



“Closer to Our Lives”: Teaching Animal Farm to Junior High EFL Students in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how sociocultural perspectives that recognize literacy as language use in context is played out in novel-based learning of four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) junior high classrooms taught by one teacher. The study is teacher-research centered around the classroom practices and student writings of the first author’s junior high grade 2 classes from 2013-15. Member-checking conducted in 2020-21 with former students triangulated and enriched the data in ways unique to educational research. Findings trace how the first author’s classroom activities helped students recognize literacy as the contextualized use of language that connected English to their lives in localized and critical ways.

INTRODUCTION

Grace: What is a message you want to tell junior high teachers?

Chloe: I think junior high teachers may be limiting themselves – like they may assume that we can understand only so much, so they use textbooks to teach us since textbooks are more formatted. However, when we read novels we can understand a lot of things related to history and culture to trigger our thinking. We can even link it to current societal issues and make connections. They are closer to our lives.

As Grace turned over Chloe’s words, she was reminded of why she had chosen to teach novels in Taiwan. Having immigrated to the United States (U.S.) at the age of five, Grace returned to Taiwan from 2013-15 to teach at a private junior high school. As a “foreign” teacher, she was not required to use government approved textbooks. Rather, she could draw from her experience teaching English in the U.S. This afforded her an opportunity to use novels to do what Chloe had aptly recalled: draw English closer to their lives. Then, in 2020-21, displaced by the Covid pandemic, Grace found herself back in Taiwan and reconnected with her former students. It was then, with the support of Hyesun and Shr-Jya, Grace reflected with her students on the learning that took place several years before. Taking Chloe’s words that EFL teachers should go beyond

textbook based instruction to finding ways to connect language to students' lives, this study examines how Grace used novels in her EFL classes to enact a sociocultural approach to EFL instruction.

Contextualized Language Use

Sociocultural perspectives of literacy (and in turn, language and language learning) are, as Perry (2012) explained, “a collection of related theories that include significant emphasis on the social and cultural contexts in which literacy is practiced” that places “an emphasis on culture, activity, identity, and power” (pp. 51, 52). This framework situates language learning as a phenomenon inseparable from *who* is studying it and *for what purposes* (Bloome & Green, 2015; Gee, 2012). Put simply, literacy is irrevocably a social practice.

This is certainly the case for EFL in Taiwan. Learning English in Taiwan cannot be detached from its situated meanings. Namely, Taiwanese are encouraged to learn English because of Taiwan's reliance on English speaking nations, particularly the U.S., for economic and political recognition, strength, and protection (Wu, 2011). Additionally, learning English adds a layer of complexity to Taiwan's multilingual history, where a majority of citizens are already fluent in Chinese dialects of Taiwanese and Mandarin (Ku, 2019).

Importantly, sociocultural perspectives center *contextual language use* (Gee, 2012). Contextualized language use makes language learning relevant to students' lives. English help students gain new perspectives only when it is contextualized to what students already know (Wu, 2017; Wu et al., 2009). For instance, a study discovered that teachers rarely used the discussion exercises provided in textbooks. When asked about this, one teacher explained, “my students had no background knowledge about the topics and did not know what to discuss” (Luo, 2017a, p. 149).

Additionally, contextualized language use is recognizing that language shapes students' identities (Gee, 2012). Bakhtin (1981) theorized that persons are social beings in continual dialogue with themselves, each other, and their worlds. As a primary mode of dialogue, language molds students' identities as they listen, speak, read, and write.

Lastly, language is a contextualized product embedded with meanings through our interactions. For instance, English – a language rarely used outside the Taiwanese classroom – takes on an institutional meaning grounded in grammar drills, translation-based lectures, spelling tests, and entrance examinations. In turn, such meaning translates into negative attitudes and low motivation, confidence, and English literacy rates (Chen & Tsai, 2012; Ngangbam, 2022).

Literature Review

Understanding language learning as a social practice, attempts have been made to implement sociocultural-based language instruction in Taiwan. Two ways this has come about is through communicative language teaching (CLT) and non-textbook based alternative sociocultural instructional practices.

In 1968, English became a required secondary subject of grammar studies and translation-based lectures in Taiwan (Wu, 2011). After a generation of dismal results, in 2001-02 Taiwan's Ministry of Education tried to overhaul their English curriculum by replacing “form-based” instruction with a Western-based sociocultural model called communicative language teaching (CLT) (Liu, 2005; Savignon & Wang, 2003). Yet CLT has been riddled with

implementation challenges (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Huang, 2016). On top of this, a recent study found only token CLT strategies in government approved junior high textbooks. For instance, an activity that drew on students' prior knowledge "ask[ed] learners to match the famous sightseeing places with their locations and countries" (Wang, 2017, p. 63). Since international travel is impractical for most Taiwanese students, this was a test of geography rather than a connection to their experience. Additionally, the question's closed-ended nature limited discussion.

Amidst the ineffectiveness of CLT, non-textbook based alternative sociocultural EFL practices emerged. Such practices included reading literature (Chen, 2006; Chi, 1995; Lee, 2015; Liaw, 2001; Shen, 2013; Su, 2010; Tseng, 2010; Wu, 2017; Wu et al., 2009), analyzing textbook and other literature through a critical literacy lens (Chou, 2004; Huang, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2019; Ko, 2013a, 2013b; Ko & Wang, 2013; Kuo, 2009, 2013, 2015), and experimenting with translanguaging by blending spoken and written Chinese and English (Chen et al., 2019; Ke & Lin, 2017; Ko, 2013b; Tseng, 2010).

