

# Theoretical Views Underlying the Selection of Classroom Activities: Paying Attention to the Classroom of English Literature in EFL Context

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**Abstract:** This essay reviews literature on the theoretical views underlying the selection of activities for classrooms of English literature teaching in EFL context. The review include: 1) literary criticisms, 2) constructivism, and 3) research on students' perceptions of classroom activities. One literary criticism, reader-response, is beheld to pose a similar spirit to that of the constructivist mode of teaching. Both reader-response and constructivist teaching perspectives require the teaching of English literature to focus on the students. This requires giving attention to the students' ideology, horizon of expectation, and "*ma'lumat sabiqoh*" (background knowledge) in order to situate the students to actively generate their own meanings, understanding, or knowledge of given literary works offered as class materials. Since the students' personal ideology, horizon of expectation, and *ma'lumat sabiqoh* are influenced or the socio-culture undergirding every student, the teaching of English literature needs to take into account such socio-cultural properties. Another point reviewed is the students' perceptions of classroom activities. Consideration of combining the top-down mode of thinking, as offered by the reader-response and constructivism, and bottom-up mode of thinking, as offered by research on students' perceptions of classroom activities, constitute the ending part of this essay.

**Key words:** EFL, reader-response, constructivism

Research on teaching has overlooked the teaching of literature. The *Handbook of Research on Teaching* did not contain the topic of research on the teaching of literature until its fourth edition was published in 2001 (Grossman, 2001). Even when the significance of subject-specific studies came to the fore, people tended to fail to notice the teaching of literature (Grossman, 2001).

In her writing on research on the teaching of (English) literature, Grossman (2001) exhaustively included sub-topics such as an account of literary theories, approaches to teaching literature, literature curriculum, and teachers of literature. However, it is apparent that Grossman's discussion is confined to the teaching of literature of English as a first language (L1). She does not touch upon the sphere of English as a second language (ESL) nor on English as a foreign language (EFL). This is conceivable, for Grossman is concerned with the teaching of English literature in the United States. Accordingly, it is safe to assume it is significant to pay attention to the teaching of English literature in EFL settings.

Basthomi (2000) reviewed twenty-four English literature-related theses written in 1990-2000 by first-degree students at the English Department, Universitas Negeri Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The students were those undertaking the Stream of English Education. The review found that although the majority were written in the light of psychology, including educational psychology, none of them was devoted to the teaching of English literature in EFL classrooms. Even though the writers were those undertaking English Education, particularly for the purpose of teaching English in the Indonesian context, one of EFL settings (Debyasuvarn, 1981), all of them were devoted to the analysis of English literary works as the objects of study. This bears a similar token as observed by Grossman (2001).

Grossman's (2001) point on people's negligence of research on literature teaching seems to be true with the teaching of English literature in EFL settings. Accordingly, it calls for mindful attention. Attempts to shed light on the practice of teaching English literature in EFL classrooms necessitate a review of how literary criticisms have, hitherto, had implications for the teaching of English literature, particularly, for teachers' decision on choosing and setting classroom activities.

### LITERARY CRITICISMS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHING

Abrams (1981) classifies literary criticisms into four categories: 1) mimetic criticism, 2) pragmatic criticism, 3) expressive criticism, and 4) objective criticism. Abrams further explains that mimetic criticism deems literary work as an imitation of the world, including human life; representational truth is the criterion applied to the literary work. Pragmatic criticism considers literary work as a means to secure particular effects on readers (audience); success in attaining the effects is the norm for a "good" literary work. Expressive criticism views literary criticism as an expression of the author's state of mind; adequacy of the expression is the norm for a good literary work. Objective criticism sees literary work as a self-sufficient object which is free from its author; any literary work should be approached as an independent object which has self-intrinsic adequacy.

Modern literary criticisms (including those of English) have tended to leave mimetic criticism and favoured pragmatic, expressive, and objective criticisms (Pradopo, 1995). Aminuddin (1990) puts, when discussing literary work, that as a form of communication, the very nature of literary work requires three main components: 1) author, 2) objective entity of linguistic properties, and 3) reader (audience); as such, the orientation of modern literary criticisms is of these three kinds, that which gives an emphasis on: the author, the literary work as an object, or the reader (Pradopo, 1995).

