THEMATIC INVESTIGATIONS WITH INDONESIAN EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: FROM DESCRIPTIONS TO SOCIAL CRITIQUES AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This paper aims at illuminating EFL educators with the application of "thematic investigation" as endorsed by a Critical Pedagogy exponent, Paulo Freire. The investigation involved 14 EFL pre-service (student) teachers and me as a teacher-researcher. In the investigation, four pictures (a McDonald's advertisement, a beauty pageant, a crowded city, and a beggar in front of a temple) became the media for these teachers to make sense of realities. Using English as the medium of expression, these teachers suggested nuanced interpretations of the pictures. In view of various senses of "critical", the student teachers' interpretations represented various "breadths" and "depths" (i.e., the scope) of criticality. Knowing the scope of criticality is essential in being more aware of limits that restrict one's views. The analyses on the generated themes will become the bases for further reflections to transcend the restrictions of one's own perspectives.

Keywords: Critical thinking; social critiques; thematic "limit-situation(s)"; problematizing practices.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the incorporation of Critical Pedagogy insights in EFL teaching and learning in Indonesia, especially from Paulo Freire, will be of a primary concern. Central to the Freirean Critical Pedagogy is *conscientização* (or "conscientization") which means "…learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 19). The methodology for conscientization has been offered by Freire in his notion of "thematic investigation" or "the investigation of thematics" which includes the investigation of the people's thinking – thinking which occurs only in

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and among men [sic] together seeking out reality. I cannot think *for others* or *without others*, nor can others think *for me*. Even if the people's thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change (p. 100).

For thematic investigations to occur, the Freirean Critical Pedagogy believes in the power of "dialogue"; that is, "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 76), including teacher-teacher or teacher-teacher encounters. The world here also interchangeably refers to realities in the world (recall the notion of conscientization). Dialogues necessitate that people stand equally. Thus, dialogues are not "depositing" insights to other people; nor are they exchanges of insights to be swallowed by listeners attending passively in a discussion; nor are they imposition of one's own truth (p. 77).

Instead, dialogues entail "critical thinking" and attempt to eliminate "naïve thinking" (Freire, 1970, p. 81). However, defining "critical" and "naïve" is not an easy task. Scholars have different perspectives regarding this distinction.

THE SENSES OF "CRITICAL"

Pennycook (2004) has summed up several conceptualizations of "critical". First, the sense of "critical" is used in critical thinking (e.g., the use of Bloom's taxonomy or "the taxonomy of cognitive objectives" in Hall, 2001, pp. 88-89, which requires learners not only to display and comprehend knowledge but also to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate it). Furthermore, a proponent of this kind of thinking, Fisher (2001), citing Fisher and Scriven, defines that "[c]ritical thinking is skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation" (p. 10). Further he suggests that to be critical requires "clarity, relevance, reasonableness", picking up the best options to authenticate claims, and assessing the reliability of claims, among others. However, according to Pennycook (2004), it is "the weakest and most common version of the critical in many domains of education" because it is only "a way of trying to create objective distance, of identifying bias or lack of logic" and fails to address a social agenda broader than the perpetuation of its own "liberal" social agendas (p. 329). The second sense of "critical" is "concerned mainly with making things socially relevant". This critical sense too, nonetheless, has a limitation because it has no "larger vision of social critique" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 329).

The third sense of critical, which Pennycook (2004) categorizes as *emancipatory modernism*, has "clearly articulated social critique and explicit

agenda for change". For such modernists, no explicit agenda for change means naivety. Nonetheless, its most obvious weaknesses are the taken-for-granted and "static" assumptions on "social and political relations" and terms such as "emancipation, … equality, democracy, and transformation" (p. 329). To illustrate a bit, social relations in Freire's classic distinction between "the oppressors" and "the oppressed" are susceptible to criticisms. One of Freire's critics points out that regarding landlords as a single, monolithic entity of "oppressors" and peasants as "the oppressed" is problematic. In fact, a male peasant may be oppressed by feudal landlords but at home he may be very oppressive to his wife and/or children (Jary & Jary, 2000, p. 228). Despite this criticism, the idea of transformative education by Freire (1970) is still useful.

Freire (1970) contends that "critical" thinkers "perceiv[e] reality as process, as transformation". This is different from "naïve" thinkers who view reality as a static entity. Critical thinking in this sense will constitute "true education" (pp. 80-81). In true education, the content of the program is not imposed by the teacher to the teachers. Neither is the content a gift to be devoured by (or deposited to) the teachers naively. Rather, it is "the organized, systematized, and developed "re-presentation" to individuals of the things about which they want to know more". The representation may consist of bits of oppressive realities to be critically examined and reflected by learning participants (teachers and learners). Thus, "[a]uthentic education is not carried on by 'A' [teacher] *for* 'B' [teacher] or by 'A' *about* 'B', but rather by 'A' *with* 'B', mediated by the world" (p. 82).

The oppressive situation is embedded in the so-called "limit-situations" in which people think that the "real" is unalterable, taken-for-granted, and thus they succumb to this reality. The reality limits them. In an optimistic tone, however, the "limit-situations" must be brought to the fore by critical educators and learners, and subjected to transformation by virtue of "limit-acts". Such acts are to counteract the "limit-situations" (Freire, 1970, p. 89). Praxis is then for the people to figure out "limit-situations" through reflections of their present reality and "limit-acts" are the actions to transform (or to transcend) the present reality. Beyond the "limit-situations" is an "untested feasibility", which denotes the possible outcomes of transformation which are not yet tested.

