

# The Practice of Critical Literacy Teaching in EFL Classroom: A Case Study in a Reading Class in Indonesian Higher Education

Ari Setyorini

*English Department, Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia  
arisetyorini@fkip.um-surabaya.ac.id*

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to frame critical literacy practice in EFL Classroom in Indonesia since it is known that critical literacy should be implemented by higher education in the 21st century to answer the need of transformative pedagogy. Using descriptive qualitative analysis, the study was focused on two prominent points. Firstly, it examined how a higher education teacher in EFL classroom put critical literacy into practice and challenged her students to be critical learners. Further, applying Critical Language Awareness (CLA) strategies, this paper took a deeper discussion on how CLA could enhance student's critical consciousness in reading a text. Secondly, this study described the challenge of teaching English Language using critical literacy perspective for higher education in EFL classroom.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

UNESCO (2004) emphasizes the importance of teaching critical literacy in this fast growing information era which often presents text with symbolic violence in order to avoid the oppression and preserve the diversity of civic life (Street, 1995; Wagner 1999). Regarding this notion, Paulo Freire (1973) says that illiteracy is not a neutral condition. Thus, he suggests that educational institution should focus on teaching literacy to awake students from the domination of the social and economic oppressive structures.

De Castell, Luke & MacLennan (1989) argue that today's technological society has shifted the meaning of literate from the one who could read and make literal meaning of the text or known as functionally literate into the individual who is able to read for social practices or called as critically literate. Moreover, this perspective supports the educational institution to teach reading with critical perspective by correlating reading with the teaching of cultural way of seeing, describing and explaining (Luke & Freebody, 1997). It means that in teaching reading should be aimed to understand the representation of a text, ideology embedded in a text, subjectivity and author's position about a particular issue. As noted by Janks, it must be borne in students' mind that the act

of reading is a matter of knowledge and power distribution in society. (2000)

In Indonesia, the focus of teaching English as Foreign Language (EFL) reading especially for university's student should get a serious concern since there is a new curriculum based on Indonesian Qualification Framework which obligates higher educational institution to make their students be perceptive and adaptive toward the global change and needs. Thus, this is in dire need of placing the cognitive level of undergraduate student particularly for EFL learning by not only focusing on the mastery of language skills in a certain level, but also considering the need of transformative critical pedagogy through the EFL teaching. In doing so, Indonesian university should construct their lesson in accordance with the need of creating critical students in this millennial era. It is to prepare the university student to be the agent of change who must be ready to take on their participatory roles of being global citizens by understanding the various socio-political perspectives of a text.

It is broadly noticed that critical literacy has been on the spot of light for years ago in Western Education, particularly through L1 classroom. In EFL context, Ko and Wang (2009) noted that the theory of critical literacy and its implication in EFL classroom is limited. However, critical literacy has been gradually explored by literacy practitioners in these recent years. Those researches are mostly conducted

in primary or secondary level of education. It means that critical literacy in the EFL for Higher Education level has not been explored immensely yet. In Asian context, Koo's research (2008) confirms that Higher Education students still do not articulate what they are thinking, perhaps reflecting the situation of literary practice in schooling. He adds up that the low level of critical literacy of Asian students could be seen from the EFL examination system and the practice of rote learning in EFL teaching (Koo, 2008). Further, it is noted that the lack of critical literacy practice in Asia is mostly due to the reasons of the insufficient understanding on the need of critical literacy in this region and a lack of knowledge and skills on its implementation in non-Western contexts (Kim, 2012), and the cultural reason of which is typically marked by hierarchal structure in which student is in submissive position and it is impolite to express their critical opinion toward their teacher (Kuo, 2009) which makes passive culture of the class (Yulianto, 2015).

This article intends to frame the critical literacy practice, particularly in teaching EFL reading, in Higher education in EFL classroom in Indonesia by concerning on the chosen reading material and teaching strategy. To accommodate the objective of teaching EFL reading critically, this research applies Critical Language Awareness (CLA) by correlating the language figures and critical literacy (Wallace, 1998). The use of CLA strategy is to balance the teaching material proportion between language skill and critical reading skill which is exceedingly needed to be explored in EFL education.

