# "This Is a Food Ad but It Is Presenting Gender Stereotypes!": Practicing Critical Language Awareness in an Iranian EFL Context*

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**Abstract**

Despite a fairly long emergence of critical approaches to language teaching, there still seems to be a dearth of practitioner inquiries narrating experiences of implementing Critical Language Awareness (CLA) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Prompted, the present study narrates the measures taken by an Iranian language teacher for encouraging learners to analyze and examine language deployment in the world around them. The participants of this semester-long study were a community of twenty young female students studying English Literature at a state university in Tehran, Iran who were engaged in a series of reading events including reflective reading of advertisements and TV commercials, and critical analysis of literary works, news and journalistic writings, inter alia. The analysis of classroom records plus reflective journals written by the students display the ways through which the students practiced standing back from texts, questioning the biased ideas, developing reasoned position, and responding in their own voices.

**Keywords:** Critical language awareness (CLA), English as foreign language (EFL), practitioner inquiry (PI), reflective reading.

**Introduction**

With the term "critical" becoming something like a "buzzword", the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has witnessed a surge of interest in critical approaches to language and language teaching within the last two decades or so. In line with the notion of critical literacy, a fairly large array of studies have been conducted around the globe investigating the implementation and applications of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), theoretically rooted in the works of Fairclough (1992/2014), Wallace (1992, 2003 & 2018) and other scholars who have made contributions to this field via seminal works. Advocates of CLA, while acknowledging its indebtedness to Language Awareness (LA) and borrowing theoretical and methodological perspectives from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Ali, 2011; Alim, 2010; Bolitho, Carter, Hughes, Ivanic, Masuhara, & Tomlison, 2003; Wallace, 1992), extend its purview beyond a narrow linguistics enterprise chiefly associated with lexical and grammatical knowledge, and pay heightened attention to the socio-economic and political nature of language and its effects on our everyday life (Males, 2000; Taylor, Despagne, & Faez, 2018). Dismissing text neutrality, they see texts loaded or inscribed with veiled ideologies, invisible power relations, interests, and "hidden agendas" that creep within lexical and syntactic choices made by authors (Fairclough, 1992/2014).

At pedagogical level, it is argued that "integrating these aspects will likely enhance the students' ability to make meaning from texts by linking the social, political, and cultural aspects of the text with their own" (Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017, p.221); nevertheless, discerning such hidden layers by language learners, problematizing, and critiquing them demand higher levels of consciousness-raising on the part of language teachers. Although CLA is now a relatively timeworn concept, it does not still enjoy much popularity on practical orientation in English as a foreign language education in many contexts (Huang, 2013; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017; Taylor, Despagne, & Faez, 2018), and "accounts of critical practices" particularly the ones narrated by practitioners "are

scarce" and "still under-explored" (Ko, 2013, p. 92). As appraised by Suarcaya and Prasasti (2017) and Huang (2013), respectively, "only few studies in relation to the implementation of critical literacy approach in EFL are identified" (p. 222) and "few studies have documented students' learning as a result of actual classroom implementations of CLA" (p. 65); partially because a transformation from traditional approaches to critically-oriented ones is demanding for teachers and curriculum developers making them take on an added-weight (Metz, 2018). Nonetheless, in an era in which multifarious types of visual, verbal, and digitally delivered media are emerging, the necessity of such awareness-raising classroom practices is felt more than ever (Wallace, 2018).

Not unlike many other contexts, within the Iranian EFL setting, barrages of criticism have also been leveled at mainstream language education for engaging teachers and learners with parrot-like memorization, infantilizing tasks and "trivial and shallow topics carrying no intellectual value" which at best prepare learners for "ordinary life" rather than "intellectual life" (Fatemi, Ghahremani Ghajar, & Bakhtiari, 2018, p. 91). Not disregarding or depreciating a handful of studies conducted quantitatively or qualitatively in Iran (e.g., Asakereh & Weisi, 2018; Sadeghi, 2008), there still seems to be a palpable dearth of *practitioner inquiries* recounting the process involved in preparing, selecting, and presenting materials purported at critical language awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts and the ways classroom events are planned accordingly.

Concerned, in this practitioner inquiry, I, as an Iranian English language teacher gently endeavored for integrating critical language awareness to a Study Skills course attended by a community of English Literature university students. The questions that guided the study were what types of classroom events could be designed for imparting critical language awareness with English-major university students and what types of reading would occur as a result of such events. I attempt to display that through planning a series of events, namely, discussing the power behind the words, critiquing literary texts, analyzing print

advertisements and commercials, and journalistic texts, the students started questioning, critiquing, and challenging the stated ideas, attitudes, and values that lie beneath the surface of the texts and somewhat resisted them by voicing their personal stance. What this study is yearning to express is the necessity of encouraging both teachers and students to break the routines and see the hidden images of the texts already looked at with sightless eyes. I hope the narrative would make the process more readily imaginable and pragmatically accessible for other interested teachers.

**Conceptual Framework**

Critical Language Awareness which "highlights how language conventions and language practices are invested with power relations and ideological processes which people are often unaware of" (Fairclough, 1992, p.7) was proposed as an extension of language awareness movement. CLA draws heavily on Critical Pedagogy of Freire, which dates back to the 1960s (Karagiannaki & Stamou, 2018; Wallace, 2003) and Critical Discourse Analysis. While showing objection to "banking" education in which students play the role of "depositories" filled in by a depositor (teacher), Freire (1970) proposed a methodological approach based on problem-posing aimed at encouraging learners to think critically and to continually question and make meaning from everything they learn. Critical Discourse Analysis also aims at analyzing various types of texts in terms of their manifestation of power relationships and ideologies in a detailed fashion.

