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Editor

Reflections on Qualitative Research in Language and Literacy Education

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Chapter 10

Critical Practitioner Research in Language Education Under Difficult Circumstances

Gordon Blaine West and Graham Crookes

Specialists in language teaching are increasingly adopting a critical approach, in which attempts are made to address issues of social justice through teaching practices and content. Under favorable conditions, these may result in action; if conditions are less favorable, even to address such topics is a move in the right direction. A key aspect of such approaches is students having an active role. Usually, teachers who try out such an approach start to explore their own teaching, having not attempted such initiatives before. This, like all critical language pedagogy, is a form of praxis, in which theoretically-grounded teaching is reflected upon by the teacher in practice in a continual process of improvement of theory and practice. Consequently, within it, some form of teacher research, with a collaborative dimension (involving students and teachers together) that is consistent with an overall critical philosophy, is called for. It needs to reflect the difficult circumstances (West 1960) in which such teaching, overtly or covertly non-mainstream and opposed to dominant viewpoints, is often likely to be attempted.

This understanding of teacher research comes under the broad heading of qualitative research in language education. Yet such a perspective has rarely been described in applied linguistics settings dealing with young L2 learners, and is certainly not found as a fixed and familiar set of practices depicted in applied linguistics or language education research methods textbooks. In the study we will be discussing in this chapter, we consider developments in research methodologies

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appropriate to a particular critical conception of research that would be appropriate for young learners studying in a second language, which we here call "critical practitioner research".

Having identified the strengths and weaknesses of past perspectives that are sympathetic and supportive of a critical perspective on teacher research, in this chapter we synthesize these perspectives, illustrating the important aspects of this understanding of qualitative research in a case of a teacher attempting a critical pedagogy in a context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young learners. Specifically, we draw on the experiences of the first author, as an EFL teacher of young children in South Korea. Over several years, Gordon worked through several phases of developing both a critical pedagogy of EFL for young learners and also a research methodology appropriate to the participatory values of critical language pedagogy that would realistically reflect the youth and language abilities of the participants, and the difficult contextual circumstances of this work.

Critical Perspectives on Teacher Research

Critical versions of the social sciences have increasingly been articulated across disciplines. We have critical psychology, critical linguistics, critical perspectives in sociology and cultural studies, broader perspectives such as that of Fay (1987), and we have critical applied linguistics (Pennycook 2001) and critical language pedagogy (Norton and Toohey 2004). At least two related senses of *critical* may be pointed out here. One is that deriving from Horkheimer (1937/1976) who coined the term *critical theory* to refer to a theory of society that questioned dominant values, favoring instead those of equality, freedom, and social justice. The meaning of this key term has been extended for our field by Pennycook (2001), who in calling for critical applied linguistics is suggesting a form of problematizing practice that is reflexive and willing to question its own assumptions, still with emancipatory intent. Critical perspectives (in our field, and in others) refuse to take for granted the normalized state of the status quo and instead investigate how current conditions arose, with particular attention to how they might be improved with social justice objectives in mind. In language and literacy education this includes research into power relations associated with dominant and less dominant languages, language classrooms and learning, and literacy practices. Critical approaches also at the same time interrogate the process of research for those same power imbalances between the researcher and the researched.

An important understanding of critical research is that associated with action research. Developing somewhat separately, not attached to any one discipline, action research, which began with an emancipatory orientation (Collier 1945; Freire 1982; Lewin 1946; Marrow 1969; McKernan 1991), developed a research perspective which was intended to put a strongly democratic form of research into existence, as well as work towards collectively designed forms of theory. This perspective was eventually developed into Participatory Action Research (PAR),

most strongly associated with the names of Kemmis and McTaggart (e.g. Kemmis 1980; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, 2000). In this perspective, the expert researcher is in a responsive or advisory role, responding to the requests of a community to engage with them, but not direct research, on a project or issue that they have identified.

