

# Switching to Postmodern Teaching

## *Turning to Critical Literacy*

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Keywords: Postmodernism, Critical Literacy. EFL.

Abstract: This paper presents a partial finding of an ongoing study. The purpose is to bring forward reasons for changing education paradigm into postmodernism and to encourage embracement of CL into EFL classroom. It pinpoints three foci. It begins by putting forward the reasons for switching to different (if not new) paradigm of education: the postmodern education. Then, it discusses reasons for implementing critical literacy (CL) that is based on postmodernism, and finally, it showcases possible infusion of CL into conventional EFL classrooms. In this particular study, infusion of CL into conventional Reading class is viewed as a 'compromise' in the effort to minimize resistance to CL as a full course or as part of mainstream curriculum. As observed, the teaching of EFL particularly in Indonesia, still largely sits on conventional literacy, adopts blanket curriculum, and is still relatively immune to CL. However, considering its importance, the least that be done is to incorporate CL into existing program. The incorporation involves the use of Luke and Freebody's (1990, 1999) four resources framework (FRF), SQ3R reading strategy and its modification, cooperative learning, and mindful material and questions selection.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Education has been attached to positivism view for decades. As observed, our education system including the curriculum still largely inherits and maintains the hegemony of positivistic paradigm. Education is analogous to a big factory processing materials (students) per batch in a standardized way and at the end of the production line, the product (students) undergo a quality control (high stake testing). Product (students) who do not meet the standard will be discarded and have no market, thus marginalized. On the other hand, product (students) who meet the standards will be packed in a uniform box of labelled competence. This kind of systems has produced not only marginalized but also socially, culturally, politically numb students. In reality, the industry-like education cannot meet the growing demand for literacy. As the world border is diminishing, students of the twenty first century have to deal with pluralism, not mono-ism, of ideas, ideologies, cultures, languages, etc. This requires students who are equipped with the ability to embrace differences, who have and can provide alternatives instead of single solution, who are able to questions and participate in preserving democracy, who are able

to work collaboratively with other citizen of the world. Against this reasoning, education needs to attend to its paradigm once again

## 2 WHY SWITCHING TO POSTMODERNISM AND TURNING TO CL

Postmodern advocates who spotted gap in current education paradigm with the real world demand urge that it is time to turn to postmodernism at least for four reasons: (a) the emerging concern over students literacy, (b) observation on the lifeless democracy, (c) awakening that concepts normally taken for granted by teachers and implicit in their practices (including curriculum) are in fact cultural and 'man'-made, (d) new generations of learners can no longer inherit socio-political preconceptions from the past (Cahoon, 1996, Giroux, 1991, Usher and Edward, 2003, Finch, 2008, Hargreaves, 2005; Weil and Anderson, 2000).

Postmodernists concern on the need to provide education which equips, empowers, and enables students with criticality to resist social unjust, to participate and preserve democracy, to question, to

become a fully functioning human being; not a programmed being.

To move education toward the pole of postmodernism, Giroux (1991) and Edward and Usher (2003) suggested nine and five points of change respectively, which mainly centered on embracing and promoting differences and divergent thinking, reducing borders, and increasing students participation. Likewise, students and teacher should uncover new perspectives, new angles on the world, everyday life and self which is a central feature of post-formal critical thinking.

It is exactly at this point that CL works. CL “transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one’s world.” (McDaniel, 2004). Shor (1999) noted that “When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it”. CL teaching is thus the key for responding to issues such as of marginalization and pluralism.

In the context of Indonesia, bringing CL under spotlight is driven over a concern on decaying democracy. In this twenty first century, ease of spread of information via internet carries load of consequences. Some loud individuals who fail to embrace diversity can easily pull others texts into their circle of side-blinded-ness by means of texts. On the other hand, unquestioning submission to value-loaded texts including hoax results in tension among people holding different perspectives, both in virtual and real world. Meanwhile, there are also some individuals who prefer to stay in safe zone and avoid tension by not voicing their thoughts. This state would maintain status quo and create an illusion of peace. But, as this happens, democracy is decaying.

In addition, unquestioning submission to texts bring about economic consequences i.e. consumerism. Texts can be created to address stereotypes, build public opinion which may influence decision making. In brief, texts are crafted (Luke and Freebody, 1990, 1999) in ways that move or stop people into the direction pointed by the writer. Against the aforementioned background, it is vital to nurture the ability to read and question texts from diverse angles and to build the habit of well-founded reasoning. It is to preserve democracy, to voice thoughts, to recognize and end oppression that critical literacy is required. Thus, bringing CL into EFL classroom is obviously not driven by trend but by need instead.

### 3 PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION ON INFUSION OF CL

The CL in this study is conducted in a regular Reading class and the course is labelled Intensive Reading 1. Forty students of first year English Education Department in Central Java were involved. They did not have CL class prior to the study.