Perceived effective, the last two decades have witnessed a surge of interest in adopting Freireian critical literacy pedagogy and more particularly critical reading practices in EFL language classes (Huang, 2011 & 2013; Izadinia & Abednia, 2010; Luke, 2000; Macknish, 2011; Ko, 2013; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017; Wallace, 2003 & 2018).

As one of the early researchers, Wallace (2003) delineates the application of critical reading in one of her EFL courses in Britain. The teacher-researcher used a range of genres, like newspapers, magazines,

advertisements, and literary texts and introduced the students to Hallidayan systemic-functional grammar which proposes ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions for text analysis. While analyzing the discourse choices within the surveyed texts, the students discussed the readership of the texts, the reasons why they had been written and how, and the way they could personally connect with them. Following the text analysis models proposed by Wallace, Zingkraf (2003) assessed the development of CLA by EFL university students. In a series of workshops, the students became acquainted with tools for detecting hidden ideologies in the content of the British newspapers. The author explicates that although the students attested that they had gained new consciousness about the nature of language, they mentioned some problems related to the program; namely, time-intensiveness of the tasks and their tediousness, "the overwhelming feeling of distrust of everything and everybody" (p. 10) caused as a result of becoming skeptical of veracity of the news, and their lack of sufficient background about social and political issues.

In the Asian context, Macknish (2011) reports on practicing critical reading with postsecondary Chinese EFL students in an English-medium university in Singapore. The participants were involved in discussing newspaper articles based on analytical frameworks and interpreting them in groups. Analysis of the displays of critical reading revealed that the students, chiefly as a result of having teacher and peer scaffolding and modeling, gradually shifted from providing cursory comments to deeper explorations and assessment of viewpoints in the texts, the credibility and veracity of sources, the connection of ideas to their own experiences, as well as the hidden messages.

Huang (2011), working with a group of EFL university freshman in Taiwan, explored the implications of practicing critical literacy by critically examining the ideologies, worldviews, and the power relations presented in the contents of an internationally popular English language teaching textbook and a Western teen magazine. It is reported that through critiquing the whole publications, the students began to discern aspects of Western hegemony, materialism, gender positioning,

and the like in the surveyed materials. In another study, the researcher, Huang (2013), examined the possibility of implementing CLA with a focus on writing in an EFL context in Taiwan. The students were engaged in a number of activities like analyzing different texts in terms of their "sociocultural assumptions"; the authors' ideological intentionality and presuppositions; the interests served by the texts; and the construction and use of linguistic structures. Besides, they were involved in composing a series of relevant texts which demanded them to think cautiously about their selection of words and grammatical structures like describing the negative attributes of a person euphemistically. The researcher argues that such activities offered the students "the identity position" of a real writer and aided them to "direct their attention away from the sole emphasis on reading for learning vocabulary and grammar to other dimensions of texts and identity possibilities as readers" (p. 81).

In a case study, Ko (2013) explored the process through which a teacher moved towards critical literacy in a college-level EFL reading classroom in Taiwan with the students who were accustomed to transmission model of literacy on the one hand, and the challenges experienced by the teacher, on the other hand. The researcher reports that through adopting a variety of techniques, like inviting and supporting the students' perspective-taking, encouraging the students to interrogate the texts' ideological positions, deconstructing the values and stereotypes laying beneath the surface of the texts and reconstructing them via posing challenging questions, the teacher attempted to raise critical language awareness in the students. However, as a novel practice, the teacher experienced certain changes and challenges in his teaching including moving from teaching language forms (like vocabulary and grammatical structures) to critical examination of construction and representation of meanings in the texts and abandoning the habit of authoritarian lecturing to the class and experiencing whole-class discussions instead.

In another strand, the implications of Critical Discourse Analysis in EFL classrooms as one of the approaches that is "of particular

importance for CLA" (Farías, 2005, p. 214) have been investigated. As an example, Karagiannakia and Stamou (2018) explored the way a group of young Greek children developed critical and reflexive stance through teasing apart the linguistic choices in their favorite fairy tales and conferring their hidden, ideologically loaded messages. This was done through familiarizing the students with a simplified version of Halliday's systemic functional grammar as an analytic tool and a number of classroom tasks like comparing different old and modern versions of the same story critically, writing another ending for the tales, and producing multimodal texts.

In the Iranian context, Abbasian and Malaee (2015) examined the effect of familiarizing university students with CDA techniques on their ability of reading news reports and their orientation to language quantitatively. The findings of the study revealed that as a result of the experimental treatment "the critical language awareness of about 90% of the students was raised" (p.12 ); however, "they could not analyze the articles based on the linguistic elements in detail and their analyses were weak" (p. 13). Having adopting a fairly similar procedure, Danesh, Aghagolzadeh, and Maftoon (2016) reported comparable results.

Sadeghi (2005) was one of the early researchers who qualitatively explored practicing critical consciousness with a community of EFL students in a southern city of Iran. The researcher explicates that through being engaged with a series of socio-politically relevant topics, the students attempted to sound out their own voices and take critical stances by considering the presence of power, dominance and social inequality in the dominant discourses. In a fairly similar study, Asakereh and Weisi (2018), in a case study, traced the development of critical consciousness in an eighteen-year-old Iranian Arab girl tutored to critically reflect on topics related to her immediate social life. Researchers argue that while the participant initially was succumbing to her socially-restricted life and orthodoxies, she gradually showed more awareness of subjugations established by the norms; though "it

seemed she could not think critically when it came to her personal issues" (p. 284).

