# CRITICAL LITERACY AS A PEDAGOGICAL GOAL IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors provide an overview of the area of critical literacy as it pertains to second language pedagogy (curriculum and instruction). After considering the historical origins of critical literacy (from antiquity, and including in first language education), they consider how it began to penetrate the field of applied linguistics. They note the geographical and institutional spread of critical literacy practice as documented by published accounts. They then sketch the main features of L2 critical literacy practice. To do this, they acknowledge how practitioners have reported on their practices regarding classroom content and process. The authors also draw attention to the outcomes of these practices as well as challenges that practitioners have encountered in incorporating critical literacy into their second language classrooms.

## INTRODUCTION

The ability to exercise one's critical faculties or engage in a sustained analysis using forms of speech or writing is a general human capability. Thus, there has been critical literacy as long as there has been literacy. In this section, the authors focus on critical literacy developments having a particular claim on or respect for the work of Paulo Freire, but they also acknowledge historical precursors. They then present Freirean ideas as marking a significant turn in the growth of the importance of critical viewpoints in studies of language and especially literacy and review their current manifestations.

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***Historical Background***

Early indications of critical literacy can be identified in the dialogues of Plato and Socrates, particularly Plato's writing against the traditions of Homer (Yoon & Sharif, 2015), drawing on Gee (1990); Morrell (2008). More directly based in textual evidence and even earlier, Caizzi (1999) points out how the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers Xenophanes (570-475 BCE) and Heraclitus (535-c.475 BCE) observed that their fellow Greeks had not read Homer and Hesiod, perhaps the only thing most literate Greeks *could* read at that time, in a critical way. He and Heraclitus (says Caizzi, 1999, pp. 337-338) "denounce the fact that the ancient poets have not been examined critically" and their readers have not thought for themselves. This kind of critical thinking (about works of literature) was part of the Greek mindset. Scholarly discussions of much earlier, very instrumental forms of writing practiced by other literate civilizations (Egypt and Sumer: temple list-making, going back to around 2000 BCE; and China: haruspicy, as far back as the pre-Zhou dynasties) do not report indications of a critical dimension in their attitudes, unlike those identified by the Greeks. On the other hand, dispute and dialogue in philosophical and religious contexts was part of the traditions appearing at almost the same time (Jaspers' [1953] "axial age"), historically, as the pre-Socratics, in the not-too-distant area of India, as representatives of contending schools (Jain asceticism, Buddhist idealisms, Chakravartin materialists) challenged each other in debates. Subsequently, text-based and text-oriented traditions of careful, challenging, and disputational scholarship are to be found in Jewish and Islamic traditions. The former are well-known for layers of textual exegesis and dispute, the latter for (among many other things) careful inspection of the elements of oral report that were to be included, or excluded, from the hadith tradition of the Qu'ran (e.g., Abdullah, 2012). Challenge and dispute also shaped the development of Chinese intellectual traditions, as neo-Confucianism replaced earlier lines of thinking around 1300 CE. The somewhat critical "Silhak" scholars disputing neo-Confucianism in Korea (for the good of the people and good government, in the 17th and 18th century) often found their critique responded to with exile if not death (Crookes, 2017).

Criticality is very difficult without intertextuality (in the sense of being able to compare different perspectives and texts) and that was neither inherent nor feasible in what little remained of the European tradition after the fall of Rome. The eventual critical analysis of the established texts of the Christian church was only made possible by the gradual recovery of the writings of

early Greece and Rome by Renaissance humanists drawing particularly on points of contact between the Muslim and Christian worlds (as in Spain and Italy; Nakosteen, 1964). It was Islamic (specifically Persian) scholarship (and the translators of Jundi-Shapur; Crookes, 2011) which preserved critical traditions of scholarship and translation when they were elsewhere extinct in the West. "The ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, particularly between 850 and 1000 (the golden age of Islamic scholarship), were a period of interpretation of classical thought, chiefly Neoplatonic and Aristotelian life and world views, *criticism of this thought*, and adaptation of it to Muslim theology and philosophy" (Nakosteen, 1965, p. 192; emphasis added). This is subsequently visible in the personal careers of individuals such as Abelard, Aquinas, and Luther. Morrell (2008) extends this into the social critique of Marx, for which the theorizing of a critical view by Kant (e.g., 1781) was also important. As the rise of the West from the 17th century on eclipsed (temporarily) Asian traditions of thought, "critical reading" was enshrined in European studies of the classics, modern literature, and the liberal education traditions.

At this point in the historical record we approach current critical literacy specialist Allan Luke, for a view of the story in the 20th century (2012, p. 6). He approaches it less from the elite perspectives so far mentioned and more from that of popular culture, seeing this as the run-up to Freirean critical literacy. First, Luke notes that

> There are many antecedents to Freire's approach. Early 20th century exemplars of working class and African American community education were established in many cities.... There are significant European treatises on language and literature as potential modes of political and social action. These range from Voloshinov's (1929/1986) analysis of speech genres as political acts, to Brecht's experiments with political drama (Weber & Heinen 2010). Work in postwar British cultural studies... set the directions for approaches to critical literacy: (a) the expansion of education beyond canonical and literary texts to include works of popular culture; (b) a focus on critical analysis as counter-hegemonic critique that might, in turn, (c) encourage recognition of marginalized communities' histories and experiences.

Second, the term *critical reading* had been in play for much of the 20th century (to mean, at least, a careful and close reading of especially literary texts). It was also to be found in forms critical literacy specialists would recognize in some of the material used by progressive educators in the 1930s. (Rugg's [1931] social studies textbooks explicitly put students in the

position of reading several newspaper reports of the same event, printed by newspapers with different editorial positions, for analytic purposes.) This curricular perspective gained renewed emphasis just after World War Two (e.g., Altick, 1946; cf. Robinson, 1964, on a century of critical reading) when curricula in the English-speaking world were adjusted so that students would never again be left unprepared against the likes of Nazi propaganda, and also should be prepared to resist Communist propaganda as well as that of commercial materialism in the age of the advertising man (e.g., Wright Mills, 1951). In addition, as Luke points out (ibid.),

> Current models of critical reading also draw from postwar literary theory. Many 1960s university and secondary school English classrooms focused readers on the close reading of textual features and literary devices (e.g., Wellek & Warren, 1949). In US English education, the shift from New Criticism to reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) set the grounds for an increased emphasis on personal response to literature. The assumption was that literary texts produce diverse meanings, depending upon readers' affective responses. In more general terms, literature becomes a means for the moral and intellectual construction of the self.

