Recent conservative reviews of Australia’s national English curriculum argue for a return to less critical approaches to English language education and a stronger emphasis on traditional, functional approaches to provide adequate English learning experiences for school-age students. This neoliberal shift poses a threat to adolescent learners from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds because it demands second language learning without critical engagement with the political, social and cultural conditions that the learners are experiencing. The authors argue that newly arrived English as an additional language (EAL) learners need opportunities both for academic skills development and critical engagement with the new conditions of their lives. The authors use critical discourse analysis to highlight the historical dilution of critical literacy across iterations of state curricula in Australia, and the ways teachers mediate and mitigate the curriculum changes in lessons for EAL students. The findings indicate that while critical approaches to second language education are under threat at the policy level, teachers are continuing to promote them through contextualized, contingent, and at times, covert, classroom practices. The detailed description of these practices demonstrates the ongoing commitment of teachers to the power of critical engagement to enhance the lives of their EAL students.

Introduction

Criticality in English language education is a contested ontological space. As political agendas seek to influence education policy and practice, it is necessary to continually monitor the place of criticality and critical literacy in school curriculum and pedagogy. This study is interested in how criticality within language and...
literacy education is being enacted by teachers of adolescent English language learners amid the so-called literacy crisis in the neoliberal eduscape of Australian schooling. Education authorities in the Global North, including countries such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, are favoring more easily testable, functional approaches to English language teaching (Locke & Cleary, 2011). Within such contexts, critical literacy is left fighting for space in the curriculum (Moore, Zancanella, & Ávila, 2014). In Australia, the metaphors for this crisis have included literacy wars and battlegrounds. The debates have been largely located around striking a balance between the literacy legacies of the past, for example, reading the Western literary canon, and the future-orientated, technology-based literacy needs of students (Snyder, 2008). Currently in the state of Queensland where we live, the Education Department is increasing the emphasis on skills, naming reading as one of its priorities in its action plan for education in the state (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016).

The debates about literacy and the place of critical literacy are not isolated to Australia. In the United States, Masuda (2012) argued that the context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has presented difficulties for teachers interested in engaging students in critical literacy practices. For her, this is problematic given the need for such work in contemporary and future societies. While the literacy wars in the Australian context focus mainly on the ideological tussles in curriculum construction, Masuda’s work pinpoints the work of teachers and the discourses of compliance and prescription in the NCLB agenda. In other settings, the questions relate to the value of blending critical and more skills-based orientations to literacy. For example, Huh’s (2016) study at a Korean university examined critical literacy in a program of language learning in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The questions for Huh are if and how critical literacy can complement a skills-based functional language teaching program. A core focus of the work is balance and the ways that conventional and critical literacy can augment each other beneficially for EFL teaching and learning.

Here we are interested in teachers’ work and the teaching of critical literacy in Australia where the literacy wars have been long and loud. We present a study of the accounts and classroom
interactions of three Australian high school teachers and their approaches to critical literacy with classes of English language learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of particular interest are the ways that the teachers envision and enact criticality within the curricular conditions currently favoring more functionalist approaches to literacy. By functionalist we mean a focus on the relationship between language and meaning for the purpose of achieving social goals but without the critical recognition of power relations and the possible need for social change (cf. Crossman, 2016). Our point is that this approach is no doubt important as part of the curriculum, but it is diminished without criticality. The approach becomes “critical-lite,” which means a failure to address power both in and behind language (Fairclough, 2001). Instead of engaging learners in robust critical engagement with how things are intentionally represented in texts with associated ideological assumptions and effects, a functionalist approach adopts a light touch, —merely employing a skeptical reading or looking for bias. We argue that this critical-lite curriculum approach is impoverished and fails at a policy level to equip second language learners with the resources to recognize and respond to power in their social lives. Our research shows that it is indeed the classroom teachers who remain committed to critical work and its importance to their English as an additional language (EAL) learners.

Our argument, which will be made clear through the analysis, is that critical literacy and notions of what criticality is currently reside with and are practiced by teachers at the level of the classroom. Re-envisioning criticality, then, needs to be done in relation to what teachers as professionals are doing at the grassroots level, often in the face of indeterminate representations of criticality in the curriculum. The politics of curriculum enable us to understand that the curricular policy may or may not present a range of useful, theoretical models and when it does, these models are subjected to political tussles and corrosion over time (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). Our argument is that looking closely at what teachers actually do such as combining disparate resources including policy in the interests of particular learners—can provide new understandings of criticality as it is currently being enacted. Additional theoretical models and definitions of criticality divorced from the real lives of teachers and learners are
not necessarily required. Critical literacy has its origins in grassroots practice through, for example, the work of Freire (1970, 1973), and we argue that this is where most of the explicit and productive work on critical literacy is currently occurring. In this study we return to classroom praxis to explore localized interpretations of criticality.

