The Interplay of Critical Language Pedagogy and Young Arabic EFL Learners

Abstract

This paper is based on the first author's experience of experimenting with critical language pedagogy (CLP) when she was teaching in the UAE. While prior research focuses mainly on the theoretical aspects of CLP, empirical studies on the effectiveness of implementing critical approaches and developing related teaching materials in Arab EFL contexts with young learners are underrepresented. Informed by Paulo Freire's formulation of 'culture circles', this case study reports on the problem-posing literacy practice in a class of Grade 4 female Arabic students in an Abu Dhabi government school— a sample unique to both CLP and case study research. Results indicate EFL learners' increased capacity for problem posing and motivation for writing, metacognition, and application of prior knowledge during the pre-writing discussion. Findings of this study add evidence-based, practical dimensions to existing critical research, paving the way for like-minded language educators to trial CLP with young learners.

Abstract in Arabic

الملخص

يستند هذا البحث إلى تجربة المؤلفة الأولى في تطبيق أصول تدريس اللغة النقدية (CLP) أثناء تدريسها في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. بينما تركز الأبحاث السابقة بشكل رئيسي على الجوانب النظرية لـ CLP، إلا أن الدراسات التجريبية حول فاعلية تطبيق النهج النقدي وتطوير المواد التعليمية ذات الصلة في سياق تعليماللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية مع المتعلمين الصغار غير كافية. واستنادًا إلى صياغة Paulo Freire's لـ "دوائر الثقافة"، تتناول الدراسة الحالة هذه ممارسة أحد طرق التعليم النقدي (the problem-posing literacy) مع طالبات الصف الرابع في مدرسة حكومية بأبوظبي - وهي عينة فريدة للغاية في الأبحاث عن CLP ودراسات الحالة. وتشير النتائج إلى زيادة قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على طرح المشكلات، والتحفيز على الكتابة، والتفكير ما وراء المعرفة، وتطبيق المعرفة السابقة أثناء مناقشة ما قبل الكتابة. وتضيف نتائج هذه الدراسة أبعادًا عملية قائمة على الأدلة للأبحاث النقدية الحالية، مما يمهد الطريق لمدرسي اللغات الذين يتطلعون إلى تجربة CLP مع المتعلمين الصغار.

Plain Language Summary

This study is the fruition of a question that had perplexed and frustrated me as an English teacher of young Grade 4 Arabic learners: '*How do I increase student talk in a way that is authentic to them, where ideas are discussed openly and earnestly*?' This frustration led me to critical language pedagogy and the work of educator Paulo Freire, and in particular, his formulation of 'culture circles' with the rural poor in Brazil. His problem-posing approach where authentic dialogue and conversation was the basis of language learning captivated me. I was fascinated with the idea that such culture circles could work with young learners to encourage unrehearsed and deep conversation, drawing on the experiences of my students in relation to actual issues that troubled them. As we worked through the issue in discussing it, we could together generate some solutions. This paper outlines the way in which we formulated and conducted culture circles for young Arabic EFL learners. Results from this study revealed that giving an increased opportunity for learners to look at a problematised scenario, increased the student's ability to take different perspectives and voice their own thought processes. We saw an increased desire to write about the problems posed, and the provision of that oral rehearsal of ideas through discussion was evidenced in the students writing. More importantly, this paper is developed with the English language teacher in mind, to document working with younger learners and perhaps guide future studies in the field of critical language pedagogy.

Background to the Study

> What happens then, when a young teacher meets for the first time the
> hypothesis of changing his or her behaviour in the classroom? What happens
> when the young teacher meets the possibility of changing his or her teaching
> practice? Maybe she or he reads some text and think for the first time to
> become a critical educator, a new way of simultaneously reading the word
> and reading the world. What happens? (Shor & Friere, 1987)

Crookes (2021) defines critical languange pedaogy (CLP) as a perspective on teaching second, addtional, heritage, or other languages that are based in the values of social justice. CLP can also be understood as "emerging from the theories and practices of language teaching that foster language learning, development and action on part of the students, directed towards improving a problematic aspect of their lives as seen from a critical perspective of society''

(Crookes, 2013, p. 23). Teaching values grounded in social justice essentially began with the life and work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and pioneering figurehead of critical pedagogy and himself a literacy specialist (Crookes, 2021; Lin, 2012), and it was his writings which sparked CLP as an L2 practice and agent for reflection, agency, and social change within language education.

My journey with CLP began during my employment as an English Medium Teacher (or EMT), working in a female only government school in the United Arab Emirates. To provide a historical context briefly, in 2006, the government of Abu Dhabi announced a school reform plan or 'new school model' that began with Kindergarten and Grade 1 students and was rolled out in subsequent years to cover all grade levels. This resulted in changes within the pedagogic, curricular, and leadership arenas, but one major change was the inclusion of English as the medium for instruction alongside the existing Arabic as their first language (L1), otherwise known as an early side by side partial immersion model (Gallagher, 2011).

The resulting drive to recruit primary school teachers from the Global North such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia had impact on school staffing and inclusion of Western centric pedagogies and methods within the existing structures. The EMTs were native English speakers, but largely monolingual. Most came from the "Inner Circle" (Kachru, 1985) countries where English is the 'core' language spoken straight into EFL classrooms, with little formal training in teaching EFL students or being bilingual themselves (Gallagher, 2011). The expectation in hiring overseas inner-circle teachers was that EMTs would bring with them student-centred approaches that focused on communicative tasks, dialogic teaching, or problem-based learning.

With four years of teaching experience as a primary school teacher in Sydney, I arrived in Abu Dhabi in August 2012, and began work at Fatima School (pseudonym). At the time of my research, I was the Grade 4 EMT. In my conviction that L2 students must have ample opportunity to practise English by speaking in order to consolidate new vocabulary, my teaching practice was largely focused on finding ways to encourage student 'talk'. But apart from this central belief, and other observations I had gathered, I had no direct training that prepared me for teaching young EFL learners. I was the only teacher present in the classroom and knew only a few words of Arabic. The lessons were conducted entirely in English, and I was dependant on more capable students who were confident to provide translation from

English to Arabic when needed. I was typical of inner-circle teachers who teach "without considering how it [using English as a medium of instruction, EMI, for core subjects] is introduced or promoted in certain ways depending on historical, political, socio-cultural and economic considerations in each country's particular context" (Sung & Pederson, 2012, p. 153). I busied myself initially for the first two years, creating systems that had served me well in primary schools in Australia. I began my guided reading programmes using reading texts about snowmen and bugs that could talk, and so on.