The exploration of these themes starts with "coding" a reality through "abstraction". The abstraction is not intended to oversimplify an issue (a theme) but rather to evoke other related themes (or sub-themes) from a critical lens that may be generated from the abstraction. A process of "decoding" is the next stage when critical educators and learners shift from abstraction back to the concrete. An abstraction may be represented (coded) by a sketch or photograph when a certain reality is focused. The decoding

occurs when participants of critical learning find new meanings out of the abstraction (Freire, 1970, p. 96). In this process the participants generate related themes of the abstraction. The inability to generate such themes indicates the *theme of silence* of a community. This silence denotes the overruling power of "limit-situations" (p. 97).

While on the whole the idea that transformative education can be mediated by exploring themes through "coding", "abstraction", and "decoding", and identifying "limit-situations" in thematic investigations, there is one caveat. It is very tempting to label teachers who think like Freire (or an emancipatory modernist researcher) as "absolutely more critical" than those who do not. Such labeling is in fact another kind of oppression if criticality as a construct is not well-defined. By casting more doubt on loosely defined terms such as "critical" and "naïve", I may share the same spirit of "problematizing practice" that Pennycook (2004) holds regarding his fourth sense of critical. While criticality and naivety may be present as constructs in scholars' and lay people's minds, the problematizing practice envisioned by Pennycook encourages us to tease out how criticality and naivety are subject to re-conceptualizations.

In light of the review on the senses of critical thus far, the questions then become (1) which sense(s) is/are more "correct" than the other(s) and (2) whether each sense is mutually exclusive or inextricably linked to other senses. To me the issue is not that one is more right than the others but how one sense of critical compensates inadequacies of the others. Freire (1970) has inspired many critical approaches in the sense of emancipatory modernism (the third sense in Pennycook's [2004] review) which may lack in the rigor of critical thinking that Pennycook classifies as the first sense, just as the first sense is deficient largely in its attention to social critiques. Hence, instead of saying that deficiency in one critical sense implies absence of criticality, I would rather view the degree (or scope) of criticality as having "breadths" and "depths". By "breadth" I mean the extent to which a person is aware of and uses different senses of "critical". One's criticality is broad, for example, when he or she applies critical thinking in tandem with social critiques. It is even broader when the person can be involved in a problematizing practice that puts into question or throw more doubts on constructs like "democracy" and "liberation" that social critiques and revolutionary actions often adopt to ameliorate the world from oppression. Concerning "depth" I contend it is possible to have an impression that one's explication using a certain critical sense is more plausible than that of another person using the same critical sense. It is likely, for instance, that with the same wavelength of social critique two persons are qualitatively distinct in terms of their reflections on, let's say, poverty. If one is

fatalistically pessimistic about changing the status quo due to poverty and the other acknowledges general people's pessimism to alleviate poverty and yet he or she suggests some ways to, we can say that the latter's degree of criticality is deeper than that of the former.

The next two senses of "critical" that Pennycook (2004, 2007) brings up, together with the fourth (i.e., the problematizing practice), are useful in expanding the breadth and depth of criticality. The fifth sense of "critical" requires that language teachers find "critical moment[s]": that is, "when we seize the chance[s] to do something different, when we realize that some new understanding is coming about" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 330). In his observation of classroom interaction, he came across learner's expressions ("[open or] close the tap") instead of the commonly used expressions by English native speakers (turn on/off the tap) (p. 339). This is an example of how such "new understanding" occurs: speakers whose English is not their first language use a different variety of English which is acceptable as far as intelligibility is concerned. The present study, however, extends the scope of critical moment in that the thematic investigations are to seize the opportunities to grasp my EFL student teachers' understanding of themes and their repertoire of criticality.

The final sense of critical is elaborated on by Pennycook (2007) in his transgressive theories to account for the use of Englishes in hip-hop lyrics and performances. Inclusive of these theories is the problematizing practice (recall the fourth sense), and more importantly here is that transgressing entails "[trespassing] on forbidden territory but also attempts to think what should not be thought, to do what should not be done" (p. 40), or, citing Jenks (2003), "… go beyond the margins of acceptability…" (Pennycook, 2007, p. 41). In light of Freire (1970), transgressive pedagogy is to transcend current limit-situations. Specifically in this study limit-situations may indicate (1) some language lecturers' reluctance to empower student teachers' self-expressions and to have fruitful dialogs with their student teachers through multimodal tools such as child-doll figures (cf. Stein's [2004] study) or pictures, as I apply here, in whatever Englishes and code-switching, and (2) lack of determination in reflecting upon and generating more themes from various critical perspectives following the present thematic investigations mediated by pictures.