The article has four parts, with the aim of showing the policy recontextualization of critical literacy in Australian curriculum across time through the efforts of teachers to interpret and manipulate the curriculum for the benefit of their learners. The specific sections are (a) revisiting and exploring new directions in definitions of criticality and critical literacy, (b) outlining the research methodology, (c) presenting findings on curricular recontextualization of critical literacy and teachers’ classroom practices with EAL students, and (d) arguing the implications of the research for new ways of understanding criticality and its resilience in teachers’ practices despite the ascendancy of functionalist discourses in curricula.

Revisiting and Redefining Critical Literacy

Defining Criticality

As noted previously, critical is a term that has been fraught with ambiguity, especially in educational settings. Barton (2007) made the point that all education is critical in that it teaches people to think, reason and evaluate. The term loses its force, however, when all educators claim to teach critically. This argument preempts more socio-politically focused definitions of the critical that have their roots in critical theory and liberation movements, such, as that associated with Freire, and orient to social change. While critical thinking might legitimately involve discerning flaws in an argument (e.g., Goatly, 2000), a more socially conscious approach examines social structures such as class and language, and the ways they maintain inequitable access to power for certain groups in the society.

In a foundational book on critical pedagogies and language education, Norton and Toohey (2004) linked critical second language teaching to social change. This goal of social change through critical endeavors has provoked questions about scale
and impact. For example, Poynton (2000) argued that while integrating language and the social in an agenda of social change seems reasonable, she is not convinced that the linguistic analysis of texts can effectively imagine, much less bring about, radical social change. Taylor (2001) provided a means of resolving these concerns. She proposed two possibilities for change as an outcome of critically oriented research: direct intervention in practices that are identified as (a) problematic and (b) critique. Critique can take several forms including discrediting the status quo, or conversely, raising awareness of hitherto undervalued discourses and practices. Both forms of critique can lead to recommendations for change. Taylor’s insights are useful for recognizing how classroom critical literacy can effect change in practice. Where teachers afford students the voice to discredit or affirm classroom texts, social change is in part achieved because power positions are disrupted through students being granted the authority to comment on the texts under discussion.

Within second-language education, learners are often directly affected by the constraints imposed by the power of the dominant language. Luke (2004) argued that pedagogies in the field must scrutinize the social structures that lead to material disadvantage and violence of all types against language learners. He maintained that these pedagogies are characterized by externalization, naming and questioning the world, and can be accomplished through discursive practice and embodied action. The challenge for education systems, schools, and teachers is in the practices they adopt to address the cultural, social, and linguistic needs of EAL students for whom education is central to building individual capacity and life pathways.

Conceptualizing Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is understood as an important component of contemporary reading and writing practices. The skills of reading and writing are recognized as basic literacy practices that are foundational to critical engagement with the texts and textual practices that constitute social life. Masuda (2012) argued that the importance of basic literacy skills cannot be dismissed but that literacy teaching needs to go beyond teaching only the basics in order to help students meet the “increasingly complex demands
of a technologized, multimodal communication society” (p. 221). The core tenets of critical literacy were addressed by Luke (2000): critical literacy “focuses on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and remediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-taking with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work” (p. 460).

Freebody and Luke (1990)’s Four Resources Model of a literate person has enjoyed considerable uptake in classrooms, especially in Australia. The model defines the literate person as a composite of code-breaker, text user, text participant, and text critic. Despite the holistic approach proposed in the model, the critical dimension is overlooked at times. In language teaching classrooms in Canada, critical literacy instruction is often omitted in favor of reading skills development (Lau, 2013). In EFL settings, critical literacy is often an add-on to skills-based curricula and then often only with exclusive groups of students or in after-school classes (Huh, 2016).

Subsequent to the work of the early critical literacy advocates and models such as the Four Resources Model, many have argued that the distillation of critical literacy to one method should be actively resisted and rethought (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2000, 2012; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005). This is because molding and deploying “the tools, attitudes and philosophies of critical literacy … depends upon students’ and teachers’ everyday relations of power, their lived problems and struggles … and on educators’ professional ingenuity in navigating the enabling and disenabling local contexts of policy” (Luke, 2012, p. 9). Increasingly, the focus is on context and contingency. Others, for example Anwarrudin (2015), have argued that critical literacy has not sufficiently engaged with the affective domain, which is crucial in responding to ethical dilemmas and human suffering.

Toward Reconceptualizing Critical Literacy

Leung (2013) argued that situated practice can often be more instructive than abstracted norms, such as those found in policy. Following Leung, we argue in this article that generalized constructions of critical literacy in curriculum need to be accompanied by empirical examples of praxis. We maintain that re-envisioning and
Retheorizing criticality cannot be done in isolation from what teachers are doing in classrooms. Critical analysis of language education policy, curriculum, and syllabuses helps to make visible authorized and legitimized possibilities and limitations. Equally, classroom pedagogy that realizes the curriculum is crucial to show how critical literacy is being recontextualized in active, contingent ways.

