

INQUIRING THE NEO-IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CURRICULUM: TEACHING FOR *READING AGAINST THE GRAIN* USING READER-RESPONSE

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Abstract: The spread of the so-called ‘indispensable language’ for the immersion of English in the global world has mesmerized its victims in the classrooms through the operation of curriculum, material, and teaching methodology. Since the perspective of the traditional/structuralism school could not provide enough ‘reader involvement’, reader-response is one of the alternatives that support *teaching against the grain*. It provides the students with a more active exploration of the text in relation to their selves. This active engagement is important from the perspective of pedagogy. It enriches ‘student-centered’ methodology. The application, however, must be combined with a critical perspective. This process encourages students to identify the position of power in the literary texts. It allows teachers to explore students’ responses that will obviously become invaluable resources in the teaching-learning process.

Key words: English, Globalization, Post-colonialism, Curriculum, *Reading against the Grain*.

The total number of English speakers is roughly between 700 million and one billion (Pennycook, 1994: 7). They can be divided into three groups—native speakers, speakers of English as a second (or international language), and speakers of English as a foreign (or international language). Regarding the last group Pennycook raises the debate of the political values of English. He presents two points of view regarding English (1994: 9-27).

The first point of view is from linguistics and applied linguistic circles. Pennycook claims that these disciplines view English as *natural, neutral, and beneficial*. English is natural because its subsequent expansion is seen as a result of inevitable global force. It is neutral because English has become detached from its original cultural contexts and become a transparent medium of communication. It is beneficial because international communication assumes that this occurs on a cooperative and equitable footing. He considers this from the structuralist and positivist view of language as an idealized, abstract system disconnected from its surroundings and free of cultural and political influences.

The second is from the materialist point of view—the *social, cultural and political* context of English. This sees English as embedded in social, economic, and political struggles. Its global communication relates to the spread of capitalism, development aid and the dominance particularly of western media. Pennycook raises the issues of the functions of English as gatekeeper to positions of prestige in a society, and the effects in the field of education, employment and social positions.

Along with the English language, literature formed the core of the British Empire's focus for exporting culture, and in many ways literature still holds a special place (Willinsky, 1998: 214). Literature is not the tool of imperialism but rather a product of colonialism. This "colonialism should not be seen as an historical period but rather ..., should be understood in terms of its legacies to European thought and culture" (Pennycook, 1998: 18). Literature is a human construct, an entity that mirrors the values and prejudices of the society that reads it or refuses to allow its exposure (Eagleton, 1998). The European literature is fixed into the standard of the 'western literary canon' that should be studied by the students to pass their degree. It brings about the basic problem for the students as learners of English literature due to the fact that "English is both the language that will apparently bestow civilization, knowledge and wealth on people and at the same time is the language in which they are *racially defined*" (Pennycook, 1998: 4).

Pennycook (1998) underlined three principal issues that should not be taken for granted by any English Language Teacher practitioners. In this case, as a literature teacher, as I am being posited now, I should consider the following ideas. *First*, he sees that "English has clearly been interwoven with British colonialism throughout colonial and postcolonial history (Pennycook, 1998: 24). *Second*, he believes that "colonialism was a significant site of cultural production: it was indeed in this context that many constructions of Self and Other

were produced” (ibid). *Third*, “colonialism remains, despite the increased focus on colonial histories in recent years, a location of discourses, cultures and histories that merits constant further investigation” (ibid). It is clear that English language becomes the most significant of the production of the colonial enterprise. Thus, the relation between colonial discourses, English culture, and English language becomes tangible now. This raises the question of the discourse of post-colonialism.

POST-COLONIALISM AND WESTERN CANON IN THE CURRICULUM

The theory of post-colonialism is formulated in the book of three Australian writers, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989). Their proposal is inspired by the distinction made by Edward W. Said between the Occident and the Orient in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Said divides the world into two hemispheres, the west as the Occident and the east as the Orient. The relationship “between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, 1978: 5). He argues that Orientalism is a Western style “for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978: 3). The discourse of Orientalism further influenced the movement of post-colonial literary theory in the teaching of English literature. “... [P]ost[-]colonialism represents a set of conceptual tools which enable the experience of colonial domination to be understood in new and diverse ways” (Darby, 1998: 217). The teaching of English literature is seen in a different way, as a form of cultural imperialism rather than as a standard that has been taken for granted for decades. It also swept away the “stereotypes of colonialism as solely the brutal oppression and economic exploitation but it opens our eyes to show that it is basically a constant cultural and micropolitical operation of colonialism” (Pennycook, 1998: 24).