Little empirical evidence on this path of thematic inquiry has been documented, to the best of my knowledge (e.g., see Barthes's [1977] analyses on photographic messages in some advertisements and cinematic scenes; Freire's [1974/2005, pp. 76-78] thematic investigations in the State of Rio de Janeiro, and my own research findings using the same set of pictures to elicit data from four rural high school teachers through semi-structured interviews in Mambu, 2007), although an internationally growing

interest in Critical Pedagogy in relation to general education (e.g., Bahruddin, 2007; Manurung, 2007; Simarmata, 2008, to name but a few in Indonesian contexts) and second or foreign language learning (e.g., House, 2002; cf. also a collection of edited articles on critical pedagogies by Norton & Toohey, 2004) has become more apparent. In particular, House (2002) was fascinated by interpretations of themes on poverty, homelessness, or unemployment that her ESL teachers in the United States who came from various countries brought up during class discussions. It was quite unthinkable for the Japanese, for example, that unemployment was a common phenomenon in the United States as in Japan working hard was the ethos. Packing food boxes to be distributed to the homeless was therefore arousing their anger as they were regarded as lazy. A Venezulan teacher, however, was excited about helping the homeless, partly due to her religious beliefs. Such a thematic inquiry that addresses social issues such as those emerging in House's study should also resonate in Indonesia through EFL teaching and learning within the spirit of Critical Pedagogy that does not ignore the traditional critical thinking (recall Pennycook's [2004] first sense of "critical") which may be neglected in some very biased social revolutionary endeavors.

Thus, in this study I will answer the following issues: (1) what themes came to the fore when they were elicited by my EFL teacher (or pre-service) teachers through four pictures; (2) to what extent the themes were critically articulated in light of Pennycook's (2004) senses of "critical"; (3) how the problematizing practice can be applied to challenge, transcend, or "transgress" – to use Pennycook's (2007) term – student teachers' current thematic "limit-situations".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Context. The data were elicited in the sixth meeting of the course so I assumed that my teachers (who are prospective or pre-service EFL teachers) had had the basis for critical analysis in the thematic investigation. In the first week (early January 2008) I initiated a whole-class discussion on oppressions, especially in Indonesian education. From the second to the sixth week, I gave my student teachers short modules to be read before attending classes. Each module for weeks 3, 4, and 6 contained some punchlines paraphrased or quoted from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with these themes: conscientization (week 3), humanizing pedagogy (week 4), and thematic investigation (week 6). Modules for week 2 and 5 were on Critical Pedagogy as a curriculum paradigm and Ivan Illich's (1971) *Deschooling Society* respectively. Outside of the class, they were assigned to

find literary works (movies, short stories, or novels) that had some themes on oppression to be discussed in the third-week class session. Besides that, in the third week they were to submit their reflective journals on either literary works they or their peers discussed in class or scholarly works from Illich or Freire.

Classroom discourse in which teachers do most of the speaking – like what transpired conspicuously in the first five weeks in my class despite my attempts to initiate oral dialogs – is one spatial dimension of "limit-situations" whereby thematic investigations are close to impossibility. This observation led me to use in-class writing activity to push the multi-directional dialogs in which the student teachers answered my questions (see *Instrument* below).

Participants. Ten male and four female teachers (i.e., EFL student teachers or pre-service teachers) taking my elective course "Critical Pedagogies and Literacy" in the English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University were present and participated in the thematic investigation. To ensure anonymity, male teachers were coded as M1 to M10, and F1 to F4 for female teachers. The majority of them came from middle-class upbringing or financially established working-class families (i.e., not living below the economic poverty line).

Instrument. To allow dialogues to occur, I prepared questions (see procedure below) and four randomly chosen pictures for thematic investigation (see Figure 1): The first picture shows a McDonald hamburger advertisement (a photograph found in Jandt, 2001, p. 322). The second picture (from *Chic*, an Indonesian magazine primarily for women, 20 June 2007 edition, p. 93) depicts a beauty pageant, with Miss Universe 2007 being spotlighted. The third picture displays a crowded city (a photograph copied from Samovar & Porter, 2001, p. 10). A beggar becomes the central attention of the fourth picture (taken from the fourth page of *The Jakarta Post* 12 September 2007 edition).

Picture 1

Picture 2

Figure 1:   Four pictures for the thematic investigation in a Critical Pedagogies and
                Literacy course (January-April 2008) in ED-SWCU.
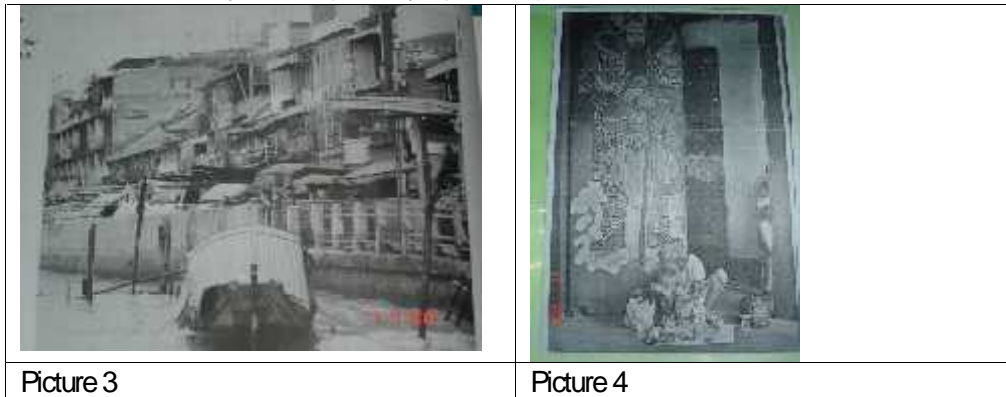
| Picture 3 | Picture 4 |

     Procedure of data collection. To explore how the 14 teachers made sense of each of the pictures, I prepared five questions which were then answered in one class meeting (6th week) through an in-class writing activity. In this article, however, I only focus on the first two questions, I did not show the second question until they finished with the first question. The questions are as follows:

  (1) What are the themes for each picture? Explain why you come up with the themes!