Ideas about action research and teacher research were in the air as the field of applied linguistics moved forward from its early development in the 1960s. In terms of dominant research perspectives appearing in our field at that time, we saw the disappointments of large-scale experimental studies, leading into, on the one hand, case studies of informal Second Language Acquisition, and on the other, small-scale academic studies of curriculum and methods, initially quantitative (cf. Chaudron 1988) with qualitative work eventually coming to dominate. Perhaps it has always been an issue, but the 1980s and 1990s saw discussions of the difficulty with which academic research could be taken up, engaged with, or understood by language teachers (cf. Brown 1991). The field of TESOL demonstrated a rapid upsurge of interest in action research as a result. Some specialists placed, and still do place, their hope for a productive form of research in applied linguistics within the hands of teacher-researchers doing classroom research (Allwright and Bailey 1991). Unfortunately, the critical potential of some forms of action research (notably PAR) were neglected in TESOL at that time in favor of individualist forms in which the teacher was the main actor (Crookes 1993, 2005; Friesen 1999; Kincheloe 1991). PAR is conceptually important for critical qualitative researchers in TESOL, specifically because it embodies a critical view of society and a radically democratic, fully participatory model of research practice. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) refer to it as occurring.

when participants are dissatisfied with the way things are, they do not just want things to be different; they understand that things have to be made different by themselves and others. To the extent that this is so, it indicates that participants are generally aware that social settings are constituted through social practices, and that making change is itself a practice. Participatory action research (not always by that name) frequently emerges in situations where people want to make changes thoughtfully—that is, after critical reflection. It emerges when people want to think “realistically” about where they are now, how things came to be that way, and, from these starting points, how, in practice, things might be changed. (p. 573)

Thus PAR assumes, or hopes for, a fully-participatory community which engages in research. It seems to envisage something like a village, or a group of teachers and parents, who collectively have identified a problem and call on researchers to act with them as co-participants in an equal fashion. PAR expects an emancipatory orientation and critical understanding of society to be present or to emerge through interactions between researchers and other participants. The central points of PAR, as it was originally conceptualized can be summarized as follows:

- It must be radically inclusive. The individuals involved are not distinctly separated into categories of ‘researcher’ and ‘subjects’, ‘teacher’ and ‘students’, or even ‘participants.’ Rather, all are equally co-researchers.

- The research is also conceptualized collectively. In educational contexts, the teacher does not work alone to select a problem to focus on before involving students as co-researchers. The group must collectively decide which problems or areas will be the focus of research, and the methods which will be used to investigate.
- The work must lead to some kind of emancipatory action to solve the problem that is the focus of the project or it must at the very least produce new collective knowledge that is shared publicly with the hope of making change.

This is consistent with the example Kemmis and McTaggart provide from their own work with Aboriginal teachers in Australia – a funded collaboration between two Australian universities. There have been some efforts to apply PAR ideas in TESOL/Second Language Studies (Davis 2009). This also was in the context of a funded program development project with groups of teachers taking university classes and working under specially negotiated circumstances and Davis (2009, pp. 210–211) notes that the project “deviated” (constructively) from PAR precisely because that model did not allow for participants who had been socialized into identities and discourses that prevented an initial fully participatory stance. These PAR projects suggest a model which, while highly desirable (both in its original form or Davis’s development of it), is far from the conditions of the often almost-isolated critical language teachers, for whom parents and other teachers may be part of the problem and whose freedom of action may be fairly limited.

Another deviation from original action research ideas when encountering specific contexts of practice is also important for our discussion. Prominent TESOL/language education qualitative researcher Allwright, after initially advocating teacher research, went on to question the conception. He reported that in working with teachers of English as a foreign language in Brazil and Bangladesh, he had come to realize that language teacher’s working conditions were usually too poor to allow for the doing of conventional teacher research (and he also thought that for academics to call for this was unethical and showed their own ignorance of most language teachers’ working conditions). Consequently, Allwright (1991, 2003; Allwright and Hanks 2009) advocates *exploratory practice*. In this, teachers are encouraged to use a loose framework and normal classroom practices (i.e., classroom discussions, reflective assignments) as investigatory tools. It came as a response to the onerous demands of traditional academic research on classroom teachers, while at the same time acknowledging that pedagogy and research methodology should not be in competition, but rather can be two sides of the same coin. What this approach still lacks for critical practitioners is an explicitly critical agenda. Exploratory practice focuses on *quality of life* issues within individual classrooms and programs (Allwright 2003), but does not respond to social justice issues explicitly or directly address the political nature of language and literacy education. The *third world* teachers Allwright worked with in Brazil lacked resources but they did have a certain amount of autonomy in choice of content and technique, and were not subject to the surveillance (Taylor 2012, 2013) or accountability regimes which increasingly affect language teachers around the world today.