In another qualitative study, Parsaiyan (2007) studied the challenges experienced by a community of sophomore Iranian English Literature students during their year-long practicing of critical literacy. Having been used to a competitive, test-centered education system which put primacy on memorization of information than critical understanding of knowledge and student participation and involvement, the students took on new challenges with critiquing the reading materials they were given and thinking critically about policies or politics behind the production and consumption of the texts as well as the attitudes, values, and beliefs that lie beneath the surface of words and sentences. The students practiced this new perspective towards the act of reading by showing sensitivity to single words; looking for historical, political, and philosophical roots of the words; making the familiar concepts strange through seeing more in them; showing an ''I'' stance while reading; having dialogues with the texts' writers; and making mental webs of written and visual texts. To use Shor's (1992) words, the emerged classroom events were suggestive of "desocialization" which involves "critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, taken for granted facts, existing knowledge and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out" (p.114).

Ghahremani-Ghajara and Kafshgarsouteh (2011), partially adopting Freirian critical literacy approach, also explored the ways a community of English-major language learners developed critical understanding of texts through being engaged with several courses of action including webbing (finding the relevance and importance of the texts to their personal life,  reading the worlds behind the words of the texts, and taking a critical position towards the hidden ideology, meanings, and values by designing creative shapes); blogging (showing involvement with the texts by writing comments in the margins, talking to the writer of the texts, posing questions and challenging the authorial stance); and sharing written dialogic journals with their teacher. Realizing the non-

neutrality of the texts, going beyond limiting rules and freeing thoughts: seeing underlying messages hidden in the words: appreciating the value of living, sharing, and learning together; and feeling the inside power were some of the reported findings of this practice.

Against this backdrop, the present practitioner inquiry was aimed at introducing critical reading awareness to a university skills-oriented course and tracing the unfolding events.

## Methodology

### Design

The present study could roughly be seen as a practitioner inquiry; a qualitative research approach with anti-positivist orientation in which teaching practitioners—prompted by their wonders or questions concerning their own practice and the changes they wish to make—start gathering and analyzing data systematically, and then share their context-based understandings, discoveries, as well as evidence-based practices with others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Hilton & Hilton, 2017; Kemmis, 2012). Concerned with bringing change and improvement to my professional life and the life of my students, I decided to use my immediate context of teaching, a two-credit course on study foreign language skills, as a research site to see how critical language awareness could be integrated into the program and what happens as a result of this integration. Wherefore, I kept reflecting on my quarter-long experience of teaching English in institutes and academes; consulted existing literature and conducted studies on critical language awareness; and devoted a lot of time planning the classroom practices and selecting or preparing materials (reading texts, video clips, question sets) which could serve the purpose. As a whole, I attempted to engage the students with critical examination of multiple types of written and visual texts including advertisements and commercials, literary texts, and news and journalistic writings, and scrutinized the events (including the students' reactions and interactions and written reflections submitted by them) which emerged in each phase.

**The Site and the Participants**

The very context of the study was a state-run comprehensive university in north of Tehran which offers graduate and postgraduate programs in a wide range of fields. I conducted the present research with a community of twenty female freshmen studying English literature at this University. They were all in their late teens and early twenties. Nearly all the students had taken English in private language schools for two to six years prior to their acceptance to university and had a good command of English (roughly at intermediate and upper intermediate levels of English proficiency). Through my previous acquaintance with the students, I knew that they enjoyed a variety of sociocultural backgrounds, with some attending the University from other cities or capital suburbs. A number of students knew other languages (like Turkish and Kurdish) besides their mother tongue, Persian; and demonstrated different artistic prowess in poetry writing, playing musical instruments, painting, and movie making. They also showed good enthusiasm for lively class discussions and communal learning projects and interactions.

The idea of introducing critical language awareness was put into practice as part of a two-credit Study Language Skills course. Being held once a week for ninety minutes, this required course, which is conventionally offered to English-major students in their freshman year, is purported to introduce techniques and strategies for developing basic skills of language like using dictionaries, vocabulary learning strategies, paraphrasing, making inferences, margin writing, writing and punctuation rules, using internet sources, and delivering effective oral presentations. Within this purview, practices of engaging with texts critically, though not shunned, are often pushed to the periphery or approached lightly. To teach the course, the Department instructors enjoy autonomy in choosing their own materials and developing their syllabi. To be at liberty, I structured the course to open spaces for critical language awareness.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for the study was collected through several sources including my observational notes, the students' documents and teacher-researcher journals. Observational notes consisted of the classroom events, interactions, and discussions I captured for nearly one semester (thirteen ninety-minute sessions). The documents included the students' weekly reflections on class materials sent via our class weblog, which were of various lengths, as well as their written assignments and projects emailed to me. The teacher-researcher journal contained my documentation of the weekly decisions and plans for the course, including the texts, video clips and question sets taken to the class, and my preliminary reflections on the students' reaction and performance throughout the semester.

To make sense of the events, I arranged the classroom events chronologically and meticulously read and reread the data related to each phase. This was accompanied with manual open coding of small segments of the data and documenting my thoughts by jotting down my reflections and preliminary interpretations in the margin of the printed hard copies. Meanwhile, my consultation of existing literature aided me to look for instances of critical language awareness while not discarding "discrepant data". In a subsequent stage, I tried to step back from the data to see what main insights I have gleaned and how they may bear resemblance to each other. Wherever possible, I retained the students' own words by using *In vivo* coding or codes that emerged from their exact spoken or written accounts. To illustrate the emerged themes, examples from the students' oral or written accounts were used in reporting the findings.