Still, such practices were not common. Only 25 empirical studies of secondary and tertiary classrooms were found in the last three decades; of these, only three studies had secondary student participants (Hsu & Lee, 2007; Ke & Lin, 2017; Tseng, 2010). Moreover, despite centering sociocultural perspectives of literacy, only four of these studies connected to students' lives by addressing local Taiwanese social issues (Huang, 2009; Ko, 2013b; Liaw, 2001; Wu, 2017). Others relied on universal topics such as marriage and teenage acne (Chou, 2004; Kuo, 2013; Lee, 2015), a trend that was, incidentally, also found in CLT-based textbooks (Luo, 2017a). And, in contrast to novel reading, studies used abridged texts or shorter length texts such as poems, popular articles, or children's literature (Chen, 2006; Huang, 2011a; Ko, 2013a, 2013b; Ko & Wang, 2013; Kuo, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2015; Lee, 2015; Shen, 2013; Tseng, 2010; Wu, 2017). The longest text was Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* at 3500 words (Wu et al., 2009).

In the context of Taiwan's difficulties implementing sociocultural EFL instruction through CLT and non-textbook based alternatives, Chloe's belief that EFL can be expanded to reading novels that draw language learning closer to students' lives is worth examining. With this, our study asks, *how can a novel-based unit on Animal Farm contextualize and expand EFL learning to fit into students' lives?*

METHODS

This teacher-research study uses post-practice analysis to examine Grace's instruction alongside her students' work in a reflective process of learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Grace reunited with her former students, who, by then, were in college. Explaining her study, they were eager to share their classwork and reflect on their junior high experience. Upon university IRB approval, a three-fold process of data analysis took place. First, Grace reviewed *Animal Farm* lesson plans, 193 PowerPoint slides, and essay writing materials to recreate what took place.

Second, Grace analyzed participants' work totaling 82 notebook pages and seven typed documents. Reading and re-reading their essays, patterns emerged from manifest content that became central to the findings (Berg, 2009). Data was initially analyzed for technical skills of grammar and vocabulary and cognitive skills of reading comprehension. However, as analysis

continued, patterns emerged that connected Grace's sociocultural literacy instruction to students' contextualized language use.

Third, member-checking confirmed and refuted patterns that emerged and mediated the balance of voice (Leu, 2020). Member-checking was a year-long dialogical process. Participants were chosen from a purposeful sampling reflective of the diversity of English abilities, personalities, classroom behavior, and academic achievement (Maxwell, 1996). Choosing their pseudonyms of Augustine, Chloe, James, Madison, Nancy, Ryan, and William – choices reflecting a common practice of giving children English names – seven students became integral to this study. Participants wrote self-introductions and described Taiwan's sociopolitical context. They reflected on Taiwan's English instruction. Participants corroborated what occurred in their class and enriched descriptions of classroom activities. They helped with translation. Moreover, participants were sent manuscripts for feedback and revision. Corresponding via chat messages, emails, phone calls, café meetings, and three online conferencing sessions that lasted from thirty minutes to an hour and a half, participants were generous with their time and resources. In sum, member-checking consisted of much more than fact-checking. Member-checking was a critical part of the analysis process that drew students' perspectives of classroom practices into this study in nuanced ways atypical of educational research.

Classroom Context

This study examines four junior high classes over the course of two years. Moving up with her students, Grace taught two classes of junior high grade 1 and 2 (J1 and J2) her first year and two classes of junior high grades 2 and 3 (J2 and J3) her second year. The four classes totaled 88 students, averaging 22 students per class with equal gender representations and minimal influx. These classes were part of the school's immersion English program that totaled 10 elective periods per week. They were taken in addition to required textbook-based English classes taught in Chinese. Students were selected into the program based on their English proficiency. Nonetheless, without a cultural environment where English was used outside the classroom, the range of English abilities was significant.

While most students entered Grace's classroom understanding verbal directions, this was not the case for everyone. Similarly, while many students could pen two to three sentences for a journal prompt, a handful, such as Augustine, struggled to write anything without word-by-word assistance. Augustine was a reserved student who, at times, felt out of place. He frequently waited for sentence starters and asked his peers to clarify directions.

In this context of varied English abilities, Grace selected canonical texts to please administrators and young-adult novels that suited the concerns and interests of her students (Table 1). Among these, Grace chose to teach *Animal Farm* during students' J2 year. While it fit as a canonical text, it was also a difficult one. As one of the highest-level readers exclaimed, "*I couldn't even get through the first page on my own!!*" With a 1170L Lexile level, *Animal Farm* is recommended for 9th and 10th graders in the U.S. (Lexile, 2023). So why did Grace believe *Animal Farm* would be accessible to J2 students in Taiwan (equivalent to 8th graders in the U.S.)? Moreover, why assign a British novel about the Russian Revolution written in 1945 to connect with students living in Taiwan 70 years later? How did the students find this novel "closer to their lives"? Despite these differences, *Animal Farm*'s message fit into Taiwan's sociopolitical context as a highly participatory yet threatened democracy.

