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Journal of English Applied Linguistics

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Contents:

<i>Iskhak</i>	'Classroom Criticism' of Reader Response-Based Literature Class in EFL Pre-Service Teacher Education and Technology Integration: A Critical Pedagogical Framework	87
<i>Jumbuh Prabowo</i>	Optimizing Vakog as Human Senses in Teaching English For Young earners	95
<i>Dian Ardiansah</i> <i>Asep Dudi Kurnia</i>	An Analysis of Modality in Students' Hortatory Exposition Texts (A Systemic Functional Grammar Perspective)	109
<i>Yusuf Hidayat</i> <i>Etika Rachmawati</i>	Register Analysis Realized In Students' Recount Texts (A Classroom Discourse Analysis Perspective)	119
<i>Dedeh Rohayati</i>	An Investigation of Students' Learning Strategies (A Descriptive Study in a Private University in West Java)	130
<i>Ratnawati</i>	A Critical Discourse Analysis of The Vision And Mission of Islamic Early Childhood Education "Az Zakia Islamic Preschool"	140
<i>Lystiana Nurhayat</i> <i>Hakim</i>	A Sociolinguistic Competence Analysis of English Textbook "Buku Siswa Bahasa Inggris Kelas X Semester I"	149

‘Classroom Criticism’ of Reader Response-Based Literature Class in EFL Pre-Service Teacher Education and Technology Integration: A Critical Pedagogical Framework

By Iskhak

Abstract

The study reports on the classroom practice of literary studies on critical theory (literary criticism) in EFL pre-service teacher education with technology integration. Under the framework of reader-response theory, literacy language program, and media literacy, the present study shows the theory-into-practice process of how literary criticism of reader response and other critical approaches were made down to earth in EFL pre-service teachers’ own contextual classroom through the so-called ‘classroom criticism’. The participants of the study included the third grade students of the department who were enrolled in the subject of Literary Criticism. They got involved in enjoying literary works assigned and were introduced to the ways or strategies to respond to them with reference to Reader Response theory. They got involved in using technology, gadget and/or other similar types of technology for mobile communication, to get access of relevant sources discussing the nature of the theory of literary criticism. Working in group of three or four, they shared what they had understood from the stories and responded appropriately to them. The findings indicate that the participants got involved in critical activities such as group discussions and writing critical comments in classroom and benefitted pedagogical implications from ‘classroom best practices’ for their expected future classroom practices. In addition, the study recommends that further study explore more on the influence of socio-cultural contexts of classroom toward classroom dynamics.

Keywords: Literary criticism, classroom criticism, media literacy, critical pedagogy

Introduction

The role of technology in the current digital era has significantly changed the new direction of TEFL trends. The shift from conventional to more sophisticated trend of using ICT-based multimedia has brought EFL in- and pre-service teachers to get awareness of being literate in ICT. In the realm of approach to language teaching pedagogy, the move of theory-into-practice discussions have offered newly-adjusted and negotiated teaching strategies that are assisted by computer and digital technology. UNESCO, thus, has outlined that media literacy is central since “it promotes the individual’s right to communicate and express, and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. It encourages the evaluation of media and information sources based on how they are produced, the messages being conveyed, and the intended audience.”

The significance of media literacy is widely acknowledged by most EFL teachers of all parts of this globe. Son et al. (2011) reports that Indonesian in-service teachers indicated their good computer and media literacy level and positively perceived its important role in their pedagogical development. Yu’s (2014) study reveals that Taiwanese pre-service EFL teachers positively perceived the IT-based teaching strategy. By using digital and media literacy, the classroom activities will lead to democratic interaction (Hobbs 2014).