These three kinds of criticism have informed the practice of English literature teaching in classrooms. In his reflection on English literature classrooms in Javanese settings, Basthomi (2001) observes that teachers have a strong authority to push that their understanding of literary work is "the same" as what the author of the given literary work has intended to mean. Students do not possess any space to roam about the possible multi-significance or meaning the literary work might pose. This kind of practice is seemingly the manifestation of the literary criticism which gives an emphasis on the author; a literary criticism which strives to find what the authors of literary works wish to mean in their works. Consequently, the teachers who hold this type of criticism are bound to struggle in leading the students by their nose to comply with what the writers mean (as the

teachers understand it) in their literary works. This suggests that such teachers overlook the notion that students have their own world: world view, background knowledge, schemata, ideology, and expectations (An-Nabhany, 1957; Butler, 1984; Cook, 1994; Freund, 1987; Horton, 1979; Iser, 1992; Jeffries, 2001; Semino, 1995).

Miall (1996) shows that English literature teaching (in Canada) has been tainted with the practice that students are to memorise a great number of literary terms. In other words, English literature classrooms are places for the teachers to check their students' ability to label the properties of literary works using the literary terms. Seemingly, this kind of practice is informed by the objective criticism; literary work is deemed to have a self-sufficient structure or properties which can be "incised" using the "knives" of literary terms. In such an "operation", students' mental engagement is bound to be neglected. It is understandable, therefore, that Miall (1996) found a number of his students made complaints of such a way of literature teaching and admitted not to be fond of English literature due to such a type of teaching practices.

The role of the students in the classrooms where emphases are given to the literary works and the authors seems to be neglected; students are to conform to certain "norms." This type of practice is challenged by the notions implicated by literary criticisms which grant the readers key roles in attaining meanings or significance of literary works (Barthes, 1992; Corcoran & Evans, 1987; Wolff, 1993). This kind of literary criticism is what is referred to as reader-response (Corcoran & Evans, 1987; Elliot, 1990; Freund, 1987; Gilbert, 1987; Hirvela, 1996). Miall (1996) points out that conferring students as readers with roles in gaining significance of literary works is a crucial factor in the attempt to empower the students. The position the reader-response holds in empowering students, as to generate their own meanings or significance of literary works, seems to bear a similar token to that of the constructivist mode of teaching. This point is worth reviewing.

#### CONSTRUCTIVIST TEACHING AND READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Constructivism coloured the twentieth century (Vadeboncoeur, 1997). Particularly, it was central in the educational arena from the 1980s to 1990s (MacKinnon & Scarf-Seatter, 1997). Constructivist teaching is

derived from constructivism, which, in its own right, has emerged as a concept of knowledge and learning (Jaworski, 1993; Matthews 2002). Vadeboncoeur (1997) and Jaworski (1993) remind us that people engaging in educational enterprise interpret constructivism in different ways. Vadeboncoeur (1997) makes a distinction between two major views of constructivism as adapted for educational purposes: Piagetian and Vygotskian. Whilst the former puts an emphasis on developing individual cognitive properties, the latter emphasises social transformation; Piagetian views cognitive development as progressing from the individual to the social, whereas Vygotskian from the social to the individual. For Piaget (1943/1968), "[t]he self is at the center of reality." On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) observes that the child's development exists in two planes; it exists in the social plane, in the first place, and then moves to the psychological one. For Piaget, knowledge construction takes place via "action on the world of objects", whereas for Vygotsky, it happens via "interaction in the social world" [emphasis original] (Vadeboncoeur, 1997, p. 27).