Table 1. Unabridged Novels Read Over Two Years

Older Students (J2 and J3)	Younger Students (J1 and J2)
Outsiders by S.E. Hinton Number the Stars by Lois Lowry Animal Farm by George Orwell	
Holes by Louis Sachar Small Steps by Louis Sachar (summer reading) Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt Tangerine by Edward Bloor Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine	Maze Runner by James Dashner (began during the semester, finished as summer reading) To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Sociopolitical Context

Taiwan is an island country of almost 24 million people, recognized for its thriving democracy. After 38-years of martial law, democracy began in the 1990s with President Lee setting term-limits and holding the first island-wide presidential election (Morris, 2019). Since then, Taiwanese have maintained high levels of political participation. Taiwan averages 76 percent voter turnout during presidential elections (Reichenbach, 2020). Grassroots campaigns have resulted in major reforms. For instance, farmers have reshaped government irrigation processes (李, 2018) and aborigine activists have obtained a national apology for centuries of mistreatment and official recognition of their languages (Daley, 2016). Internationally, Taiwan has been hailed as a “beacon of democracy” beaming above threats of communist takeover (Huang, 2020). In this environment, reform agendas are part of household conversations.

Sensitive to Taiwan’s sociopolitical context, Grace chose *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945/2004). Imagining a farm as a small society consisting of workers (animals) and rulers (human farmers), *Animal Farm* is the story of how animals on one farm sought to improve their conditions through a working-class revolution. Rallied by the words of a wise old boar, Old Major, a rebellion ousts the farmer and institutes a new government under the name Animal Farm. Established by a list of commandments, Animal Farm sought to create a farm of prosperity and equality. However, when Old Major died, disagreements among the leaders, Napoleon and Snowball, rapidly escalated around building a windmill to modernize the farm. Then, in a series of misfortunes, Napoleon banished Snowball as a traitor and declared himself the sole leader, with Squealer as his spokes-pig. Mysterious and unnerving changes followed as commandments were secretly modified. Some animals futilely protested while others remained faithful and obedient despite persistent mistreatment and disappointment. Eventually, it became undeniable that the conditions on Animal Farm were no better than before; and that the ruling pigs were no longer distinguishable from the farmers whom the rebellion sought to overthrow.

As a political allegory of Russia’s communist revolution, *Animal Farm* resonates with Taiwanese’s commitment to participatory democracy. Moreover, students’ class privileges made it likely that they would face the political and social concerns raised in the story. Little did Grace know, a decade later, *Animal Farm* would be even more salient in the face of their neighboring communist government’s increasing political, economic, and military threats.

Grace's Positionality

While Grace was given license to shape her class, unfamiliar with Taiwan's school culture, she faced challenges along the way. She was operating within an educational tradition where teachers were given "total control over the teaching/learning process" (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007, p. 169) even when she made ill-suited decisions. One such decision was her insistence on timeliness. Roster in hand, she required that students were seated the moment the bell rang and, without exception, marked every offending student late, not realizing students were unaccustomed to such demands. (Years after, one former student admitted that her strict expectations were such a put off it took months before she decided Grace's class was worth her attention.) Thankfully, despite such tensions, students recognized her commitment to their learning and found her classroom a welcoming space. They came early to play pop songs on the class projector. They dropped by during lunch time to ask questions about American culture and chat with friends. In these informal settings, Grace developed relationships that fostered their learning together. It was also in these relationships that Grace kept in touch with her former students to allow collaborative member-checking for this study.

FINDINGS: A LITERATURE UNIT ON *ANIMAL FARM*

The findings are in two parts. The first part describes how students comprehended and connected their lives to *Animal Farm* through classroom activities. The second part analyzes students' unit essays to show how students connected *Animal Farm* to Taiwan's sociopolitical context. In the spirit of teacher-research, the findings will be narrated in first person (Grace's) voice.

Comprehending *Animal Farm*

As I (Grace) sought to read novels to draw EFL closer to students' lives, I knew a formidable task would be reading comprehension. Many EFL teachers see novel reading as an impossible challenge since novels lack textbook access points of translations, abridged sentence structures, grammar exercises, and definitions (Wang, 2013). Ko (2013a) advised, "Though the teacher may perceive it to be important to immediately engage texts at the discursive level, a successful teacher does not neglect students' practical needs" (p. 106). Ultimately, three activities were essential to students' reading comprehension: teacher read aloud, student conversations, and translanguaging.

Teacher Read Aloud

A staple of my class was teacher read aloud. Initially, I read aloud to boost students' listening fluency by allowing them to connect what they recognized in print with sounds. (I had been told that, unlike native speaker practices of internally hearing written words, non-native speakers heard internal Chinese "audio" translations rather than the sounds of English written words). Yet, recognizing that listening was a challenge, I scaffolded read aloud with PowerPoint slides of images representing characters and plot. As I read, I advanced the slides and paused just

long enough for students to make a visual connection to what they were hearing without breaking the rhythm of the story.

Later, I discovered other reasons for read aloud. One day, when I gave students the choice of listening to an audiobook, there was an uproar. Thinking that they would appreciate trained storytellers, I was taken aback. As I reflected on this, I realized that I modeled my thinking process as a fluent reader (Brown & Palincsar, 1986). Not only did I dramatize the story as it played out in my mind, but I paused, slowed down, repeated important phrases, defined vocabulary, asked rhetorical questions (*was there actual evidence that Snowball destroyed the windmill? What really happened to Boxer?*) and made comments (*Napoleon's dogs are scary!*) These moves modeled reading as a meaning making process (Rosenblatt, 1982).

During member-checking, Augustine explained that when I read aloud students could ask questions. James, an easygoing and cooperative student who took learning seriously and felt confident about his English abilities, added, "Read aloud is better because you can put in emotion, recording may sound tedious. I also think students and teacher can be more engaged." Gauging students' real-time confusions and understandings, read aloud added a level of engagement that audiobooks could not accomplish.