Exploring the interrelationship between curriculum elements on the one hand, and teacher uptake, adaptation, and resistance on the other can generate productive understandings of criticality and its localized forms across time. Being cognizant of the agentive roles teachers take in enacting curriculum and exploring how this happens at the micro level, helps to provide evidence of teachers’ knowledge and their professional, discretionary judgments that are often downplayed in national standardized reporting (Comber & Nixon, 2009). It also provides a mechanism by which to see how teachers talk back to the neoliberal priorities that tend to elbow out criticality. The dilution and marginalization of critical literacy, in Australian and U.S. English language curriculum frameworks, has recently been documented (Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016; Brass, 2015).

As school cohorts increasingly mirror super diverse (Vertovec, 2007) migratory populations, the ways teachers interpret criticality from the curriculum in their lessons with diverse student cohorts is therefore highly relevant.

**Research Methodology**

**Theorizing Recontextualization**

Our interest is in the ways in which critical literacy is presented and re-presented across a chain of interrelated pedagogical contexts—from policy to classroom practices to teacher accounts. Drawing on Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), we argue that each of these contexts provides the material milieu for observing the distinctive, situated implications for critical literacy as it is being enacted. We use critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2001, 2003) and its concept of recontextualization to show how a discourse in one social practice can rematerialize in a different social practice. In his application of Bernstein’s (1990) notion of recontextualization, Fairclough (2003) outlined four
features that indicate recontextualization has occurred. These are (a) the degree of abstraction from concrete events; (b) the presence or absence of particular elements; (c) the order events are presented in; and (d) additions, elaborations, legitimations, and evaluations that are present. Associated is Fairclough’s (2003) notion of the genre chain that “works as a regulative device for selecting and privileging some discourses and excluding others” (p. 34). As texts move along a genre chain, a filtering process occurs. Part of the filtering effect is that discourses which are drawn on and evident in one genre (e.g., a syllabus) are filtered out and missing in the next (e.g., a school-based English teaching plans). Through this process of inclusion and exclusion, the chain serves to regulate the selection of discourses. Crucially, however, as found in this study, the filtering process can also occur in the opposite direction. That is, discourses that were not present in the syllabus were found to be present in the teachers’ classroom practice and interview talk. Indeed, it is rather more complex than one text being filtered and recontextualized into another subsequent text as many, often competing texts from different time periods (e.g., curriculum policies) can impact on succeeding texts, such as teachers’ classroom talk. This makes analysis of policy enactment a complex matter of tracing how teachers might “rework and recombine aspects of different policies, and draw on disparate ideas, examples of ‘good practice’ and other resources to produce something original” (Ball, McGuire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011, p. 628).

Investigation of the enactment of critical literacy can provide evidence of shifts in priorities between contexts. Janks (2014) argued that “the point about recontextualization is that the new context changes the meaning of the original” (p. 37). This is of particular interest to educational researchers seeking to explore how teachers exercise agency to follow, modify or reject certain discourse elements of powerful genres such as curriculum statements on critical literacy.

Research Methods

Classroom and interview data are drawn from a larger, critical, multiple case study (Simons, 2009) conducted in two state-run high schools, Beacon High and Riverdale High (both pseudonyms) in metropolitan Brisbane, Australia. Situated in a low to
middle socioeconomic area, Beacon High School has a large proportion of refugee-background students (70%) and also migrant students with a small cohort of international students. Riverdale High is situated in a higher socioeconomic area with fewer refugee-background learners but a growing number of migrant and international students. The overarching interest of the study was to identify how official constructions of critical literacy are reworked in the hands of teachers in their efforts to re-envision criticality in ways that matter to real lives—both students and the teachers themselves. The questions guiding the research were:

Research Question 1. How does English language education policy construct critical literacy for English language learners in the research context?
Research Question 2. What understandings about critical literacy do teachers of EAL learners articulate and why?
Research Question 3. How do they enact critical literacy?

Participants

Invitations to participate in the study were sent to several metropolitan schools in Brisbane, Australia, where a specific syllabus was taught (discussed subsequently). Four high school English teachers volunteered to participate in the study but only three are included in this article. These three teachers—Riva, Margot, Celia (pseudonyms)—were experienced teachers of EAL learners. Riva taught at Riverdale High and had over 30 years of teaching experience and, like Margot, was a writer/designer of her school’s senior EAL Work Program. Margot had taught languages (Italian and French) and English as a second/additional language for over 25 years in high schools. She was a writer/designer of the Beacon High senior EAL Work Program, had taught many refugee-background adolescents experiencing trauma and hardship and was active in advocacy work. Celia had an Early Childhood degree, and had retrained later in her career with a master of education in teaching English to speakers of other languages. At the time of the study, she had been teaching English language
learners for five years at Beacon High. Riva and Celia identified as White, Anglo-Celtic Australians while Margot was of Italian descent.