It has been indicated above that the constructivist view has a similar concept to that of reader-response in giving a significant role to the readers (including students) to generate meanings of literary works (objects of study). A similar notion in that the existing dichotomy of constructivism, namely, personal and socio-cultural alignment, is also demonstrated by reader-response theory. On the one hand, reader-response is inclined to grant an emphasis to individual differences in the meaning-making of literary works (e.g., Bleich, 1978) and, on the other hand, reader-response is coloured with the understanding that meaning-making is affected and effected by socio-cultural factors (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981) or interpretive communities (Fish, 1980).

A Jordanian scholar, An-Nabhany (1957), who refers to Islamic teachings, comes up with a seemingly combination of Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivist views. He observes that "aql", which contains the notions of knowledge, understanding, and significance or meaning, results from processes involving simultaneously the following elements: "waqi" (object, world), "ihsas" (sensing), "dimagh" (mind), and "ma'lumat sabiqoh" (background knowledge). As is the central case in the discussion of the distinction between the Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivist

views, An-Nabhany (1957) views that *ma'lumat sabiqoh* is possessed by or inherent in every normal individual. In this sense, individuality is central and, accordingly, this view seems to align to the Piagetian view. Yet, he observes that this individual property is influenced by external factors (e.g., parents, society). In this sense, he seems to align with Vygotsky. These external factors are dominant particularly when an individual is not yet "*baligh*" (religiously mature, more or less 12 years old for male and 9 years for female). As an individual comes to "*baligh*", s/he is deemed to have a greater active role in negotiating with the external factors (An-Nabhany, 1957). As *ma'lumat sabiqoh* is focal and subject to manipulation, the role of education creeps in right here: manipulating *ma'lumat sabiqoh*. In this very process of education, constructivism comes in with the spirit to engage the students in the endeavour to generate understandings, meanings, or knowledge of objects (e.g., literary works) by activating students' *ma'lumat sabiqoh*, be it individual (Piagetian) and/or socio-cultural (Vygotskian) in nature. This is also the spirit of reader-response when it is brought into the classrooms of literature (Corcoran & Evans, 1987; Miall, 1996).

Articulating von Glaserfeld's idea, Jaworski (1993) puts forward two principles the constructivist view bears: 1) knowledge is something which learners actively construct and 2) the learners' experience of the world is responsible for the modification and adaptation of their knowledge. In the attempts to bring these principles into the classrooms, other possible factors attributable to the formation of constructivist classrooms need to be taken into account. Richardson (1997, p. 9) observes two factors which play significant roles in affecting the extent to which the constructivist view is accommodated in teachers' approaches: 1) the extent to which the socio-cultural aspect is accepted as "integral to the individual learning/development process" and 2) nature of subject matter. The first point is central in the discussion of the difference between Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivist views as briefly discussed above, whereas the second point needs more discussion.

The present essay is dealing with English literature which is substantially different from mathematics. Mathematics allows correct or wrong judgement, for it employs discrete symbols which make such a judgement possible. However, literature reading allows a substantially interpretive

mode of understanding, which, to a large extent, is dependent on individual as well as socio-cultural ideas, concepts, and significance (meanings) (Richardson, 1997). Accordingly, there is a probability that the students do nothing wrong in terms of their understanding or meaning/significance-making of literary works. Therefore, literature teaching allows no "either or" judgement on the part of the teachers when judging their students' meaning-making of literary works. Since the process of meaning-making is dependent on individual students' *ma'lumat sabiqoh* (An-Nabhany, 1957) or horizon of expectation (Iser, 1992) or ideology (Butler, 1984) which is socio-culturally shaped or affected, central in the teaching of English literature classrooms is the consideration of the socio-cultural group to which the students belong.

In their recent study of one intact class in the English Department, Universitas Negeri Malang, East Java, Indonesia, Basthomi, Amri, and Subagyo (forthcoming) found that most of the students referred to Islamic ideology in evaluating and giving meanings to Hardy's novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This finding was derived from the students' essay reflecting their (free) personal responses to the novel as part of the materials in a Prose Fiction class. This finding endorses Butler's (1984) proposition that readers bring to the fore their own ideology so as to be confronted and negotiated with that present (or (un)consciously presented by the author) in the literary works. The finding supported the researchers' presumptions; the researchers expected (simply on the basis of intuition) that as the majority of the students were Moslems, most of them would refer to Islamic ideology. In this sense, the students' ideology seems to be shaped by the prevailing ideological notions embraced by the communities. In other words, the individual students' ideology is shaped by the socio-cultural factors. This point, in turn, attests Fish's (1980) notion of interpretive communities.