Ryan, a playful, easily distractable, and friendly student who started learning English at the age of two, reminded me of another reason. "You know I have a disorder? Like I look at a word and I am unable to read it out," he explained, "In elementary school Teacher Rich would tell us to read. And I couldn't read it and then he would say, Ryan! You need detention because you can't read it aloud!" Ryan went on, "So when I was in junior high, when the novels came, I was like, 'oh crap, we're going to start reading, and then- oh! Ms. Leu is going to read! Oh sweet!'" Aware of my own struggles with fluency, I had made a conscious choice to not ask students to take turns reading. Moreover, I suspected that, conscious of their non-native accents, such requests would provoke anxiety and diminish students' ability to engage in the story. Yet teacher read aloud was only the beginning of comprehension.

Student Conversations

Even with scaffolded read aloud, *Animal Farm* was difficult. As a result, students turned to each other for support. Between classes when students were not required to speak in English or expected teacher-centered instruction, lively conversations in Chinglish emerged. In one class, a handful of boys would stand around William and ask him questions.

William was a student who, despite having excellent English, showed little effort in his work. "I was lost when I was in junior high. At that time, I didn't know why I should study, so I started to mess around and became the worst student at the best class in the school," he recalled, "I studied English because of my families. They have high expectations for me, and they think if and only if I learn English I will have a better life in the future." Yet, while reading *Animal Farm*, he became an attentive student. Asked about this change, William explained, "It's mostly because of them, like friends from junior high, like Ryan, Justin, those boys... they kinda just got me to study." And, having excellent English, he reciprocated by assisting his friends in interpreting *Animal Farm*.

In Chloe and James' class of older students who had scored higher in English proficiency tests, different types of conversations took place. In their classes, heated debates and outrage centering around the lawlessness of Napoleon and Squealer were heard.

During member-checking, some participants collaborated with my recollections. Augustine remembered asking his peers for help. “The first three weeks I completely didn’t understand anything – so, well, I just asked my classmates about what the teacher was saying.” Chloe recounted, “The more interesting the novels are, you might discuss the message together and exchange our ideas. And that really helps, ’cause people look at things differently.” Student conversations helped comprehension and criticality. In William and Augustine’s class, students began by understanding what was happening in the story. In Chloe and James’ class, from the get-go, students grappled with matters of injustice and heard each other’s varying perspectives.

Yet, other participants remembered something entirely different. Instead of collaboration, they recalled peers spurring them to improve by creating a hostile environment. Ryan explained, “Joe was a jerk. He was like, “Oh, your English is not good! Blah blah blah blah, you’re so Taiwanese!” Nancy confirmed, “I agree with Ryan.” Madison added, “I think part of it was ’cause that Joe was really a pain, but we had to admit he really has good English – no?!” Ryan summarized, “So gotta keep up!” While some students leaned on each other’s language and analytical skills, others studied to avoid being teased. Yet, ironically, while Joe teased his peers about their “not good” English, it was through my speaking in “not good” Chinese that students were encouraged to practice their English.

Translanguaging

When I was hired, I was told to never speak Chinese within earshot of my students for fear that, once they knew I could understand Chinese, they would no longer speak English in class. Awkward as this was, I was familiar with the request. A decade earlier, as the only Taiwanese foreign teacher at a cram school, I was given the same rules.

However, this time things were different. As the first year proceeded, I began to question this rule. By the second semester, I started to leak evidence that I understood what students were saying in Chinese and could converse with them at a basic level. By the time I taught *Animal Farm*, I told the foreign language director that I would include translations of historical figures and geographic locations to help students make cross-curricular connections. As this unfolded, I discovered that fears of students no longer speaking English was unfounded. Years later, I can only identify one student that regularly asked me questions in Chinese during class – who was also regularly reprimanded by his peers for doing so.

What is more, rather than disrupting their English practice, when students realized I could speak Chinese, more students began dropping by during their lunchtime, some admitting they felt more comfortable getting to know me now. With this, English was no longer restricted to classroom talk as I conversed with them in both English and Chinese during breaks due to my lack of Chinese fluency. My practice of translanguaging reflects Ivy, a junior high English teacher in rural Taiwan, who “by using English together with Mandarin and Min-nan [Taiwanese], gradually her students became comfortable blending in English words and phrases in their daily conversation” (Ke & Lin, 2017, p. 46).

Together, teacher read aloud, student conversations, and translanguaging worked to meet students’ practical needs of comprehension. Now, students were eager to dive into *Animal Farm* at a discursive level. *Animal Farm* was Ryan’s favorite novel. He explained, “it is a great story, and there is more to it when one dives deeper, the morals and the metaphors in the story give it layers upon layers of thickness.”