Data are presented from individual interviews with the teachers—three each—and three of their critical literacy lessons, which were observed and video recorded across a period of one school term (10 weeks). At both schools, the teachers designed and taught whole units of work that drew on critical literacy concepts in term blocks of 30 lessons, three per week. Prior to data collection, the teachers were each asked to self-select three of their unit lessons—one from the beginning, middle, and end of the 10-week term—equaling nine 70-min lessons in total spread evenly across the term. Doing so ensured that the practice captured in the data collection was representative of their regular critical literacy teaching. The teachers also wore lapel microphones to capture their audio, which was then transcribed, and the researcher, Alford, took field notes while observing. As the authors of this article, we are both involved with second language education and regularly work and research with teachers. The details of the students and the two schools are provided in Table 1.

Findings and Discussion

Tracing Representations of Critical Literacy in English Curriculum as Policy

Representations in policy are significant as they texture certain discursive possibilities, at the official level, and omit or peripheralize others. In doing so, they offer teachers an endorsed, legitimized view of what it means to learn English. We discuss first in this section some of the representations of criticality in the curriculum, which was in operation at the time of data collection in 2010. Following this, we discuss the same for its antecedent, the original syllabus for EAL or English as an additional dialect (EAL/D) learners issued in 2007. We then zero in on the 2002 syllabus—a pivotal and influential curriculum text which included a more strident rendering of critical literacy and which featured in the teachers’ work despite being superseded by the later, less critical version used in 2010. Following this, we explore the teachers’ classroom practice for the ways in which they are “engaged in elaborating the condensed codes of policy
[curriculum] texts to an imagined logic of [their] practical work” (Singh, Thomas & Harris, 2013, p. 1).

The teachers were using the second iteration of the state-based syllabus for English language learners called English for ESL Learners (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007, 2009). This syllabus is still being used today by many state schools as EAL/D learner enrolments rise and as schools make the transition to the national curriculum. The English for ESL Learners syllabus only mentions critical literacy in the glossary and has largely expunged the critical from its content in exchange for more traditional ways of teaching English. The closest resemblance to critical literacy can be found in the Objectives section where it states:

Section 3.3 Cognitive processes

In the Cognitive processes objectives, students analyse, evaluate and produce texts to demonstrate how and why meaning is created.

By the conclusion of the course, in their own work and in response to the work of others, students should be able to:

- select, analyse, synthesise, infer, and evaluate subject matter from a variety of written and spoken texts,
• offer a position, drawing conclusions and justifying decisions in response to written and spoken texts. (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007, 2009, p. 5)

This statement includes a small range of mental or thinking processes, some of which indicate a possible critical approach: select, analyze, synthesize, infer, evaluate, draw conclusions. However, these are more aligned with critical thinking, a cognitive approach with no vision of social transformation. Due in part to the vestiges of the literacy wars that pitched critical literacy against traditional literacy approaches, there is no overt commitment to critical literacy as an overall objective for learning (see also Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016).

Two years prior, in 2007, the English syllabus specifically for EAL/D learners was introduced after decades of lobbying by EAL/D teachers. This senior high school syllabus, English for ESL Learners (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007), foregrounded explicit second-language teaching, and posited a less clear version of critical literacy but still retained some of the 2002 focus, as is evident in the following excerpt:

**Critical reading.** In all areas of study it is expected students will learn to read critically. This involves:

- analyzing texts (e.g., subject matter, author, audience, purpose, positioning);
- selection and exclusion of content/information (e.g., gaps and silences); marginalization;
- use of language (e.g., idiom, emotive language);
- how attitudes, values and beliefs impact on construction and interpretation of texts. (p. 11)

However, the more robust terminology used in an earlier 2002 syllabus, discussed subsequently, was not apparent.

By far, the most critically oriented syllabus in Queensland to date was the English: Senior Syllabus (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 2002) for all students, including EAL/D, undertaking senior high school English. A paucity of professional development material available meant this syllabus became one of the few points of reference for critical literacy for teachers of EAL/D. This syllabus foregrounded that a critical
approach to language study included understanding “how texts reproduce, negotiate or challenge ways of thinking and being that are available in a culture at particular times, and why readers, viewers and listeners may make different readings from a text” (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 2002, p. 1). Central to the view of language study underpinning this syllabus was the understanding that “discourse, genre, register and textual features interact and are interdependent in texts … [and that] they are used in making meaning of, or producing readings from, texts” (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 2002, p. 2). The syllabus drew intentionally on Gee’s (1990) concept of discourse, which requires attention to cultural assumptions, values and beliefs characteristic of different groups and how these underpin all texts (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 2002). A committed though rather abstract depiction of critical literacy was obvious in this syllabus with terms such as discourses, marginalization, representations, and readings positions (invited, dominant, alternative, and resistant).

An observable shift in the representation of critical literacy is therefore traceable from clear commitment in the 2002 syllabus, to waning commitment in the foundational 2007 EAL/D syllabus, to a more diluted version in the 2009 amended syllabus. What the teachers did in interpreting and augmenting these divergent representations in order to enact critical literacy is explored subsequently.