It became apparent that despite my routines, and my organisation of materials, my students struggled to engage fully with the lesson or the reading, and so discussion around themes fell flat. A lack of vocabulary was of course an issue; however, the problem was much greater than this. Because students needed so much teacher input in introducing new concepts, the amount of my talk dominated the lesson, and the gap in the students' understanding was still apparent. Their reading of the text might be accurate, but robotic, and I could sense the disconnect the students had with the content of the teaching materials. Discussion was driven by my questioning, but the students had nothing to contribute beyond basic comprehension skills, and there was therefore never any sense that students were trying to communicate with me proactively and spontaneously.

I also knew there was stagnation in the classroom regarding critical, analytical thoughts. Critical thinking is required to participate in true dialogue, but the act of dialogue generates critical thinking in the process (Spener, 1993). The turning point towards CLP was when I read Thomas Graman's (1988) account of conducting Freirean 'culture circles' with rural labourers in Colorado in the late 1970s:

> The farm worker ESL class illustrated to me the motivational importance of tying student experience to the process of language. Students are more able to develop linguistically and intellectually when they analyse their own experiences and build their own words to describe and better understand these experiences. (Graman, 1988, p. 435)

My next challenge lay in finding suitable examples of how to operate CLP small group sessions. This search led me to the early work of Freire's adult literacy program developed in Brazil in the 1960's. The method and approach that he developed, alongside a team of

anthropologists, educators, and students who worked in amongst the rural poor, formed ethnographic research that was founded on problem posing, inquiry, and genuine dialogue (Spener, 1993). Teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships were intentionally reformed where all participants were active subjects in the educational process. These adult literacy classes, or *culture circles* (Spener, 1993), were later distilled by researchers as a five-phase model.

The current article illustrates my implementation[1] of Freire's problem posing approach with elementary aged Arabic EFL learners and for ease of reading, uses the descriptor "Freire's problem posing model" to describe the process of running culture circles according to Freirean approaches. Freire's problem posing model is also the conceptual framework that underpins this research. This study seeks to contribute to wider research within CLP, providing another situational example of CLP in action, and with a sample of students that is unique to the field of CLP.

Freire's Problem Posing Model as a Conceptual Framework and Application

Spener (1993) rightly captures the essence of the Freirean problem posing approach that "emphasises meaningful communication based on themes of emotional importance to learner. It is content driven approach, in which the formal aspects of language play a secondary role to the learner's conceptual development' (p. 76). Freire (1973) stated that "if critical education was the process in which the educator permanently reconstructs the act of knowing, then it must be problem posing" (p. 153). This is the central concept to CLP—it is in the problematising of the status quo, or norms of society that, as Shor (1992) attests, students can begin to "express opinions and most importantly, generate their own language materials for learning and peer teaching" (p. 43). Further research points to authentic problem-based tasks increasing language learners' higher-order cognitive involvement with the learning content, resulting in more effective vocabulary learning (Ansarian et al., 2016).

The following details Freire's problem posing model individually as phases, alongside the application of each phase pertaining to my research. The table below outlines the structure of Freire's problem posing model that guided this study, on the left-hand side, the five distinct

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[1] A separate article (Nelson & Chen, 2022) has been developed from this case study and focuses on the subject of codification in greater depth.

phases of the model. On the right-hand side, the interpretation and application of each phase during the case study.

Table 1

Five Distinct Phases in the Problem Posing Model

Freire's Problem Posing Model
Phase 1
Listen to student histories and language for generative words
Phase 2
Select generative words based on phonemic richness and pragmatic tone
Phase 3
Create codification or visual representations of situational problems to be decoded by culture circles.
Phase 4
Create an agenda, not a rigid schedule for the discussion.
Phase 5
Post literacy circle learning incorporating L2 language learning at a phoneme or theme level.

Phase 1 is the relationship building phase through daily interactions, conversations, and observations of each individual characteristics and traits. Members of Freire's team spent significant time with the community before the literacy program was to begin, by building relationships through observation, and informal discussion. One of the purposes of this phase, was to listen for repeated words and themes that carried weight and possibility for use in the materials presented in the culture circles. This phase was a naturally occurring, organic and genuine pursuit that set the foundation for the current study and was informed by my role as classroom teacher and observant co-sharer of the classroom environment.

For Freire, *Phase 2* took the recurrent words and expressions that seemed to stand out in importance, and these were turned into lists that would later be used in the materials. These generative words would be used in basic decoding and encoding strategies, whose syllabic elements could be combined into new words. The generative words, however, needed to carry some sense of emotional importance to the participants (Spener, 1993, Shor, 1992). In the current study, in preparation for Phase 2 with younger learners*,* "generative themes" or problematised situations were observed and generated during the students' daily class routines. It was important that the generative themes were experienced by all students, which were indigenous to our "shared classroom discourse", and not situated in the student's home life, or even the school playground. These generative themes would then form the codification. This

was to mitigate what I felt would again fall into the banking concept of education where "we (the knowing teachers) will invent reality in the classroom and give 'knowledge of language' to you [the passive students] as deposits of information" (Spener, 1993, p. 84).

I could never assume to generalise from my position as outsider, what the home life, or even playground life for my students could be. The only perspective I could determine with complete certainty was the fact that I shared the classroom space for a sustained amount of time daily, and this became the setting for the generative themes and codification which was to follow. For this reason, the generative themes identified during Phases 1 and 2 were:

- Low-level bullying
- Student perceptions of good and bad behaviour
- Injustice, corruption of classroom systems
- Language barriers to learning

Codification is defined by Freire (1973) as "visual representations as coded situation problems containing elements to be decoded by the groups with the collaboration of the teacher" (p. 74). During *Phase 3*, Freire and his team drew by hand scenes from the rural communities to generate discussion in the culture circles. These depictions would be familiar to the participants and emotionally laden to stimulate a response and encourage debate. In my research, I produced four staged photographs depicting a problematised classroom scenario, each of which was based on each of the generative themes and enlisted the help of former students to recreate each image (see Figures 2 - 4). Each photograph was taken in our own classroom, recognisable to the participants and familiar to all.