  (2) What is the general theme for the four pictures as a whole? Explain why!

The data was then typed and slightly edited in a Microsoft Office word document format.

     Methods of data analysis. To determine the breadths of the pre-service teachers' thinking, I used the following codes: "0" means a (mere) description of the picture(s); "1" denotes critical thinking (see Fisher, 2001; Hall's [2001] discussion on higher-order thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy on pages 88-89); "2" suggests pre-service teachers' addressing social issues and/or critiques (see Freire, 1970 and Pennycook's [2004] second and third category of critical sense – emancipatory modernism). While "0" is presumed to belong to the lower-order thinking as it simply shows one's knowledge on the pictures, "1" and "2" determine the breadth of criticality in one's thinking. Concerning depths, these codes were used: "A" means poor descriptions (for "0") or shallow criticality (for either "1" or "2"); "B" shows an average description or degree of criticality; "C" demonstrates good descriptions or profound criticality. This rubric is a kind of *axial coding* in which I as the researcher "begins with an organized set of initial codes or preliminary concepts" (Neuman, 1997, p. 423) for determining "0", "1", and

"2". The depths (i.e., A, B, and C), however, were determined by calibrating overall student teachers' repertoires; that is, C only represents the "best" or "deepest" level these student teachers were capable of displaying.

TABLE 1
A rubric for assessing descriptions and criticality

	0	1	2
A	The description (of objects literally shown in the picture) is not detailed.	The explanation is not thought-provoking; The reasoning is weak or not well-supported by evidence.	One or more social issues is/are superficially addressed but social critiques in terms of injustice or marginalization are not explained.
B	The description is a bit more detailed.	In spite of being relatively thought-provoking, the explanation may still be partial or trapped in logical fallacies; there is very limited evidence of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.	Social critiques in terms of injustice or marginalization are slightly addressed.
C	The description is elaborate.	The explanation is more logical, thorough, and thought-provoking; there is some evidence of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.	Social critiques in terms of injustice or marginalization are obvious and well-explained.

In analyzing themes I applied *domain analysis*. According to Neuman (1997), a domain is "an organizing idea or concept" which has three parts: "a cover term or phrase, a semantic relationship, and included terms". The cover term, or cover theme here, indicates the domain's name and entails the included theme. A semantic relationship "tells how the included terms [or themes] fit logically within the domain". For instance, a bus (as the included term) is a kind of (i.e., the semantic relationship) motor vehicle (as the cover term). Besides "a kind/kinds of", there are "is a part of", "is a way to", "is used for", "is a result of", "is a characteristic of" (pp. 429-431). Furthermore, the domains/themes consist of a mixture of "folk domains" (i.e., "terms from the argot of the members in a social setting" or, simply put, the pre-service teachers' own wording for themes, which I indicated between quotation marks) and "analytic domains" (i.e., "terms from the researcher and social theory", which are exemplified here in Table 1 above and the cover themes throughout Tables 3 to 7 below). In addition,

it is possible for one student teacher's explanation of a picture belongs to two cover themes (e.g., see M01's in Table 3).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Overview

Overall, my student teachers (except F03, M07, and M09) showed several degrees of criticality (see Table 2). They range from being critical (i.e., the ability to use some degree of critical thinking and express social critiques) in one phase (e.g., in general theme by F01, F02, M01, M02, M10), two phases (e.g., M03's explanations on the themes of picture 4 and general theme; M04's explanations of Pictures 1 and 3; M08's explanations of Pictures 1 and general theme); three phases (e.g., F04's explanations of Pictures 2 and 3, and general theme; M05's explanations of pictures 1 and 3, and general theme); and four phases (e.g., M06's explanations of Pictures 1 to 4). This means that regardless of "naivety" in simply describing the Pictures, some students like F01, F02, M01, M02, M03, and M10 rethought their prior descriptions and began to apply their critical thinking to view social realities. This lends some empirical support to Freire's (1970) vision on the benefit of thematic investigations; that is, "[e]ven if the people's thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change" (p. 100), which I have cited in the Introduction.

In the following sections, I will address in further depth the limits of the student teachers' scope or repertoire of criticality (which I call "thematic limit-situation" in light of Freire, 1970) and how these limits can be transcended.

