



Probing Learners' Critical Reading: Reader-Response Activities in an EFL Context

Wigati Dyah Prasasti

Universitas PGRI Adi Buana, Indonesia

Introduction

The main objective of reading activities in EFL contexts seems to emphasise more on understanding the literal content of a text. Until quite recently, the centre of reading comprehension is more on the surface-level of understanding a text while there is negligence on meaning making and text analysis (Iyer, 2007). There is a tendency that the teaching of reading in EFL context is anchored on pragmatic reasoning particularly instrumental reading (Cox & Assis-Paterson, 1999) and the emphasis is on the cognitive activities of word decoding and recognition for the sake of understanding literal meaning (Gee, 1999; Idol, 1987). Such an emphasis may result in college students' incontestably low ability in answering extended reasoning questions (Talebinejad & Matou, 2012). The principal aim of reading comprehension in EFL classroom context seems to be consequently far from the objective of the literacy scheme of English as first or second language of which focus is on the achievement of critical literacy (Comber & Nixon, 2011; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2011; Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011).

In Indonesian context, additionally, the focus of EFL teaching of reading is more on intensive reading of which purpose is to arrive at learners' comprehension by emphasising on text decoding and the use of schemata to enable EFL learners, particularly those at the university level, to understand expository texts of which composition is ordinarily used in the text books (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). In order to achieve the comprehension, Indonesian EFL learners need to have some related background knowledge (Floris & Divina, 2009) and knowledge on linguistics, reading strategies, and text structure (Sulistyo & Suharmanto, 2007). This Indonesian context has confirmed the findings of some studies in EFL reading comprehension which are predominantly centred on the lexical and syntactic levels (e.g., Farley & Elmore, 1992; Guo, Roehrig & Williams, 2011; Lo, 2011; Ozturk, 2015; Uccelli et al., 2015; and Zhang & Annual, 2008). It denotes that in responding to the text, learners have not yet actively involved other 'texts' in their cognition as a result of their interactions with the other reading texts and the real world.

Reading class should not merely concern a language skill limited to teaching learners' linguistic knowledge of English. It should encourage learners to make meaning of the words used in contexts (Ko, 2013) by way of providing critical responses to a reading text. This way, EFL learners consequently need to be active readers and are encouraged to establish interrelatedness between the textual world and their own experiences (Lee, 2015). This requires readers to be critically involved with the text they read. EFL learners' reading activity should accordingly be situated in the social and cultural elements adhered to the text and the readers.

This study is therefore aimed at examining EFL learners' critical reading by way of enquiring into the



way they respond to a reading text. The responses are in form of written responses focusing on how they relate the textual world of the text with the real sociocultural conditions they encounter. This research area is fruitful to see the development of critical reading in EFL context.

Literature Review

Critical Reading

The term ‘comprehension’ in reading comprehension courses should be explicated further so that reading is not merely a literal-level understanding activity. Sadoski and Paivio (2007) define ‘comprehension’ as a ‘construction of meaningful interpretation’. The interpretation they mean is divided into some levels: literal (taking the words’ meaning based on their basic sense), inferential (extracting the meaning of the words based on evidence and reasoning), and critical (involving some political, social, cultural and ideological aspects in making meaning of the words).

In the context of reading comprehension in EFL, critical reading cannot be separated from critical thinking. Critical thinking should not be only activated inside the class, but is also expected that learners take critical thinking out of the class and apply it in their lives (Beaumont, 2010). Critical thinking, which also means critical reading in EFL realm, is often associated with “hierarchical order of cognitive skills” including evaluation, analysis, synthesis and comprehension (Benesch, 1993 p. 546). Critical reading in fact not only concerns cognitive activities, but is also relevant to social practice that employs the readers’ critical standpoint (Macknish, 2011). Since critical reading is part of social practice, it becomes a practice of individuals in reading all representatives they encounter in their daily acts. Critical reading activities serve as a dynamic arena for textual and sociocultural contestation that enable readers to see a text from multiple perspectives (Iyer, 2007). When EFL learners are given an opportunity to explore their critical reading, they manage to relate the ideology contained in the text with their critical thinking (Macknish, 2011), and with their social, cultural, and personal experiences and values they embrace (Park, 2011; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017) particularly when EFL learners are provided with culturally familiar texts (Sheridan & Condon, 2020).

Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory supports some practices of which focuses are on activating language learners’ responses as well as assisting them to improve their response ability when reading a particular text (Picken, 2007) through the text’s meaning and structure. While reading, the learners as readers respond to the reading text. In the process of responding the reading text, there is a transaction between the text and lived experience of the readers to evoke meanings (Rosenblatt, 1988). Their responses can also be triggered when readers’ reading experience invoking from the text attends their feeling, memories or images (Kadir, Maasum, & Vengadasamy, 2012). The mental processes of the readers are additionally involved in readers’ response activity (Whiteley, 2011). Accordingly, as interpretation in readers’ responses is fundamentally personal (Lewis, 2000), readers’ personal experience and emotion will affect their responses to the texts they read. In her study, Prasasti (2020) argues that EFL learners situate their interpretation of certain metaphors found in a reading text in particular sociocultural contexts one of which is the learner’s own sociocultural experience. Not only does interpretation concern with revealing the hidden meanings of symbolic language, but it also deals with the texts themselves as poetic texts that become the sites where readers’ imagination, experience, understanding, and emotions can uniquely be active (Feldman, 2000) based on how they relate the personal experience they have in mind and what happens in the texts.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design. Details about the participants of the study, data collection, and data analysis are discussed in the following.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were selected purposively to gain the ‘unique contexts’ (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) of the participants’ responses to the given text. Three students who enrolled in one of the private universities in Indonesia were recruited as participants of the current study. They were EFL university students in their third year and majoring in English Education. They speak Bahasa Indonesia as their main language. They have been exposed to reading comprehension activities from their first year at the university. Most of the activities aimed at extracting literal information from reading texts. I argue, accordingly, these students encountered no problem when dealing with understanding reading texts in the cognitive realms, such as understanding and analysing the text.

Data Collection

A reading task, consisting of a reading material and a writing assignment, was managed to gather the data concerning responses of the participants as readers. The reading material, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *A Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, was distributed to the participants in the fifth meeting. The participants were required to read the text thoroughly after the class as a part of their independent reading activities. After reading the text, they were required to write an essay of which content should have reflected their attitudes towards the reading text and how they related the texts with their own personal and social values and experiences. These leads were given to elicit the participants’ critical responses to the reading text in a form of essay writing. The writing assignment was done at home to allow them to be more engaged with the text without having worried about the time limit.

Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis, the data from the participants’ essays were selected and organised based on their personal responses. The selection and organization were conducted to ease the process of analysing the data. Content analysis was conducted since the main data of the current study derived from the participants’ written responses in forms of essay writing (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The contents of the participants’ written responses were read comprehensively and systematically in the analysis to make inferences from the written data and seek how critical responses to the reading text were managed to produce.

Results

Results of the analysis from the written data show that the participants were able to provide responses to the text by making the relation of the textual world of the text with the real personal and sociocultural conditions they encounter. Further analysis in terms of the way they relate the textual world and the real-life situations falls within three (3) different classifications, namely: responding to the text through dialoguing, reflecting, and emphasising. Quotes relating to the way learners’ critical responses to the text are extracted from the participants’ response essays. Each classification is described in the next subsections.

Responding to the Text through Dialoguing

As the participants finished reading a narrative text in a form of short story, they were required to provide critical responses to the text. The definition of critical responses was not explicitly explained, but they were elicited to give responses from various angles beyond the text. Participant 1 provided response to the text by dialoguing the text with the reality she faces in her daily life.

Essay 1: Reader-response by way of dialoguing

As long as I read this story, it drives me [to] imagine how it can be in real life, I think it is impossible. [There are] many related conditions from the story. The main point is [to] take some moral values from it. I can call this story like story of how Benjamin survive[s] with his life. Because it is interesting when someone is not getting older. He is getting younger [instead] and that is presented in this story.

In her response, participant 1 is dialoguing the content of the text with the situation in real life. Here, the critical reading took place as the participant went back and forth between the sequence of events of the text and the real-life situation when writing her response. She brought the textual world she encountered while reading into her imagination and predicted how it could have been if it had really happened in real life. Although she knew that the story was only a fiction, she was still dialoguing the fictional situation with the real-life circumstances in her cognition before encapsulating that the phenomenon happened in the short story was something impossibly happened in reality.

Responding to the Text through Reflecting

Reflecting on the text content and context is one of the ways to read a text critically. Reflecting can be done by relating the content of the text with the sociocultural encounters of the readers. The response of Participant 2 in the following quote shows that in reading the narrative text she was able to do reflection by looking back at what she had experienced in her previous study at one of the state university. The reflection enables her to deepen her reading process before critically responding to the text.