With a view of the history and evolution of field work methods (Ellen 1984), their “necessarily improvised nature” (Streefkerk 1993, p. 2), and their possible constraints (Nordstrom and Robben 1995), a long-standing position in qualitative research is that investigative methods can and should be developed anew, depending on the needs and possibilities of the specific research site. In the study to be described below, situational constraints would not have allowed a conventional implementation of PAR, the most obviously critical version of teacher research. This led us to conceptualize what we will here call a critical *practitioner research* framework. Following Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), the term *practitioner* is used to go beyond just teachers, to include all language education workers. We outline three main principles of critical practitioner research before describing one such project from a research methodological standpoint.

First, critical practitioner research needs to have an explicitly critical focus. The aims of the project must be to further social justice causes either through action or through discussions that seek to “decolonize the imaginary” (Crookes 2013, p. 195) of the participants. When the focus is pedagogy, it must go beyond self-improvement goals for teachers and seek engagement with larger issues surrounding language and literacy education in the community. Second, critical practitioner research needs to be flexible. As Allwright (1991, 2003) pointed out, working conditions for language and literacy teachers and practitioners are such that adherence to a rigid or extensive research methodology is not possible. Neoliberal and other repressive regimes of education create pressures on teachers in the following ways:

- **Casualization of teachers:** This is done by preventing or limiting unionization efforts, or by preventing unions from arising at all (Lin 2004) through administrative action in a limiting legal environment.
- **Work intensification:** Driven by technology and audit/accountability regimes in education, teacher workloads have increased in recent years (Apple 2007; Hill 2009; Lin 2004; OECD 2014). This has happened across the globe as education is increasingly standardized through assessment measures (Apple 2007). This leaves teachers with less time for professional development (including investigating and improving their own teaching, i.e. teacher research) and little or no time to even prepare lessons, so they rely on pre-made curriculum from textbooks (Lin 2004).
- **Lack of access to resources/research:** Teachers lack access to research databases that are blocked by expensive pay walls. Though technology makes research more easily accessible in theory, the commodification of research through costly subscriptions to scholarly journals creates a level of elite knowledge that is inaccessible to teachers.
- **Danger of doing critical work:** Surveillance in schools has become ever more ubiquitous with the rise of technology (Krueger-Henney 2016; Taylor 2012, 2013). The levels of surveillance make it increasingly difficult to do research that may be critical of the system and status quo, especially as language teachers may lack union support or other collective power.

Overall, this means that expectations concerning data collection, analysis, and use of theory deriving from academic qualitative research may have to be rethought, even beyond the rethinking implied by mainstream teacher research. Some data may not be safe for critical language teachers working under difficult circumstances to collect; depth or extensiveness of research may be limited by the facts of working conditions; the vast range of available academic theory may not be accessible to the teacher nor manifested in a report; criteria of validity should be rethought in line with the critical and activist aspirations of the work rather than conventional academic standards (cf. Lather's (1986) catalytic validity).

Third, as the last core principle of critical practitioner research, it must aim to be collaborative while recognizing and being explicit about the potential limitations imposed by context. PAR, as discussed above, is radically inclusive of participant voices in every phase of research and the researcher acts (in theory) as mainly a conduit and facilitator of the project. Critical pedagogy (Freire 2000) offers an excellent example of the type of collaboration that is possible between students and teachers. It takes student *problem-posing* as the central organizing principle of pedagogy. The teacher is able to act as a facilitator, then, who is responsive to student needs while also seeking to address social justice issues as brought up by students. This also provides a framework for inquiry – each problem posed by students is a focus and the basis of inquiry. In critical language pedagogy classrooms operating under difficult circumstances, this ideal also may not be fully attainable. At the same time, we should recognize the power imbalance between teachers (and most other practitioners) and students, which is compounded if the students are young learners. Rather than seeking to hide these imbalances, collaborative efforts (and reports) must acknowledge them and seek just ways to conduct research under such conditions.