In the context of EFL education, the pedagogical significances embedded from the discussion of literary criticism in literature class deserve our serious attentions. In developing a response-based literature teaching pedagogy, enhancement of student-teachers' understanding the principles of theory-into-practice of current trends of literary criticism needs exploring. It is admitted that response-based trend offers aesthetic experience of enjoying literary works. Through analysis of critical pedagogy by which how classroom context-based design accommodates student teachers' different backgrounds, the study is concerned with the use of media in catering for the subjects' different needs, wants, media literacy and knowledge. Yet, studies on the integration of technology in literary criticism class in the frame work of critical pedagogy are still rare. The present study then will give the accounts by proposing guiding questions: 1. *How do student teachers make breakthroughs to critically understand the concept of reader response theory and its application in classroom supported by the use of sophisticated technology under the perspective of critical pedagogy?*, 2. *How do student teachers perceive the real and contextual practices of literary criticism as integrated by the use of sophisticated technology under the perspective of critical pedagogy?*

Theoretical Basis

Critical theory/Literary Criticism: (Re)conceptualization

The ways of how literature instructors approach to their classroom practice very much depends on their understanding, beliefs, and assumption underlying their decision of determining the procedures of teaching. Those mentioned components tend to be virtually influenced by their reflected critical views, which are concerned with critical theory and literary criticism. Das (2002) argues that literary theory and critical theory have become a part of academic discipline and literary criticism offers variety of theory and practice.

Critical theory has close relationship with literary criticism. Tyson (2006, p. 6) argues that critical theory tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest". On the other hand, literary criticism is "the application of critical theory to analyze a literary text." For example, Reader response theory, a transactional theory, offers aesthetic stance in reading (Tyson 2006, p. 173). Considering its strengths of the trend, the study is more concerned with Rosenblatt's Reader response theory.

Critically speaking, the process of reading literary works should be an empowering drive. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory sees the important role of reader, she argues that "...a text is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes..." Transactional theory suggests that the role of reader is important in making the meaning of the text. The reader gets involved in expressing feelings and creativity through interpreting the text. There have been different strategies in aesthetic and efferent stances of reading. The former shows readers' engagement with emotional accounts (feelings), the latter has to do with text-oriented understanding that covers text- or information-based questions/tasks. Rosenblatt (1983) further argues that there have been shifts from new critic tradition that focuses on information-driven ways to aesthetic approach of reading.

Each type of literary criticism has its own underlying principles seen from assumptions, practices, and questioning strategies of each literary criticism (Lynn 2008). Among the currently acknowledged literary criticisms such reader response theory, feminism, deconstructivism, post-colonialism, and others, reader response theory has been placed as the most considerably influential in recent trends of classroom practices at all levels of educations. As Lynn further argues, the theory assumes that "readers actively create (rather than passively discover meanings in texts, guided by certain goals and rules that may be personal, or shared with other members of a community." In addition, according to Lynn, the practice of the theory is focused on how particular details shape readers' expectations and responses. The questions tend to be developed on the basis of readers' emotional aspects.

The classroom dynamics of response-based literature instruction normally leads to 'classroom criticism' (Reyes 2007). The members of classroom community become teacher-critics or student-critics and they create critical literacy events driven by literary responses.

Reyes (2007) argues that 'classroom criticism' is socially and pedagogically created by teacher and-critics through reading to talk and to write in classroom. Beach (1993), following Rosenblatt's views of aesthetic reading, offers several steps in the process of experiential response that consists of engaging, constructing, imaging, connecting, and evaluating/reflecting.

Response-based literature teaching pedagogy: from theory into practice

Reader-response theory assumes that readers are active meaning makers. Advocates of this theory offer practical guides with reference to transaction process of reader with the text assigned. For example, Karolides (2000) figures out the logic of pedagogy from theoretical to practical accounts in classroom settings of transactional theory (reader response), that is, the teacher/instructor should not deal with teaching about literature, but bringing readers to aesthetically engage in reading. Harfitt and Chu (2011) report their study in Hongkong context about trainees' impressions (opinion and feeling) of reading poem by means of reader response. The findings indicate that the subjects preferred aesthetic ways of enjoying literary works to information-based approach. In the response-based classroom, as Beach (1990) suggests, the response activities should include as a process of discovering meaning through talking and writing. The role of the teacher/instructor then plays an important role of liberating students to be free in dealing with their responses to literature (Park 2013, Probst 1990).

