Transformative reading pedagogies: Perspectives from Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study that engaged English language teacher educators (ELTE) in Indonesia and investigated their perspectives of the teaching of critical reading. The findings suggest that Indonesian academics identify the skills that are involved in critical reading and how to teach them, but not why they choose a specific teaching practice. Based on this finding, the researchers argue that in the absence of a rationale that would link the "What?" and the "How?" of teaching, missing are perspectives that can demonstrate the lecturers' understanding of the transformative value of the teaching methods that they use.

Keywords: *reading, critical reading; transformative pedagogies; competency-based education;*

1. Introduction

Recent education reforms in Indonesia are a testimony of the country's commitment to competency-based education, where the emphasis is placed on higher-order thinking skills. The policies are in place, but what vision of competencies informs how Indonesian academics go about embracing the change? The paper begins with a brief literature review of the key shifts in the pedagogy of reading in the English-speaking countries and in Indonesia in order to locate its own intellectual framework against the concepts that led those developments. The researchers present findings of their study and discuss their implications for higher education reforms in Indonesia.

2. The pedagogy of reading

In its early stages, literacy research in the UK and Australia tended to view texts as self-contained objects consisting of words organised by grammar [1]. Hamp-Lyons [5] distinguishes this traditional model from a "process-oriented" approach that emerged from systemic functional linguistics [3]. The systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory is of the view that students are constructors of meaning and that learning to read should shift away from teaching lexicogrammatical relationships in texts to the teaching of processes, or methods, for text analysis, enabling students to "extract meaning" from text by connecting information in the text with the readers' knowledge about the world [4]. The SFL theory is a descriptive model of language "in use". From the perspective of pedagogy, it does not say anything about the nature of the problems that students experience in the context of reading. In fact, the model neither investigates nor attempts to theorise these problems from the students' perspective. This presents a challenge to the proposition made by Hamp-Lyons that the SFL theory [4] has a potential to offer a process for addressing the problems that students experience when learning to read or write. The linguistic categories in Halliday's model are solutions for addressing the problems of a theory from which they emerged; these are not necessarily the problems that students experience when grappling with a specific task at hand when learning to read.

3. Teaching reading in Indonesia

In Indonesian English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) departments, the scholars work with the SFL model for teaching literacy, and focus students on what they see that matters in texts, and to texts, one may add, considering the emphasis that is given to textual features at the expense of students' own sources of values that give reason, and thereby meaning, to their social engagements. Following SFL-strategies, teaching includes pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities that teachers design to activate prior knowledge and help them connect relevant elements of text, questioning students to build inferences, and summarising and synthesising. For example, in Yulianto's [9] study, in the pre-reading stage, the authors sought to activate students' prior knowledge and, in so doing, practically told the students what to expect in the text. Once the patterns were established and the "overall meaning" of the text was "found", students moved to surface detail, i.e. the "while-reading" activities, with students responding to comprehension questions and analysing linguistic choices in order to collaboratively build the meaning of the text. "Post-reading" activities

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include exercises believed to secure transfer of the skills learnt to new activities. The evident absence of the connection between students' understanding of their own literacy needs and the arbitrarily constructed activities is characteristic of Indonesian research in English literacy. The present study emerges from this concern. The study is part of a number of research projects currently underway in Indonesia.

4. Methodology and research design

Ontologically the study is positioned within a framework that distinguishes between the scientific and value-based principles that inform human actions [8]. The distinction draws a line between non-subjective and subjective realities respectively. The categories in relation to which students "make meaning" are not a product of objective facts captured by the language of formal disciplines. They are experienced as subjective judgments that draw on students' value categories, i.e. categories of experiences that have motivational significance and that inform people how to be or act in the world. The aim of the present study was to learn how Indonesian ELTE academics in Indonesia think of literacy teaching and how they position students and their beliefs in the context of their pedagogy. To this end, a questionnaire was constructed in order to elicit responses to this issue.