However, while doing honor to the way critique and being critical as manifestations of human capacity appear repeatedly across cultures and time (and are certainly not the preserve of the West, as stereotypical discussions of E. Asian or Islamic educational traditions has repeatedly suggested in the recent past), there is also distance to be put between, for example, critical reading and what in the last forty years or so has come to be called critical literacy (cf. Cervetti et al., 2001). What comes to mind as the most obvious difference is in the presence of an action orientation in critical literacy. In the repeatedly quoted formulation of Freire, critical literacy is reading "the word" in order to *change* "the world."

In continuing our exploration of the development of critical literacy, it is now time to focus on Freire's own work and writings. Though again, some aspects of his immediate antecedents should be noted. There had been radical education ever since the time of the French Revolution and the Romantic movement. There had already been progressive education, increasingly visible in the American tradition that Dewey is associated with. But Freire was an educator of the grass-roots. Although trained as a lawyer, and with doctoral work in the philosophy of education, early in his career he became involved in adult education (in Brazil) in a discriminatory sociocultural and political context in which there was a literacy test for political participation. In short, without

the ability to write, men and women were denied the right to vote. The provincial government in Freire's region sponsored adult education programs, and as he developed experience in this area, he eventually designed and administered large-scale adult literacy programs that appeared to be highly effective—so effective that during a coup he was seen as a danger to the established elites and became an exile. So literacy, and its elements, as the basis for social change actions, are absolutely central to Freire's understanding of education.

It may be remembered that the term 'critical', as used in 'critical theory' or even 'critical pedagogy', let alone 'critical literacy', was not a term that Freire initially made much of on its own, except in the phrase "critical consciousness" (e.g., Freire, 1965; though even this is a translation from a single term, *concientizaçao,* that transliterates as "conscientization" and does not contain the word *critical*). While he was influenced by the neo-Marxist tradition of "critical theory" (as defined by Horkheimer (1937), which Freire accessed particularly through its reworking by Kosik (1976)) he did not initially intend to make the connection explicit in a labelling of his work, until this was suggested by Giroux. So one may also ask, 'At what point did Freirean approaches to literacy become signalled by the term "critical literacy"?' (There is comparatively little use of this term in his earliest writings.) Equally, even without the term, one could consider what were the initial elements of a Freirean approach to literacy, that eventually became taken up and developed under the heading of "critical literacy." And then the next substantial question is to consider how these in turn have been translated for use in second, foreign, heritage and indigenous language teaching contexts.

Freire himself in earlier work (e.g., 1972) simply refers to "literacy" (as in *literacy campaigns*), but clearly, he had in mind his own preferred kind of literacy, which is critical in nature. The term "critical pedagogy" only really began to be used in English after Giroux's (1983) work recuperating critical theory for Freirean purposes (about fifteen years after the first appearances of Freire's work in the English-speaking world). It is then perhaps not surprising that the term "critical literacy" seems to appear initially in English not in Freire's own oeuvre, but in that of his close colleague, Ira Shor. In Shor's substantial and highly practical first book-length work (1980), he uses the phrase eleven times. In Shor's early edited collection (1985) it appears a number of times but only in editorial introductory material (by Shor) and in Shor's own chapter. That is, scholars and teachers even close to Shor and familiar, early, with Freire's work, were not at that point using the term, apart from Shor himself. It also appears in Shor's

1987 dialogue book with Freire (but in Shor's contributions, not Freire's). A 1987 work of Freire's, simply entitled *Literacy*, consists mostly of dialogues with his co-author Macedo (with a theoretical introduction by Giroux); in it, despite the topic of the book, Freire rarely uses the term *critical literacy*. When he is concrete about literacy instruction in this volume, it is through an account of materials he developed for L1 literacy in São Tomé after it gained independence in the mid-1970s (to which he does not apply the term critical literacy directly). These are simple didactic materials with a focus on dialogic education for active citizenship and learning to read in an environment with almost no reading materials or resources. Elsewhere in the same book (Freire, 1987) the work of Shor is conspicuous by its absence.

With this focus on the term itself and its appearance, it seems natural then to ask, 'What were key features of this perspective?' Shor's own work can be considered, and then the extensions from it, recognizing that this starts with a first language focus, and of course it is helpful to know also how it looks in both early and current manifestations with a second language orientation.

### *Features of Critical Literacy and the Transition from L1 to L2*

When he developed his ideas and instructional practices in the mid-1970s, Shor was a teacher of writing at a US community college. He was teaching working-class students. He operated in a standard part of the US post-secondary curriculum (sometimes called "freshman composition")—mostly, required courses that introduce young adults to basic conceptions and practices of academic writing. At that time these courses tended to have a personal focus with some use of literary material as well as other readings that would be of interest to students. A process-based approach to pedagogy, emphasizing idea generation, "free writing" (Shor, 1980, p. 129) and peer feedback on several drafts of writing, with a concern for form less of a priority, was in place. Looking back on his early work, Shor (1987) refers to the Open Admissions policy that had been operating at his university in the mid-1970s, which allowed the poor to enter the university to an extent previously unknown. (It also placed him in the position of being able to work with underprepared students who nevertheless might be sympathetic to, and certainly in need of, a critical pedagogy.) Other conditions had been favorable. Shor refers to the extensive cultural shifts of the immediately preceding decade that had altered people's attitudes, and also made, for a while, the larger political climate one in which a critical pedagogy, and critical

literacy, could flourish. However, conditions deteriorated and by the 1980s Shor was referring to a decade of conservative reaction.