Connecting Animal Farm

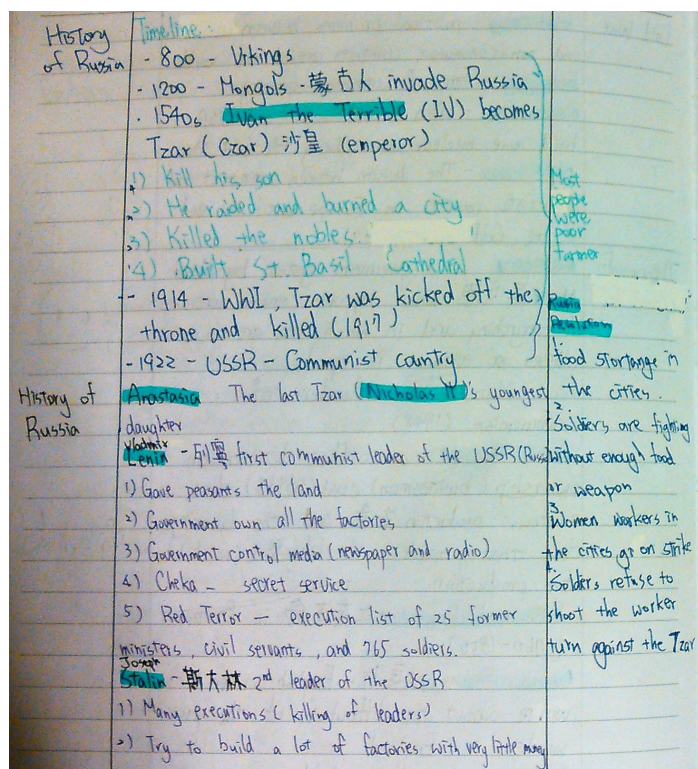
History lessons of the Russian Revolution connected *Animal Farm* at a societal level. Journal writing prompts connected *Animal Farm* at a personal level.

History Lessons

As a political allegory, *Animal Farm* connected to history. I taught the fall of the Russian monarch and the rise of the communist party (see Figure 1 for James' meticulously organized class notes). This helped students recognize characters as historical figures. "The author of this book George Orwell is really trying to do was to satir[iz]ed the communist government in USSR," James wrote, "every animals represent a character in the past. For example, Napoleon, the pig, stand for Joseph Stalin. He has the biggest power to do everything, but people that have the biggest power might corrupt other people."¹

Moreover, these lessons connected to their required history class. Discovering that their J2 history curriculum covered the communist regime in China, I asked students to notice parallels between *Animal Farm* and what they were learning in history. In my second year, I invited their history teacher to visit. I have a fond memory of a student dropping by one afternoon just to tell me that he had learned the same thing in history class. In his excitement, I could tell that cross-curricular references were uncommon but appreciated.

Figure 1. Excerpt of James' History Lesson Class Notes



¹ Excerpts from participants' work have preserved original spellings, punctuation, and grammar to reflect their junior high English abilities more authentically. Exceptions to this are edits placed in brackets.

Journal Writing

Students began class by completing a five-minute journal prompt. Journaling was a low-stakes opportunity to practice writing fluency while making meaning of the text in personal ways.

Early in the unit I asked, *do you think the animals (Old Major) are correct in saying that 'Man is the only creature that consumes without producing?'* Madison, Chloe, and Nancy's answers reflected their academic strengths and personalities. Madison was a calm and collected student. Foreign languages came easily for her in part because her parents spoke several languages. She also seemed to write effortlessly. Under the title "Consumer" decorated with a cartoon sheep, "baaa" in a word bubble, and a large-snouted, curly tailed pig, her answer agreed with the animals. "I guess the animals are right," she wrote, "We produce things from other animals. We take energy, stuffs from the nature but these are all not really from ourselves."

In contrast, Chloe, a mature and hardworking student who was always attentive in class making sure she didn't miss anything that was taught, insightfully disagreed, "No, man isn't the only creature that consumes without producing." She explained, "Because some insects such as ant, spider, grasshopper also doesn't produce anything. Besides,... we also invented technological products." She concluded, "Humans aren't that weak, and we got 'the king of animals' for reasons."

Then there was Nancy and her response. Nancy had an outgoing personality and, outside of class, noisily spread laughter around her. Still, during junior high, Nancy lacked confidence and did not like to write, finding it difficult to express her thoughts in English. However, watching sitcoms, she was enamored with the social life of American students and wanted to improve her English so she could go to high school in the U.S. In typical Nancy style, after staring at her open journal for several long minutes, she refused to take sides:

Mabye 'Yes' and maybe 'NO', because if I am a animal I won't think that man only ~~reature~~ creature consumes without producing cuz they give us food and we don't know where the food come from, but if I am a human. than maybe I will say Yes, because we didn't do anything, and we just kill the animals.

Prompts gave room for personal differences. While Madison and Chloe answered from an omniscient perspective by listing scientific evidence, Nancy answered by imagining herself first as animals and then farmers who did not care to know scientific facts.

I later realized how their personalities were reflected in their writing. Once, Nancy commented on how she saw Madison as a more practical and independent person whereas she spent more time managing relationships. Such differences played out in their writing. Madison responded straightforwardly while Nancy felt conflicted as she put herself in the shoes of one character and then another. Additionally, prompts adapted to students' English proficiency. Relying on technical words from the novel (consumes, produces), Nancy wrote her response without additional vocabulary. Alternatively, being open-ended, Chloe and Madison used extra vocabulary to expand their ideas.

Prompts also challenged students to think about their identities. I asked, *What kind of people do you think should have power in this world? Should you have power to control others?* Under the bubble letters "POWER" framed in a black rectangle, Madison wrote:

I think a person that is trustworthy should have power in this world. I guess in some ways I can have power to control others, but I shouldn't use the power to do some horrible things. So maybe in some of the time I'll say yes [to take power], and sometimes no.