**Trustworthiness**

My semester long encounter with the students as well as my prior familiarity with them aided me to have a good recognition of their salient characteristics, interests, beliefs, values and stances. To have a richer and more robust account of the events, methodological triangulation was used by collecting data through multiple channels (personal journals, class discussions, and students' reflection

assignments sent via our class weblog). Besides, thick description of the decisions made along the research path and adequate evidence drawn from the participants' original data are provided to let other researchers audit the "decision trail" used. For the sake of naturalness, I attempted to include a breadth of responses from nearly all of the students while quoting them verbatim, as in most cases I felt that the minor erroneous structures were not troublesome. Any changes to the students' quotes are displayed by square brackets. All names are pseudonyms and accounts which were deemed to infringe the students' privacy were not included. Although no generalizable data with replicable results are intended, given the particular purposes and circumstances of the research, I hope that the provided explications aid the readers evaluate the transferability of the findings to their own contexts.

**Procedure**

To implement CLA, I planned a series of classroom events including negotiating power within words, discovering enigmas within literary works, decoding advertising commercials, and analyzing journalistic writings throughout the semester. Each of these is delineated below.

*Negotiating power within words*

"Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, and to humble." This impressive statement by Yehuda Berg and the perspective projected by it has long reminded me of the complexity of words we use in our everyday life; a perspective which rarely has got a place in the mold of academic publications purported to enhance language learners' knowledge of words. The textbooks on study language skills I occasionally take to my classes contain voluminous chapters on vocabulary boosting strategies like word games, word formation, guessing the meanings of words from context and their roots, creating mental images or mnemonics, inter alia, but rarely do they refer to how words carry power. At the same time, I have always seen an avid desire on the part of language students, particularly new English-major entrants, for expanding their vocabulary repertoire. Nonetheless, to me a missing cameo in the mainstream

system of language teaching is the world, ideology, and power behind the words.

In pursuit of sharing such a perspective with my students in an engaging manner, I considered an array of ideas. Opportunely, through one of my colleagues, I came across an old, well-famed video clip of Muhammad Ali clay, the American Black Boxer. In his interview with Michael Parkinson in 1971, Clay talked about his childhood when he inquired his mother about the reasons why everything deemed "good", like the Jesus, Angels, Mary, the Pope, Miss America, and Santa Claus were "always" depicted as "white" and everything "bad" was displayed as "black". He then described an event that happened to him after he won the gold medal in the Rome Olympics. Back home he tried to get a meal in an all-white restaurant; however, despite his outstanding triumph, he was kicked out by the restaurant manager for being a Negro. Though sounding humorous—followed by bursts of laughter on the side of the audience—the interview is considered one of the anti-racist speeches. Clay criticized the way "black people have been brainwashed", have become deprived of their language, name, and identity, and "how they've been taught to love white and hate black".

The criticality on the part of the articulate boxer and the passion conveyed through his speech provoked reflections and thoughts in the class. As mentioned by one of the students, "in the depth of Clay's speech was a disaster, a kind of tragedy… from the word white he did not mean the color exactly but he showed the discrimination and suffering he had during his life". I took advantage of the emotional aura and asked the students to reflect on the way Clay is making sense of the words (black and white in this case) and how the attributed meanings are possibly different from the "conventional dictionary-based definitions" or the ones we are exposed to "in English language textbooks". Going through their reflective notes, I could see how they were providing a different perspective on words; though some of which sounded fairly impressionistic. Amongst, they expressed that "words are alive, they aren't just the effect of ink on the paper, as they build our world with their meanings"; "words carry so much in their hearts,

you just have to scratch the surface and you'll find a new world lying beneath them"; and "a single drop of a word may drown a person's town of dreams, or bestow life to the sprout of their hopes" as there is "a strong power and world that exists behind the words". For example, in her reflection paper, Shima referred to the "mysterious world behind" the words which "don't live in dictionaries" but in "the minds" of individuals. Similarly, distinguishing between "the dictionary of words" and "dictionary of emotions", Parisa added, "there's no such definitions [for black and white] in the dictionary of words but I can get in touch with them in my dictionary of emotions".

This was followed by a mini-project of pondering "the place of words in our everyday life" and sharing our personal experiences and discoveries. In the due week, although some of the students had taken the assignment lightly, probably due to the strenuousness of self-reflection and self-disclosure, the thoughtful reflective notes written by some others created a pause for thought. As a personal self-reflection, Nazanin who often kept quiet and rarely took part in the class discussions explained how the words "can't" and "you don't understand" had habitually crept into her mind and manipulated her "unconsciousness". She read, "*can't* plants doubt and fear in the soil of my brain and dominates my whole body, so my hands, feet, face, eyes, ears and etc. start to feel weak and incapable of even attempting to do the job. You can see how that can be dangerous …". As another self-discovery, Shima, who often amazed the class with her reflective views, referred to a stereotype about "beautiful" as being "skinny and in a great body form…because of how they use this word [in the media]" which she had tried to re-vision. Adding to the discussion, Adeleh pointed out that "words are wonderful when used in a proper way. They can encourage,…edify and give confidence to the hearer. A right word spoken at the right time can actually be life-changing". Taking up the idea of "life-changing" effect of words, Fahimeh referred to an "impressing scene" in a famous Iranian movie "Mohammad the Messenger" through which she had learned how words could penetrate individuals' heart and mind and have a lasting effect.