TABLE 2
"Folk" themes from 14 pre-service teachers and their degree of criticality

Teachers	B&D	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4	General theme
F01		Fast food restaurant	beauty contest	hygiene problem	Poverty	Social and wealth problem
	B	0	0;2	0;2	0;2	0;1;2
	D	B	B;A	B;A	B;A	C;C;C
F02		Food	Beauty	Crowded city	Poverty	human life
	B	0	0;2	0;2	0;2	0;1;2
	D	B	A;A	A;A	B;A	B;B;C

F03		Fast food restaurant	The Miss Universe 2007 election	Crowded place	A poor girl [woman]	Life is changing
	B	0	0;2	0;2	0	0;1
	D	B	C;A	C;A	B	B;A
F04		food (junk food)	Concept of beauty	Poverty	Marginalized people	[high vs. low social class]
	B	0	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2
	D	C	B;C;B	C;B;B	A;A;B	C;B;B
M01		Fast food	Miss Universe	City	Poverty	Social status or social level
	B	0;1;2	0;2	0;2	0;2	1;2
	D	A;B;A	B;A	B;A	A;B	B;B
M02		Fast food advertising	Miss Universe	Landscape	King['s] Rules	Careless [without/no care about the poor]
	B	0	0;2	0	0;2	0;1;2
	D	C	C;A	B	B;A	A;B;B
M03		Advertis[e]ment	Female appreciation	social living	Poverty (differences in social status)	Social diversity
	B	0;2	0;2	0;2	0;1;2	0;1;2
	D	C;A	B;A	A;A	B;B;B	B;B;C
M04		Consumerism	The pride of life	The struggle to live	Art	Human being needs
	B	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2
	D	B;B;B	B;C;A	C;B;B	B;B;A	A;A;A
M05		Capitalism	Gender equality	Poverty	Slavery	Social gap
	B	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	1;2
	D	B;B;B	A;B;A	B;B;B	B;B;A	B;B
M06		Starvation	Irony	Social discrimination	Poverty	The contrast between rich (powerful) and poor (powerless)
	B	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	1;2

	D	A;C;B	B;B;C	A;B;B	B;B;B	A;B
M07		The menu in McDonald	Miss Universe	live at the river bank	street art	Metropolis
	B	0	0;2	0;2	0;2	0;2
	D	A	A;A	A;A	A;A	A;B
M08		Fast food for fast funeral	The most beautiful God['s] creation	suburbian [urban] life	Life [is] so cruel	Social life and its gap
	B	0;1;2	0;2	0;2	1;2	0;1;2
	D	A;B;B	A;A	A;A	A;A	A;B;B
M09		Fast food	Miss Universe	Home town	Worship	---
	B	0	0;2	0	0;2	--
	D	C	B;A	A	A;A	--
M10		Rich people's food	A witty beauty contest	The most wanted place	A picture of beggar	Stratafication [Stratification] in our life
	B	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;1;2	0;2	0;1;2
	D	A;A;B	B;A;A	B;A;A	B;A	A;B;C

Notes: B = breadth; D = depth; Boxes shaded grey represent pre-service teachers' broader and deeper degrees of criticality, as far as my assessments based on my working rubric are concerned.

Thematic Limit-Situation #1: Mere Descriptions, Few Arguments

Generally, I categorize cover themes #1 (Tables 3 to 6) to represent the literal descriptions of things or people shown in the pictures. Interestingly, such descriptions constitute the mainstream proportions in the first two pictures (see Tables 3 and 4), with nine student teachers in each cover theme #1. At this stage, most of these nine students might not have been aware of my hidden expectation that they should have looked beyond the given pictures and addressed social issues or critiques that could be related to the pictures, especially after I shared some of my understandings of oppressions and Freirean conscientization in previous class meetings. Or

even when a social issue was addressed, it was not extended to social critiques. For example, see M01's description of Picture 1:

> [His theme:] Fast food. I think that the picture about one of the big company who run their business in selling fast food. Yeah maybe their product now become a trend center [trendsetter]. People ussualy young age consider that if we have to be "gaul" [sociable] or something acceptable for their society, one of the ways is to eat that kind of food.

I rated his with A, B, and A for his description, critical thinking, and social critique respectively (see Table 2). The phrases like "the big company" and "fast food" marginally describe the picture. The ideas of "trend center [trendsetter]", being "gaul [sociable]" and "acceptable" are quite thought-provoking and logically linked. These ideas also show, albeit limited, some evidence of analysis of a social issue (i.e., conformity to a certain way of life, particularly capitalism – see Table 3). The analysis was built up by associating the picture with a trendy lifestyle (cf. Hall's [2001, p. 89] mentioning the word "associate" as an action word for analysis).

The above findings suggest that literal descriptions and very limited associations with social issues turn out to be the first type of thematic "limit-situation" in "conscientization", to use Freire's (1970) terms. To be precise, at this reflective phase some student teachers had yet to perceive "social, political, and economic contradictions" in their society as potentially implied in the first two pictures. At later phase(s), however, these teachers could show some degrees of conscientization through broader and deeper levels of criticality (see boxes shaded grey in Table 2 again).

TABLE 3
Themes generated from picture 1

Cover theme #1: *Literal descriptions of things related to fast food*			
No.	Included themes	Semantic relationship	Teachers
1	Fast food restaurant	[Each of the included themes] is a kind of	F01, F03
2	(Junk/fast) food		F02, F04, M01, M09
3	Fast food advertising/advertisement		M02, M03
4	Menu in McDonald		M07
Cover theme #2: *Capitalistic way of life*			
1	Consumerism	[The included	**M04**, **M05**

		theme] is a characteristic of	
2	An unhealthy life	is a result of	**M08**
3	"…to be 'gaul' [sociable]… and acceptable"	is a way to conform to…	M01
4	Rich people's food	is a part of	M10
Cover theme #3: *Being marginalized*			
-	Starvation	is a part of	**M06**

Note: Student teachers' codes in bold represent their broader and deeper degrees of criticality; cf. the boxes shaded grey in Table 2.