Modern critical literacy did not start from nothing. Besides cultural changes (or as part of them) the 1960s had also seen the growth of alternative approaches in schools and universities. In the US, the "Open Classroom" movement had followed on from humanistic approaches to education which emphasized personal growth and small group work. This was derived from or consistent with the "encounter groups" and "consciousness-raising groups" (Shor, 1980, p. 121) that themselves reflected post-war developments in psychotherapy and American existentialism. More generally, there were "progressive educational practices" (Shor, 1980, p. 94) and the more radical educational ideas that Shor references as having been tried and recorded "in the last ten years" (Shor, 1980, p. 146 fn. 2). So, conditions for the developments of Freire's ideas that Shor and others worked with were briefly favorable. Against them, to an extent that is hard to imagine these days, was the isolated nature of teachers like Shor, who found it difficult to share ideas (as Shor, 1987 mentions: ideas travelled less easily and there were, of course, no social media pages or ways to easily find writings, informal accounts of practice, and so on).

In Shor (1980), after initial background he presents a comprehensive list of key features of his teaching, as follows (1980, p. 94):

> Social life in dialogue; self-regulation of process; withering away of the teacher; symbolic separation; contextual skill-development; conceptual exercises; self-created media and texts; ego-restoration; character-structure awareness; integrative study formats; organic evaluation; comedy as a learning resource; the convertible classroom.

Let us briefly explain these, as indicating an initial specification of critical literacy. Many of them are not directly reflective of reading and writing but refer more to a critique of the alienated and alienating aspects of conventional education. By "social life in dialogue," Shor means that the lives of students and the issues and problems they face form core content of the curriculum; and they are not to be taken as they might appear on the surface but subjected to inquiry through challenging dialogue that the teacher may stimulate. "Self-regulation of process" is a way to say that it is the students together with the teacher who have control of the processes of the class, which includes selection of content and determination of the trajectory of the course and what might arise out of it. Relatedly, the "withering away of the teacher" is a slightly exaggerated way to emphasize that in any critical pedagogy, the teacher does not have a solitary and authoritarian

role, but steps back so that students can step up. "Symbolic separation" refers to the importance of students and teacher distancing themselves from content so as to inspect and analyze it critically. "Contextual skill development" means that the basic skills of literacy, from spelling and grammar to the command of form (or genre) and composition processes are not neglected, not separated out, nor practiced only through drill, but all develop together under the teacher's guidance through the students' focus on issues and topics that are real and of concern. "Self-created media and texts" (many samples of which Shor provides: 1980, pp. 181-194) suggests that not only do students contribute to producing the materials that are studied in their course, but also those materials may be carried over and used by successive groups of students in later courses. "Ego-restoration" is Shor indicating his recognition that many of his students have had their egos badly damaged by the processes of education, or schooling, that they have already suffered through. They arrived in his classroom often lacking confidence in their ability to benefit from formal education or the appropriacy of a university or even a community college for them, given their negative self-image. They need, from a sensitive, supportive, and critically-minded teacher, a curriculum and process that validates their existence and their concerns and puts them (back) in the driving seat assured that they can contribute to their own improvement and the betterment of society. "Organic evaluation" indicates that the students together with the teacher determine how they are to be assessed in completing the course and will contribute collectively to an evaluation of the course itself. The convertible classroom is one with chairs that move to circles, or to work-groups.

Shor notes (p. 108) "the critical study of printed works and mass media which habitually fill school and daily life" as something that he is taking for granted as part of a critical literacy. And then he goes on to explain in more detail how "self-creation of media and texts," that is, students' own writings, form part of the content and output of the class. This becomes clearer when Shor summarizes a more literary segment of the class: "... which studied dramatic writing, both literacy skills and awareness grew through the self-design of scripts based on their lives. The study of literary form was also a study of their lives" (ibid.).

This is also a step beyond the kind of literacy that was focused on in Freire's mass literacy campaigns for peasants and workers. Freire's reports (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987) of his work with these students (not themselves part of conventional educational systems at all) do not refer to their lives or institutions as habitually being filled with written material. As Shor says (1980,

p. 127), "The specifics of this pedagogy cannot be mechanically lifted from Brazil or Guinea-Bissau to North America, but need to be evolved right here." Shor extended Freire's ideas to a richer and more intensively literacy-dominated and infused environment.

In Shor's account, various progressive and process-based writing activities and techniques precede a move towards reading (1980, p. 140). He uses pre-reading, so that "the students' own thoughts and words on the reading topic are the starting points for the coordinated material." He wants his students not to be "ruled" by text. He wants to "demystify" print, so that it is no longer something distant from students' lives, and both authoritative and dull. And in a point that is doubly relevant today, he notes that his students are "over-stimulated" by non-print media and not accustomed to "the careful examination of a 'slow' medium like the printed word."

Another significant feature of Shor's critical literacy (that would not have been available to Freire) is technology (and resource availability). Shor reports "scour[ing] the mass media, books, etc., for articles" and selects readings "in a reasonably colloquial idiom," and he then produces a large collection tailored to the specific class and themes, which may or may not be repeated on subsequent occasions. "Each class does not get to read all the articles" (pp. 142-143). Obviously, that is even easier these days with digital resources (Shor refers to using a "xerox machine" for his efforts here), but it is a point that critical literacy programs will run better to the extent that their teachers and students can work together to accumulate a flexible and diverse range of course, class, and student-specific literacy resources.

More detail still could easily be extracted from Shor's comprehensive and detailed lesson plans and other accounts in this early work of critical literacy. And his follow-on works (e.g., 1992) also are still fresh and deserve study. But it is time for us to consider how some of these ideas began to show up in second language oriented pedagogical advice. By the time Shor's book was re-published (1987), the L2 literature was beginning to grow. Crawford's early reworking of Freire's ideas for world language teaching had appeared (Crawford, 1978; Crawford-Lange, 1981). Auerbach and Wallerstein had developed these ideas in a number of publications including two influential textbooks (Wallerstein, 1983; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987). But particularly as Auerbach and Wallerstein were working with adult immigrants, they were in some ways closer to Freire's original target and not, like Shor, in a more literacy-oriented mode and environment.