*There is a very impressing scene in the movie. An Arab man… a muscular one wearing Bedouin traditional clothing…is digging a hole to bury alive his new-born daughter. He looks so furious… and his wife is pleading…begging him not to do so. The Prophet who was in his teens at that time was watching the scene. He approaches the man and says that your daughters' eyes are very similar to yours and they are so beautiful. Daughters are great blessing. While he is speaking, the Arab man looks at his daughter's eyes and it seems that something is happening inside him. A change of view…a change of heart. To me it shows the power…the influence of words.*

### Discovering enigmas within texts

As a fan of literary works, I have long been fascinated by the mind-nourishing power of literature and its role in deepening and sharpening our reflective thinking. To me, literary works are like enigmas artistically crafted by authors; awaiting to be unearthed by sharp-minded readers. Besides, what heartened me was a considerable bulk of literature acknowledging the role of literary texts in reflective reading (Amer, 2003; Carey Webb, 2001; Domínguez Romero, Bobkina & Stefanova, 2019; Hullah, 2018). Against this background, I sought a piece of literary work that would possibly challenge the students to read between lines, though not in an overwhelming manner. Having considered different options, the story I eventually took to the class was "*Cat in the Rain"* by the American author, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), reputed as the 1954 Nobel Prize winner. In the face of the story's brevity and simplicity of language and style, it has been argued that "behind [its] very realistic surface there is a wealth of symbolism and possible meanings for the readers to supply for themselves" (Taylor, 1981, p. 62). The story is about an American husband and wife on vacation in Italy who are residing in a hotel on a rainy day. While the husband, George, is reading a book, the wife, whose name is not mentioned, is looking out the window. She spots a cat crouched "under one of the dripping green tables." Feeling unhappy for the cat, she decides to rescue it. As she goes downstairs, the hotelkeeper bows to

her and a maid, holding an umbrella, follows to shield her from the rain. Not having found the cat, she returns to the room in despair and starts complaining about things she does not possess and seemingly childish things she desires to change like having a "kitty", "eating at a table" with her own "silver" and "candles"; and pulling her "hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back". Frustrated, George quickly tells her to "shut up" and returns to his book. Just then, there is a knock at the door. It is the hotel maid holding "a big tortoiseshell cat"— a gift sent to her "by the padrone".

On the due day, I distributed the printed copies of the story among the students and asked them to read it thoroughly. Within the next few minutes, it happened to me that the students had succumbed to ennui and listlessness. Later on, they told me that they had initially found the story "too simple", "vague", "boring" and "meaningless", or as described by one of the students "a random piece of an ordinary every day-diary, aimlessly including the description of most neutral and tedious events that ever can happen in one's life" which gave her the initial impression that "probably the writer was crazy to write such a stuff". However, a revision of premise and perspective occurred as we started re-reading the text, this time line by line for a more detailed analysis.

By posing various questions, I drew the students' attention to certain elements in the story; namely, the images and moods provoked by "bad weather" and "an empty square" in the opening sentences of the first paragraph; the author's selection and repetition of certain motifs like "rain", "cat", "war monument", and verbs "like" and "want" and their possible significances or symbolic functions; the reasons for deploying a feminine pronoun for the cat; the reasons for the female character lacking a name; her possible feelings towards the padrone and the hotel maid; her physical features like her hairstyle and manner of speaking; the reasons for the silence or indifference on the part of her husband; and how the story could be related to Hemingway's own life and time. I also asked the students to write their analytic questions, impressions, preliminary interpretations and annotations in the text margin, color

code the words they assumed to be carrying certain meanings, and consult the literary criticisms on the work for our next class.

With that introduction, I could see the class stewing over the literary enigmas and speculating on possible interpretations of the story; though some interpretations still lacked sufficient sophistication. Some of the students showed their attentiveness to the symbolic meanings of selected words or structures and the reasons for their repetition. For example, some of the students, while borrowing ideas from the online sources they had consulted, explained how seeing the ways certain lexical and syntactic items had been selected by the author to imply particular meanings had made the text more meaningful to them. Below is an excerpt:

> *For the very first time, I didn't pay attention to the words like "war monument" which indicates the war between the couple, "rain" can be their stormy relationship or the sense of the girl's sadness, "cat" as something that the girl empathies with or a child. Also the word shifts like "cat to kitty" to show the child-like behavior of the girl… .*

Although due to time constraints, the adventure of analyzing literary texts could not be further developed, it turned into a practical experience for going beyond the literal meaning of a text by teasing apart its linguistic features such as lexical and syntactic items, sequencing of information and their ideological functions.

### *Decoding advertising commercials*

The next platform for practicing critical language awareness was the world of advertising's commercials. Advertisements, despite their prevalence in our daily life as a type of "media discourse", are rarely used in mainstream EFL context, whereas the existing literature acknowledges their values as sources of raising critical awareness about the nature of language (Leeman & Rabin, 2007; Özdemir Akyol & Oral, 2007; Picken, 2000). With that in view, I judiciously selected two print ads and prepared a list of items that could be taken into consideration

while exploring advertisers' deployment or manipulation of verbal and visual language.

The first advertisement we examined was a whole page print ad advertising a diet program. The ad showed the image of a tall, good-looking "grandmother", Cara, after her 30 IBS weight-loss. Cara was depicted wearing a tight red shirt and black trousers with a big smile on her lips. Another picture at the top left of the page showed her before weight loss. She was sloppily dressed and was wearing dark sunglasses. A quote by her said: "I'm a grandmother and I love the way I look". Other sentences on top right of the page, typed in capital letters and large fonts, read: "EAT FREE FOR A WEEK! That's 7 breakfasts, 7 lunches, 7 dinners, and 7 desserts. ABSOLUTELY FREE!". There were claims that the program "is based on the Glycemic Index" offering foods which are "low in fat and rich in carbs…so you can eat what you love and lose weight sensibly". Two other small images on the right side of the page showed two other women, Nachole and Pat, after losing 70 and 112 IBS. respectively with ONE FREE WEEK inserted once more.