Phase 4 was the discussion itself, the culture circle. In a Freirean culture circle, the generative words already gleaned in the earlier phases would be embedded in the codifications, to be spoken about and analysed as they looked at the key conflicts being depicted. For my elementary aged students, I employed Wallerstein's (1983) tools for dialogue to engage the students in a meaningful process of decoding the image through what they saw, what they thought was happening, and using their own experience to reconstruct the meaning conveyed by each image. This process is known as 'decodification'. Because each discussion ended with the question "what could you do?", students were able to discuss workable solutions to the

classroom issues that were presented or known also as 'recodification' (Rashidi & Safari, 2011).

Phase 5 consolidates the linguistic aspect of the model. For Freire's adults, the generative word might have been used as a basis for further word family study, chunking the word into syllables and making new words. For example, the Portuguese word favela (slum) would be broken into the syllables fa-ve-la. These syllables would then be used to introduce a family of syllables: fa, fe, fi, fo, and fu. Using these introduced syllables, the students would then construct other words by combining syllables taken from other generative words. The combination of discussing the picture codification with the syllabic exercises explicitly linked the spoken observed reality with the written language. While my efforts largely directed towards the culture circle itself, the recurrent theme words would be listed and written into vocabulary lists that the students would then integrate into short independent writing activities.

Methodology

Case study design is widely accepted as a research approach for evaluating complex educational innovations in specific contexts (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2014), and social and educational phenomena in general (Duff, 2014; Merriam, 2002; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as an "in-depth description and analysis of a 'bounded' system" (p. 38), or a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries (i.e., the researcher can fence in what is to be studied). This justifies and demarcates the "case" of this study—to closely examine the pedagogical benefits of incorporating a CLP approach with young Arabic learners of EFL in their literacy practices. The term, *pedagogical benefits*, is understood as pertaining to greater insights being made into the theory, method, and philosophy of teaching young Arabic children through CLP. To this end, the main research question was raised:

> *What are the pedagogical benefits of applying critical pedagogy as part of the literacy lesson with young Arabic learners in an EFL classroom setting?*

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a Grade 4 class at Fatima School, a female-only government primary school located within the older city centre of Abu Dhabi in the UAE. Twenty-four Arabic female students attending Fatima School participated in this study. All 24 participants were in
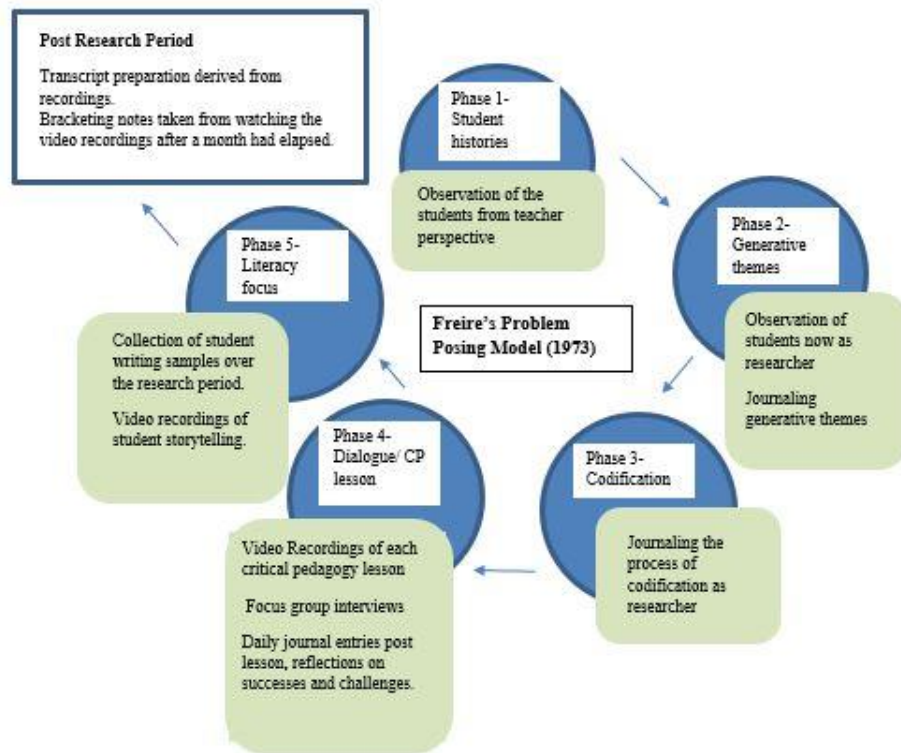
Grade 4 and were either nine years old or had just turned ten years old at the time of the research. They were my own students and belonged in one class, and in the final months of the academic year I began my research and data collection with them. All students in the class participated in the research. Classroom routines and systems had already been in place since the beginning of the year, and the students were very familiar with me as their teacher, and I was likewise very familiar with them as learners. The class was comprised of students from diverse family backgrounds within the Gulf Region who had settled into the UAE. Not only did I teach Emiratis (n =12), but students from Syria ($n = 6$), Saudi Arabia ($n = 2$), Yemen ($n = 1$), Jordan ($n = 1$), Egypt ($n = 1$), and Sudan ($n = 1$). All of my students spoke Gulf Arabic as their L1 at home, with English being a foreign language. Depending on the student's year of enrolment in a government school, all participants had been exposed to English through the public schooling system from Grade 1.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected and triangulated from multiple sources throughout this six-week study. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of each of the five research phases, along with the instruments for data collection.

Figure 1

Five-phase Data Collection Procedure following Freire's Problem Posing Model (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

Post Research Period

Transcript preparation derived from recordings.
Bracketing notes taken from watching the video recordings after a month had elapsed.

Phase 1- Student histories

Observation of the students from teacher perspective

Phase 2- Generative themes

Observation of students now as researcher

Journaling generative themes

Freire's Problem Posing Model (1973)

Phase 5- Literacy focus

Collection of student writing samples over the research period.

Video recordings of student storytelling.

Phase 4- Dialogue/ CP lesson

Video Recordings of each critical pedagogy lesson

Focus group interviews

Daily journal entries post lesson, reflections on successes and challenges.

Phase 3- Codification

Journaling the process of codification as researcher

Formal data collection began at Phase Two but was informed by developing rapport and better understanding of the setting throughout Phase One. Phase Four introduced a wider range of instruments once the critical pedagogy lessons began with the participants. During this phase, I used daily video observations to record each session, wrote daily lesson observation reflections straight after each session and, during the final week of field work, I conducted focus group semi-structured interviews. The following sections outline the Data Collection instruments in greater detail, and the process of collection.