Ashcroft et al. (1989) furthermore explain that “[O]ne of the main features of imperial oppression is the control over language and this becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated (Ashcroft et al., 1989: 7). This power supports the very basic concern of the emergence of “canonical texts” (Ashcroft et al.: 32). The canonical literary texts produce a set of fixed discourses maintained by a particular group to define the center and the marginal texts. The discourse of post-colonialism is therefore grounded in a

struggle for power—that power focused in the control of the metropolitan language (Foucault, 1982: 167). The center texts or the metropolitan literary texts reflect the centralization of the will of power to dominate. “Canonization is the most extreme form of what Nietzsche called Interpretation or the exercise of the will-to-power over texts” (Bloom, 1975: 100). “A canon is not a body of texts ‘per se’, but a set of reading practices [...] and these reading practices, in turn, are resident in institutional structures, such as education curriculum and publishing networks” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 189). The western literary canon experiences total exposure because of the power of frequent representation through the discourse of English language teaching.

There is something important in the development of English language as global communication nowadays. Haneline (2001) argues that English is not a ‘White’ language anymore. It is used throughout the world by those of every race and culture. Haneline is in line with the structuralist’s point of view that is discussed in Pennycook (1994). Regarding this, one of my feet is at Defoe’s step of teaching Friday—Indonesians see English as indispensable—and one of my other feet is confronting colonialism and the cultural identity imposed upon me (Pennycook, 1994). This dilemma means that I am “negotiating spaces ‘in between’” (Arber, 2000: 45). Arber argues that position is not simply a set of binaries—black-white, female-male, English-non English—but a multiposition. She highlights that “we are multipositioned” (2000: 46).

From my previous experiences in the context of the literary classroom, the established western literary canon needs to be taught in different ways. If the curriculum authors insist on teaching the material *in accordance with the grain*, they should re-consider the goal because all the teaching-learning activities should be directed to the needs of the learners. Baumlin suggests that “once literary-aesthetic criteria are relativized, no single author, text, tradition, class, cultural status, or ideology can be argued into a secure position of value or dominance” (Baumlin, 2002: 11). Even curriculum needs to be created by the classroom community, not by textbook authors (Doll, 1993: 180).

The curriculum of the English department at tertiary level is set and verified according to the ‘*reference group*’ (Richard, 2001: 52). This reference group refers to experts in the industries of ELT that are disseminated widely throughout the world (Ashcroft et al, 1989; Darby, 1998; Pennycook, 1998; Willinsky, 1998). Indonesian curriculum authors have had no awareness until now that the canon they formulated in the curriculum is the canon of western literary writers such as Dickens, Conrad, Hardy, T. E. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence.

Teachers who expect to teach literature are expected to have a good command in mastering these canons. Arriving at the English department to teach English literature means knowing widely the entire elements and all of the writers in these canons. There is also a growing attention toward the arrival of other contemporary literary works from different ethnic backgrounds, religions, cultures and societies. This fact indeed invites debate among literary scholars and lecturers.

TEACHING FOR READING AGAINST THE GRAIN USING READER RESPONSE

The Indonesian government believes that the teaching and learning of English language course should be accompanied by its culture. And one of the elements of culture is the work of literature. The curriculum is based on the belief about language teaching and learning that "the study of language is also a study of people and cultures, because language is an integral part of a culture" (Kramsch, 1993). It is believed that by exposing students to the history, ethics, customs, religion or beliefs of a culture that speaks the language by means of literary works they can foster their mastery of the language. The curriculum board also assumes that the exposure of the western literary texts is directed to meet the learners' needs. Through inquiry, students are guided to developing a deeper knowledge of the language and the culture.

All of the works being offered in the English Department are basically from the western literary canon. And the teaching method involves a traditional way of inquiring about the characterization, plot, style, point of view, and theme. All of these imported materials are exercising power in my classroom context. The curriculum, teaching material, syllabus, the way I teach and the way the students read are all prescribed by the western method. All the episodes are a dictated way of transferring the central knowledge to the peripheral context. The process of critical thinking is even blocked in the way of meeting the standard. My students' preferred learning style and my preferred teaching style are connected in complex ways to the social and cultural world that shapes both my students and me. This relation of power operates and reduplicates self in the classroom context. My students are sometimes questioning the cultural values that are embedded in the literature.

The contexts which I have experienced show that it is important for readers to understand how texts may position them and how they themselves are positioned in their approaches to the text. My role as a reader and as a teacher shows

that critically reflecting on positioning is important in the process of reading. The process of reading literature needs an inquiry into how this power relation positions the author and the reader. In this section I will design a sample of syllabus that attempts to show how such an investigation will operate.