TABLE 4
Themes generated from picture 2

Cover theme #1: *Literal descriptions about things or people related to a beauty pageant*			
No.	Included themes	Semantic relationship	Teachers
-	Women in a beauty (Miss Universe) contest	[The included theme] is a kind of	F01, F02, F03, M01, M02, M03, M07, M09, M10
Cover theme #2: *Romanticized views of women*			
1	"female appreciation"	[Each of the included themes] is a kind of	M03
2	"the pride of life"		M04
3	"Gender equality"		M05
4	Women as "[God's most beautiful creations]"		M08
Cover theme #3: *The ironies of beauty pageant*			
1	The stereotypical concept of beauty	is a characteristic of	**F04**
2	No sense of crisis in beauty pageant		**M06**

TABLE 5:
Themes generated from picture 3

Cover theme #1: *Literal description/analogy of the picture*			
No.	Included themes	Semantic relationship	Teachers
1	"live at the river bank"	[The included theme is] a kind of	M07
2	"Home town"	is a kind of	M09
Cover theme #2: *Romanticized views of living in an urban area*			
-	"The most wanted place"	is a kind of	M10
Cover theme #3: *Problems of living in an urban area*			
1	"Hygiene problem"	[Each of the included themes is] a kind of	F01
2	Crowded city/place		F02, F03, M01, M02, M03, **M04**, M08
3	Poverty		**F04**, **M05**
4	Class struggles and discriminations		**M04**, **M06**

TABLE 6
Themes generated from picture 4

Cover theme #1: *Descriptions of the background picture*			
No.	Included themes	Semantic relationship	Teachers
1	King rules	[Each of the included themes is] a kind of	M02
2	[Street] Art		M04, M07
Cover theme #2: *Human's way of relating to a god*			
-	"Worship"	is a kind of	M09
Cover theme #3: *Oppressive realities reflected in the picture*			
1	[Being] Marginalized people	[Each of the included themes is] a kind of	F04
2	Slavery		M05
3	"Life so cruel"		M08
4	Poverty		F01, F02, F03, M01, **M03**, **M06**, M10

TABLE 7
General themes

Cover theme #1: *Human beings' needs*			
No.	Included themes	Semantic relationship	Teachers
-	Food, adoration, shelter, satisfaction of soul	[are kinds of]	M04
Cover theme #2: *A narrativized cycle of life*			
-	"Life is changing"	is a kind of	F03
Cover theme #3: *Class divisions in human's societies*			
-	"High" vs. ""low" social class	is a kind of	**F01**, **F02**, F03, **F04**, **M01**, **M02**, **M03**, **M05**, M06, M07, **M08**, **M10**

Thematic Limit-Situation #2: Romanticism

The second type of thematic limit-situation is what I designate as "romanticized views" of women (see Table 4) and of living in an urban area (see Table 5). Similar to the previous limit-situation (i.e., mere descriptions and very few discussions on social topics), issues are limited to idealized views of the status quo and hence there is no social critique that challenges, questions, or at least mentions its ironies. To illustrate, see the following selected excerpts:

[M03's theme:] Female appreciation; Women as foto [photo] models; Miss world/universe Award.

[M05's theme:] Gender equality; It is one of the way for the woman to express who they are and what make them special. Beaty [beauty] is something that men posses [something that men do not posses], as if women said "This is me, I am admirable and you are not. I am the queen of the world!" (to the men)

[M08's theme:] "The most beautiful God creation"; For me woman is the most wonderful God creation. From her we was born in this world. She was the one who introduce us to this

world. God creates them to complete us. So, it's no doubt anymore for me to admire them as the most beautiful God creation.

M05's folk theme initially startled me as it read "gender equality" and I expected that he would view the beauty pageant more critically. I am not saying that M05 cannot be critical. More at issue is that his explanation is unclear as to how women can be equal to men. It also runs the risk of reducing women's significance into their beauty per se. Moreover, M05's assertion that absolutizes the superiority of women's beauty is both too hasty a generalization, showing a relatively weak critical thinking, and, in view of Freire (1970), another form of oppression. Women who have been typically oppressed by patriarchal society may end up being oppressors themselves when they have an insulting attitude toward men as animated by M05. The animated sentence "This is me, I am admirable and you are not" is also unreliable. In short, M05's idealized view of women's beauty as a means of endorsing gender equality is subject to problematization both at the level of critical thinking and at the level of social critiques. Likewise, M03's and M08's interpretations gloss over the struggles that women across cultures and countries encounter in everyday life, especially struggles with sexual harassment, for instance, in foreign language classrooms (see Pavlenko, 2004, pp. 60-63 for further details).

With regard to Picture 3, M10 overlooked the real struggles of living in real areas. Rather, he was engrossed by his utopian view that people of different ethnicities and social classes could live in harmony.