One of the earlier attempts to manifest critical literacy in L2 contexts was the UK-based, ESL-oriented work of Catherine Wallace (1986, 1992a, 1992b, 1999, 2001; see also McLeod, 1986) who variously referred to her work as critical reading, critical language awareness, and critical literacy. In her first published (1986) work, she does not cite Shor (though Holt, 1969 appears) but she is explicit that "literacy is political" (p. 14), directly describing the work of Freire (1972). In her (1992a) simple introductory book for L2 teachers she goes into some detail on Freire (citing his 1976 work) and reproduces and discusses sections of Auerbach and Wallerstein (1987) materials. As interpreted by Luke (2011, cited earlier), her work is a valuable parallel development to the Freirean tradition, because "while Freirian models provide a pedagogical approach and a political stance, they lack specificity on how teachers and students can engage with the complex structures of texts, both traditional and multimodal. The acquisition of language, text and discourse requires the developmental engagement with levels of linguistic and discourse complexity and access to multiple discourses and affiliated linguistic registers." Luke refers at this point to Gee's (1990) influential study of "social literacies," also noted by Wallace as important to her theoretical approach. While consistent with this emphasis, Wallace took her main theoretical lead from Critical Discourse Analysis and the UK-based work of Fairclough, building this onto aspects of communicative language teaching (with its emphasis on genre and authentic texts) and language arts pedagogy as it had developed in the "class-conscious" (Wallace, 1986, p. 2) and increasingly multiracial Britain of the early 1980s (thus also sensitive to race, not to mention gender). She developed courses in this area beginning in 1989; her published work derived particularly from a course she ran for international students temporarily resident at a London university in 1993. Students were volunteers of at least intermediate, perhaps advanced levels, who were interested in improving their English while engaging with reading. Carefully selected texts were analyzed using basic concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics, concerning their social functions and genre characteristics. This led to "critical framing," where students indeed develop a critical perspective on the texts, with a view to transforming their own reading practices and developing a new active understanding of language.

Suffice it to say, by the turn of the 1990s, critical literacy was spreading in L1 contexts, had been tested out in ESL contexts (including South Africa in the latter group: Pierce, 1989; Janks, 1989) and was poised to enter the world of EFL. Through the influence of Simon (1992) in

Canada, critical ideas were to be found in influential applied linguistic discussions (Pennycook, 1990). The authors turn now to a consideration of that spread across geographical and institutional contexts. A question continues to be asked, 'Can L2 critical literacy be done in such and such a place?' Reviewing the literature assiduously, one can often come up with a small report, a proof of concept or limited trial, from locations outside the developed world. Much depends on the specific teacher, students, and the institutional context. Certainly, just as Shor built on Freire without reproducing him (Weiler, 1996), L2 specialists must make their own judgement about what is possible. But a consideration of the subsequent published literature should be encouraging.

## CRITICAL LITERACY WITHIN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

This section reviews a large, but by no means comprehensive, sample of published accounts of critical literacy practice. It starts with a brief focus on the geographical and institutional contexts of the studies and then discusses different ways in which critical literacy practitioners have approached classroom content and process. Finally, a summary of the reported outcomes of critical literacy practice and the challenges involved is presented.

### *Geographical Areas*

As mentioned earlier, critical literacy has a long history in English (subject) education in English-speaking countries like the US, Canada, and Australia. In the context of teaching L2, many empirical and conceptual pieces on critical literacy still come from these countries. However, an increasing number of published reports, with most having appeared over the last 10 years, have been emerging from EFL regions. These include different parts of Asia: In the Middle East, most of the reports appear to come from Iran, with several recent contributions from Israel. In East Asia, accounts of critical literacy practice have emerged in several countries like Taiwan and South Korea. A few studies have been published in South Asia (Nepal & Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam & Singapore). Teacher-researchers in a few European (e.g., Poland & Spain) and South American countries (e.g., Brazil & Colombia) have also reported on how they teach critical literacy (see Table 1). This spread shows that critical literacy is being increasingly adopted as an approach to ESL/EFL education around the world, including

countries which are currently understood to be conservative societies, with democracy considered as more of an area of improvement than a defining feature of their educational systems and political structures.

Table 1
*Geographical Spread of Critical L2 Literacy Studies*

| **Middle East** | **East Asia** | **South Asia** | **Southeast Asia** | **Europe** | **South America** | **North America** | **Australia** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Iran** | **Taiwan** | **Nepal** | **Vietnam** | **Poland** | **Brazil** | **US** | **Australia** |
| Abednia & Izadinia (2013) | Chen (2017) | Sharma & Phyak (2017) | Bui (2016) | Molek-Kozakowska (2015) | Correia (2006) | Albers & Fredrick (2013) | Alford (2001) |
| Abednia & Karrabi (2010) | Huang (2011, 2012) | **Sri Lanka** | **Singapore** | **Spain** | Jordao & Fogaca (2012) | Ajayi (2012) | Alford and Jetnikoff (2016) |
| Ghahremani Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh (2011) | Ko (2013a, 2013b) | Liyanage (2012) | Curdt-Christiansen (2010) | Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) | Mattos (2012) | Benesch (2006) | Alford & Kettle (2017) |
| Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini (2005) | Ko & Wang (2013) | | Kramer-Dahl (2001) | **Turkey** | **Colombia** | Cho (2015) | Comber & Nixon (2011) |
| Izadinia & Abednia (2010) | Kuo (2009, 2013, 2014) | | | Michell (2006) | Mora (2014) | Gallo (2002) | Hammond & Macken-Horarik (1999) |
| **Israel** | **South Korea** | | | | | Hobbs, He, & Robbgrieco (2014) | |
| Hayik (2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016) | Huh (2016) | | | | | Park (2016) | |
| **Pakistan** | Lee (2017) | | | | | Roy (2017) | |
| Zubair (2003) | Park (2011) | | | | | | |
| | Suh & Huh (2017) | | | | | **Canada** | |
| | | | | | | Chun (2009, 2016) | |
| | **Japan** | | | | | Lau (2012, 2013) | |
| | Hammond (2006) | | | | | Morgan (2009) | |
| | Stillar (2013) | | | | | | |
| | **China** | | | | | | |
| | Qu (2011) | | | | | | |
| | Xiong (2012) | | | | | | |
| | **Hong Kong** | | | | | | |
| | Luk & Lin (2015) | | | | | | |

### *Institutional Contexts*

Most of the reports focus on critical literacy practice in the university context, several studies are situated within secondary education, and only a handful come from primary education (see Table 2). This is an unsurprising observation, given that engaging adult learners in critical practice tends to be cognitively less challenging in comparison with adolescents and especially children. A similar pattern is reflected in the studies regarding how linguistically prepared learners are for critical engagement with content.