The syllabus is generally conceived as a list or inventory of items or units with which students are to be familiarized. As one aspect of the apparatus of the curriculum, the syllabus specifies “the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested” (Richards, 2001:2). A syllabus designer at the very least should provide a rationale for the design of the syllabus. And this will emerge from an approach that “selects language units for progressive assimilation by [students]”(Crombie, 1985:1).

Teaching for “Reading against the Grain”

Questions over value, meaning, social function, and canonicity have become the subject of controversies in the recent history of literary theory. And one of the struggles within the English Department as Tiffin highlights it is “the relationship between canonized and deeply institutionalized ‘mainstream’ British literature and other literatures in English” (Tiffin, 1994: 41).

As the discourse of west-oriented literature has been investigated critically by Said, he does not mean to annihilate the canon but rather to “search for a more flexible, more provisional canon answering to a broader range of immanent cultural needs” (Gorak, 1991: 209). This proposal of an open canon reveals a place for the peripheral and marginal texts to have their representation. The canonical works are expected:

“to provide knowledge of the world represented, to exemplify powers for making representations that express possible attitudes or produce artistic models, and to articulate shared values in a past culture that influence the present or to clarify means of reading other works we have reason to care about”. (Altieri, *Canons and Consequences*, 1990: 41).

As suggested by Tiffin, the starting point in teaching post-colonial theory remains the literary text because in spite of the recent turn to theory “the literary texts remain the focus of most English department curricula” (Tiffin, 1994: 42). The particular reason why the literary texts become the center in the curriculum is that “for most post-colonial literary critics, a return to the post-colonial literary text itself comprises an absolutely crucial gesture within the politics of critical

writing and the *sine qua non* of a literary critical engagement with the structures of neo-colonialist power” (Stephen Slemon in Tiffin, 1994: 42). Further, Tiffin suggests that teaching post-colonial literary theory involves more than teaching the relevant literary texts and relevant theorists. It involves “an approach which necessarily impacts on literary study generally and the current structures and ideologies of English departments as they are still generally organized” (ibid: 46). It opens a more critical and interrogative awareness in the teaching process. And the influence is operated in teaching “*against the grain*” (ibid: 49). It teaches the students the current canon not in the traditional way but rather teaches them to read against it—understanding the influence of the value, meaning, and behavior in the students’ own context.

Teaching against the grain suggests inquiring into the relation of power. Power is not only repressive but also productive. The location of productivity within the text should be inquired into, not in a traditional way in which the fetishization of western canon becomes absolute. This inquiry is structured to address questions of gender, colonialism, representation between the centre and its Others and even slavery. Instead of questioning the character and characterization, style, point of view, plot and theme within the structuralist framework, teaching against the grain questions the positions between characters, how these positions might be exchanged, or how the texts could be rewritten from a different position. And the textual analysis should be combined with analysis of practices that produce power. This will deal with how the author positions him/herself, how characters are positioned, how the readers are positioned by the author, how the reader positioned her/himself in reading the texts.

Using Reader-Response to Develop Students’ Critical Engagement in Reading the Texts

To develop students’ critical reading using post-colonial theory, I propose using Reader-response (RR) in which students’ critical insights can be unraveled. The basic principle that underlines RR theory is “the importance of the reader in making meaning out of textual material”. This suggests that the readers’ duty is not to reveal the author’s meaning. Very often, my students have to strive hard to determine what is the meaning implied in the text while also searching for an understanding of the author’s social background. It is very common to have one single meaning in the class. There was a ‘stable determinacy of meaning’ (Fish, 1980: 309) in my class that perhaps also happens in

other classes. Fish disagrees that meanings come already calculated (ibid). He explains further that:

In literary criticism this means that no interpretation can be said to be better or worse than any other, and in the classroom this means that we have no answer to the student who says my interpretation is as valid as yours. (Fish, 1980: 309).

In the same tone Culler sees readers as occupying the ‘centering role’ (Culler, 1982: 32) in reading texts. This suggests that my focus should be on the readers, my students, in interpreting the literary text. The authority centers on the reader and not for the text. This implies that variations in interpretations are welcomed because as Culler quoted from Barthes there is no single ‘theological’ meaning but each text represents a multi-dimensional space (ibid: 32). The reader is thus the meaning maker. As the slogan says, ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’ (Barthes p.148 in Misson 1998: 104 and Culler 1982: 31). Barthes, Fish, Culler, and other critics clearly give the authority back to the readers.