Teachers as Agents of Recontextualizing Critical Literacy

Drawing on the concept of recontextualization outlined previously, we present elements that were most evident in the teachers’ work. Evaluations are most evident in the accounts of the teachers as recorded in interviews. The other three strategies for recontextualization are more prominent in the classroom interactions and thus we focus on these: the presence or absence of particular elements; the degree of abstraction from concrete events; and the order events are presented in.

The first indication of recontextualizing criticality in schools is evident in the English work program planning for Years 11 and 12. As experienced, leading teachers, Margot and
Riva had selected particular Key Learning Experiences and assessment items for the Year 11 classes from the available options in the 2009 syllabus that were then expanded on in their term unit planning. These included (a) examining how individuals and groups, times, places, events or concepts and their relationships with one another are represented in written or spoken or multimodal texts such as documentaries, feature articles, and television and radio news broadcasts; and (b) analyzing how vocabulary and verbal, nonverbal, visual, auditory, or language features are selected and used for different purposes and audiences.

The associated assessment item was a written, investigative report on how the media represents groups in society (e.g., women in sport, refugees). Beacon High also included in their Year 12 planning the following focus taken directly from the syllabus range of options: identifying the individuals, groups, times, places and issues that are represented in a variety of literary texts; making and justifying decisions about why they are represented in similar or different ways. The assessment item was a written persuasive text—a hortatory speech calling a group of people to action in relation to some aspect of the unit theme of oppression. It is important to note that schools in Queensland can exercise choice in the kinds of learning experiences and assessment items they choose for their learners. The suggested range in the syllabus includes some learning experiences/activities and assessment items that are not necessarily critical in nature. It is significant, then, that these two schools were selecting learning experiences from the syllabus that easily afforded critical engagement with language, literature, and literacy from among others that do not. The presence of these particular elements in their planning signifies the schools’ commitment to critical literacy, despite the diminishing syllabus commitments over the eight-year period.

The following quotes from the interviews outline the teachers’ views of critical literacy, and why they see it as important for their learners:

> Critical literacy is not too hard for these kids to understand. It’s just the tools that you attach to it, to explain it … You’ll often hear criticisms of using critical literacy that are really criticisms of the material that they’re
expected to manage, I think. Not criticisms of their ability to understand. (Riva, interview 2)

I could have easily done an investigative report and said, “write me a report about animals in the Antarctic” which would just be simple fact finding without actually judging and evaluating and trying to understand why it’s been said in this particular way. (Margot, interview 2)

(My students have) got to realise that a particular text has cultural implications and assumptions behind it. Second language learners need to know how to sort out those cultural implications. (Celia, interview 1)

These comments sit in contrast to the growing assumption that EAL learners benefit most from functionalist approaches to teaching English language, which leave them being able to read literally and to a degree interpretively, but without the ability to critically analyze textual features and the ideological work these texts do. The teachers seem convinced that their EAL learners can and need to do critical literacy, despite it being contested, and that what is required is appropriate pedagogy to enable this to happen.

Recontextualizing Critical Literacy in Classroom Interactions

In the following section, we examine the ways that the three teachers recontextualize critical literacy in their classroom interactions.

Case 1: Riva

Degree of Abstraction From Concrete Events

In the following extract, we see that Riva deliberately opens access to critical literacy by mobilizing critical literacy terminology through everyday language in order to make it accessible to her learners. Fairclough (2001) argued that one of the constraints on access to discourse, and therefore on access to knowledge, is manifest in the formality of language form. Fairclough argued this is “a common property in many societies of practices and discourses of high social prestige and restricted access” (p. 54). Formal language can constrain contents, subjects (people), and their relations. Reduction in formal language, on the other hand, reduces these constraints and can make access to knowledge possible. During the whole unit, Riva interlaced abstract critical
literacy terms such as *invited readings* and *resistant readings* from the 2002 syllabus, with everyday explanations. Formal terms became the everyday language of the classroom as Riva used them repeatedly in her talk by the end of the lesson.

Riva, Lesson 1: What did you think about the Chinese (program called) “China? Pandas’ Future?” [Pause]. Was it a positive story?

Nancy: Not really.

Riva: So they are showing that the Chinese people are helping the pandas and it’s improving and succeeding. Scientists? Government? Scientists?

Male 5: Scientists.

Riva: Scientists. So it’s a very positive picture of the Chinese scientists, successful? Helping? Nancy says not really?

Nancy: Yeah. In that way it is- I don’t know really.

Riva: Not really, because? [Riva pauses and waits for a contribution]

Nancy: Because they need- they can’t breed and they can’t [inaudible].

Ben: Because it is artificial.

Nancy: Yeah, it’s artificial.

Riva: Because they can’t breed, because the problem is?

Female: Because they won’t sort the problem. They are just trying to have...

Riva: Okay, very interesting.

Crystal: Because they can’t do it forever. Why would they help them if they try to make a solution [inaudible], you have to make a solution that can help them.

