision, and transform the world with their creative words.

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