Before discussing the infusion of CL, a brief overview of the original syllabi is presented. The syllabi consists of three competencies: general competencies, specific competencies, and attitude. General competencies and attitude cover items such as being responsible, becoming an active citizen, being able to cooperate, having social sensitivity, applying critical, logical, systematic, and innovative thinking. Meanwhile, the specific competence includes the following five: finding meaning from context, identifying main idea, identifying detailed information, recognizing reference, and text structure. This specific competence turns out to be the sole attention as reflected in the lesson plan and in particular in the activity and the targeted learning experience. The teaching method suggested for the class is cooperative learning in addition to lecturing. The texts and reading strategy is not specified.

While syllabus in different institutions/ levels/ areas may not look like one in the context of this study, there are three points of considerations that apply to many attempts in embracing CL. (1) material selection, (2) use of questions, (3) teaching method, and reading strategy.

Material plays important part in CL teaching. Luke and Freebody (1990) mentioned that texts are crafted and it takes a careful selection of texts to introduce this idea to the students. There are several criteria and consideration for selecting material in this study: (1) complexity of texts (including length), (2) variation of genre, (3) stimulating/ provoking topics.

In this particular study, the complexity of texts were set to the minimum to allow students at low proficiency level got the sense of success and invited larger number of students to get in touch to critical questions immediately. The complexity was adjusted after the grand picture of students’ proficiency is observed. The texts used in this study covers: advertisements on air pollution (by Coca Cola company and Greenpeace), a video on gender stereotyping (Do It Together), a satire (Fresh Air will Kill You by Art Buchwald), News article from Huff Post (Time Magazine is in Hot Water over a Tweet on Amal Clooney’s Baby Bump), a poem (I too by Langston Hughes), and other short texts available online: A Feminist Double Standard; Students

Bullying Teacher and Momentous Arrest. The list of material are selected to stimulate students' recognition on issues of racism, stereotypes, oppression, and sexism. There were topics that were addressed by several kinds of texts to help students recognize the effect/ impact of idea wrapping (text as crafted object)

The importance of material selection echoes previous study by Kuo (2014) who achieve positive results and study by Park (2011) that faced challenge due to the selection of material which is 'unreachable' by the less able students. Providing differentiated materials needs extra effort to prepare and to implement. Nearly all studies on CL implementation, questions were always involved and whether or not they were explicitly highlighted, questions are indeed at the heart of CL.

Another important point to consider is the questions used to evoke students' critical thinking. While questions and prompts such as on what certain word means/ refers to, as prescribed by the syllabi is prepared, there are larger portion of questions that aim at stimulating students recognition on the structure, function and effect of certain form/ lay out/ word, what is being problematized, who is not addressed, who is benefitted, and the like. A rich lists of questions can be obtained from Rice (1998), Wallace (2003, p. 115), Tindale (2003), Tomasek (2009), and Kucer (2009, p.257), and by no means is exhaustive.

A twist on the use of the prompts/ questions is the use of 'switching technique' as also used in Kuo's study (2014) in which he asked his students to switch their identity. The questions or prompt may cover switching gender, switching time, switching place, switching point of view, etc. The point of this switch is to train students get different and diverse perspectives in comprehending text. Sample questions include: (1) Do you think the writer will tell you the same thing if he/she is male/ female? (switching gender); (2) Is the idea still relevant here and now? (switching time and place); (3) What happened if the lesson/ the situation are reversed? (switching point of view).

The questions used in the context of critical literacy teaching mainly aim to train students to think critically. One problem that may stumble teacher in the process is the issue of power relation between teacher-students and among students. In this study, there were moments when teacher imposes the critical thought to the students.

While teacher questions in the classroom are means for critical exercise, an important indicator of students developing criticality is the ability and

willingness to ask their own critical question. Based on Bowker's (2010) question approach, the ability to raise questions requires time and training. Time in this case includes wait time. In this study, the teacher occasionally fail to give proper wait time and ended up by giving too many or repeated clues that lead students to certain answer. Meanwhile, training means that when implicit modelling of questioning does not work well, explicit training should be considered. Several technique that can be used include, among others: TeachThought Taxonomy, Question Formulation Technique (QFT) from Right Questions Institute, using Bloom Taxonomy, and Socratic Seminar (Heick, 2015, 2017).

The third aspect that can be worked on in the effort to address CL within constraint of conventional literacy class is immersion of CL framework into existing or already used teaching method/ reading strategy. The original syllabi of this study does not specify the reading strategy to be applied in the class but SQ3R is chosen for its clear step and ease of independent use by students. The use of SQ3R in this study is incorporated in the four resources framework. Expecting benefit of the neat steps of the method, the study maintains the order of the steps while approaching each of them critically. The SQ3R in this study is slightly modified by adding more moments for students to raise questions i.e. during reading.