[His theme:] The most wanted place. I think it is the place that people really want to live in because we can find many ethnics or races in "Rumah susun" [flats/apartments]. There are many beautiful place outside there, but I wonder why "perantau" [people moving to urban areas], foreigner, middle low class until lower class prefer to live there.

More broadly, this is reminiscent of *liberal multiculturalism,* endorsed by the "dominant ideology of individualism" and "liberal humanism", which respects superficial tolerance and equality but "evades unequal relations of power and privilege" (Kubota, 2004, pp. 35-36).

Thematic Limit-Situation #3: Restricted Criticality

Beyond the second type of thematic limit-situation is a stage on which student teachers showed more awareness of social ironies. Regarding

Picture 2, for example, F04's and M06's comments may challenge M03's, M05's, and M08's romanticized views of women:

> [F04's theme:] Concept of beauty. The picture shows how a woman is crowned and regarded as the most beautiful woman in the universe. Here, it shows that the concept of beauty is still in the physical appearance of one person. Although there is a motto that a beautiful girl is a girl who has 3B (Brains, Beauty, and Behavior) actually the beauty will comes first. Just consider that eventhough you are very smart and kind person, if you don't have attractive appearance, people will not consider you as a beautiful person.

> [M06's theme:] Irony; If we imagine famine, disasters, plagues, wars, crimes and destructive actions toward nature, it is very ironic with such beauty pageant shows where beautiful ladies are gathered and smile. It seems that these shows are only concerned with beauty rather than reality. For example, "Miss Universe" title is only an icon. It doesn't have any effect to global issues.

Interestingly, F04 was the only female teacher in the present study to transcend the descriptions of the second picture as merely a Miss Universe/beauty contest. She understood that 3Bs were parts of the evaluation in the contest but eventually it was the Beauty that prevailed. Similarly, M06 was the only male teacher to give the most thorough contrast between the contest and serious global issues.

Despite their social critiques, the nature of my in-class writing assignment had yet to urge all the student teachers to set out actions to transform the present reality. This may account for the third type of thematic limit-situation: preoccupation with critiques and no feasible agendas for radical social actions, which still belongs to Pennycook's (2004) third sense of critical – emancipatory modernism, let alone problematizing practices that shed critical lights on such modernistic radicalism. Therefore, it is worthwhile to transcend the current student teachers' critiques by delineating some further agendas for praxes (i.e., reflections and actions) with a problematizing spirit.

Regarding Picture 1, for example, it is important to examine the critiques on capitalistic way of life and the society's lack of attention to marginalization (see Table 3). It may be true that consumerism and eating excessive junk foods are undesirable effects of capitalism. However, simply

lambasting McD as a symbol of capitalism does not in any way help marginalized people to improve their lives. I personally think that the crucial action for extremely poor people is how they get whatever food (including McD) as soon as possible. Although I am not implying that the poor must have McD regularly, thus possibly ruining their health as well, I do not go to another extreme that McD must be made taboo or boycotted because they can be harmful to people's health and belong to capitalism.

At stake is, therefore, how people can make use of the inevitably swamping effect of capitalism such as that represented by McD franchisees around the globe. For instance, as far as English language learning is concerned, EFL teachers in Indonesia may empower their students (in urban or rural areas) by showing them video clips (or field notes) of the typical service encounters in franchised fast food restaurants (e.g., McD, Subway, and Hungry Jacks in Australia). Looking at these encounters, students will be more equipped with communicative competences (cf. Savignon, 1997, 2003) required in English-speaking countries both as customers and employees (if they at all want to eat McD or work as McD's employees in Australia).

A counter-discourse of capitalistic food like McD (as typically echoed by the "left", socialists, and those in "critical" circles) may still be brought to the fore during EFL classrooms. For example, EFL teachers are to encourage their students to appreciate local foods more than Western foods by making recipes or positive reviews of Indonesian cuisines in English for an international audience. This response is particularly inspired by M05 who said "[McD] dominate the food market and defeat the local ones (gado-gado, kupat tahu, and so on)" but did not explain how the local foods were to be empowered.

By embracing capitalism in a thoughtfully selective way (recall the possibility of EFL students' finding a job in fast food restaurants in English-speaking countries) and thinking of its counter-discourse, EFL teachers and students will have a balanced critical view on a certain theme. This supports Freire's (1970) contention that being critical means getting away from "sectarianism", either the "leftists" like the pure socialists (cf. "emancipatory modernists") or the "rightists" like the absolute capitalists (p. 23).

The other critiques with regards to Pictures 2, 3, and 4 and the general themes are also subject to problematizing practices. Even though M06 found beauty pageant irrelevant to global crises, for instance, Christian teachers and students need to remember the account of Esther in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible who joined a similar beauty contest to replace the rebellious Queen Vashti and eventually Esther became the Queen who had a critical role to save the entire Israel as a nation from oppressive people