Literacy-based language program

Literacy tends to be contextually (re)defined, depending on the stances taken into consideration. Venezky (1990) argues that literacy is not merely concerned with reading, writing, numeracy, but higher demand of more complex thinking and doing. He confirms that "What we needed are higher competency levels, and higher levels of literacy are required underpinning." It is because language is a meaning-based system of communication, has a dual structure, is also a rule-governed, creative, and generative system, and indicates the interplay of context, situation, and the systems of language (Kucer 2009, p.44). There is a very close relationship among reading, talking, and writing (Kern 2000, p. 132). The connection indicates the same interactively shared points (Kern 2000, p. 131).

Pedagogically speaking, literacy-based language education offers certain tenets. One goal of a literacy-based instructional program is to make learners aware of the multiple relationships among all levels of text structure—how word choices, syntactic choices and text level organization choices all interact and affect meaning (Kern 2000, p.93). Kern further mentions the five dimensions of literacy development that can be assessed: a. application of various kinds of knowledge, b. selection of material, c. articulation of a reasoned understanding of the text, d. reflection on the readings, and e. consideration of the role of literature in society. Those dimensions can refer to linguistic, cognitive/metacognitive, and sociocultural elements (Kern 2003, p. 38). Literacy is also socially relevant to contexts shaping and being shaped by (see also Tarone et al. 2009). Robinson (1988, p. 243) argues, "What we do is influenced not only by the what, but also by the where, when, and to whom. It is also obvious when we think about it, that the teaching of literacy is specially sensitive to the pressures of social context."

From sociocultural aspect, Perry (2012) argues that "Language in all of its uses is an intimate part of human experience: Language is expressive of identity and personality, but it is also socially binding and expressive of collective values." Perry postulates that there are three perspectives on literacy: 1. literacy as a social practice, 2. multiliteracies, and critical literacy. Thus, literacy events are observable: that is, we can see what people are doing with texts. Lantolf and Thorne (2007) support the literacy education based on sociocultural theory emphasizing on the principles that learning language takes place through interaction within social environment. In this sense, Heath (1988) outlines the nature of literacy event: "A literacy event is any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and ... there are more literacy events which call for appropriate knowledge of forms and uses of speech events than there are actual occasions for extended reading or writing."

The logic of the supportive connection between literacy and literacy has come up from the both theoretical and practical evidences. Kern (2000, 207, 111-112) argues that reader-response-based literacy development offers beneficial significances to the EFL learners.

The use of technology as Media literacy enhancement and Literary Criticism Practices for EFL pre-service teachers

The use of high technology in ICT-based teaching pedagogy is meaningful in this digital era. It brings the demand of media literacy of every citizen in this globe. In every life circumstance, no matter it is personal or public, media literacy is required to accommodate any type of needs. Consequently, this condition has brought EFL pre-service teachers to be well-prepared to be engaged in media-literacy-based language program. McKenna et al. (2003) argue that from sociocognitive perspective, the use of media will promote the subjects' language growth and communication skills, and other soft skills such as demonstration, collaboration, and social interaction (p. 315).

Previous studies indicate that the teaching of literary studies in EFL education with technology integration gave meaningful influences to the subjects. Young and Bush (2004) examine the language arts education was based on classroom contexts accommodate the English teachers' needs and wants under the framework of critical pedagogy. Yet, there are still limited studies on this direction.

Critical pedagogy

Critical analysis of approach to teaching pedagogy the teacher may take into account entails the issue of critical pedagogy. Pennycook (1994) argues that critical pedagogy sees schools as arena where different cultural, ideological and social forms are constantly in struggle. It also, Pennycook, further argues, aims to change both schooling and society, to the mutual of both. In the context of literary criticism practices, it is the classroom members who deserve free chances to take active part of shaping the class community, as Reyes (2007) calls it as 'classroom criticism'. The daily patterned routines and curricular designs tend to reflect the degree of freedom and enjoyment of active participation of each member. The more democratic the atmosphere of the class is, the better socialization process will be, in terms of the construction of the members' identity (see Stein 2004).