Table 2
*Institutional Contexts of Critical L2 Literacy Studies*

| **School** | **University** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Primary** | **English programs** | **EAP and General English** |
| Ajayi (2012) | Abednia & Izadinia (2013) | Benesch (2006) |
| Comber & Nixon (2011) | Abednia & Karrabi (2010) | Chun (2016) |
| Lee (2017) | Chen (2017) | Correia (2006) |
| Roy (2017) | Ghahremani Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh (2011) | Hammond (2006) |
| | Huh (2016) | Huang (2011, 2012) |
| **Secondary** | Izadinia & Abednia (2010) | Kramer-Dahl (2001) |
| Albers & Fredrick (2013) | Ko (2013a, 2013b) | Kuo (2009, 2014) |
| Alford & Jetnikoff (2016) | Ko & Wang (2013) | Molek-Kozakowska (2015) |
| Alford & Kettle (2017) | Park (2011) | Qu (2011) |
| Bui (2016) | Stillar (2013) | |
| Chun (2009) | Suh & Huh (2017) | **Workplace literacy** |
| Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini (2005) | Zubair (2003) | Gallo (2002) |
| Hammond & Macken-Horarik (1999) | **Teacher education** | |
| Hayik (2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016) | Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) | |
| Hobbs et al. (2014) | Cho (2015) | |
| Lau (2012, 2013) | Curdt-Christiansen (2010) | |
| Luk & Lin (2015) | Mattos (2012) | |
| Michell (2006) | Mora (2014) | |
| Park (2016) | Sharma & Phyak (2017) | |

### *Classroom Content*

Critical literacy puts a major emphasis on L2 learners' engagement with social issues and appropriate media constitute a main source of classroom material. Advertisements (e.g., Grigoryan & King 2008; Hobbs, He & Robbgrieco, 2014; Luk & Lin, 2015), magazines and newspapers (e.g., Ko & Wang, 2013, Park, 2011), and the alternative press (e.g., Michell, 2006; Morgan, 2009) have been widely used in critical classrooms. Content with political themes is popular in critical literacy practice (e.g., Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016; Alford & Kettle, 2017). Works of literature are used to engage students of different age groups in critical reading of the word and the world. These include popular canonical literature books (e.g., Zubair, 2003), literature related to students' cultural backgrounds (Albers & Fredrick, 2013), children's literature (e.g., Hayik, 2011; Lau, 2012; Lee, 2017), and poems (e.g., Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Michell, 2006).

To address the dynamic relationships of visual images to text (New London Group, 1996), practitioners have also used works with strong visual elements in their teaching. Many have recognized a great potential in picture books for critical engagement with important social issues. Addressing stereotypical views of women, for example, Hayik (2015b, 2016) used *Piggybook*

(Browne, 1986) and *Cinder Edna* (Jackson, 1994), which is an empowering version of *Cinderella*, with middle school students in Israel, and Kuo (2009) incorporated *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995) and *A Picture Book of Anne Frank* (Adler, 1993) in a tertiary communicative course in Taiwan. These picture books characterize women as strong, active, and in charge of their own lives. Roy (2017) reports a teacher using *Grandfather's Journey* (Say, 1993) for a lesson on migration in her class with Somali Bantu refugee students in the US, and Hayik (2015c) reports using *I am Rosa Parks* (Parks & Haskins, 1997) and her own book, *This is My Land* (Hayik, 2009), to facilitate her students' focus on minority issues. As learners' engagement with multiple perspectives is a major goal of critical literacy education, Kuo's (2014) use of Browne's (1998) *Voices in the Park*, in which the story is told from four different perspectives, is worth noting.

While Kuo (2009, 2014) reports on university classes, picture books are conventionally, but by no means solely, created and used for young learners. Critical practitioners who are interested in using stories with visual elements for more mature students have sometimes opted for graphic novels, which often feature a relatively higher level of sophistication than picture books. Park (2016), for example, reports on a teacher's use of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Moore, 2000) in an after-school literacy program for high school female students in the US, which facilitated the students' critical analysis of the story. In a high school in Canada, Chun (2009) describes his colleague's use of *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) featuring a Holocaust survivor which resulted in her ESL students' deep engagement with history.

Taking a step further forward in multimodality, many critical literacy practitioners and researchers have shared accounts of effective use of videos, such as documentaries (e.g., Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016; Alford & Kettle, 2017; Roy, 2017) and movies (e.g., Ajayi, 2012), and combinations of a wider range of content types, like videos, newspapers, pictures, and online resources (Bui, 2016) or essays, poems, and paintings (Michell, 2006) in their teaching of critical literacy. Depending on the nature of the classroom, this combination has taken other forms as well. Huh (2016), for instance, integrated texts from different genres, such as argumentative essays, literary texts, newspaper articles, and scientific reports in a reading class. Huang (2011), in a reading and writing course, presented students with two texts on each topic which reflected opposing perspectives.

While the practitioners in the abovementioned studies selected and approached materials with a view to establishing their relevance to their students' concerns and lived experiences, others worked towards establishing this connection through inviting learners to have a share in content selection through, for example, contributing readings (e.g., Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Ghahremani Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh, 2011) or advertisements (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2014) to the classroom content.

### *Classroom Process*

***Preliminary steps in critical literacy practice.*** Critical engagement with the word and the world necessitates an adequate knowledge of both. A command of English and mainstream literacy practices necessary to make enough sense of a given text or a video and a proper understanding of the topic focused on in that text/video serve as catalysts or rather prerequisites for critical analysis. Published accounts of critical literacy practices around the world showcase different ways in which teachers incorporate a focus on these catalysts/prerequisites into their teaching practice.

***Learners' background knowledge.*** In the interest of acknowledging and using the background knowledge that learners already have and bring to the classroom, activating and eliciting this knowledge would be an appropriate starting point. As an example, in a unit of work on human reproduction in a secondary science/literacy program in Australia, Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) observed a teacher start with engaging students in discussing and writing about stages of egg development in the female. Such work helped the students to develop the necessary prior knowledge to be able to understand 'in vitro fertilization,' the focus of the unit, and critically engage with it. To prepare her students to do a project on cyberbullying in a university course of General English in Taiwan, Chen (2017) first elicited their background knowledge and experiences related to the topic by asking them to write what they knew about it and if anyone they knew had been affected by it, followed by a group discussion.