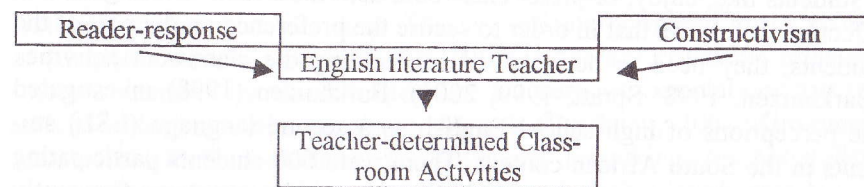


Figure 1. Teacher's Assumption-based Classroom Activities

Reader-response and the constructivist view seem to be theoretical in nature and works in a top-down way; the view is what seems to inform teachers. As specifically with the English literature teachers, this view is responsible for the teachers' assumptions of what constitutes plausible English literature classroom activities (see Figure 1); reader-response and the constructivist spirits seem to guarantee that it engages the students in the process of knowledge production, which, in turn, warrants that the students will develop self-reliance, autonomy, and a high quality of engagement in the classroom learning process. However, such an assumption might need for cross-checks. Investigations of what the students like about classroom activities can provide promising measurement tools to see if the teachers' assumptions about the engaging classroom activities, as propagated by reader-response and the constructivist views, are accurate.

#### LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM TEACHING-LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Barkhuizen (1998) and Spratt (1999, 2001) remind us of the importance of finding out what students like regarding classroom teaching-learning activities, which are, more rather than less, dependent on teachers' day-to-day decisions. This tends to be so particularly in the Javanese context, for Javanese belongs to the Asian cultures which, in terms of education, are accorded by Flowerdew and Miller (1995) with the following characteristics: a) the teacher should be granted high respect, b) the teacher should be considered unquestionable, c) the family and pressure to excel are student's motivations, d) silence and effacement are of positive value, and e) group orientation is highly desirable.

Apparently, the point of departure of the research in this area is that if students like, enjoy, or prefer classroom activities, their learning will be effective. It follows that in order to secure the preference on the part of the students, they need to be involved in deciding the classroom activities (Barkhuizen, 1998; Spratt, 1999, 2001). Barkhuizen (1998) investigated the perceptions of high school English as a second language (ESL) students in the South African context. There were 600 students participating in the study. The study found out that the learners' perceptions frequently surprised their teachers. For instance, the teachers often assumed that the

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method was promising and they set activities of CLT spirit, accordingly. Yet, the study discovered that the students showed resistance to such activities and were inclined to opt for more traditional (as opposed to CLT) classroom activities.

Spratt (1999) conducted a similar study in Hong Kong. Slightly different from Barkhuizen's (1998) which was not intentionally set to compare students' and teachers' activity preferences, Spratt's study was set to map students' activity preferences onto those of their teachers. The study found out that the teachers' accuracy in predicting their students' preferences for classroom activities comprised 54% of activities. The study discovered no clear pattern of accuracy in terms of the kinds of activity (e.g., speaking or writing) and types of activity (traditional or CLT).

Another part of Spratt's study was reported in 2001. This study startled the researcher in that "doing project work" and "watching myself on video" were rated medium (p. 96). The different aspect of the study, compared to the previous ones, included the comparisons of the study with the preceding pieces of research by other researchers. These comparisons did but yield a more vivid picture that different group of students studying in different cultural settings posed different preferences.