Critical practitioner research acknowledges that the teacher's research agenda may differ slightly from that of the students (i.e. exploring the response of other teachers to their critical projects or investigating the community impact of their work whereas students may focus solely on addressing the problem that they have identified). Methods and places of reporting draws from the PAR tradition, but with caveats. A full range of reporting genres and locations, going far beyond the typical academic article, have always been advocated and used by PAR. Fals Borda (1997, pp. 93–94, writing in the pre-Internet era) refers to oral reports, illustrated booklets, essays (before "theoretical books") and "material forms for returning systematic knowledge to the people", including "training centres, action units and the like, presented and considered as applied results of research". Besides the perhaps greater utility of non-academic reports of such studies, work intensification makes the more complete academic reports less feasible, and surveillance may make them, in their persistent, undeniable, easily retrievable digital form, more dangerous to the author and participants.

A Case of Critical Practitioner Research in Practice

The recent study that we use as an example of critical practitioner research was conducted by the first author over a 15-month period at a private language institute (*hagwon*) in Seoul, South Korea, which we call Universal Language School (ULS). The study focused on doing critical pedagogy with young learners (9–13 years old). Gordon began his engagement with critical language pedagogy in response to student resistance he experienced (as did other teachers) at the school. Critical pedagogy allowed students openly to pose the problems that they were experiencing and resisting in class, which included lack of relevant curriculum, lack of control over their use of time and learning, and oppressive testing policies at the *hagwon* and in their regular schools. The critical aim of the research, then, became to help students find ways to act on these issues and to see the larger community and societal pressures that were causing them. Critical practitioner research was used in investigating the transformation process, aims of the classes, and actions of the students so that the project could provide inspiration and an example for other critically-inclined teachers in similar situations.

A Difficult Research Circumstance

The site of the research described in this chapter was a *hagwon* in Seoul, South Korea. A *hagwon* is a private institute, in this case for English language education. Hagwons serve to supplement education in South Korea and students attend them outside of regular school hours, with parents paying for their children to attend. English language hagwons have boomed in Korea in recent years, creating a 10 billion dollar market for English education (Koo 2007) with more than 80 % of children in Korea attending hagwons (Byun and Kim 2010). This may be an aspect of a larger world-wide phenomenon now known as the *shadow education system* generally destructive of state schooling (Bray 2007). As private, profit-driven institutions, hagwons can prevent teachers from engaging in any activity unwished by the administration. There is no job security, no unionization, and school administrations are accustomed to high staff turn-over. Hagwons favor hiring young, short-term employees as teachers. Without union representation, workers can be terminated at will. Hagwons control foreign teachers' visas; if a foreign teacher is fired, they also immediately lose their ability to remain in the country. Critical work is thus dangerous.

Work schedules at hagwons are onerous for teachers. Typically, teachers may have six to seven classes per day. Gordon taught an average of 35 contact hours per week, each class having different ages and levels of students and each thus requiring a unique lesson plan, resulting in a total work-week of about 55 h. With only 10 vacation days per year, burnout is high. It is difficult for teachers to find adequate time to prepare for lessons or check student work, let alone plan and

carry out research in these circumstances. Teachers also face a demanding audit culture. Students underwent *level testing* every 3 months, in addition to weekly quizzes and monthly unit tests. The results of level testing were posted in the teacher rooms and teachers were informally evaluated based on the ranking of their students. Teacher marking of homework was also often double-checked by parents and sometimes administrators to search for errors in checking and to ensure that all student homework was corrected. This created additional pressure on teachers to perform that distracted from the process of teaching and learning, reducing it to a routine of filling out worksheets and counting errors.

The school administration provided teachers with no access to research, supplementary materials, or professional development literature or workshops. Local organizations, such as Korea TESOL, Applied Linguistics Association of Korea (ALAK), and the Korean Association of Teachers of English (KATE) have very scant representation of or outreach to hagwon teachers. Research by hagwon teachers is not encouraged at the hagwon level or through these local professional organizations. Politically, critical work of any sort is difficult in South Korea. As North and South Korea remain technically at war, any political views that run counter to the neoliberal discourse of the South Korean government risk putting the individual holding such views in a tenuous position. A controversial and longstanding national security law remains in place that has been used to jail those who criticize the policies of the ruling political party and to disband groups that stand in opposition. Other recent actions include the government disbanding a political party, previously making the teacher's union illegal, and the jailing of talk radio hosts and satirists (Choe 2012, 2014). Foreigners who are deemed to have been involved in political action can be summarily deported.