Teacher-researchers have also reported encouraging students to take on the role of researchers and proactively search for information about the topics of focus (e.g., Bui, 2016; Morgan, 2009). In a university writing course in Japan, Stillar (2013) tasked the students with writing three journal entries from the perspective of someone who belongs to a marginalized or

vilified community in their culture. He encouraged the students to research the assigned topics before writing their entries "in order to enhance the verisimilitude of their new identity" (p. 166).

Another, convenient, way in which critical literacy educators have enhanced learners' topical knowledge is through presenting them with relevant reading passages. Texts inevitably become a source of topical knowledge in classes where reading is the skill of focus and, thus, facilitating and gauging learners' comprehension of them is a step commonly taken before critical literacy practice. Comprehension work may take a variety of forms. While teachers like Huang (2011) discussed the main ideas and important details in texts with their students, Kuo (2014) asked his students to develop character web posters for characters in the picture books.

***Learners' linguistic knowledge.*** In addition to gaining background knowledge, and, indeed, to effectively do so, learners' linguistic knowledge should also receive due attention in critical L2 literacy education. In fact, such education would ideally integrate a focus on critical literacy development with an emphasis on language improvement. Many of the published accounts of critical literacy practice include an explicit mention of the teachers' conscious attempts to maintain such a dual focus (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2014; Huang, 2012; Huh, 2016; Ko, 2013a; Roy, 2017; Sharma & Phyak, 2017). To start with, comprehension exercises mentioned in the previous paragraph essentially involved a focus on the linguistic aspects of the classroom readings. Critical literacy practitioners have also reported other ways of enhancing their students' language knowledge. Before critical engagement with the movie of *Cinderella*, Ajayi (2012) showed photos which reflected salient events of the movie to his students and elicited related vocabulary. A teacher in Alford and Jetnikoff (2016), while encouraging her students to question the dominating power of representation in media texts, elicited relevant vocabulary items, such as 'marginalized' and 'invisible,' from the learners, who were to use such terms in a subsequent report assignment. In her critical lesson on in vitro fertilization, the teacher in Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) started with discussing the related terminology and how to apply it in diagrams, flowcharts, and cloze exercises. In Park's (2011) critical media literacy class at a South Korean university, selected students presented key words to the class as a pre-reading activity.

***Learners' metalinguistic awareness.*** A few accounts of critical literacy practice showcase practitioners' attempts to go beyond a linguistic focus in facilitating learners' critical engagement with text and raise learners' metalinguistic awareness. Most of these studies have documented a

focus on genre. Alford and Jetnikoff (2016) reported a teacher's facilitating learners' deconstruction of the generic structures of analytical essays and investigative reports. Chun's (2009) teacher participant showed her students "how to read the graphic novel visually, so that the students would be able to follow the sequential but nonlinear paneling of the story" (p. 151). This genre scaffolding had helped the learners understand the sophisticated visual metaphors in the novel. Other examples of such scaffolding include explicit focus on the genre of explanation by the science/literacy teacher reported in Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) and analysis of rhetorical traditions by Molek-Kozakowska (2015) in a seminar course for Cultural and Media Studies majors in Poland. In both cases, the students had effectively applied their generic/rhetorical awareness in their writing assignments. Finally, approaching metalinguistic knowledge as translingual experience, Qu (2011) facilitated his students' comparisons between words conventionally considered as equivalents in English and Chinese.

### *Engaging in Critical Literacy Practice*

How teachers prepare learners for critical literacy work was discussed above. This section focuses on how they foster learners' involvement within critical practice. Specifically, it discusses the ways in which teachers incorporate learners' life experiences into the classroom process, equip them with critical literacy tools and resources, foster their critical reflection, involve them in taking action, and engage different content modes and the Internet in the teaching-learning process.

***Including learners' life experiences.*** The 'Classroom content' section mainly focused on critical practitioners' conscious attempts to choose content in light of significant social issues and concerns experienced by learners and, when possible, invite learners to contribute to the content. The previous section also reported different ways in which educators acknowledge and incorporate learners' past into early stages of a critical lesson through eliciting their world knowledge and experiences. These discussions reflect the enormous significance critical literacy education attaches to learners' life experiences. Educators, the literature suggests, maintain an inclusive approach to students' life experiences throughout their critical lessons in different ways. Adopting a feminist pedagogical approach in her English literature course in Pakistan, Zubair (2003) established connections between the literary works of focus and her female students' personal and social lives by provoking classroom discussions through questions like

"How much say do they have in decision-making in their own homes?" and "Are there any popular Pakistani movies, songs, soaps that depict similar themes?" (p. 168). In an Israeli context where a sense of rivalry would hinder Muslims' and Christians' peaceful coexistence, Hayik (2015a) attempted to promote her middle school students' understanding of religious diversity through inviting them to bring photographs of their own religious practices to the class and write short descriptions. In a workplace literacy program for immigrant and refugee factory workers in the US, Gallo (2002) gave students disposable cameras and asked them to take photographs of important aspects of their lives. They similarly wrote descriptions of their photographs, which were then made into booklets, discussed in the class, and displayed on the company notice board. Since learners' prior literacy practices constitute an important aspect of their life experiences, a few critical teachers reported stimulating students' reflection on themselves as readers and writers (Huang, 2011) and how well they thought their previous literacy experiences had prepared them for the university literacy requirements (Kramer-Dahl, 2001).

***Providing learners with critical literacy toolkits.*** A few accounts of critical literacy practice report teachers giving their students resources which, together with the ongoing scaffolding during the educational process, facilitate their critical literacy development. A teacher in Alford and Kettle (2017) deliberately taught complex critical literacy terms to her students (e.g., invited readings & resistant readings) and their parts of speech. Repeated use of them in classroom exchanges resulted in them becoming the everyday language of the class. Morgan (2009) introduced video and reading resources on critical literacy for his EAP students to get help from in their assignments (e.g., *With these words I can sell you anything* (Lutz, 1995)). Abednia (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013) provided his university students with a list of critical literacy questions from an online resource to draw upon when engaging with the course readings.