With similar sentiments, Chloe penned:

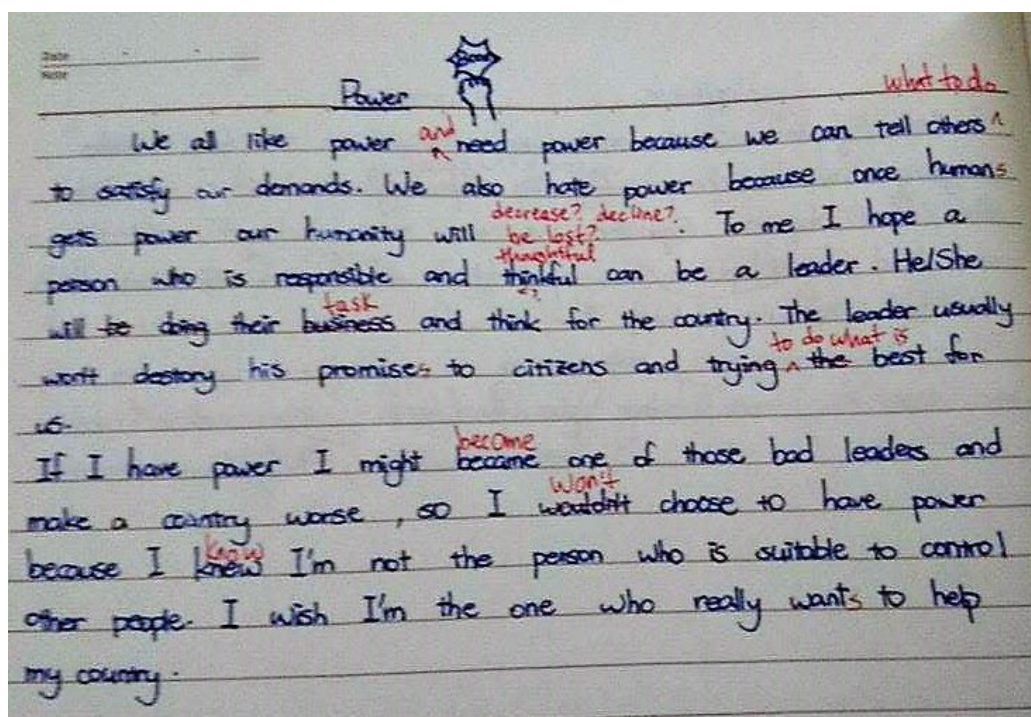
We all like power and need power because we can tell others to satisfy our demands. We also hate power... To me, I hope a person who is responsible and thankful can be a leader... The leader usually... trying the best for us. / If I have power I might become one of those bad leaders and make a country worse, so I wouldn't choose to have power because I know I'm not the person who is suitable to control other people. I wish I'm the one who really want to help my country.

(See Figure 2 for Chloe's complete answer). Drawing on *Animal Farm*, Madison and Chloe recognized power as a necessary evil. Chloe pointed out this conflict, "We all like power and need power... We also hate power."

Aware of its danger, they were hesitant to take power. Madison hedged her response with, "I guess," and was uncertain whether she'll "say yes" to having power. Similarly, Chloe was fearful that she might "make a country worse, so I wouldn't choose to have power." Asked to grapple with this wicked problem, Madison and Chloe reflexively saw their moral weaknesses. Their responses revealed a critical consciousness that, as privileged youth, they had a responsibility to lead justly.

Journal writing let students respond to the literature in ways that reflected their academic strengths, personalities, and formative identities. Such conclusions echo Liaw (2001)'s EFL college students' journal responses to American short stories. Liaw wrote, "each one of the students brought a piece of himself or herself to the interpretation of the story and responded uniquely. Their English language proficiency might have been limited, but their thoughts on the stories were rich" (p. 39).

Figure 2. Chloe's Journal Writing on Power



Contextualizing Animal Farm

Finishing *Animal Farm*, students wrote an essay. Students were given two prompts: 1. Explain how the system between the animals is a form of government controlled society. 2. Give at least 5 examples of how the government of *Animal Farm* became corrupt. Virtually all the students chose the second prompt. In hindsight, their choice was clear: the second prompt reflected Taiwan's political concerns as a young democratic nation.

Time was built-in for brainstorming arguments, writing outlines, and finding textual evidence. Students reorganized the story from its narrative structure into an argument structure. For instance, Augustine organized the story into suggested topics of "government offices," "social services," and "economy" in his brainstorming chart (Figure 3). Observing the learning that occurred in student conversations, in my second year I added two periods for collaboration when students could speak in any language. In small groups, students used their multiple "linguistic repertoires," like Lego blocks, to creatively build a deeper understanding not only of languages but cultures (Ke & Lin, 2017, p. 40).

Figure 3. Augustine's Essay Brainstorming Chart

Animal Farm Essay Question
How did Animal Farm become corrupt?

Essay requirements:
• Introduction Paragraph
• 4 Body Paragraphs
• Conclusion Paragraph

Governmental Offices	Social Services	Economy
Police—dogs —kill the animals when Napoleon tells them without trial. —The dog use fear do control the animals. —Threaten the animals.	hospital—knacker —old animal go to knacker. school—farm house —Young pigs have school, the others not.	wind mill - egg - food worker—animals (no pigs)
leader—Napoleon radio—sheeps speaker, of president Squealer	food—farm land	factory—The chickens lay eggs, then they break the eggs because they don't want their "children" to be taken to sell for money.