Daily Lesson Reflections

A reflexive journal was kept for the duration of the research, and daily entries were written during Phase Four at the conclusion of each critical pedagogy lesson. These reflections were spontaneous, and the voice is that of the teacher documenting the successes and challenges that I felt. The notes included observations of students' reactions to critical pedagogy and critical evaluation of the lesson from my perspective as participant observer.

Video Recordings: Video recording each lesson was a key component, and necessary both for transcription purposes and for micro-analysis of the interaction's students had with one another, the teacher, and the way the lesson was conducted. Cultural historical researcher Marilyn Fleer posits:

> Being able to view the interactions repeatedly and at times to review them frame by frame was invaluable for doing microanalysis of children's interactions. Unlike adults, whose language abilities are well developed, children's interactions are marked by nonverbal signs and body language. (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, p. 110)

Each daily critical pedagogy lesson was recorded using a microphone and video recording software on my laptop. The Mac OS X application *Photobooth* was chosen because it was user-friendly, and easy to open and set up quickly. A research quality microphone was used to ensure that extraneous sound was minimised. During the recordings, at each new utterance, I would move the microphone close to the speaker. Facilitating discussion effectively with the participants meant that there were turn-taking expectations, listening to others, and orientating the students to whose turn it was, normally by going around in a circle. However, in the instances where conversation flagged, or a student really wanted to share, these formalities were adjusted depending on the situation. Where I felt the conversation was being dominated by single voices, or where students had 'opted out' due to lack of confidence, my role was to bring everyone back into the discussion.

The camera on my laptop computer was angled to include all students in the frame and checked thoroughly before recording to ensure that all students were filmed correctly. Because I was working with small groups of students ($n = 7$ maximum in each group), this was achievable. We formed a semicircle around the recording devices, where discussion could be heard, removing any formal dynamics that could influence freedom of discussion. Once the 25-minute session had concluded, or the discussion had reached an end, students were then directed on to their next literacy task.

Focus Group Interviews

Yin describes focus groups as gathered individuals who have previously had some common experience, or presumably share some common views (Yin, 2010). My rationale for selecting a focus group, as opposed to interviewing students individually, was primarily the age of the students. Alongside Yin's recommendation, I felt that a focus group was the best option when working with children, or groups of participants who might more readily express their thoughts in a group setting than they would individually. This data collection method did require 'skilful facilitation in managing the dynamics of the group' (Petty, Thompson, & Stew, 2012), but I had the benefit of having a rapport with the participants already, and a full understanding of the personalities present within the group. This meant that I was able to ask

for translation assistance from the group where students needed this support. This study also recognises that, when working with young students in small groups, there can still be dominant personalities who influence the others.

I developed a simple protocol for interviewing that generally followed the same format. I would pose the following open-ended questions to the students, allowing for student-directed conversation, while guiding back to the topic when necessary. All interviews were conducted in English, which meant I was reliant on more capable students to translate for each other where meaning was unclear. In those instances, I would rephrase or simplify the question. The protocol questions are clear and in child-friendly language that does not over-complicate, or cause confusion for the student.

1. What do you like about teacher time?
2. Do you miss guided reading, or do you like using the photograph[2]? Why?
3. What do you learn when we talk together?
4. Does talking about the photograph help your writing?

Each interview took roughly 25 minutes, sometimes longer depending on the student's engagement and participation. I was able to observe interactions within the focus group and this also formed part of my data set for further analysis. At the conclusion of Phase Five, I used the following month to organise transcription of all video recordings made during Phase Four. These transcripts were later used in analysis. I also completed a second set of observational notes which involved a detailed watching and note-taking of the recordings. The delay of a month allowed me to re-examine the recordings with fresh eyes, examining student behaviours (both on and off task), expressions, disengagement with the lesson and connection with the lesson. The notetaking here was objective, with a focus on detail and studying the student's responses as a means of cross-examining any previous bias and assumptions from my own teacher's journal.

Writing Samples

Phase Five is the consolidation phase of the model and incorporated a linguistic element that would provide opportunity for the participants to practice using new vocabulary and content

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[2] 'Photograph' refers to the codification photograph as exemplified in Figures 2, 3, and 4.

into their writing. During this study, students were instructed to write independently on the topic we had discussed during the small group discussion. Oftentimes, the students would turn the conversation into a narrative structure, or a retelling of the events which would incorporate the vocabulary that had been introduced. Figure 5 below presents two written samples taken from typical guided reading lessons to provide a comparison when looking at what was produced by the same students during the conclusion of a typical CLP sessions.

Data Analysis

Interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, 2015) was employed to code, analyse, synthesise, and interpret the multiple data sources. Smith (2015) defines interpretive thematic analysis as going "beyond description, to decipher the (deeper) meanings in the data and interpret their importance" (p. 226). It involves a deep familiarisation with the data set, coding together similar data segments, searching for themes (including thematic mapping), reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally writing the report. The following section describes each step in the process.

Familiarisation

I read and reread the transcripts from the focus group interviews and observation field notes taken from video recorded lesson activities. The focus was to move beyond reading in a superficial way and begin analysis through asking questions that guided the process; videos were reviewed again during this time, involving data screening. Additionally, I reviewed my observational notes alongside my teacher journal to further verify videorecorded observation and audio transcript data. It was during the familiarisation phase that I could identify reoccurring patterns that were across the whole data set.

Coding

These recurrent ideas became my 'codes'. With the research question in mind, I systematically worked through the data set highlighting the codes across all the data sources. I coded the entire data set twice, to ensure thoroughness. To fill in any gaps with language miscommunication, I cross-referenced the transcripts to the video data, to check for intonation and body language. What could be delineated as a code during this research were the following (Table 2):

Table 2

Overview of Coding Approaches and Descriptions

Coding Approach	Description
Comprehension	Through interpretation of the photograph, the students interpret what they see to make meaning of the codification
Personal Connection	The events depicted in the codification spark a personal account or story that related to students' personal experience
Classroom connection	This was the explicit recognition of the classroom and teaching routines that the students could recognise as something they also experienced in the classroom setting.
Small group dynamics	This was apparent across the data set as moments where students directly engaged with the other students. It might have taken the form of code-switching or translating for each other. It was instances of an active debate within the group. It was also demonstration of active listening, often evidenced during recorded observations and where body language, eye contact and clarification were present.
Co-constructing language	These were instances where my students and I supported each other in constructing language to a point where it could be understood. Sometimes I would recast, or rephase back to the student, and this vocabulary would be integrated back into the conversation. At times it would be circumlocution where students would act out a word (e.g., gossiping, worried) that was unfamiliar.
New perspectives	The codification allowed for initial responses which could be challenged. Multiple meanings and perspectives of the same event were demonstrated during the study. For example, the perception of 'good' behaviour and 'bad' behaviour were often an area where students could be challenged in their thinking.
Writing	This code was the explicit connection to what the students would write about following the discussion.