Cooperative learning as a teaching method is largely applied in classes and suggested by the many existing syllabus including the original syllabi of this study. This method fits perfectly to the CL teaching as both are based on the same philosophical foundation i.e. postmodernism. To foster the infusion of CL the five pillars of cooperative learning were emphasized explicitly via Learning Together model (Johnson and Johnson, 2009, Johnson, Johnson and Stane, 2000)

Focusing on individual accountability, each member were assigned a certain role (e.g. reader, note taker, spoke person, encourager, and resource person). Each of the role is clarified to ensure that everyone understands the responsibility. Social skill training was conducted explicitly. The students were invited to mention the indicators of 'respect' and 'disrespect'. The words/ traits can be substituted with other words/ traits to cover an issue that the instructor wish to address, e.g. 'being polite' and 'rude'. By inviting students' responses, everyone in class can express what they expect to get from others in terms of behaviour, gesture, attention, etc. The group processing was also promoted to facilitate the groups evaluated their work and contribution as a group.

Upon the infusion, the students generally responded well. The journey of students' engagement in the four resources framework is indicated as the following. (1) Code breaker. During the study, students shows that they are able to 'break the code' of the materials presented. However, guiding questions were still needed to gauge students' comprehension on certain loaded word and the non-verbal aspect of text such as colour, and pictures. Several unfamiliar words and phrases were discussed with the class by inviting students' responses and eliciting the metacognition, on how they come to the answer/ definition/ meaning. Instructor also showed how to use online resources to solve their problem. Gadget in the class is allowed and viewed as a tool. The use is optimized not only as a communication tool but also learning tool e.g. to research the background of writer or to dig for certain slang meaning. In addition, certain materials, links and notes were sent via app on weekly basis. (2) Text participant. The students responded well to questions addressing this role. They indicated interest in the materials presented. They were able to comprehend the text relatively fast. Several students seemed to get problem comprehending the news article, the satire, and the feminist double standard poster. However, the problems were mostly solved within the group without instructor's interference. They were able to link the text to their experience and self as indicated by their ability to provide another example/ case. For example they were able to use their background knowledge on the reputation and what issues that Time magazine usually focused on to comprehend why Time is in trouble because of its tweet.

The two roles: code breaker and participants were covered quite fast, most likely because the simplicity of the texts selected for the students. However, discussion on these two were relatively lively due to the topic of texts which potentially carries slang, metaphor, analogy, etc. (3) Text user. Students' responses to questions on this role were rather slow. In contrast to their answer when being asked e.g. "What is the generic structure of advertisement?" which they answered quite spontaneously they found it hard to answer questions such as "How does the writer put his/her ideas and intentions?" or "What is the function of examples given in the text?" The students thought that it was hard to deconstruct the text and was quite different from their high school experience when being asked to identify the structure of texts. While responses were slow, this signalled positive engagement as they begin to think about how certain ways of text presentation gives certain impact and covers the writer's agenda. Positive response on

this role was reflected by their writing on stereotype after reading several texts on the issue. They were able to address the issue in short writing quite wonderfully by giving examples and well-based reasoning. (4) Text analyst. Similar to that in the previous role, the students also responded well to the predetermined questions but the pace of the discussion was slow. Yet, the students' engagement in this particular role was observably progressing. In the initial meeting they were unaware of the difference between questions such as "what is the topic" and "what problem is problematized?" They were also unable to get what the question "what's the writer attitude toward the topic?" means. For example the students thought that 'Momentous Arrest' aimed at telling audience about an incident. They did not know who Martin Luther Jr. was and that complicated the problem. But as they learnt that text is crafted and is written with motives, they begin to questions hidden agenda and recognize writers' point of view toward the topic that he/ she puts forward. When working with the news article, the students posited questions such as "Why is Amal's view on the news not addressed?", "Why would Time tweet that?" "Is it a pure blunder?"

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

This article concludes the discussions by re-highlighting the need for changing educational paradigm and to foster the implementation of CL, particularly in EFL classroom. This study showcases that incorporating CL into conventional class is not only possible but also doable without causing too much 'noise' or 'chaos' due to resistance.

In the context of CL as an add-on or infused concern instead of a stand-alone course, the three aspects: material, questions, and teaching technique and reading strategy are areas in which teachers likely to have room for modification. For example, while genre or text types may be prescribed, teachers can select certain topic to incorporate CL. Even when the topic is predetermined, teachers still could provide 'additional' questions to nurtures students criticality.

Materials selection is very important particularly to get students' immediate hook to the CL. Choice of topics that stimulate students thinking into issue that were taken for granted help them to begin questioning their surroundings. As Bowker (2010) would point out that expecting students to instantly produce thoughtful answer is naïve and it is even more naïve to expect them produce powerful questions. It takes time for the students to take part in critical literacy.

On-going observation also indicate that students responded well to the infusion of CL into conventional literacy class. Viewed from the framework of the FRF, responses on the text user and text analyst roles were rather slow but not absent. The wait time to students responses were relatively longer but it was observable that some thinking was taking place.

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