This was a case study in which the teacher was functioned as the researcher as well. The research was conducted in Interpretative Reading Class which is programmed for students of third semester at an English Department of a Private University in Surabaya. The participants of this research were 14 students of Interpretative Reading in Class A. The implementation was conducted for two time meetings for each meeting was done for about 90 minutes. The main data was taken from student's responses on discussion, student's worksheet and journal. The taken data was interpreted qualitatively.

## **2 THE PRACTICE AND CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL LITERACY IN TEACHING EFL READING**

### **2.1 Teaching Material and Strategy**

To find the proper material which meets the learning objective, teacher should consider a thought-provoking topic of a passage that would challenge students to think in a different perspective. In addition, the chosen topic should be contextual to today's social, political, and cultural issue to make students be familiar with the topic and to be able to reflect the problem brought by the passage into their daily lives. As Lewison, et al (2008: 5) highlights a relation between personal and cultural resources in critical literacy instruction. It means that the material used in teaching critical literacy should accommodate the "transaction among the personal and cultural resources, the critical social practices we (teacher and students) enact, and the critical stance that we and our students take on in classrooms and in the world". From this point of view, the material should be able to make the students understand what happen in the world.

Another aspect to be considered in designing the reading material is about the students' English language level. For the Interpretative Reading class which the researcher observed, the student's English language level is low-mid intermediate. The learning outcome of this subject is that the student has to acquire a good comprehension of various reading text with critical reading strategies and is able to deal with 600 words of a passage (English Department's document, 2016).

Realizing the prominent aspects in designing the reading material above-mentioned, the teacher took two kinds of simplified reading passages having similar issue of ndiscrimination. The first text is about racial discrimination entitled "Two Ways to Confront Racism in Indonesia" taken from online news portal, jakartaglobe.id. The text form is an opinion written by a columnist, Johannes Nugroho. The second is entitled "Ahmadiyah Community in Indonesia Faces Ongoing Discrimination". This is an interview conducted by Asian Human Right Commission toward Secretary of Jamaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI) which brings out the voice of Ahmadiyah followers. This interview excerpt was downloaded from Asian Human Right Commission website.

Since the course objective was about previewing and making inference, thus the teacher set up the

reading material and student’s worksheet which covered the reading strategies of previewing and making inference. However, to meet the need of critical literacy, the main attention was on the figures of language in the text. Following Wallace in adapting Hallidayan framework for critical reading (2003) the teacher designed student’s worksheet into three layers of identification by identifying the language figures in the text. Later on, the identification is to find the interpersonal meaning, the ideational meaning, and the textual or ideological meaning of the text. To adjust the framework with the course objective, the question in the textual meaning layer was modified by inserting two questions about the fact and opinion in the text and the inference. Here are the text analysis that should be identified by the students:

Table 1: Critical Language Awareness.

<i>Complete the columns below, making reference to the key text and the Halliday framework for text analysis</i>		
1. Interpersonal Meanings	2. Ideational Meanings	3. Textual Meanings
Note any use of: 1. Personal pronoun or the writer and the main characters are presented in the text 2. Mood 3. Language items, such as adjectives which reflect writer’s attitude	Note: 1. Who are the main characters and what verbs collocate with what nouns	Note what kind of text this is: 1. How is the topic presented, what fact and opinion can you find in the text? 2. What can you infer from the presented topic and the fact?

The learning steps were conducted following Wallace (1992, 1993) which were pre-, while-, and post-reading activity. Pre-activity was designed to build up students initial background of knowledge about the topic. While-activity was the main learning activity in which the students were exposed to reading material and critical language awareness strategy. At this stage, the students were directed to answer the worksheet based on CLA strategy. The last stage of post-activity was aimed to note students’ learning experience and reflection toward the learning topic.

## 2.2 Classroom Activities

In pre-reading activity, the objective of this stage was to bring initial schematic knowledge to bear in students’ mind about the topic of passage that would be discussed at that day. To create visual projection about today’s topic, the teacher showed three pictures and asked the students to previewed the pictures and spoke up the first adjective that came into their mind after observing the picture. The first picture illustrated about three burnt Koran which was back-dropped with burnt Mosque. The students’ responded by speaking up some adjectives and the teacher wrote the adjectives in the white board. The adjectives which students had in their mind were: cruel, sinful, angry, burnt, sad, racist, Islamic. The second picture was an excerpt of printed newspaper which entitled “Rumah dan Masjid Pengikut Ahmadiyah Dibakar”. The teacher noted students’ response on adjectives of intolerant, discriminative, racist, defensive, misguided, wrong, and misled. The next picture showed a testimony of from a Chinese Indonesia girl who had lived in Indonesia for about 18 years, but she moved to USA when May 1998 riot happened. This girl expressed her feeling of being Chinese Indonesia who often got verbal bullied from people because of her racial difference. This picture was captured from kaskus website. The adjectives that came up were sad, intolerant, cruel, wrong, racist, and heart-breaking.