Adjusting Research Techniques to the Context

An additional difficulty of doing research at ULS was the fact that the students were young learners. While it was possible to collaborate with them to some extent on curriculum, especially middle school students, it would not have been possible or appropriate to involve them in the writing and dissemination of research or to move forward with reporting until the students were out of ULS and safely unidentifiable. Initially, the project was conceived of in terms of action research that would have followed a rigorous program of research interventions, measurements, and reflections. This idea quickly became untenable due to the heavy workload. Drawing on Allwright's (2003) advice that research and pedagogy practices be compatible or integrated, the data collection focused mainly on student work and materials produced for classes. Specifically, ballots cast in class voting or opinion polls, student journal entries, learner-created books, student reflections, teacher reflections, notes written by students, graffiti in the classrooms, videos of debates, and other student written work (assignments) were collected as data. All of the data analyzed in the project consisted of materials that were given or created by students in the course

of learning or naturally occurring in the classrooms. This data was then used to illustrate the pedagogical interventions and transformations made by the teacher and students, along with the discussions and actions taken by the students. Further reflections were possible on the nature and possibilities of practicing critical pedagogy in hagwons and the ultimate outcomes based on the data and research process.

Whereas PAR calls for all participants to be co-researchers, this was not possible. Gordon was working with the students on projects they had chosen, and supporting them on actions they were taking such as writing letters of protest and holding public debates about the hagwon policies. The aim of these student-led projects to find ways to make small scale changes within the hagwon (i.e., reduced homework, greater recognition for work done). In the role of a practitioner researcher, however, Gordon's aims went beyond the local site. His additional aim was to research different ways of supporting democratic decision making and to then document and report the benefits and pitfalls of different types of work to other teachers so that others might also see ways to do similar work. For Gordon as a teacher-researcher, the transformation of pedagogy in action toward a critical pedagogy was a key event to be documented. While the students were involved in this process, their focus and interest was not directed at the ways in which a teacher could facilitate such processes. In this sense, the collaboration was limited.

The focus of student-led investigations may often be localized, attempting to make change in the classroom or in the school. The focus of practitioner researchers may be broader simply because they seek to communicate and share their experiences professionally to show others what is possible. Although Gordon and the students worked together on projects, the students were not entirely interested in the same research questions or problems that Gordon was. It is important for research to be inclusive of voices and responsive to participant needs, but unlike in PAR, in this case, researcher and participant interests diverged, at least in part. When doing critical work with children, the practitioner researcher has special ethical considerations to make, which we will discuss more in the following section.

Ethical and Reporting Considerations

There are many cases of critical research and pedagogy being done successfully with young learners in language and literature education (e.g. Comber and Simpson 2001; Cowhey 2005; Haneda 2009; Lau 2013; Quintero 2007; Steinberg and Ibrahim 2016; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998; Wallace 1986). There are sometimes questions as to whether or not critical pedagogy and research involves an imposition of the teacher's views on the students (the *imposition* question; Crookes 2013). This claim may be made by those with little experience with critical pedagogy and by those who may be hostile to the project itself. This assumption rests on an understanding that teaching and education in general are neutral processes, when they are highly political projects. Failure to acknowledge the political nature of learning is dangerous because it can serve to preserve and support repressive

elements in the status quo. We view critical work as the more ethical choice because it acknowledges the political nature of education and research while making clear the stance of the practitioner-researcher, rather than obscuring it behind a false claim to objectivity. In addition, a key point is that critical language pedagogy, and critical practitioner research regard dialogue (and a sensitivity to power) as central to their processes. Students share their opinions and express their desires; teachers share in a joint investigation, and stand in a facilitative role rather than a sole source of authority.

Any type of educational research with young students has a special responsibility toward the representation of children and their positions and thoughts that should be constantly questioned and evaluated (Jipson 2000). While it was not possible in the case discussed above to include the student voices to the extent that would have been desirable, the knowledge shared in reporting research was co-produced with students (West 2014a, b). What we share are our interpretations of this knowledge. It is important for critical practitioner researchers to make this clear and to state our own positions throughout the process. In doing this, it is important for the writing to be self-reflexive and to make clear how we are making our interpretations (Ramanathan 2005). As McTaggart (1991) warned, it is all too easy, even in participatory research that is radically inclusive of all voices, for those voices and the process of knowledge production to be lost in the reporting when the writer claims the ideas for her/himself.