Moreover, focused on contextualized language use rather than memorization, I let students use their novels, notebooks, and other materials they had created during the 50-minute essay writing period. With this allowance, many students prepared drafts ahead of time. During member-checking, Ryan recalled posting on social media, “It’s 3am. I have never slept so late before, and I am still writing Ms. Leu’s essay.” Ryan elaborated,

And I wanted to write a lot of things because Animal Farm was my favorite story... And when I was writing [the] Animal Farm [essay] there was a lot of words I didn’t know how to write, like, I couldn’t spell it – ’cause my spelling was terrible, and my phonics was terrible. And so I sneaked out and checked the school computer to look up how to write it. And I remember looking up the word... I ran into your room and asked, “Ms. Leu, can I like finish my essay ’cause I got more things to write!”

Completing their essays, students were pleased with their work. “[My proudest English moment] was the first time we finished a novel and finished writing our first essay,” Augustine reminisced, “I had a real feeling of accomplishment knowing I could write something like this, to write something like this in English.” Augustine’s confidence in English writing had dramatically improved during junior high.

Participant essay word count ranged from 312 to 953, with a mean of 675 words. Their essays contextualized *Animal Farm* by defining and identifying corruption, hearing political messages, and considering their future.

Defining Corruption Using Animal Farm

The word “corruption” never appears in the novel, so to write their essays students needed to first define the word. Yet, unlike textbook approaches, they did not refer to a dictionary. Rather, they turned to *Animal Farm* for the definition.

Ryan and William’s varying definitions affirmed the contextual nature of words; that “most words do not have fixed meanings,” (Gee, 2012, p. 21). Exploring the workings of Animal Farm’s government, Ryan defined corruption as a social concern. Ryan wrote, “when a government corrupts is basically means that the government break down, and having problems with leadership, economy problems, citizens education problems...etc.” Alternatively, William used *Animal Farm*’s characterization to define corruption as a character flaw. William explained, “when they [the pigs] have the power, they became like their enemies, the human beings, and started to corrupt. Corrupt means dishonest or immoral behavior.” Having defined corruption, students now drew on Taiwanese politics to identify how corruption took place on Animal Farm.

Identifying Corruption in Animal Farm

In Taiwan, protests of government policies were common. As I taught *Animal Farm* in the spring of 2014, college students had occupied the legislative building during the Sunflower Student Movement to protest a trade agreement with China. Coincidentally, news broadcasts showed a pig poster alluding to Napoleon with the words “拒絕豬頭治國” (never allow pig head to rule the country) pasted behind the legislative hall podium (陳, 2014). In this milieu, students drew on Taiwan’s democratic process to explain incidences of corruption on Animal Farm.

Students were familiar with Taiwan’s open counting procedures where the public take active roles of checking for mistakes, analyzing unclear ballots, and requesting recounts (Reichenbach, 2020). Augustine identified corruption in its voting system, “The... way Animal

Farm become corrupt is when the vote for the leader, Napoleon tells every animals to vote it, and the animal who want to became leader is just Napoleon, so Napoleon is very very bad.” By telling “every animals to vote” in an uncontested election, Napoleon deceived the animals into thinking they had a choice while reinforcing his power as the so-called elected leader.

Accustomed to Taiwan’s freedom of speech (*Taiwan*, 2022), Nancy saw corruption in Napoleon’s suppression of dissent. “Military became corrupt...when anyone had said something bad about Napolen, the dogs will use fear to control the animals and they will threaten animals too.” Nancy also saw a lack of due process when the military executed animals without trial, “Your job is to ‘protect the animals’ not to protect the leader, and... they killed many of the animals and the dog didn’t ask any questions and just killed them!” She issued a public warning, “I think we need to let the animals to know, in this farm only you can protect yourself no one can protect you! There are no more justice in this farm.”

Echoing charges against President Chen’s misuse of government funds (Wong, 2009), Ryan condemned Napoleon’s deception in forcing the animals to labor for his personal advantage.

...you can read a part when they said “The windmill, however, had not after been used for generating electrical power. It was used for milling corn, and brought in a handsome money profit.” Every animal at work so hard on the windmill project. They were told that, finishing the windmill brings better life to the farm. With electrical power, hot and cold water, and the three-day week. These are the things that the animals had once dream of after finishing the windmill. Boxer even die because of the heavy labor to finish the windmill. But when the windmill was complete. The pigs use it to making money. And all that cashes turn in to the wines that the pigs drink.

Aware of Taiwanese sentiments regarding crimes of bribery and money laundering (Aspinwall, 2021), Ryan continued,

It’s like the government said to you that “The building that you built will be use as a library for the benefit of the country”. But after, they used for their own holiday hotel. Won’t you be angry at the government? That’s how the animals feel.

Written eloquently, Ryan’s critique of the pigs reflected democratic principles upheld by Taiwan’s judicial branch that governments are by the people and for the people.

Lastly, William understood the principle of social contracts that no one, not even the leader, is above the rule of law:

At first all the animals vote for the seven commandments for everyone to follow, but Napoleon starts to break all the rules,... Napoleon has all the power, so he believes that he can change the rules the way he wants... They should punish themselves and set an example but not corrupt as the story goes.

William explained that Napoleon did not have the right to change the law simply because he was in power. Whoever breaks the law, including the highest government officials, should be judged under the law. Notably, William’s suggestion of punishment likely drew on the life sentence of President Chen for corruption (Wong, 2009). Taken together, Taiwan’s political events, energy, and activism was essential to students’ critical reading of the text. And, in exchange, they heard *Animal Farm* as a political message relevant to Taiwan’s democracy.