led by Haman who wanted to eliminate all Jews. Bringing up such a religious text in a language classroom, by the way, may be risky and yet transgressive spirit that Pennycook (2007) shares may support my contention that the "forbidden territory" or "margins of acceptability" that limits religiosity to be discussed in language classrooms is likely to be trespassed. In fact, Christian (and other religious) worldviews have their own critical tools that humanistic worldviews – in which orthodox, Marxist-orientated (leftist) Critical Pedagogy is rooted – ignore at best or condemn at worst. Some humanists may be correct when they pinpoint ironies of religions. But religious people may even be aware of these. None of the student teachers in my data was aware of the irony that I, as a person with a religion, and also perhaps *the Jakarta Post's* contributor, could infer from the fourth picture: a poor woman in front of a worship place usually owned by rich people. The critical (and unanswered) question here is how religious people can help alleviate poverty. The issue of poverty has emerged in my student teachers' interpretations of Pictures 3, 4, and general theme. However, none of them came up with the notion of spiritual poverty. Wagiyono Sumarto (1998), an Indonesian Christian theologian, suggests: *"Kemiskinan spiritual dari sudut pandang iman Kristen berawal dari keragu-raguan terhadap Firman Allah, sehingga iman menjadi lemah dan hidup semakin jauh dari anugerah Allah"* [Spiritual poverty from the perspective of Christian faith starts from casting doubts on the Word of God, which leads to the weakening of faith and ever-widening separation from living in God's grace] (p. 11). Religions other than Christianity may also have their critical views on spiritual poverty. By taking into account the spiritual lens in problematizing the notion of poverty as simply reduced into deprivations of access to material and financial gains, English language learning has been extended to a more philosophical base.

A problematizing practice should also transcend (or transgress) one pitfall of simplistically associating the causes of oppression or marginalization with two monolithic classes in our societies: "high(er)" and "low(er)" classes. F01's ideas below represent other similar views of her fellow student teachers (see Table 7, cover theme #3):

> [Her theme:] Social and wealth problem. Picture 1 and 2 show the glamorous life of human, whereas picture 3 and 4 show how the "lower class" live. I compare the picture 1 and 4, and 2 and 3. Picture 1 is a picture of rich people. They can eat burgers, French fries, fried chicken in a cozy restaurant, but picture 4 shows how the poors eat. They can't eat in the restaurant, even they can't eat their home because the[y]

don't have any. The poors eat whatever they get and can eat, and wherever they can. Picture 2 shows the elegance of life, beauty of life. How humans can have contest as big as a party, in a good and clean building, with great lights and properties. Picture 3 describes the unhealthy environment. The buildings are dirty, either [including] the river. Picture 2 and 4 can be compared as well. In picture 2, the girls wear beautiful dresses, but the old man [woman] in pic.4 wears whatever he [she] can wear.

In light of the rubric in Table 1, F01's descriptions in the general theme are the most elaborate in the current data as she mentioned the things or people in each picture, intensified by relevant adjectives (e.g., "cozy", "clean", "unhealthy", and "dirty") and noun phrases (e.g., "French fries", "elegance of life"). The choices of words are relatively plain but the number of word types (rather than word tokens) is relatively bigger than that of other students, which made me rate hers with "C" for "0". Her vivid descriptions supported her critical thinking and social critiques – rated Cs altogether – in which she compared the first two pictures with the last two pictures, the former representing the "higher" social class and the latter the "lower" class. In particular, the relatively thought-provoking and logical comparisons show some evidence of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation required in critical thinking. Despite the Cs in 0, 1, and 2, which show broadest and deepest degrees of criticality, F01's explanations are not free from problems. Even within the same class – be it "high" or "low" – racial, religious, cultural, political, and gender-related conflicts, among others, exist and cannot be overlooked.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Thematic investigations are actually pregnant with critical moments to generate potential meanings, but reflections may be limited in terms of degrees of criticality and themes. Some pre-service teachers' thinking was still restricted to literal descriptions of things and people in the pictures. Even if some other student teachers used their critical thinking and views to critique the society, no realistic agendas for social actions and for problematizing notions like "poverty" and "class divisions", or one-sided, negative views of capitalism.

Therefore, the present study needs to be replicated and extended with different (or even the same set of) pictures or modes (e.g., excerpts of movies and song lyrics) to figure out more themes and to what extent the breadths and depths of criticality of EFL learners across settings and levels

of education are similar to or different from the current findings. Thematic limit-situations that emerge in future thematic investigations will serve as the bases for problematizing practices to question, challenge, or re-conceptualize more big notions other than poverty (e.g., "empowerment", "giving a voice", or even Freirean "humanizing pedagogy"), which are ideally done by both teachers and students, not only by me as shown in the data analysis above. Recall that "I cannot think … *without others…*" (Freire, 1970, p. 100). Thus, more probing questions to problematize such big notions should be prepared following the reflections on students' thematic limit-situations.

This study also awaits refinement in order that some realistic social actions subsequent to thematic investigations can be implemented. Regarding food (cf. Picture 1), for instance, EFL teachers working with their learners in rural areas (or elsewhere, especially in Indonesia) should think of ways to collaborate with home-industry teachers in producing, advertising, and distributing traditional snacks. The role of English is salient when the school (or learning community) stakeholders learn together and use the language in writing ingredients, recipes, on-line advertisements, correspondences with potential consumers (via letters, e-mails, or blogs), anticipating potential threats of oppression along marketing processes, and advocacy learning (e.g., writing letters to newspapers' editors or petitions to local and central government concerning discriminations in traditional food marketing). These social actions have yet to be implemented but arguably they are possible to be "feasibly tested", to rephrase Freire's (1970, p. 89) term.

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