***Enhancing learners' critical reflection.*** A core aspect of critical literacy education is facilitating students' critical reflection on the word and the world during the classroom process. Perhaps the most common way in which teachers do so is through classroom discussions based on critical questions. Chun (2016) observed how his colleague's posing a question about the lexical framing of an immigrant in a passage prompted her university students to problematize the implications of such a framing for that immigrant's identity in an extended dialog. Hayik (2016) described how her critical questions about Cinderella's change agency provoked a

discussion where her middle school students shifted away from simply adoring Cinderella and towards problematizing how women are presented in their favorite fairy tale.

A popular activity to maintain learners' engagement in critical reflection beyond classroom discussions is writing. Writing can take a variety of forms such as reflective journals, dialog journals, analytical reports, and response papers (these types sometimes overlap). After analyzing advertisements in the class, the teacher in Hobbs et al. (2014) tasked his students with analyzing further advertisements in groups and write their analyses on their own wiki pages. Following a classroom discussion about misrepresentation in media, a teacher in Alford and Kettle (2017) asked the students to research and create analytical reports on how minority groups were misrepresented in the Australian media. Park (2011) asked her students to choose two of the articles discussed in the class and write response papers.

Encouraging learners to consider multiple perspectives on a given topic fosters their criticality. Discussions in a critical classroom typically entail consideration of diverse perspectives as they involve participants' sharing their views and understandings. Reading and writing activities provide a similar space. In a university reading class in the US, Benesch (2006) had her students read and compare two articles published in New York Times on an anti-war demonstration, written by two different authors. Huang (2011) facilitated her Taiwanese university students' comparative analysis of two articles on each selected theme which were written from two opposing positions. Through a writing task in a similar context, Chen (2017) asked her students to write a letter to an advice columnist asking about how to address a cyberbullying incident and then read and respond to another group's letter from the columnist's perspective. Stillar's (2013) students' assignment to write from the perspective of a marginalized or vilified person is another relevant example. And peer feedback on students' essays is yet another way in which teachers have fostered learners' engagement with diverse perspectives (e.g., Abednia & Karrabi, 2010; Ghahremani Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh, 2011).

***Involving learners in taking action.*** As mentioned early in the chapter, a defining feature of critical literacy is its emphasis on coupling critical reflection with transformative action, or, in Freire's (1970) terms, *praxis*. The literature shows writing to be the predominant tool for learners' experience with transformative action. In several cases, this experience has taken the form of writing letters to imagined and real people. In her lesson on online shopping and mobile phones, a teacher in Mattos (2012) asked students to imagine having bought a mobile phone on

the Internet which had been delivered faulty and write a complaint to the company. The students in Hayik's (2016) unit of work on gender biases decided to write a letter to the author of the Disney version of the Cinderella fairy tale, *A Dream for a Princess* (Lagonegro, 2005). Their letters involved critically examining hidden messages in the story. In Hayik's (2015c) unit of work on minority issues, after reading a story about an Arab immigrant girl in the US and her letter of critique to the American president, two Arab students wrote a letter voicing their own concerns as a minority in Israel. Yet they addressed it to the American president who, they believed, "dictated how things should proceed in the Middle East" (p. 102). Although Hayik's students' letters in both studies involved real addressees, the teacher's failure to find the author's contact information in the former and the students' fear of sending their letter to the American president in the latter made it impossible for the letters to take a form of action beyond classroom boundaries. Other studies, however, have reported learners' experience of writing as taking action in wider social contexts.

Mattos (2012) reported a class where students produced posters on a disease afflicting their local community at the time and put them in the school corridors to raise public awareness. The students in Lau's (2012) study designed posters for an anti-bullying campaign and presented their bullying-related experiences as immigrants in a professional development session for the staff. These measures raised the teachers' consciousness about the need to adjust their teaching styles. Gallo (2002) scaffolded factory workers in her workplace literacy program to develop ideas for improving production and safety and submit them to the company suggestion box. They also wrote a letter about their concerns to management which immediately addressed them. As part of a lesson on the relationships between people and place, the literacy teacher in Comber and Nixon (2011) engaged her primary students in a discussion about the loss of their drama space in the proposed new school building. Their subsequent letter to the principal and the project manager asking them for a drama space came to fruition. Hayik's (2015a) students proactively prepared slogans encouraging peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims in their village and staged a peaceful street demonstration holding the slogans in their hands.

Another type of writing practice as taking action is rewriting a piece from a critical/transformative perspective. Lee (2017) asked the students to reconstruct a story on the theme of bullying which they had analysed. A student's rewriting reflected her awareness of the

impact of sociocultural factors on children. In Lau (2013), first students wrote about bullying incidents they had encountered or witnessed. Then, they analyzed their accounts in groups and brainstormed alternative responses. Finally, they rewrote the stories adopting a more proactive approach to the incident. The students in Lau (2012) rewrote *Cinderella* where they challenged the stereotypes embedded in the original fairy tale and gave the character a more agentive role. Following a comparative analysis of *Cinderella* and *Cinder Edna*, Hayik's (2015b) students rewrote fairy tales they themselves had previously written, making similar changes to those made by Lau's participants.

***Multimodal engagement and the Internet.*** The "Classroom content" section focused on teachers incorporating content of various modes in their teaching. The current section draws attention to how teachers maintain learners' multimodal engagement throughout the educational process and draw upon resources afforded by the Internet to enrich their learning opportunities. Some teachers reported encouraging students to respond to the content in modes other than textual. Ajayi (2012) asked his students to draw pictures of their understanding of the video of *Cinderella* after a critical examination of it. After reading aloud a story to her students, Hayik (2011) similarly asked them to draw sketches to show what they made sense of it. To examine how an event is treated by the mainstream and alternative media, Michell's (2006) students did a role-play in which they acted as media critics and consultants. To encourage people to combat cyberbullying, Chen's students (2017) worked in groups to make short videos.