Searching for Themes

This is a step up into abstraction, moving from coding to identifying themes. The codes identified above could be grouped broadly into pedagogical, communicative, and social categories. Thematic mapping (or figurative representations of the relationships between codes and potential themes) was employed as a technique that helped develop individual themes while exploring the relationship between and across themes (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016).

Reviewing the Themes

Reviewing took place in two phases. Firstly, I reviewed the themes against the coded data, to check if they "worked" together. Was it a good fit, and had I done enough work in the first two phases? Did it address my research question and represent the content of my analysis and the research itself? The second phase was to do a final review of the themes and data set to ensure a robust thematic map. On completion of this final review, the major themes were identified and placed at a higher-order level: 1) *Critically examining a learning situation using multiple perspectives*, and 2) *Preparedness for writing* (see more detail in the Results and Discussions Section).

Defining and Naming the Themes

I developed thematic definitions that captured the central, overarching concept of the theme. Themes were given conceptual meaning and provided a road map for writing up the results. The definition was based on the scope, coverage, and boundary of each theme and in the instance of both themes, the following patterns were evident. Table 3 presents the overview of the themes and patterns. Also presented are a few coding examples to aid the readers' understanding.

Table 3

Defining and Naming Themes (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

Themes	Patterns	Coding Examples (taken from audio transcripts and videorecorded CLP Sessions)
1. Critically examining a learning situation using	Comprehension Visual literacy	*The cues the girls take in in general are varied, but all useful for interpretation (reading expression, body language, the activity going on). Students positions in the photo, gestures. (4B Wk2 Visual Literacy)*

multiple perspectives	Personal and classroom connection	*At 7.3 Sara sees the difference and can see how the situation is unequal for others in the group. She says 'That is not correct" (4B, Wk3 New Perspectives)*
	New perspectives	
2. Preparedness for Writing	Changing the situation (Decision making)	*Most girls had a story to share of saying sorry, but detailed accounts really describing who would move away, who would say sorry to whom (4B Wk1 Personal Connection)*
	Metacognition	
	Motivation	*Amazing construction of meaning. Salma uses all means necessary to communicate to me in her limited English. She was trying to articulate her idea across of seeing the codification like dolls in a story. (4B Survey, Wk 6, Oral rehearsal of ideas)*
	Oral rehearsal of ideas	
	Background knowledge	

Writing the report

The writing of the report followed expanding on my thematic definitions and contained two main elements of analytical reporting and excerpts of the data to illustrate and support interpretations.

Researcher Positionality

To ensure "trustworthiness" in the current qualitative case study (Duff, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I triangulated multiple data sources and methods such as my researcher journal, observation notes, transcribed interviews, videorecorded and transcribed lessons, and student writing samples. As a teacher researcher, I also sought to critically reflect on my positioning by journaling each lesson through the lens of the classroom teacher. I would write about the lesson, its strengths, and its challenges. This process allowed me to check for unexpressed bias or judgments as I went along, and this form of data was made transparent in the final analysis. I developed rapport with students via participant observation and prolonged engagement in the field, due to my position as the classroom teacher. I conducted peer debriefing with a TESOL professional (the second author in the current study) to clarify ambiguity in initial coding and reach agreement on data interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

I ensured that my research was carried out and reported in an ethical manner throughout all stages. Ethical considerations were abided by at each stage, including parental permissions, informed consent and confidentiality of school and student identities. Separate information sheets and consent forms were provided (translated into both English and Arabic) and these were sent home, for both parents and students to sign. An Arabic teacher assisted me in speaking to the students before the research began, also to translate and answer any questions the students might have had. My communication regarding my research was transparent, in order to minimise any possibility of coercion that students might have felt. It was made clear in the information letter sent to parents that participation was not linked to grades, specialised treatment or reward of any kind. Likewise, non-participation would incur no penalty, and no data would be collected for any students who chose not to participate. As it was, all students and their parents were enthusiastic about the research, with full participation given. The school and student names appearing in the current article are all pseudonyms.

Results and Discussions

The findings indicate that the implementation of CLP lessons yielded two key benefits for the students. Firstly, it enabled students to critically examine a problematised situation from multiple angles. As students became familiar with the meaning-making discourse in each CLP session, they moved away from seeking the group consensus that generally led to only one acceptable answer. Instead, they were motivated to contribute their views from different perspectives and use logical reasoning to support their opinions. Students delved more into problem-solving, not only in the sense of resolving the issues depicted in the codification, but in trying to determine the hidden clues that could underpin the scenario itself. Secondly, students made explicit connections between the discussion around the codification during Phases 4 and 5 where they were encouraged to write a short independent narrative, using topics, themes, and events from the codification as writing prompts. Below presents the thematic categories arising from the data analysis, supported by illustrative examples across the dataset.

Critically Examining a Learning Situation Using Multiple Perspectives

During Phase 1, as students were still adjusting to the flow and format of the CLP approach, the observed lesson episodes often evidenced students' simplistic responses that reflected a superficial understanding of the problem-posing scenarios. For example, when determining the actions and motivations of actors in the codification, the descriptors of "good" and "bad"

students were often quickly allocated without much deeper processing. Student discussion around the behaviour that was displayed would then reinforce other students' opinions of the actors in the photograph, to the point where a consensus was reached without much debate.

To illustrate this point, student actors are discussing the "Work or Play" codification in Figure 2 where three actors appear to be attending to their bookwork and task, while one has a pile of blocks and a closed book. In establishing the initial scene through the open question, "what do you see," the topic of 'doing work' (or student engagement to the set task) was quickly elicited from the students. One student, Bayan, commented on which of the students in the photograph was on task and who was, in her words "cheating":

> Tasneem is writing in her book. She don't like look for other what they are do. She is doing also Aisha, Aisha doing her work. Hind she is looking at Aisha, maybe she is finish Aisha, she put all the counters in her, she want to cheat her on her work. And she don't, like she maybe close her eyes don't see, she do her work with, she Mahra and Tasneem and Aisha are doing a work but Hind, she is cheating [3](Video-recorded lesson episode 1, 05/2016).