Riva: Very good. What I’m asking you to do is to make meaning from this text and you are making meanings almost in two lines. You are making the meaning that the Chinese Government, the Chinese scientists anyway, are doing a very good job of helping pandas through a very difficult situation and you are also making the meaning that it’s artificial, that it’s not sustainable. So we can see the same text in different ways, can’t we? … But is any one of those meanings less valid than the other or more valid than the other? Is Ben’s meaning more valid than Crystal and Nancy’s? [Students shake heads] … They’re all valid, aren’t they? So why do you make those different readings?

Peter: Because different people have different points of view.

Riva: … Exactly. The term we use when we are doing critical analysis is “readings”. We say that that meaning that you have made of the text is a reading and it’s a noun, -ing, gerund. So it’s a reading. It can be plural, readings. It is not the verb reading that you get in the dictionary. It is not reading a book. It’s making meaning from a text. The critical meaning of the term “reading” is to make meaning from the text and you can
make different meanings. We have names for those different readings.

By using the students’ own interpretations of the documentary, Riva minimized the degree of abstraction from concrete events, and was then able to communicate complex critical literacy terms to her students. The shifts in levels of formality in her language, evident in Riva moving from the students’ ideas, to their meaning-making, to readings, shows how her language choices act as “a linguistic bridge” (Gibbons, 2003, p. 259) between her students’ current understandings and more complex critical literacy concepts.

Presence or Absence of Particular Elements

Three elements are notably present in Riva’s lesson. First, critical literacy concepts for deconstructing texts in an objectifying, rationalist way are clearly evident. Much of this approach is derived from the earlier 2002 English syllabus that historically guided the teaching of EAL/D learners within the mainstream cohort. The text analytic approach to critical literacy endorsed in the 2002 syllabus included critical literacy concepts such as: the constructedness of texts, ideological assumptions in texts, representations, gaps and silences, Discourse, and reader positions. In this lesson, Riva recontextualizes the reader position concept with her learners in ways they can understand. Second, Riva engages her class in the process of examining ideas in a text from a range of perspectives which “challenge(s) students to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions and understandings” (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004, p. 56), for example, the perspectives or readings made by several students in the class. Third, Riva deliberately teaches the grammatical word classes of the critical literacy terms, for example, readings as gerunds. She develops metalanguage with her students in order to talk about the new language presented. In this lesson, she also provided models of complex sentences with relative and complement clauses, indicating a strong scaffolding of language with a writing focus, as seen in Figure 1. In this way, Riva is showing simultaneous focus on text encoding, text using, and critical text analysis. Her practice here also reflects the 2007 syllabus, which, as noted
previously, had a stronger emphasis on grammar and sentence teaching, important aspects for EAL learners.

*Order Events Are Presented in*

Notably absent in the syllabus was any suggested ordering of critical literacy stages of inquiry so this was left to the teachers’ interpretations. Riva commences with the idea of a message, then moves to meaning-making, followed by readings, and then specifically to the types of readings available to readers, for example, dominant, resistant, alternative. She then returns, almost full circle, to meaning-making. She employs a purposefully premeditated order of events in her teacher talk, moving from message in the documentary to meaning making to readings and finally to specific types of readings (e.g., invited and resistant). This ordering lessens the cognitive load and allows her students to see connections between interpretations and readings. Student contributions were legitimized and used by Riva as uptake as she built

**FIGURE 1. Students’ sentences on whiteboard.**
on what students had said before moving on to the critical concepts. Returning to meaning-making reinforces an underlying principle of critical literacy: that readers are agentive and bring to bear on texts a range of cultural as well as personal values, attitudes, and beliefs that influence the way they interpret texts. Linking new concepts to the everyday in a series of connected steps such as this enables students “to move step-by-step toward more in-depth understandings of challenging concepts” (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 15). The initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern observable in the talk in Riva’s classroom reflects of number of school conditions. First, it is indicative of the traditional approach to teaching taken by many teachers at Riva’s school. Second, the learners in the class had a range of English speaking proficiency levels and many were not confident speakers of English making it challenging for them to respond to Riva in lengthy turns. In response, the IRF pattern adopted by Riva granted students opportunities to participate but with reduced language demands.

Case 2: Margot

Degree of Abstraction From Concrete Events

The following data extract comes from Margot’s second lesson at Beacon High, also in a Year 11 language of the media unit, in which she explored the key critical literacy concept of representations and the key language features of an investigative report. The aim of the investigative report was to show how the media under-represents or misrepresents certain community groups.

Margot, Lesson 2: Why are we looking at how the media represents people? How does it affect you?
   Male student: Future generations.
   Female student: Because we are African.
   Margot: Yeah, you’re Africans, but how does it affect you not, not being represented in the media? (laughter). No, seriously, how does it affect you, for example if you do not see yourself in the media?
   Male student: You’re unwanted.
   Margot: Good. Thank you.
   Female student: That’s how. Forget us!
   Margot:
You feel [pause] left out. So people who are not represented - that’s an excellent, that’s a fantastic point. You feel left out. You feel that you don’t belong to the community. Are you reflected in the media? No you are not. So you feel left out. You become [pause]?