This is a qualitative study. Fourteen (14) lecturers of a different rank responded, all ranging from 2 to 17 years in teaching experience. The participants' responses were organised thematically and in relation to the following focus questions: (a) "What does the job of addressing higher education reforms involve?"; (b) "What experiences need to be provided for the job of addressing higher education reforms to be done?"; and (c) "What needs to be done for those experiences to be provided so that the job of addressing higher education reforms is done?" [6]. The studies by Hak [2], Nashruddin [7] and others have offered already quite a range of themes and subthemes that were used in the present study and served as a baseline for comparing and contrasting the range and the quality of responses obtained from the Indonesian participants

5. Findings

It was expected that the data would show how the respondents develop the objectives and the goals of critical reading instruction ("what is involved"), into "learning experiences that need to be provided", i.e. statements that would link with the concept of critical reading, specifying its purpose and, possibly, with a learning theory that guides the development of learning activities. Lastly, the authors anticipated information about the exact strategies that "need to be done/designed" for the learning environment to be conducive to learning. In other words, if one of the objectives is for students to see critical reading as a tool for generating "new solutions to an issue" (Respondent 6), what role is critical reading to play in relation to this goal for ELTE academics to design a learning context that meets these requirements?

The respondents focused almost exclusively on the objectives critical reading (the "What?" of instruction) and the strategies by which critical reading should be taught (the "How?" of instruction). In turn, no data was found that would connect the goals to the concepts of reading and learning (the "Why?" of instruction) in order to inform the design of reading activities. This polarisation of data between the "What?" and "How?" of critical reading instruction is the most striking finding of the present study.

In relation to Question (a), the analysis showed many gaps that were not addressed on a number of issues such as Global and National Relevance, Course Design, University Funding, Workload and Support, Stakeholders' Awareness, and Personal Research. In the area of Unit Design, all responses focused on Identifying Learning Outcomes. Among these were: Critical reading involves "not only understanding the message of the text but also analysing the text (agreeing/disagreeing, comparing, questioning, etc.) (R2); Critical reading involves "synthesising of information and understanding the intention of the writer" (R3); Critical reading involves "covering the skills needed to establish meaning, appreciate values, find viewpoints, contrast perspectives, identify biases and generate new solutions to an issue" (R6).

Other possible sub-themes could have included: Building Connections Between the Curriculum Components; Setting Assessment Goals; Linking Unit Description and Graduate Competencies with Lesson Plans. None of these was mentioned.

In relation to Question (c), all responses focused on pedagogy. Examples of responses include: "Enabling students to activate their background knowledge relevant to the text we were to read, and to attract students' attention, by using the iceberg approach" (R1); "Involving the reader in searching for information using both on- and offline sources to find new insights" (R1); "Providing discussion time

before and/or in the process of reading the text" (R2); "Using recent methods such as GIST: Generating Interactions Schemata and Text" (R3).

The analysis showed a general lack of any references in the participants' responses to government policies relevant to the national and international interests and developments of Indonesia. This is an important finding in view of the ongoing investment by Indonesia in its educational reforms. The respondents also make no mention of any stakeholders who would have the stakes in the outcomes of education policies and their impact on the ELTE students. Typically, these stakeholders include the future employers of ELTE students and pupils, their future teacher colleagues and academic collaborators. The analysis also reveals the lack of data on the impact of personal research on the participants' own approach to critical reading. The questionnaire explicitly targeted this aspect of teaching by inviting ideas and criticism of the field, and proposals for new directions. The respondents also do not express the need for more support from the university to fund ongoing professionalisation of English literacy lecturers, their research and development.

6. Discussion

The findings of the study point to a number of issues. First, it is evident that Indonesian educators rely heavily on research paradigms from Anglo-Saxon countries. While this is neither good nor bad, it is not clear why the Indonesian academics believe that these paradigms would address the needs specific to their contexts and values? The study participants do not make those links. Furthermore, modern and innovative thinking requires stepping beyond the limitations of mainstream paradigms. While this may seem risky, the findings in this study show that a "safe" approach does not offer a better alternative. Following "ready-made" patterns resulted in all ELTE academics participating in the study generating pretty much the same responses to questions, with none showing courage to think outside the "authorised" formula. This is a dangerous approach considering that progress depends on playful and critical engagement in the problems of the disciplines. Compliance and reproduction result in stagnation and uncritical dependency on external sources for ideas and models. This is not exactly why Indonesia embarked on the path of education reforms. If the reform is to live up to its promise, Indonesian academics will need to exercise more agency in their own destiny as leaders of innovation and change.

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