Figure 2

"Work or Play" CLP Codification (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

Students either agreed with Bayan's account, or labelled other actors as "not working", "playing", or, alternatively, "doing their work." Another student, Hadeel, who found the abstract nature of looking at a photograph for information difficult, expressed her frustration:

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[3] All grammatical mistakes in verbatim accounts of students' responses are kept intact to reflect the data originality/ authenticity unless it interferes with comprehensibility. In this case, researcher's notes will be provided in brackets.

"Miss, when are we going to write a story?" (Observation Notes, 05/2016). Other students in the same group also struggled with the CLP lesson because it took them into an unfamiliar territory where they no longer were the "experts" in providing only the standard simplistic response of "good or bad". My teacher journal entry further verified this observation:

> They weren't sure what the right response was, and so where I had this instant conversation with my lower groups, my more able girls weren't sure. They asked if they were going to read a story and seem annoyed that it was another talk about a photo. (Teacher journal, 05/2016)

When asked to compare their first experience with the CLP lesson to their former guided reading discussion, one student, Fatima, revealed her frustration at "not knowing" when being "pushed" to critically analyse the problem-posing situation encoded in a visual stimulus:

> Because Miss Nadine, when you read a book you get information and you learn a lot of words and when you see a photograph you are like 'why that photograph?' We see only, we don't like maybe read something or you tell us question we don't know maybe because when we, the last thing we in the photograph I didn't know and some girls don't know. (Focus group interview, 05/2016)

However, as the same students became more familiar with the discussion format, there was some marked evidence of students adopting flexibility and openness in their thinking (Larkin, 2009). I documented this pedagogical shift in my reflection journal:

> My success seems to be a richer talking environment that occurs on the student's behalf, rather than me leading with a question-and-answer format. Talk remains on talks, sometimes repetition of comments made before but the girls are starting to look for new interpretations of events. (Teacher Journal, 05/2016)

Through the careful use of questioning that challenged any rigid stance, I was able to elicit other possibilities, and, in some cases, there was a change in the status of the characters depicted in the codification. In the following video-recorded lesson episode, students were

discussing the 'Language Barrier' codification (Figure 3) and trying to determine why one student shown in the photo stimulus was noticeably disengaged from the task.

Figure 3

"Language Barrier" CLP Codification (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

> **Teacher**: I want you to think about what the reason could be that she just sitting there not doing anything? Yeah?
>
> **Hamda**: Miss maybe she, her mom and dad, they are fighting and maybe split.
>
> **Ghadeer**: Miss maybe her best friend die.
>
> **Hadeel**: Miss maybe she is cutting down.
>
> **Teacher**: Did you hear Hadeel? Hadeel said maybe she is working but she is just cutting under the table. She is still doing her work. That's a smart way to think about it. I am thinking this another way. Girls when you come into my maths class what (language) do you girls all know how to speak?
>
> **All**: English
>
> **Teacher**: Does everybody always know how to speak?
>
> **All**: No.

(Video-recorded lesson episode 2, 05/2016)

In this episode, the teacher's questioning led to a fruitful discussion about awareness of others who might feel isolated due to their low English proficiency. This is also evidenced in the excerpt below that presents one such group discussing the 'Work and Play' codification in Figure 2. In this learning episode, I modelled an alternative reason as to why one student in the photo stimulus had the coloured blocks, namely that this student had been given free time because of her hard work in class. Layan picked up on this and was able to see other alternatives as evidenced below:

Tolan: Miss maybe she finish but she want to play but she don't say for the teacher.

Teacher: Maybe. That's another thing. Do you know, did you think that maybe this girl, maybe she had finished her work?

Shamsa: Maybe

Teacher: Maybe

Layan: Miss I said to you

Teacher: Maybe she finished her work first and the teacher said, 'ok now you can have free time'.

Layan: And when you see it only the bad thing you say that she close her book and but when you see the good things you say she go to the miss and she say to her 'I finish my work', she [the teacher] will say to her you finish your work you have free time.

(Video-recorded lesson episode 3, 05/2016)

Traditionally, open schoolbooks, sitting at the desk and being quiet were indicators of working, whereas a student doing another activity was off-task or playing. As demonstrated above, students were able to *challenge* the notion of what task engagement looked like (Gupta & Lee, 2015). Specifically, they ventured to reconceptualise the scenario to positively (also critically) explain the students' blocks, or different task, in a way that challenged any superficial reasoning. Due to the increase in student generated talk, opportunity to provide corrective feedback by way of rephrasing student utterances was also present. I would take the students partially formed utterances and rephrase them correctly, while maintaining the flow of the conversation.

Preparedness for Writing

Findings also indicate that discussion of generative themes and content from the codification prepared young EFL students for writing independently. This is in keeping with the key constructs outlined in the definition for preparedness for writing, where metacognition, student motivation, oral rehearsal of ideas, and recall of background knowledge are presented.

Metacognition

Metacognitive awareness, or knowledge of how students learn through voicing their own thought processes, enables them to become "professional learners" (Tarrant & Holt, 2016, p. 3). The cognitive demands placed on the students were significant in the CLP lesson. The CLP codification encouraged students to read the underlying meaning embedded in an image. This

led to critical evaluation of students' responses considering any new information about the codification. All these processes occurred from the starting point of a recognisable situation, activating prior knowledge. The shift from our previous literacy lessons to CLP lessons, albeit cognitively more demanding in the latter, was the right direction as some students could articulate their metacognitive awareness for the first time.

When asked to describe their experience with CLP codification as a discussion basis and writing prompt, students kept using the word, "big", to encapsulate their experience with this critical approach. For example, students in the following excerpts described the thinking process required when talking to each other in English in order to prepare for writing. They mentioned doing a "big work" or "going big" and, in this sense, it points to students' capacity to think and produce something worthy and meaningful to them:

> **Reem**: Miss what is the good way we go big and we only know the word and we write the word or when we go big and write all story and all the people know. The only, good as the people all know me and I write stories so much like that. (Focus group interview, 06/2016)

> **Tolan**: Miss I love, I do like, I love it because I can know another something and I, and I talk with the girls about this picture and we do a big work like this. (Focus group interview, 06/2016)

Similarly, Elham spoke of her head being "too big" in the following excerpt, in the context of her recognition of the growth she had made as a learner, and improvements she had made with her reading and writing: "Miss I love it the reading and writing because my head is very, is too big." (Focus Group Interview, 06/2016). This resonated with my observation notes made later about this student, "She [Elham] persistently reaches for new ways to describe what she is seeing" (Observation notes, 08/2016).