Male Student: Invisible.
Margot: Invisible. We can’t see you, exactly. Can you give me some other words we could use instead of left out? [The students call out the following words in rapid fire style]

Male Student: Marginalised.
Female student: Excluded.
Male Student: Looked past!
Margot: Marginalised. Excluded. [writes these on the board]
Female student: Omitted.
Margot: Any (more) ideas? [pause] Alienated? To feel alienated means that you feel like an alien, [pause] a person who doesn’t belong in the group, you are outside the group. So if you are alienated. Are we talking just about a classroom for example?

Male Student: No!
Margot: We’re talking about the community. We’re talking about Australian society, when you don’t see people like you on TV, you feel like you don’t belong to the community.

Margot uses everyday language with only one formal critical literacy term, \textit{marginalized}, offered not by Margot but rather by a male student and then taken up by Margot as a formal term. In this way, Margot recontextualized critical literacy concretely for her particular learners who were at a lower language proficiency level than those at Riverdale High. She explicated key vocabulary, reinforcing synonyms such as \textit{excluded, alienated, marginalized, and omitted}. Margot fosters interaction that legitimizes her students’ knowledge, viewpoints and experience, in order to tease out a tangible understanding of a key critical literacy concept: representations. Margot drew specifically on her students’ own African identities and experience to help them to see that the concept of representation has a direct impact on their own lives. She encourages her students to ask questions about power and disparities that exist within society as it relates directly to their experience. Her focus is on her students’ “everyday relations of power, their lived problems and struggles” (Luke, 2012, p. 9) in exploring real effects, such as social alienation. In doing so, she lessens the abstract concept of representations and grounds it in relevance to their social world, opening up space for reflecting on their human subjectivity.
Margot sees the concept of representation, which was prominent in the 2002 English syllabus, as highly pertinent, and avoids focusing solely on deconstructing texts in a rational way (Morgan, 1997). She indicated, however, in interviews that she did not consider topics such as binary oppositions and Discourse, featured in the 2002 syllabus, to be immediately relevant to her students’ lives and so avoided these in her practice. The data here indicates a social empowerment application of critical literacy through investigating the impact of representations in the media on her students’ own lives, affording them the voice to discredit or affirm the media texts.

In this extract, Margot moves from firstly posing a question about how media representations affect her learners to eliciting their personal feelings in response to this. She then allows them to explore associated formal vocabulary that will be useful in their upcoming assessed report—excluded, marginalized, alienated—words her students have no difficulty using due to their lived experiences as Black “Africans” in a predominantly White society, and which they call out in rapid succession. The segment ends with discussion of the overall effect of nonrepresentation at a community or societal level and critique of wider social structures and practices. The subsequent stage involved the students researching and preparing analytical reports on the ways the media has misrepresented minority groups including refugee-background people in Australia. This kind of critical task sits in stark contrast to the option of a report on animals in Antarctica that Margot noted previously in her interview statement and eschewed because it lacked the opportunity for students to engage with evaluation of the conditions of text production.
Case 3: Celia

Degree of Abstraction From Concrete Events and Presence or Absence of Particular Elements (Combined)

In preparation for their own speech-writing task, Celia asked her students to identify key aesthetic rhetorical features in Martin Luther King’s March on Washington Speech (1963). After she guides her students (see Table 1 for their backgrounds) as a whole class to identify the rhetorical features in the written speech, Celia pulls together the overall effect of these combined devices. The words underlined indicate our emphasis on the affective effect of the text while the words in bold suggest a focus on the constructedness of the text.

Celia, Lesson 2: Any other examples now of metaphors, figurative language? ...Why are the metaphors used? Can you feel that you become involved when you read those metaphors? So the metaphors create pictures and images of the reality of the situation. They raise the consciousness of the listener(s), the people who are struggling and feeling the oppression, I think after a while, they feel bound by it and they feel that they can’t escape from it. When a speechmaker uses a metaphor he takes them to another place through his language use. So he uses these metaphors to first of all show them the reality of their situation and then he wants to take them beyond that point. He’s trying to engage his audience, get his people to rise up with him... [pause] And he puts it together very well. So he says, “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of colour are concerned.” ...He makes declarative statements as well... and then he goes into the repetition. There’s a mixture of rhetorical questions and we have some more statements of fact, and some more metaphors. A nice combination put together to have a fantastic effect. Does anyone else notice anything different that moves them or persuades them?