After taking note toward students’ adjectives list, the teacher asked the students to classify the positive and negative adjective based on the context of the pictures. The teacher highlighted that the list had more negative adjective and confirmed the students about their feeling related to the negative adjectives. Next, she asked the students to predict the topic of discussion at that day based on the pictures they saw and the adjectives they found. The students guessed the topic as the following:

Student 6: *“From the pictures in the slides, my prediction, ... Mmm... maybe today we will discuss the bad... bad effect of racism.”*

Student 10: *“I think ... Maybe... it is about discrimination happens in Indonesia. If I read some negative adjectives there, yes, I agree with Student 6. It is about negative side of discrimination in Indonesia.”*

From those two responses, it can be noted that through previewing and predicting, the pre-activity stage was succeeded to build students’ the initial schematic background knowledge of the topic. The teacher, then, strengthened the students’ initial knowledge about discrimination by correlating the issue of discrimination with the students’ experience

in their real lives. Some students keenly answered by telling their experiences of being discriminated.

Students 3: *In my home country (at this case, the student is from Southern Thailand) there is religious discrimination experienced by Muslim in Southern Border Province like me. The conflict is between Buddhist and Moslem.*

Student 8: *Racial discrimination. I often discriminated because of my accent or you know about the stereotype because I am a Madurese. I often get bully from my friends, verbally.*

The two students' responses show that the students were able to make a link between the reading topic and their real experiences.

In while-reading activity, the students were divided into two group which each group consists of 7 students. The first group had a passage about "Ahmadiyah Community in Indonesia Faces Ongoing Discrimination", while the second group got a passage entitled "Two Ways to Confront Racism in Indonesia". Firstly, the students were asked to find generic classification of the text by stating text's title, the author and the publisher.

After finding the genre of the text, the students were directed to do close-reading and identify the language features based on the Halliday framework as written in their worksheet. Here, the teacher explained briefly the framework to make the students understand the use of this three layers of identification. In addition, she also emphasized the analysis of figures of language can reveal the representation of particular race, religion, belief, and stereotype therein a text.

The learning stage was closed with post-activity where students can reflect the learning material that day and what they experienced during the teaching-learning process.

### 2.3 Assessing Student's Critical Awareness

In While-Reading activity, each student had to classify the language items in the column individually, even though they were divided into two groups based on two different articles.

The assessment of the students' worksheet of first group shows that 85% of the students (6 out of 7 students) was able to classify the personal pronoun or the writer and the main characters were presented in the text, the mood of the text, and the adjectives reflecting the writer's attitude. Only one student did not answer the question about mood correctly due to the misled concept she had about the mood. For the second layer question, all students could mention the

main characters in the text who are the Ahmadiyah community, the Minister of Religion, Indonesian Ulama Assembly, Regional Government, Indonesia Police and Court. They also could identify the adjectives and verbs that follow the characters. Through this activity, the teacher emphasized the subject position of each character in the text and the standing point of the writer toward the issue of the text.

Finally, the students were able to state the topic of the passage which is about religious discrimination and able to identify the fact and opinion. For knowing the textual meaning, the students were asked to identify the kind of text and the inferred meaning of opinion presented in the text. However, when they were asked to infer the meaning of the fact and opinion, there were misinterpretation found from the students' answer. The percentage of right answer is 57% or 4 out of 7 students who inferred the right meaning.