These three pieces of research indicate that teachers' perceptions of promising and engaging classrooms activities, which might often be derived from certain theoretical perspectives, such as reader-response and constructivism, do not necessarily correspond to those of their learners. The studies also suggest that students of a certain socio-cultural background might have classroom activities preferences which are different from those of another socio-cultural background. It follows that any claim about engaging classroom activities made on the basis of the currently desirable reader-response (in the particular realm of literature teaching) and constructivist perspectives need attempts for an improvement. Endeavours to attain such a betterment can be done by investigating the learners' preferences for classroom activities. This is particularly crucial in the sphere of (English) literature teaching, for, thus far, literary criticisms often act solely to inspire how English literature teachers set expectations and the activities their students are to go through (Basthomi, 2001; Grossman, 2001). This kind of teaching practice needs rethinking; teacher-student negotiation concerning classroom activities is desirable (see Figure 2).

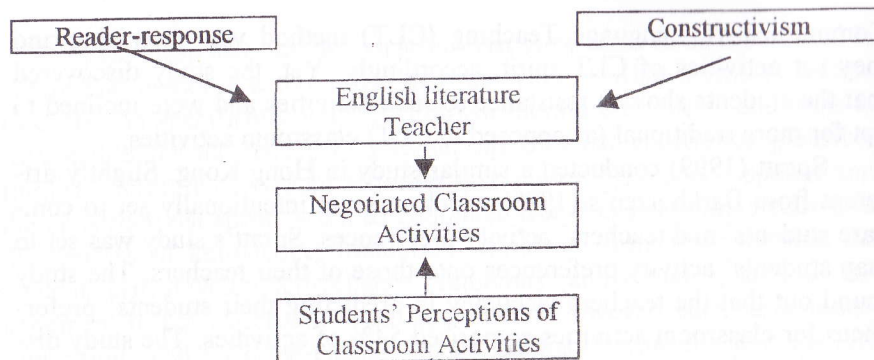


Figure 2. Teacher-student Negotiated Classroom Activities

## CONCLUSION

Classroom activities for English literature teaching seem to have been made rich with the information from literary criticisms (Basthomi, 2001; Grossman, 2001). However, one type of literary criticism, reader-response, seems to be more promising than others for the purpose of teaching. This is due to its view which accords readers, including students, with a significant role in the process of meaning or significance making of literary works. This view, which emanates from literary tradition (Corcoran & Evans, 1987), seems to correspond with the constructivist view of teaching, which originates from different theoretical tradition. The constructivist mode of teaching has the root in constructivist theory of knowledge and learning (Jaworski, 1993; Matthews, 2002). Hand in hand, reader-response and constructivist modes of teaching might inform English literature teachers of classroom activities in which their students are to get involved. In this sense, the enterprise works in a top-down manner. This might pose deficiency and, accordingly, needs to be furnished with a bottom-up mode of thinking, which can be secured by investigating what the students like of their English literature classroom activities. This point comes from the learner-centred language teaching "tradition" (e.g., Nunan, 1988). Studies in this last point (e.g., Barkhuizen, 1998; Spratt, 1999, 2001) suggest that decision making regarding designing classroom activities needs to involve students in order to promote students' engagement

and enthusiasm in learning. These studies also suggest that students of certain cultural group might have certain tendency regarding their preferences for classroom activities. Since EFL students are likely to have certain cultural background (e.g., Javanese), decision on the selection of classroom activities for the purpose of English literature teaching need to be informed with results of investigations on the students' perceptions of classrooms activities.

However, there seems to be a lack of research of this type regarding English literature classrooms in EFL context. Probably, referring to Javanese EFL settings (which might also apply to other EFL settings), English literature is often taught by teachers who have been trained with literary criticisms rather than with English education or applied linguistics. The training of literary criticisms probably plays a great role in inspiring the teachers of what their students need to do, and in informing their decision concerning their classroom activities they set for their students. If this proves accurate, the crucial immediate future agendum of research in this area would be to find out what the students of English literature in EFL settings like about their classroom activities. Another type of future research might investigate the kinds of training English literature teachers in the EFL context have received; Grossman (2001) points out that English literature teachers are often those trained with literary criticisms. Focus on comparing the English literature performances and attitudes of students who are and are not involved in classroom activity decision-making might also be of interest for other future research.

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