Celia demonstrates a focus on critical aesthetics or the affective potential of language to simultaneously enthrall and sway readers ideologically. As Misson and Morgan (2006) argued, there are “certain obvious formal features of texts that mark it as available for aesthetic reactions and perhaps even requiring an aesthetic reaction from audiences” (p. 35). In making this element present, Celia is making the language awareness work more concrete and less abstract for her learners by connecting it to their affective or emotional responses. She is also engaging them in thinking about the power
certain language choices have to enlist hearers and readers ideologically, which, in this case, points to oppression and racism. The presence of this critical aesthetics element is significant because it shows that in recontextualizing critical literacy, Celia focuses on the affective power of language to persuade the reader to ideological action.

Order Events Are Presented in

The data show Celia’s teacher talk includes three main elements that proceed in three distinct phases: from discussion of the formal aesthetic features of the speech, to eliciting an emotional response to the aesthetic, to critiquing the values and ideology of the text and returning to formal features again. In this excerpt, we can observe this progression as she moves from a focus on metaphors and figurative language, to the students’ feelings and personal involvement generated by these features, then to consciousness raising about oppression, and then back to the formal features of rhetorical questions and metaphors. If both emotional and rational responses are generated by aesthetic texts (Lewis, 2000; Misson & Morgan, 2006), then Celia seems to be attempting to capture this in her teacher talk about language—being moved is emotional, being persuaded is rational. The two are needed together to have the desired overall effect. Her practice indicates that she draws on the critical emphasis of the 2002 syllabus, and the focus on appreciating literature from the 2009 version of the syllabus, as well as her own personal pleasure in being moved by the carefully chosen characteristics of texts.

To summarize, amid diminished legitimatized footing in curriculum, critical literacy was positioned visibly by the three teachers in their planning and teaching, demonstrating agency, which is fundamental to recontextualization. Critical literacy is used not only for analytically deconstructing texts and building language awareness (as in Riva’s and Celia’s lessons), but also to reflect intellectually and subjectively on ways cultural texts position EAL learners as members of communities (as in Margot’s and Celia’s lessons). Critical literacy is also a way by which to identify persuasive literary devices and examine the ways these devices have an emotional effect on readers that lead to an understanding of ideological values and positioning (as in Celia’s lesson).
Conclusion

We have reported on the critical literacy practices of three teachers working with EAL students in senior high schools. At a time of increasingly functionalist approaches to literacy, the study was interested in the teachers’ interpretations of the critical-lite curriculum in their classes with students who were migrants and new to the cultural and linguistic norms of the school.

The analysis shows that criticality can be given form in policy but does not transfer neatly across genres: for example, from the curriculum to school planning documents to teachers’ plans to classroom interactions. Elements are filtered out or manipulated by human agents as they move along the chain of practices. The analysis indicates the dexterous recontextualization strategies used by the teachers from ordering and reordering, to inclusion and exclusion, and rendering points concrete or abstract. Furthermore, with criticality under threat in so many teacher-proofed curriculum contexts, the teachers’ practices demonstrate the possibilities and affordances that can be found within the current curriculum climate to provide critical literacy and language study. Despite the top-down influence of policy makers and curriculum designers, it appears that these teachers of EAL students are doing significant work in providing often marginalized students with opportunities to critically examine their life experiences in relation to the materials presented in their English classes. The teachers remain committed to critical literacy, despite its diminishment in the curriculum.

The analysis highlights the orientations to critical literacy favored by the teachers. We argue that understanding criticality in relation to a given group of learners involves careful contextual referencing to the historical and contemporaneous conditions of the learners’ lives. The teachers’ responses will differ depending on the policy and practice context. For the teachers in this study, re-envisioning criticality involved a range of elements drawn not from a sole syllabus but from a range of professional knowledge sources and, most importantly, from awareness of their learners’ lives, needs, and ambitions. These included analyzing the semiotic constructedness of texts, exploring (mis)representations in texts and reader–viewer positioning, scrutinizing texts as sources of cultural information, building metalinguistic resources for talking
about critical literacy, exploring the language of analytical writing for assessment, legitimizing students’ experiences and viewpoints; empowering students to talk back to texts and not accept them at face value, and engaging students affectively to understand values and ideologies.

This article demonstrates that while critical literacy has become more muted at the policy level, it is being sustained by teachers at the classroom level in second-language education contexts. These teachers are currently the custodians of critical literacy through their practices and commitment to its benefits for their EAL learners. Current manifestations of what critical literacy is, and how it is being enacted, are most evident at the grassroots level. It is at this local level that much is being accomplished in the maintenance and conceptualization of critical literacy in the current curriculum context.

NOTES

1. In Queensland, Australia, teachers prepare school-based work programs that interpret and guide the enactment of the syllabus. It involves teachers, especially Heads of Department, being familiar with the syllabus and then making decisions about study areas, topics, learning experiences, resources, and assessment instruments for local learners. District panels, which include teachers, approve the selections made.

2. EAL/D includes learners who are new to English and also for Indigenous Australians who may speak a dialect other than Standard Australian English.

3. Transcript conventions are as follows: ellipses (...) indicate the removal of language unrelated to the analysis, for example, classroom management language or asides; pauses are indicated in parentheses.

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