In analyzing the ad, I initially drew the students' attention to the linguistic elements of the ads like the selection of the printed words, grammatical structures, text font sizes and styles, and proportion of the texts to images. I encouraged them to see the way certain statements like "free", "seven", "scientific", and "breakthrough" had been used and what they possibly implied. One step further, I asked them to carefully consider the paralinguistic features of the ad like deployment of colors, artifacts, models and their gender, facial expressions, gestures, gazes, body positions, outfits, settings, and moods or emotions evoked by the ad.

For example, referring to how advertisers benefit from color psychology and their attention- taking effects, one of the students observed that "the woman's red color coveys senses of satisfaction to the readers". Considering the physical gesture of the model, some questioned the way the woman in the before-diet image was wearing dark sunglasses "probably to hide her identity" ; "to show that she feels

ashamed of something like her body" or " being low in self-confidence"; while in the after-diet image "there is a full-sized picture of her body which is upright and her head is up…meaning that she now feels proud of her new shape". With the comments becoming more vehement, I channeled the students' attention to the power of advertisements in controlling or manipulating the minds; the possible motives behind the production of the ad; possible voices and visions which have been omitted from it; and the lifestyles and values projected by it. With regard to the "text silence", a variety of hunches was proposed including "no mention of the costs" or "the possible side effects of the diet". A question I raised was why in the ad only women and no men had been depicted. With some hesitations, Shima who always enlightened the class with her thought-provoking remarks stated that "I suppose… it is a food advertisement, but it is *stereotyping* women. In ads women are always tall and slim and they look happy".

Another print ad we analyzed was about education oversees (figure 1). The ad showed the picture of a young smiley girl wearing a black graduation gown; looking at the sky with her eyes closed.



*Figure 1*: An advertisement taken to the class

Borrowing ideas from our previous discussion, the students began analyzing the image; this time with more eyes for details. Focusing on

the colors, some of the students observed "the generous blue sky used as the background symbolized hope and happiness" and "can make a watcher feel calm and confident".  She added, "the word biggest word that attracts us is 'choose' which is printed in yellow like a sun in the sky". Interrupting her, Negar added that "the word's font size is very big and can give people the feeling that …by choosing they can make changes in their lives". Furthering the issue, Atefeh put her finger on "the three parts of search, apply, and fly" and commented that "they mentioned it so briefly to give us the feeling how *easy* the process is and everything carries out in *rapid pace*…but we know it is so exaggerating". She added, "the other thing that is bold is 'admission open'. It shows that you needn't take certain and difficult examinations and that everyone can be a part of this". In a more critical appraisal, Nazanin drew our attention to what is possibly implied by the ad through leaving out certain things. She said that although at the first glance it portrays "a ready to fly graduate…boosted by confidence and pride", it "ironically evokes senses of dissatisfaction, inferiority and infulfillment in the audience to urge them…experience the same sense of infinite success as the image promises". She added "a new destination is the best trick to conjure the ideal future for students who by mistake are in the wrong place". Bita was critical of the way "only the flags of certain European countries and their names" had been inserted in the ad; possibly "indicating that this bright future would be made in these countries". While laughing, Haniyeh wondered why "we don't see any fact about prices and tuitions or possible problems you may go through. I'll bet that is going to be very high".

With that introduction, I asked the students to choose a print ad or TV commercial, which appeals to them, and share their reflections with the class.

### *Unraveling news' non-neutrality*
The next event was reading journalistic news. A piece of news I took to the class was *Cosmetics Boom in Iran*, written by an Iranian-American journalist and published by Al-Monitor, the Pulse of the Middle East on December, 2014. I rationalized that the news report could be conducive

to discussion because of the topic and the way it had been presented. The article reported, "makeup is a large industry in Iran and the demand for makeup products has increased at such a fast pace that Iran has become a major destination of counterfeit products". It added "Iran is, after Saudi Arabia, the highest consumer of cosmetics in the region, and holds seventh place in the entire world". Quoting an interviewee, the article reiterated that "Even though these cosmetics are smuggled into the country through neighbor countries and are generally not produced in the West, the mere fact that they have Latin letters and characters imprinted on them seems to suffice". A fairly big image on the top of the page also showed two Iranian girls purchasing cosmetics.

To read the news more analytically, I provided the students with a set of questions for critical analysis of news. The questions asked for aspects related to the production and consumption of the news report such as the source of publication, its affiliation, the author's background in the subject, the probable motives for publishing the text; the author's attitude, tone, biases and purposes; the possible target readers, the issues implied by the author, the threads evidence brought for the claims (Cots, 2006; Stevens & Bean, 2007); and the excluded details since "the structure of a text can silence certain voices" (Wharton, 2011, p.225) and "omissions may tell the reader something about an author's bias" (Correia, 2006, p.18), among others. Such questions prompted the class to re-consider the text.

Non-neutrality of the news was one of the initial points that grabbed the attention of the students. Elaheh stated that although "there are some drops of truth but the author is absolutely exaggerating" as she "plays with words to seem neutral". More specifically, there were agreements about the distorted image of Iranian women as depicted in the news. Zohreh argued that there is an "unpleasant picture of an Iranian girl…Iranian girls are not self-confident and they also don't have clear identity with useless and so small ideas…so they are just some copycats who follow others blindly…there is a clear *degradation* here". We then discussed whose interests are served and whose voices are marginalized in the news. Bita added that since "the addressees of the article are non-

Iranians this causes some bad reputation for Iranian women" which "is a kind of soft war", as one of the students uttered.  Having searched about the source of publication, the students came up with different conclusions. Setareh stated, "This publisher (Al-Monitor) is not an old and experienced media, it gives you a sense that there is a special destination for writing such news about Iran and Iranians by a half-Iranian writer!" Adding to the debate, Arezoo commented that "writing such news must have some benefits for author" and Rahil uttered the term "political purpose".