When considering the reporting process for critical work in general, it is necessary to think about venues beyond the traditional academic routes. It is important to be an advocate for social justice and that means finding specific venues that would reach those in the communities we work in to make an impact. In the case of the study discussed in this chapter, Gordon used the results of the research to make presentations at local teacher conferences in Korea, write non-academic newsletter articles, have informal conversations with other hagwon teachers, and to give a teacher-training workshop for fellow teachers at ULS. His aim was to call into question and change the way hagwons operate. To that end; he focused on reaching out to teachers who he thought could make the biggest and most immediate impact by changing the way they ran their classes.

Considering critical practitioner research specifically, and developing a framework for those whose difficult circumstances make conventional forms of reporting too challenging, it is especially important to consider other reporting options. Desktop publishing (blogs, self-publishing platforms for e-books, digital media, etc.) offers opportunities for raising our voice that were not available previously. It is easier now than ever before to publish our work, although rigid systems of prestige-granting still exist and there are still hurdles in terms of technological availability. It is especially important, however, to hear more critical voices, and the voices and experiences of those who are working under difficult circumstances in language and literacy education because they are so rarely heard.

Some Findings and Associated Research Issues

Having sketched key points of this version of a qualitative methodology appropriate to difficult circumstances and a critical action research perspective, we will illustrate some other details of the nature of the data collected in the study, the nature of the qualitative explorations of our data, and some actual findings of the study that may further illustrate aspects of critical practitioner research in the difficult circumstance of concern.

The Nature of the Collected Data

As mentioned above, it was fairly consistent with the practices of teacher research that much data be the same as would have been generated through normal teaching practices. Thus *student work* was a major source of data. But the critical perspective of the teacher resulted in student work including the results of voting on topics and activity types (supporting the somewhat participatory nature of the process – see Fig. 10.1). It also included accepting as student *work*, written material that clearly attested to student resistance. On the other hand, the data, although extensive (because of the length of time Gordon spent at the hagwon) was not a complete and unitary data set such as might have been obtained by an ethnographer working under favorable circumstances. This was a teacher-researcher working under difficult circumstances and ideally should not be judged by academic research standards, but

Fig. 10.1 Middle school ballot on preferred topics of discussion in class

- ① School life
- ② Questions
- ③ hobbies
- ④ TV program
- ⑤ Movies
- ⑥ Job
- ⑦ The happiest time in my life.

(as with teacher research in general) more by its catalytic validity as established by the community making use of the work. At one level that would be similar teachers. Had the students been more fuller participants, it would have included them also, but again, the expectations of PAR cannot hold under difficult circumstances and need some adjusting when participants themselves, as young learners in an oppressive institution have very far from full autonomy.

The Nature of the Data-Exploration Process

A creative research methodology response to the interrupted nature of the data stream collected was the decision to make use of the narrative analysis research concept of *emplotment* (Polkinghorne 1995). Emplotment is way of combining different events into a unified story, or creating a plot to link the data in a story line (Polkinghorne 1995). Polkinghorne's example of emplotment is the combining of two events such as "the king died; the prince cried" (1995, p. 7). Putting the events together gives additional meaning and leads to a better understanding of the events. By putting them together, we see that the prince cried because the king died, whereas if they were told separately, we may not understand the reason for the prince's crying. This analytical concept is useful in looking at student artifacts, such as ballots, notes, and even pictures because it allows the researcher to connect these examples of what was done to tell a more coherent story of what happened.

In this project, data collection and analysis were intertwined and informed each other. For example, when students in one class voted on what topics they wanted to discuss in the class, the process was analyzed and used to make improvements on the next round of voting in that and other classes. When examining the data set in its entirety, it encompassed student work from a wide range of classes at different proficiency and age levels. Each class had a unique trajectory and unique experience, but emplotment was used to bring them all together in more complete narrative to show a rough progression of the kinds of critical work that were done.

Through emplotment, this unified narrative then gives meaning to the data as a complete set that it would not otherwise have. For instance, the ballots from a series of votes in one class tells a narrow story of critical work, but looking at the ballots from many classes, combined with the use of learner-created materials in other classes, and finally the artifacts (i.e. evidence cards – see Fig. 10.2) from a student debate, show together a progression over time of increasing space being made for critical pedagogy. Emplotment is a means of allowing us to make sense through narrative of a chaotic world (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). Many researchers use narratives to tell the story of their research and to draw out meanings, and emplotment is useful as a tool to make explicit that process.