Methods

The study occupied a qualitative case study (Barone 2011). The student teachers (around 50 people, who were enrolled in the fifth semester, taking Literary Criticism after Introduction to Literature) participated in the study. The inquiry took place in response-based literature classes that were underpinned by pedagogical approach to critical theory and literary criticism. The course included the discussions of basic theory of reader response and practical accounts, and, thus, theory-into-practice perspectives. The subjects' indicative classroom participation to show their critical thinking was captured by means of field notes. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to portray their perception about the treatment. On the basis of convenient sampling, the returned questionnaires deserved analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Two major findings of the study help correspond to the research questions proposed. Firstly, they relate to the subjects' strategies of making breakthroughs in critically understanding the theory and practice of reader response conception. And, secondly, they have to do with the subjects' perception of the integration of critical activities and the use of technology.

Strategies of making breakthroughs in critical analysis

As most the subjects were literate in media and digital technology, they did not complain about the project of media literacy-based instruction. Yet, some subjects were found reluctant to actively participate in the small discussions in critically understanding the topic.

Classroom discussions led to more motivating conditions for classroom communication. Some of the subjects self-confidently shared their understandings of the issues of theoretical and practical accounts of reader response theory through reading aloud their critical written comments and wrote them on the board.

Another indication suggests that top-down and bottom-up approaches to understanding the topic also characterized their strategies. Some were dependent on the instructors' explanation then exploring it to the Internet. Some tried to search for the relevant issues in the Internet and then consulted it to the instructor. Such tasks as developing the model of how to design supporting ones for reader response seemed to be helpful for them.

Subjects' Perception about the treatment

Basically the subjects saw that the integration of technology in their literary criticism class was fruitful. All subjects were literate with ICT-based tools and the up-to-date gadget for global communication. They felt free to access all sorts of sources in the Internet. Being a critical reader, each subject claimed that she or he had tried to critically select the relevant points or issued articles or descriptions. Most of the subjects saw that the use of technology help comprehensively understand the topics of discussion. Yet, some admitted that instructors' explanations still played important roles to comprehensively match the shared points of the selected information. Regarding the pedagogical implication of the treatment, most subjects thought that best practices covering enjoyable and challenging literacy events in their classroom can be applicable in their own future classroom practices.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study offers at least two final notes. Firstly, under the framework of critical pedagogy, student teachers tend to be more creative and self-confident in making breakthroughs in critically understanding the concept and the applications of Reader Response Theory. Secondly, the use of technology in practicing the chosen theory made the subjects feel easy to (re)construct the conceptual issues and become critical to what they had thought and expected in the future. Since the study potentially is limited to very typical contextual classroom of a private college with West Java socio-cultural backgrounds, he study recommends further study focus on more complex situation.

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Appendix

Open-ended questionnaire: *Critical Pedagogy in Studies on Critical Theory (Literary Criticism)*

1. Apakah Anda terbiasa menggunakan gadget (atau alat sejenis) untuk akses internet sebagai cara memperoleh sumber belajar Critical Theory atau Literary Criticism?

2. Apakah Anda merasa lebih leluasa melakukannya? Mengapa?

3. Apakah Anda menggunakan cara berpikir kritis dalam melakukannya? Jelaskan seperti apa contohnya.

4. Dengan cara demikian, apakah Anda merasakan lebih dapat memahami hal yang Anda sedang pelajari? Berikan contohnya.

5. Sebagai calon guru Bahasa Inggris, dengan cara demikian apakah Anda mendapatkan manfaat pengalaman pedagogis/cara mengajar untuk praktik nyata kepada murid sendiri nantinya? Mengapa? (Jawaban dapat disediakan di balik halaman ini)

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