To aid them buttress their reasoning, I drew their attention to the way the author is supporting her claims by bringing exact words of some interviewees as evidence for her claims. Questioning the credibility of the information, Negar objected the way the author had selected the interviewees and stated, "They undoubtedly are familiar with survey regulations; that a survey must be carried out randomly but here we're witnessing something totally different". Agreeing with her, Sara referred to "the bias of selection" and stated, "All interviewees have been …those who totally fit for fulfilling the aims of this news while of course we know that this is not something [that] could be generalized to the majority of women in our country". To that, others added that there are just "some examples of women who are somehow addicted to cosmetics" and wondered why the reporter had "not interviewed women who are not interested in cosmetics" or those "Iranian girl who don't apply makeup" or "with different social classes of the country like doctors or university teachers, those who are more educated".  Arezoo commented that "All the things that she's trying to imply are…not even based on reliable sources and are *unofficial* statistics", and Bita concluded, "Some voices are not heard in this report …so it is not right to generalize the fact that Iranian women are freak about beauty".

Like our previous experiences, this practice set the ground for more sharing on the part of the students as they were asked to choose a recently-published news report and analyze it in terms of the writer's

stance, linguistic evidence implying that, and ideological constructions embedded in the news.

**Discussion**

The present practitioner inquiry was an attempt for integrating critical language awareness into a language-skills-oriented course; a perspective on "language and education" which is "all too often absent from foreign language programmes." (Cots, 2006, p. 336) This was put into action by planning a series of classroom activities like discussing the world behind the words, resolving enigmas in literary works, analysing print ads and commercials, and reading news reports and journalistic writings with a critical eye. Analysing the classroom events and the students' reflection papers and documents aided me to see a number of themes emerging. The in-vivo-coded themes are discussed briefly below.

### *"There's no such definition in the dictionary of words"*

To display the complicated nexus between everyday language and ideology, I directed the discussions on power behind words in the first place. Inadequately, practical language learning coursebooks are replete with principles, techniques, tasks, and tips for practicing, learning, recalling and using words; the most conventional ones are using word parts, mnemonic techniques, memory games, pictures, synonyms, antonyms, context clues to figure out the meanings of unknown words, just to mention a few (Folse, 2004; Nation, 2001; Scrivener, 2009). Nonetheless, promoting awareness about the sociopolitical power and ideological forces of words or their manipulative effects seems to be rarely attended to in the current state of English language teaching (Abbasian & Malaee, 2015; Cots, 2006).

In the context of this study, watching a video clip by the American Black Boxer, Clay who gave a talk on the socio-political ideologies behind the "black" and "white", and our subsequent discussions and reflections provided spaces for the class to perceive that "there is so much beneath the surface of a word which can effect a person's life and change their perspective of words"; that "words don't [merely] live in

dictionaries"; and "words even have the power to control us". Although some of these accounts may sound impressionistic, the fact that the students began to conceptualize that words are not limited to "fixed definition, part of speech, pronunciation, spelling" as "the way we interpret them for ourselves and the image of them that we make are [also] important" was a welcoming event in the midst of the hustle and bustle of cramming words and boosting the vocabulary repertoire.

### *"Like coming out of long-lasting hibernation"*

The second adventure was reading a literary work, Hemingway's *Cat in the Rain*; a story which was initially devalued by the students as being "meaningless". The reason for the students' initial displeasure and superficial outlook might be sought in the way reading literature has chiefly been treated in language classrooms, where recreational reading outweighs analytical one. This dereliction for "commercial fiction" became pointedly clear in the words of one of the students:

> *The first time when I read this story I didn't understand its hidden meaning and its normal because we are used to reading commercial fiction whose aim is to take us away from the real world it helps us temporarily to forgot our troubles.*

However, as expressed by the students, the practice of looking at literature as a "mysterious world" containing literary enigmas to be resolved, and seeing how nuanced details can carry weight of meaning aided them to "broaden" their perspective and made them "look at the story, the words and also the hidden meanings behind them from a very different view". Using their artistic prowess and flair, the students used various analogies to describe this "new" experience of reading literature. One stated, "The literary symbols are like a candle which lights some important concepts in our mind". Another compared this "disillusioning" to that of "coming out of long-lasting hibernation" since "once the symbols and similes showed up, the story utterly kept its distance miles away from ordinary platitudes and the circumstances that seemed once blurry, turned out to be in an unprecedented unison…". Two other students resembled reading literature to

*swimming* "in a deep ocean which has various layers and each person can swim based on his understanding…and nobody can limit literature in one or two points"; and examining a *sculpture* "where each sentence is three-dimensional and carries multiple meanings which need to be discovered". This suggests that literary works could be fertile ground for practicing critical language awareness granted that we strive to go beyond literal understanding of the texts.

### *"This is a food ad but it is presenting gender stereotypes"*

In another phase of the practice, we were engaged in reading commercial advertisements through questioning the purposes behind the production of the commercials, the visual and verbal elements deployed by the advertisers (like colors, slogans, models and their gender) and the reasons for their selection. As a result of re-visioning the discourse of advertising, the students began to perceive market-based advertising beyond that of selling intended products to customers. Although on some occasions, the analysis of the students' presentations was suggestive of a neural or shallow perspective and restricted to overt, obvious features, like the colors or models used, there were instances of unearthing the ideologies underlying the ads and commercials.