When using emplotment to analyze a large, complex, and interrupted or partially-incomplete data set, it is important to tell exactly what is being included in the narrative and what is being left out of the narrative. For the larger project, each section of data analysis was accompanied by a summary of the emplotment that was

Arguments	
For	Against
<p>Remembering is very important.</p> <p>Students to be able to grasp an individual understanding.</p> <p>Homework helps develop our brain.</p> <p>Homework helps you review what you learn in school today.</p> <p>to earn money.</p>	<p>We are wasting paper.</p> <p>school should stay in school!</p> <p>It makes me learn how to be bored.</p> <p>and without homework we would save trees.</p> <p>homework causes stress and just gets on your nerves.</p> <p>We already spend 6 hours a day doing school work.</p>

Fig. 10.2 Middle school *abolish homework* debate argument summaries

done, explaining briefly what things had been left out and explicitly stating how the data was arranged in a narrative. This openness allows readers to have a greater interpretation of the data and the analysis than they would otherwise have.

Research Findings

The most obvious finding of the research itself was that critical language pedagogy can be done in neoliberal conditions. To expand a little, a small but important line of research exists within critical language pedagogy which attempts to show (to discourage critics and encourage teachers) that critical language pedagogy can be done under circumstances that seem unfavorable, or with students for whom it might seem difficult, and so on (e.g. Shin and Crookes 2005). Stereotypical *Confucian cultures*, misread by western academics, are posited as being made up of classrooms where nothing communicative or critical can happen, and where any degree of dialogue between teacher and students is *culturally inappropriate*. If this sort of perception is not challenged, it will be discouraging to language teachers who might want to move in critical directions. The hagwon environment is not just a school in a culture stereotypically (or even actually) quite hierarchical and subject to considerable policy constraint; it is even more pressured, because of the profit motive, the expectations of parents, and the narrow curriculum focus (the test). Yet particularly as a result of Gordon's long engagement with students, including multiple students from the same family, the gradual build up of rapport and mutual trust, along with the high degrees of resistance and resentment concerning the institution the students felt, democratic dialogue and student input into curriculum, as well as student participation in out of classroom action to press the school administration for changes, all occurred.

Some of the specific actions taken as a result of this work included a student protest by elementary students against school policy on reward systems and public debates (within the school) by middle school students over homework and the abolishment of the hagwon system. These actions in particular gave a focus to the students' resistance through critical work and allowed them to challenge policies made by the administrators. In turn, these challenges were met with counter-measures taken by administrators, including tearing down protest signs and suppressing student voices. After a middle school debate on abolishing homework was held in the school auditorium with all other students in the audience, a second debate on abolishing the hagwon system was moved to a smaller classroom with a very limited audience. These actions and the resulting suppression served to show the possibilities and potential difficulties that critical pedagogues face in neoliberal environments. While action taken by students was stifled, different types of openings and prospects for democratizing classes and using learner-created materials to stimulate critical dialogues nevertheless occurred, and the report itself (presented in many forms and forums) may stimulate other such initiatives.

Conclusion

A range of critical traditions in research exist (going well beyond those referred to in this chapter). In this chapter we have tried to make clear the ways in which one of the most obvious critical research methodologies, PAR, needs to be adapted to the (EFL) circumstances of the researchers. Critical language specialists, particularly those working with the currently-dominant international language of power, English, have to face an educational world that is dominated by neoliberal perspectives. They will thus usually be working under difficult circumstances. We have presented one such adaptation, which we have called critical practitioner research, which should be seen as a process that requires more development from those in the field. The principles we laid out, (1) that the research focus on social justice issues, (2) that the research be flexible in regards to data collection and analysis under difficult circumstances, and (3) that the research be collaborative to the extent that it does not endanger those it involves, were developed from our reflection on Gordon West's own critical language teaching. If this overall argument is found plausible, it may prompt others to develop additional principles, and in a dialogical spirit we would encourage this. Even as it stands, we feel we could say to other prospective critical language teachers who hope to work with their learners to investigate their jointly-created practices, there are ways to do this which reflect your circumstances, and that by providing such a sympathetic framework, this work will be encouraged and continue.

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