Drawing Political Messages from Animal Farm

Augustine heard *Animal Farm* encouraging governments to listen to its people. “I think if the government wants to stop corruption, they need to really know what the humans really want,” he wrote, “and do something really for the [w]hole country, not for themselves.”

Madison found lessons in civic participation. First, citizens must be educated. She wrote, “I think the way to stop corruption is the animals should remember the commandments better. Almost every reason that they were corruptions because the seven commandments, but Squealer is going to convince them that it’s wrong.” Second, grassroots leadership is essential. Madison explained, “So there should be someone that would like to stand out [speak out].” Third, referendums are a good option. “Another way that I think it’s going to be faster,” Madison reasoned, “is they should start using democracy – voting – as their government system.” And if all else fails, citizens should revolutionize. “If this still don’t work,” Madison concluded, “Maybe they should find Snowball and draw up a plan, kill the dogs and Napoleon.”

Reflective of how Taiwan’s democracy has been forged through overcoming colonization, conquest and, more recently, martial law and government corruption (Wu, 2011), Augustine and Madison read *Animal Farm* as a cautionary tale that sustaining political freedom requires the collective efforts of the government and its citizens.

Animal Farm’s Implications for Future Selves

Recalling the former principal’s words that I was teaching Taiwan’s future leaders, I asked students to consider, *when I become a leader, how will I lead?* Chloe wondered whether she would have the character and emotional courage to stand up for what is right:

I saw how savage and selfish are the government sometimes. I also think about am I going to do something to change the government if I’m one of the animals. Do I have the bravery and ability to help everyone who is suffer?

Chloe saw *Animal Farm* as a warning of the dangers and potential of individual power.

Literature is a means to contextualized language use. Students comprehended *Animal Farm* through scaffolds, made connections from text to society and personal life, and analyzed the novel by drawing on Taiwan’s democratic process.

Learning from Students

Reflecting on my process as a teacher-researcher, I am reminded of the words of a beloved professor, “I love teaching because I learn so much from you all!” From teaching students in Taiwan to analyzing my practice alongside former students, I learned many things. Observing student conversations, I shifted instruction to include translations and invited translanguaging in class. Analyzing participants’ work, I became aware of how Taiwan’s participatory democracy helped students critique *Animal Farm*. Engaging in member-checking helped me create a richer and fuller understanding of what took place in our class.

LIMITATIONS

As post-practice teacher-research, this study has limitations in curricular choice and participant population. A curricular choice that did not align to sociocultural practices was Grace's homogenous selection of White, Western novels and authors. This, instead, aligned to government-approved textbooks' emphasis on Western ideologies (Ke, 2012; Luo, 2023) limiting cultural and political connections and critique. Moreover, it minimizes the fact that, as the *lingua franca*, English currently has more non-native than native speakers (Luo, 2017b).

The study's transferability is limited by issues of "class." While English abilities in Grace's classes varied dramatically, their average ability was significantly higher than their peers. During member-checking, William shared how this helped them improve, "In my high school, okay to be straight up, their English level was really bad, like rotten to a certain degree that a lot of people said, 'well, I don't know English, I should just give up, so whatever.'" He reflected, "So think this only happens in certain classes. I feel like the attitude at my high school and my junior high was so different, like totally different feeling." Tseng (2010) collaborated with William's observations by noting that lower-level English proficiency students struggled to appreciate authentic texts, finding them "boring and difficult" (p. 56). In conjunction, students' upper-middle class status provided them resources such as international travel not typical of Taiwanese families which gave them practical reasons to study English. An additional "class" consideration was that these classes were part of a language immersion program at a private school. Such English immersion is currently absent in Taiwan's public education; and while recent initiatives has earmarked government funding for this (National Development Council, 2018), it has yet to be a sustainable reality. Yet, despite these limitations, this study affords a unique window by tracing the process of Grace's teaching and participants' learning.

CONCLUSION

This study showed how a unit based on *Animal Farm* was contextualized to the sociopolitical interest and knowledge of Taiwanese students through activities of read aloud, translanguaging, journal writing, history lessons, small group collaborations, and critical literacy. Students' writing revealed how non-standard semantics, spelling, or grammar usage, and a lack of extensive productive vocabulary does not hinder EFL students from writing arguments, offering multiple perspectives, reflecting on their lives, and discussing social issues.

As Taiwan's government has again reinvigorated its efforts to improve English fluency through the *Bilingual 2030* initiative, its proposal includes restructuring junior high for "flexible and innovative learning models" and "group learning," (National Development Council, 2018, pp. 12). Such policy changes have again sparked debate as to whether English proficiency will actually improve, though it is generally something that Taiwanese citizens support (Ngangbam, 2022). In this context, our study converses with the possibilities of local innovative English learning.

Intricately tied to these findings was student member-checking. Member-checking not only triangulated results but added alternative perspectives. Moreover, students' reflections of their junior high experiences give educators a window into the longer-term impact of sociocultural learning. Five years later, participants could recall specific novels, activities, and events that took place in Grace's class. As educational research seeks effective practices *for*

students, we hope that there will be more spaces to listen and engage *with* students. We end by responding to Chloe's message that began this article:

Chloe, we agree, junior high students can understand so much more than textbooks. Drawing on your personal and social backgrounds, you and your classmates *can* and *have* read novels that have helped you all understand and connect histories, cultures, and current societal issues. It is our hope that in sharing what took place in your class and your writings, other EFL teachers will be inspired to discover even more ways to bring learning English closer to their students' lives.

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