For example, in one presentation, one of the students shared a print ad advertising a Basic Spoken English Course. The ad contained the picture of a worried woman whose mouth had been duct-taped plus a sentence which read "Fix your broken English". Besides analyzing its linguistic and paralinguistic features, the presenter amazed me by mentioning the way the ad was ideologically-oriented since to her it was propagating English language as a superior one, "not knowing it you had better shut your mouth", and hence legitimizing its "*hegemony* in the world". In yet another presentation, a community of five students shared their analysis of a food commercial by focusing on the persuasion techniques deployed like food colors, the speaker's tone of voice, camera setting, and repetition of the words, amongst. One of the presenters drew our attention to "the position of camera which was

focused on every and each ingredient of the foods to make the spectators active their all senses to imagine its taste and scent". Two other students, while assessing the ad as a "creative" one, referred to the "hidden lies in such commercials" and their "use of visual effects to change the size of the burger to make it look more delicious than it really is". To them, this made "a contrast between what they 'show' versus what they 'serve' " and "in this way, can control the mind of the people…". Nearly all of them agreed that although the commercial claims that "there are no artificial preservatives and flavors, …it makes you forget about the fact that they have high calories or they cause obesity!". "This is the miracle of advertisements", as one student suggested.

These accounts might suggest that the students gained a heightened awareness about how ads and commercials could be deployed not simply for selling intended products but for disseminating and legitimizing implicit ideologies, values, and attitudes, manipulating the minds, and engineering social behaviors "to which we are viewers, and consumers; we are not merely service consumers, but we may unconsciously intake their suggested teaspoon ideas" (Tahmasbi & Ghorgani Kalkhajeh, 2013, p. 142).

### *"I don't agree with this news"*

Towards the end of the course, we moved attention to the news report; purposively planned to aid the class "unearth the miraculous role of language which could be used by people as a weapon in seizing or maintaining power" (Abbasian & Malaee, 2015, p.12). The students' initial tendency for scanning the texts to answer a set of questions, restating its literal meanings, or evaluating it as "informative" or "educational" did not come as a surprise as they were accustomed to taking "the printed material for granted without questioning the truthfulness or bias of the text" (Abbasian & Malaee, 2015, p. 6). As put by Ko (2013), "Such language learning belief comes from students' past experience in the English reading class in which vocabulary development, grammatical knowledge and reading skills were usually the focus of an English reading course" (p. 104). However, far from

idealizing the case, I could see that encouraging the students to pay attention to the print source, the texts' authorial tone, attitude, and motives, intended audience; assessing the ideas and their supports; questioning the biased voices in the text; and developing reasoned position while reading aided the students to practice to "filter the texts through the lens of their own individual experience" (Wilson, Devereux, Macken-Horarik, & Trimingham-Jack, 2004, p.2) or to use Hammond and Macken-Horarik's (1999) words, become non-compliant or "text-resistant". This resistance could be vividly seen in the students' reactions to the reading materials. For instance, in one occasion, a community of five students critiqued the representation of women in a news video and the way this representation was in conflict with their views. Challenging this ideological position of the author (Cots, 2006), they referred to the way the propositions "free", "freedom", and "the country's Islamic law" had been "repeated several times" throughout the text; as linguistic evidence for their counterargument. One of the group members stated that "…this video shows that it's because of the country's Islamic law that Iranians have difficulties in performing arts…but that's completely ridiculous" as "we [have] got many awards in art and cinema besides all these laws". Putting her finger on the texts' use of "Iranian regime" instead of "Iranian government", another student stated that "regime conveys a negative feeling…a government that was not elected fairly or that you disapprove of for some other reasons". To her, this implied that "the text tries to make us believe that the reason girls upload photos without Hijab on social networks is a sign of…opposition against the 'regime' ". She added, "…but what we see around is not necessarily fight or conflict but…following fashion and trend…." Agreeing with her, another student stated "I personally don't like or agree with this news …because freedom is something bigger and much more than these small things". Another student showed her heightened awareness as follows:

> *During this course, I found that news is not just news. Every news publisher has its own orientation and I have to be careful when I*

*read the news and I have to read it with open eyes because it may shape my world-view and make some stereotypes in my mind that are not easy to be erased. I realized that what some authors try to say is not really what is happening inside a society… and by this way they give us some stereotypes which tighten our ideology. Stereotypes are like dark glasses that make us blind and don't let us…see the world with our own eyes.*

Such reactions may be indicative of the students' attempts for not taking the printed materials, particularly the ones accredited as authentic ones, for granted and at face value ( Correia, 2006) or as innocent "vehicles for linguistic structure" (Wallace, 1992, p.61); and seeing them as being loaded with ideologies which can manipulate readers' minds. In other words, similar to what Wharton (2011) asserts, the students started to "take on the relatively high status role of language analysts who can critique and deconstruct a text, rather than language learners who are reading in order to understand a message" (pp.228-229). In this regard, the findings of the study are partially in line with other classroom-based investigations conducted by Wallace (2003), Ko (2013), Macknish (2011), and Zingkraft (2003).

### Conclusion

The present practitioner inquiry was an attempt for integrating critical language awareness into a language skill-oriented course. The findings of the practice reveal that as a result of being engaged in a series of activities like negotiating power within words, and analyzing literary, journalistic and advertising texts, the students moved some way towards displaying profounder understanding and appreciating of the complexity and sophistication of the words and what they stand for averring; and how the events are linguistically and ideologically construed or misconstrued by the media and advertising campaigns. Furthermore, as a practicing teacher, I could see how valuing students' share of  knowledge (Mertz, 2018) instead of spoon-feeding them would make a difference; however, this demands continuous practice and sufficient support, without which students are likely to abandon their code-breaking reading strategies and disengage from it (Wilson,

et al., 2004). It is hoped that the practice would make the process more readily imaginable and pragmatically accessible for other interested teachers.

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