The students were realized that Ahmadiyah community was represented as "errant sect" due to their different interpretation toward Islamic teaching. Related to this representation, some of students said that the identification as an errant sect was based on Indonesian Ulama Assembly's fatwa in 1995 which stated that this community did not follow the official teaching of Islam. As argued by student 6: *"I heard this community has different interpretation to legal Islamic teaching. I am not sure what is the difference in their belief, but I, personally agree to the classification.. I believe to what MUI said that they are errant sect. But... I don't agree if because of that, they are condemned to do Hajj or they can't access public service such as getting health insurance from government. They should get their right."*

This excerpt shows the negotiation position in responding the discourse brought by the text. The student still believed in his initial knowledge that Ahmadiyah community is a misguided sect, however, he thought that Ahmadiyah should have not been discriminated to get the public access due to their belief.

For the second group, all of students were correct in analyzing the interpersonal meaning of the text. They succeeded in identifying the different representation of two Chinese Indonesian figures through the use of personal pronoun and adjectives in the text. For the second layer, 85% of students in this group correctly answered the verbs collocated with three characters in the text (Jaya Suprana, Basuki Purnama, and Tri Rismaharini).

From the stage of interpersonal meaning, the students succeeded in finding the subject position of



each character of the text by looking at the adjectives which follow them. As expressed by student 9: *“The representation of Chinese Indonesia here are two images. First, Jaya Suprana is represented as modesty and non-confrontation Chinese Indonesian. In contrast, Ahok is represented as outspoken and plain speaking. However, bu Risma is also represented with similar image with Ahok. What makes Ahok, bu Risma different is people relate the bad representation of Ahok with his racial background. But not for bu Risma.”*

It can be noticed that the student was capable to explain the subject position of the characters. The teacher went further by asking the students about the writer’s intention in representing different subject position of the characters.

The question of writer’s intention is a bridge to connect the first stage of CLA with the second stage of the ideational meaning of the text. At this point, the teacher asked the students to pay attention to the use of particular verbs which collocate to the nouns. The students highlighted the use of active verbs and several modals which indicate the intention of the writer to emphasise the noun’s action, for instance, when the text stated: *Ahok, uncowed by discrimination, demands that he be treated and judged equally as any other Indonesian citizen regardless of race*, the students were asked to focus on the word of “demand” to know that the noun (Ahok) requested forcefully and urgently to be treated equally as Indonesian citizen despite his race. The use of “demand” here was to show that race was one of the plausible causing factors of discrimination which had to be taken into serious action.

After identifying the verbs that collocated with the nouns, the students were directed to interpret the writer’s stand point. To some extent, this task was more difficult to be tackled by the students. They could make a connection between the use of certain verb and the meaning behind it, but they still got confused to sum up the writer’s stand point. Thus, the teacher stimulated by asking several questions such as: whose voice was brought by the writer? Or whose voice was dismissed? By relating these questions to the language figures used by the writer, it eased the students to grasp the writer’s position.

The last stage in this while-reading activity was designed to meet the goal of reading skill. This textual level of analysis questioned the students’ understanding about fact and opinion. They had to mention the facts presented in the text and infer the meaning of the fact and opinion. Similar to the first group, the students in this second group also found difficulty in making inference to the fact they found

in the text, 4 out of 7 students answered the correct inference.

The teacher found two main challenges in practicing Critical Literacy in teaching EFL reading. First is the students’ belief on their initial knowledge about the official Islamic teaching. This belief made the student doubt what position they should take. They believed that this community follow a misled Islamic teaching. On the other hand, they did not agree to the discrimination experienced by Ahmadiyah community. Second problem is the passive culture of students. This was a predictable problem since being submissive student in the class is a common culture in Indonesia. For this problem, the teacher created student’s journal in which the students could express their thoughts. It is proven that the students who were not fully engaged to the discussion were able to express their opinion in the journal with clear critical argument.

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

CLA was applied as a way to make a balance distribution between language skill and critical literacy teaching. The learning procedure was done through pre-while-and post reading activity. In pre-activity, students were asked to preview some pictures and predict the topic of discussion. In while-activity, firstly the students were asked to identify linguistic features in the text to understand the comprehensiveness and to make inference as well. Post-activity was in form of student’s self-reflection about the discussed topic in their journals. From the observation, it was known that the teacher encountered two challenging problems which are the students’ religious belief which sometime made them be doubtful to which side they should take their position and the passive culture of the students.

For further research, it will be more comprehensive if the study takes its focus on EFL teachers’ perception toward critical literacy practice in EFL teaching for Higher Education. This study is needed to frame a holistic practice of critical literacy for tertiary education in Indonesia.

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