As Tyson (1998: 154) summarized, reader-response theorists share two beliefs: (1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature.

The previous two beliefs are especially well suited to the pedagogy I want to implement in my classroom. My goal is to build what Fish called an ‘interpretive community’—a community of readers with shared practices and competences (in Rice & Waugh 1989: 75 and Henricksen & Morgan 1990: 197) in my teaching context. This is interesting because he originated this term to provide situations or contexts that offer practice, purposes, and goals that enable communication to take place between readers and text. In the interpretive community, it is the community that determines the interpretations rather than the textual features of the work itself.

The next questions which I pose to myself when applying this method are: how far does this freedom of the reader have its own limit? Are they as omnipotent as the author in structuralist theory? Will I justify all my students’ responses as ‘valid’? Should I give them a ‘frame’ for how to see the works? How about my colleagues’ comments on their “naivety, tentativeness, insufficiency, and

outright ‘misinterpretation’” (Gilbert, 1987: 4). Pam Gilbert’s “Post reader-response: The Deconstructive Critique” gives illuminating concepts for classroom teaching (Gilbert, 1987: 3-5) as follows:

1. *Plurality of meaning*: it offers relief to teachers who had a long struggle unraveling the mystery of the author’s meaning. All of students’ meaning can be taken aboard as ‘legitimate’ because they represent personal engagement with the text. It is important to acknowledge that students believe that their personal responses to pieces of literature are valuable and valid.
2. *Plurality of response forms*: the first concept allows students to have personal meaning and it legitimates the use of personal language in responding to the work rather impersonal language in traditional criticism.
3. *Focus on the reading process*: rather than focusing on the author, we should highlight the students’ process of reading. The focus shifts to the active role of students and the students’ need that they are enjoying and happy to read the work. Thus, this offers a more student-centered literature curriculum.

Fish calls the process of being a good reader as ‘informed reader’. In the “Interpreting the *Variorum*”, Fish suggest that interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but *learned* (Fish, 1976: 183). Furthermore, Culler adds that “literature requires the active personal involvement of readers...” (Culler, 1982: 41). In this light, Fish called the reader “an ‘informed reader’—it is neither an abstraction, nor an actual living reader, but a hybrid—a real reader who does everything within his power to make himself informed ...” (Culler, 1982: 40).

With regard to post-colonial theory, this method of reading will help students to unravel a new way of reading that is critical and rich. This will help students problematize the taken-for-granted-situation that they have occupied with regard to literary texts. Students will see the texts using different glasses that will help them interpret the colonial texts that are still operating up to now. It is this awareness in the reader of the ways in which they are positioning themselves in relation to the text that is important. If I want my readers to be critical in a way that is both liberating and fair I will have to ensure that they know how they are using their critical interpretations of the text.

CONCLUSION

The macro context of the situation in Indonesia shows clearly that English is a powerful colonial tool in which globalization becomes the name that legitimizes the reproduction of its imperialism. The spread of the so-called 'indispensable language' for immersion in the global world has mesmerized its victims in the classrooms through the operation of curriculum, material, and teaching methodology.

The materials that I gave to the students were texts that represent the reduplication of the power of English in the global world. All of them are part of the western canon that is massively exported to the marginal world like Indonesia. Furthermore, the way I taught the text was also dictated in the same way as the West wanted us to teach and to read. This oppressive traditional method has shaped my students into passive receivers without questioning the political value implanted in it.

In the classroom context, the failure to understand power positioning in the work of literature can lead to Pennycook's ideas of colonization. It is crucial not to take for granted every imported material so that the students will not experience colonization in the way they read a piece of literature. The idea of Tiffin's teaching of post-colonial theory presents another way to identify and minimize the effect of this imperialism by teaching the texts *against the grain*. I am not suggesting to banish the western canon but rather to challenge it. I need to develop ways of creating teaching and reading against this canon, challenging the position of power being offered in the text. The position of power is critically unraveled using this method.

Since the perspective of the traditional/structuralist school could not provide enough 'reader involvement', reader-response is one of the alternatives that supports teaching against the grain. It provides the students with a more active exploration of the text in relation to their selves. This active engagement is important from the perspective of pedagogy. The traditional teaching methodology offers little attention to the students because it is teacher-centered. This is more student-centered. The application, however, must be combined with a critical perspective. This process encourages students to identify the position of power in the literary texts. It allows teachers to explore students' responses that will obviously become a valuable resource in their teaching. This will finally unfold the critical dimension that had long been eradicated by the power reproduction in the English language.

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