Motivation

By presenting generative themes situated in a classroom-based problem and closely related to their prior experiences, the students demonstrated different levels of motivation. When video-recorded observation notes were examined and analysed, there was a noticeable awareness of students' body language moving from passive (at the beginning of the lesson) to being fully

engaged (once the photograph had been given) in the task. As documented in my observation notes (08/2016),

> No other input is given, but I notice straight away that the body language changes. Girls [are] sitting forward and, while turn taking is happening, there is the expectation of talk, like someone will contribute as soon as one is finished.

A case in point is that one student, Reem, described her motivation to be a capable writer so that she could make money from her writing. She was driven to write lengthy books, and "not small books". When asked about the use of the CLP codification, she was able to connect the time spent thinking with the impact it had on building her confidence as a writer.

> **Reem**: Miss I like the picture. I see the picture and [have done it] because when we, when we become big, all the people know me, like I write so many book, when I write so many book is its big not small. I write so many book and when like all the people know me she [other people] give me money and all thing and I like. (Focus group interview, 06/2016)

Another vivid example below (Ahad) looks at the use of creative ways that students might call on to communicate meaning despite their limited vocabulary. At the outset of the CLP lesson, Ahad's meaning was difficult to determine. When asked to clarify what she meant, she used circumlocution as a communication strategy to resolve the communication breakdown in order to make meaning clearer to her teacher. Circumlocution is demonstrated by learners who use their known resources, either verbal (simple words) or nonverbal (body language, gesture) to compensate for cognitive and linguistic demands above their current repertoire (Nakatani, 2006). Ahad used circumlocution to communicate the way she saw the actors in the codification and how she could direct them almost as dolls within her own imagination:

> **Ahad**: I like it the photo, like read it for all the class, you take the photograph and you, you like, you take the photograph, like a picture then tell them a story. Like these girls have a story, like these girls have a story. Like, their city have like a problem, we take from this girl a story, like a doll and we do it

something, it is from her, the doll. Yeah, we need for, we read about this girl, read about this girl and like about.

Teacher: So you've liked, ok, now I want to, I am trying to understand what you mean Ahad, so when we use the photographs?

Ahad: Yeah, we take, we take this girl, we read about her, what is good in…

Teacher: Yeah, yeah

Ahad: I take this girl, you take, because she take or… [Ahad pretends to hold two imaginary figures and moves them about]

(Focus group interview, 06/2016)

For Ahad, the photograph made abstract concepts more concrete and served as visual support for her to associate meaning-making with language processing as part of her own uptake of CLP in her writing (Spener, 1993). This "dramatization" was also evidenced at other points with other students, who would use circumlocution as a means to convey meaning, motivated by the topic being discussed.

Oral Rehearsal of Ideas

Evidence from focus group interviews indicated that these students valued the opportunity to brainstorm together in order to generate more ideas before writing about their topic. Codification opened an avenue for students to orally rehearse thoughts or think aloud and to build on each other's ideas within a supportive small group setting. In the following excerpt, it is the level of oral rehearsal required during the CLP discussion that the girls viewed as preparing them for the demands of writing a story in English (McCarrier et al., 2000).

Mera: Miss maybe one day one girl her name Tasneem and three girls are working together, and one girls don't do anything because she don't know to do her--

Teacher: So like a story, like a once upon a time, we could do it like that.

Aisha: Miss, the first, the first I would write hi my name is Aisha and I will write maybe one day a Grade Five come to class miss Nadine there, then, then miss Nadine give him paper to write in. The she, miss Nadine said three was, four was like that, to get four together, four together. Then, then I get the [one…][4]

Eisha: […it's] these three girls.

---

[4] Brackets are used in transcription to enclose words in overlapping talk between speakers.

Aisha: Aisha and Hind and Tasneem to, Aisha and Hind and this, she is still working together. Then you come and take why you don't work with, why you don't work with Tasneem, why you don't work with Tasneem, she said--

Mera: Miss, or maybe say [unintelligible] what you are don't talking together. She don't understand and don't talking in the class like that.

Teacher: These are very nice ideas girls, ok.

Eisha: Miss, that you said, maybe Tasneem, maybe Tasneem take the colour because she would colour the money, colour the money. Then the three girls say no, no, we will colour first.

(Video-recorded lesson episode 4, 06/2016)

Background Knowledge

The recall of background knowledge was derived from careful selection of the generative themes during Phases 1 and 2. McCarrier et al. (2000) recommended activating a child's real-life experiences through allowing prolonged talk in order to expand and enrich the child's language repertoire before the writing begins. Our own CLP discourse based on the everyday classroom experiences of the students was an integral component in Phase 4. It enabled the students to practise the target language while scaffolding pre-writing preparation. The codification scenario being depicted was open-ended in nature and connected to personal experience, thereby eliciting meaningful and content-rich responses (Spener, 1993). Given various actors portraying different roles in the picture scenario, the students had a variety of concrete examples to identify with, thus evoking their own experiences. Some codification triggered more controversy than others, leading to more participation amongst all participants.

Figure 4

"Star Student" CLP Codification (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

The codification "Star Student" (Figure 4) was particularly effective in this sense as this positive behaviour system was closely situated in students' everyday classroom experience. In the excerpt below, we were discussing the unfair allocation of points by the Star Students, and instances when students had been given fewer points, or no points at all for the whole lesson. Both Elham and Habiba articulated their experiences:

> **Elham**: Miss, me a Star Student and there was me and Shamsa. Shamsa is take, is taken point and me bought the point. Not Shamsa is take it the point and bought the point only. I want to do take it the point and point again.
>
> **Teacher**: But did you ever had girls come to you saying 'Elham give me a point, give me a point' like this?
>
> **Elham**: No.
>
> **Teacher**: No? Ok. Did that happen to you? Has that happened to you Habiba?
>
> **Habiba**: Miss, Dana is Star of the Week, I quiet and Star of the Week, she, she take, take points, I quiet.
>
> **Teacher**: How did you feel?
>
> **Habiba**: Not happy.
>
> (Video-recorded lesson episode 5, 06/2016)

In my teacher journal, I also noted a discussion about the personal experience of one student whose lost books were the cause of great anxiety for her. This student (Tolan) produced writing of a richer complexity than she had done when writing about events that were superficial (buying an ice-cream) or fantasy (being a princess).