The Internet has also been promoted as a useful tool for critical literacy practice in different studies. Researchers like Bui (2016), Hobbs et al. (2014), and Stillar (2013) have briefly mentioned guiding their students to conduct Internet search for their classroom assignments. A more detailed account comes from Morgan (2009) who asked his EAP students to examine how the media treat a particular issue or current event in a major research essay assignment. Cognizant of the concentration of ownership of the mainstream media, Morgan encouraged the students to use internet-based critical media resources in their assignments and also provided the students with a list of them he had compiled. Some of the benefits of the Internet-based nature of these resources for critical media literacy practice that Morgan refers to are their hypertext environment which provides access to a wide range of authentic texts and enables learners to conduct textual comparisons and analyses, and multimodality of some pages which increases exposure to visual and oral evidence not available in the mainstream media.

## CONCLUSION: OUTCOMES AND CHALLENGES

The above selective presentation of published accounts of critical literacy practice shows how second language teachers use available resources to transform the classroom into a rich space for students' critical reflection and agentive action. This section provides a brief summary of the outcomes of this critical practice, some also explained in earlier sections, followed by a focus on the reported challenges.

Several studies have reported students' deep engagement with different aspects of their critical literacy experience, such as instructional materials (Chun, 2009; Kuo, 2014), classroom discussions (Chun, 2016; Mattos, 2012), writing activities (Huang, 2011; Stillar, 2013), and collaboration with peers (Chen, 2017). Learners have also been reported to develop as critically literate individuals. Specifically, they developed a deeper understanding of significant social issues, such as racial discrimination (Hammond, 2006) and cyberbullying (Chen, 2017), adopted a questioning approach to the media (Morgan, 2009), came to take account of multiple perspectives more actively (Hayik, 2016), and became more critically aware of their own attitudes and assumptions (Lau, 2013; Michell, 2006). Furthermore, they developed a stronger sense of agency as they found and expressed their voices (Ghahremani Ghajar & Kafshgarsouteh, 2011; Morgan, 2009; Zubair, 2003) and took action to raise awareness and promote social justice (Comber & Nixon, 2011; Gallo, 2002). Critical literacy practice fostered learners' language development as well, as reported by students themselves (Izadinia & Abednia, 2010) and their teachers (Bui, 2016; Lau, 2012). Finally, learners appreciated the relevance of critical literacy to their lives and its significance to their development (e.g., Hayik, 2016; Kuo, 2014; Molek-Kozakowska, 2015; Stillar, 2013; Zubair, 2003).

Practitioners have also encountered several challenges in the way of implementing critical literacy in the classroom. At a policy level, curriculum reforms in countries like the US (Wanberg, 2013) and Australia (Alford & Kettle, 2017) have been discussed as reflecting a waning commitment to critical literacy and pedagogy in mainstream and EAL education. Researchers have also problematized lack of materials offering adequate opportunities for critical literacy work (Case, Ndura, & Righettini, 2005; Ko, 2013a; Xiong, 2012), lack of administrative support for implementation of critical programs (Albers & Fredrick, 2013; Jordao & Fogaca,

2012), and the increasing impact of tests on the teaching-learning process (Cho, 2015; Curdt-Christiansen, 2010; Sharma & Phyak, 2017), including limiting time for critical practice (Kuo, 2009; Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016). Critical practitioners also need to deal with learners' resistance to critical literacy which may result from their focus on preparing for examinations (Kuo, 2013), cultural and ideological biases (Zubair, 2003), investment in their prior schooling habits (Kramer-Dahl, 2001), and limited language abilities (Alford, 2001; Dooley, Exley, & Poulus, 2016; Huh, 2016). Resistance from parents and the wider community is another likely barrier (Cho, 2015). And there are challenges related to teachers as they may have internalized a mainstream view of literacy learning (Curdt-Christiansen, 2010) and a didactic approach to education (Ko, 2013a), lack an in-depth understanding of critical literacy (Cho, 2015; Comber & Nixon, 2011), and have limited access to relevant professional development (Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016) and experts in the field (Chun, 2016).

Finally, a question we have been asked is 'Can this be done in educational or social circumstances that are undemocratic?'. This is an important question, a full answer for which would take more space than we have available here, though a partial answer is to point to the admittedly small number of studies critical L2 literacy and critical pedagogy from fairly controlled educational systems like those of South Korea or controlling, if contested circumstances, like those of Iran (cf. West, 2014; Suh & Huh, 2017; Abednia & Izadinia, 2013). Some attempts at critical literacy have been made in such places and have been reported, though it will always be a matter of selected "baby steps" (as advised by Crookes, 2013). An optimistic response would include noting that "undemocratic" countries, cultures, or institutions may not be homogeneously undemocratic (or authoritarian, or controlled, or even well-administered). Thus, they may have their own margins within which critical efforts are more feasible. Bui (2016), for example, reports a successful L2 critical literacy project from a mountainous hill province in Vietnam, presumably a case where the writ of central government or ministry does not run or where exceptions are allowed. Similarly (to take one example among many possible) Phyak (2013) reports activist youth engaged in L2 literacy planning and bilingual education in minority languages, the point being that the example is located in the relatively remote province of Lumbini, far from the capital, Kathmandu, and an additional point being that language teachers in this case have support from local young activists (cf. Bui, 2016; Phyak & Bui, 2014). On the other hand, Nuske (2017, p. 215) reports, as might have been expected, that Saudi EFL teachers,

even those who aspire to social change, state that any articulation of critical topics would "provoke censure from supervisors or senior colleagues and could possibly cost them their jobs." (Yet again, consider the sudden shift, at time of writing, in social policies in that country.) Thus, a valuable addition to the critical literacy scholarship would be research on *how* teachers navigate sociocultural, political, and institutional constraints to facilitate engagement with critical literacy in the classroom and beyond.

Critical literacy practice involves facing numerous challenges. In many cases, however, these are by no means insurmountable obstacles in the way of teachers who, while striving for social justice and human emancipation, are willing to be flexible and patient and set attainable short-term goals in pursuit of their long-term visions. Not to mention numerous competent teachers who simply do not write about their empowering teaching practice, the large number of accounts published around the world, some acknowledged in this chapter, and the wide variety of institutional contexts reflected in these accounts, ranging from core school classes, through after school programs, to university courses, each featuring, to varying degrees, a combination of the abovementioned obstacles, is testament to the fact that critical literacy is a viable path, and as the reported outcomes show, a truly rewarding endeavor.

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