> So a few months back, Tolan wrote about the time she had lost her books, and I had made a big deal about it at the time. She wrote exactly what I had said, and how it made her panic about finding her lost books. It [her writing] was a real success because she had moved away from the usual topics of going to the mall, going to eat ice cream, being a princess. I had simply recounted an event that has meaning for her and it made some great writing. (Teacher journal, 05/2016)

To further illustrate how student writing performance progressed, Figure 5 presents two writing samples taken for the same two students before and after the implementation of CLP lessons. The examples highlight the difference in substance and quality when the topic for writing

comes from personal experience. In the samples of using guided reading prompts, both students (Student 1 and Student 2) wrote in micro events related to the topic, but there was no sense of elaboration or extension of the events. These micro events, albeit tied to the topic of the guided reading text, were disjointed from each other and brief in description rather than an elaborated narrative. For example, Student 1 (S1), in her writing about the camel, begins like a narrative, but then becomes brief facts that she recalls for the guided reading text. There is little sense of elaboration or engaging the reader with details. Student 2 (S2), in her written response to her text on inventions, is able to communicate some interesting creative ideas on a book that opens on response, but the writing is brief. It loses momentum quickly. On the contrary, when comparing the writing samples taken from Phase 5 of the CLP lesson, the same students demonstrated a more well-detailed attempt at a basic narrative. While the writing still retains a series of micro events, these events were connected to each other, characters were introduced, dialogue was present, and a cogent storyline emerged. There is a certain flow and expression to the writing, as a result of the rehearsal of new vocabulary and ideas that has gone on before. Because the writing topic is personal, experiential, and familiar, the students were able to produce writing of a higher quality and quantity.

Figure 5

Comparisons of Two Students Writing Samples (S1, S2) Between Guided Reading Prompts and CLP Lessons (Nelson & Chen, 2022)

S1: Guided Reading Prompt

Camels

One day there a camel. He is so good camel. He is sleeping in the desert and drinking water in the desert so he like to sleep there in the desert and he take food there.

S1: Critical Pedagogy Lesson

'Work and Play' Codification

One day there were four girls names Alaa, Mira, Aisha, Mohra. She go to school. Miss Nadine say do your homework but Alaa not do here homework. Miss Nadine say 'Do your math'. The four girls do her homework but Alaa, she play. The three girls say for Alaa, 'Why you not?' but Alaa say 'I do not want to'. Miss Nadine say 'Girls, now Daily Five English'. The girls do Daily Five English. The girls run, but Alaa not run, Alaa play the ball. Then we go in. Miss Nadine check the book for math. The girls go home. Miss Nadine see the Alaa no do homework. On the next day Miss Nadine come school. Girls come. Miss Nadine say why you not do homework Alaa? Alaa say not have rule. Miss Nadine say and why you not go Daily Five English? 'Because I not love rule'. And she take the girls to class.

S2: Guided Reading Prompt

Inventions and Innovations

I like inventions. I want to invention a book when I said close, it close. When I said open, its open. I said I want maybe the Little Red Hen story. It's come when I click one finger.

S2: Critical Pedagogy Lesson

'Work and Play' Codification

One day Mohrah and Aisah and Hind and Tasneem. They are doing math lesson. They open math books. Then they all do her work except Aisha. Tasneem do her work very nice. Then Hind looking at Aisha. Tasneem is very nice and good and Aisha and Hind is bad. Then Tasneem is really quiet and working hard. And Hind wanted to cheat from Aisha. Then they all do her work. They work hard.

Implications and Conclusion

The key findings drawn from this study suggest that the implementation of Freire's Problem Posing Model (1973) provided two integral pedagogical benefits. The first rendered students the opportunity to critically examine a problematised scenario, while prompting them to think about different logical solutions, rather than being confined by a "quick fix" response. Students were able to generate a variety of views that were all considered and listened to. Problem solving was evidenced through students identifying hidden clues that could contribute to solving the problem being depicted in each codification stimulus. It provided students with problem-based learning that compelled them to connect with the lesson more deeply (Ansarian et al., 2016; Shor, 1992), while justifying their genuine views and stances.

The second pedagogical benefit was that the CLP discussions during Phase 4 served as a springboard to prepare young EFL learners for their writing. Four patterns were identified in relation to this benefit: metacognition, motivation, oral rehearsing of ideas, and integrating background knowledge and personal experiences (Larkin, 2009; McCarrier et al., 2000; Winch et al., 2014). The CLP lesson using the Problem Posing Model supported students' preparedness for writing because it activated their prior knowledge and real-life experiences through the problem-posing aspect of codification. They were able to rehearse language connected to the codification, scaffolded by listening to modelled sentences and vocabulary during meaningful discussion. Specifically, the CLP discussion provided an open-ended space for EFL learners to brainstorm ideas and deepen their understanding of the topic before writing.

Despite the positive outcomes, one limitation was the lack of Arabic translation, in the instances when the participants were communicating to each other in their L1. As Akbari (2008) stated, "an individual's L1 is part of his identity and a force which has played a crucial role in the formation of his identity" (p. 130). Hence, any restriction of the learners' L1, especially in our multilingual world, is disempowering (Canagarajah, 2005; Rashidi, 2011). While the CLP lessons themselves were open for expression in both languages and are evidenced by the inclusion of their occurrences, the lack of translation for each occurrence of Arabic was a significant limitation, and it is encouraged that this be considered in future research.

An implication for future research would be the welcome investigation of quantitative studies that increased the variation by choosing participants or classes from different grade levels, or mixed gender groups rather than one homogenous group. The application of Freire's problem posing approach could be explored with other target languages, thus maximising transferability (Duff, 2014; Slevin & Sines, 2000).

This study has made a compelling case for justifying the benefits of implementing CLP lessons with young Arabic EFL learners, and potentially young EFL learners in other settings. The implementation of Freire's problem posing model is not only pedagogically feasible in actual classroom practices, but also conducive to future CLP research. Freire's problem posing model establishes a concrete link between problem posing, critical thinking, and language awareness.

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