Essay 2: Reader-response by way of reflecting

You never know what's coming for you. You could be mad as a maddog at the way things went. You could swear, and curse the fates. But when it comes to the end, you have to let go. These sentences make me remember about my story. When I took my English diploma, I got a culture shock. There were many things opposite of me: the culture, friends, and etc. At that time, I was down and I failed some lesson and I had to retake the lessons... I thought I should [have] face[d] it. I tried better than before and finally I graduated and got the diploma certificate.

In the response, the participant took some lines from the text as the ground for her reflection. The lines served as the point of departure for her to draw a bridge between the text and her own experience. The lines reminded her of how she had dealt with sociocultural shock in a new place. The words '*swear and curse the fates*' from the text seemed to awake her memories that once she 'failed... and had to retake some courses'. Both the participant's cognitive and affective stances of reading were involved when she read the text and wrote the written responses. These two aspects significantly functioned in the process of her critical reading. The cognitive aspect dealt with how she could consider a text as a fundamental point of her critical reading. She then related the text with her own experience – the moment when she involved her affective particular in her critical reading.

Responding to the Text through Empathising

To be able to empathise with others is essential to obtain mutual understanding as we live in a multicultural society. The following quote is taken from the essay written by Participant 3. It shows that in reading a text, the participant can initiate her empathy by getting engaged with what has been experienced by the character in the text.

Essay 3: Reader-response by way of empathizing

After reading this story, I feel like it's fun! I imagine a baby like an old man talking with a person. Actually, I have never read the story nor watched the film before... This story is interesting and entertaining. [It is] a story that tells [about] a baby [who was] born and grows up like an old man condition which is unexpected. It seems like someone stand[s] in front of the mirror and imagine[s] himself in the future when he becomes an old man.

From the story, I can learn, "*Don't see someone by his body. Get to know him before judging*". I do not know why, but, life is too short for thinking about others' lives.

At the beginning of the response, the participant mentioned that it was fun to read the text, as she was amazed with the fact that a baby looked like an old man and could talk to everyone he met. Later she explained her empathy how it would have been when the main character stood in front of the mirror and imagined his future look when he grew older. She mentioned that it was something unexpected. It is to emphasise that the participant was putting herself on the character's shoes that it would be hard to look at his own reflection on the mirror and realise that his condition was different from others at his age. Her empathy then resulted in the last paragraph of her essay that people should not have judged someone from his or her appearance and that people should not have wasted their time by thinking about others' businesses and flaws.

Discussion

The results evince that critical reading can be achieved through dialoguing, reflecting, and empathizing. The participants were able to go beyond comprehending the in-text content and context as in providing responses they involved some sociocultural and personal aspects. The aspects become the basis of their responses. These responses are considered to be the ones at critical level as they include aspect of appreciation, reflection, and affect (Sadoski & Paivio, 2007).

In responding to the text, a reader can make a dialogue between the content and context of text and the reader's real-life experiences as done by Participant 1. The dialogue takes place as the response is made based on the meanings not only found in the text but also those found in the real world outside the text. The response constructed is the result of dialogical process between the reader's critical thinking when reading the text, which prompts the reader to link the text with real-life condition, and the ideology involved in the text (Macknish, 2011).

Another way to respond to the text is by way of reflecting. This means the reader does some reflections after reading the text. The response of Participant 2 "These sentences make me remember about my story" implies that the learner looked back at her own personal experiences as she read the text thoroughly. The response indicates that beyond-text context intermingles with the textual references the text offers. The involvement of reflection in the readers' responses seems to validate that Indonesian EFL learners are able to provide critical responses to a narrative text as a result of their critical reading (Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017).

Finally, to respond critically to a reading text, learners can empathise with the text. Empathy is the affect activated during reading. The response of Participant 3 "...a story that tells about a baby [who was] born and grows up like an old man condition which is unexpected" suggests the empathy to the odd

condition of the main character. This empathy has brought her to write “Don’t see someone by his body” which implies that she understood what was felt by the character. It denotes that empathising with what is experienced by the character in the text serves as the point of departure in the process of critical reading. The critical response, as a result, is elicited from the feeling evoked by the text as learners experience the reading process (Kadir, Maasum, & Vengadasamy, 2012).

Conclusion

In providing critical responses to a reading text, beyond-text contexts are involved. Based on the results of this study, the responses can be done by dialoguing between the sequence of events of the text and the real-life situation, reflecting the text with the readers’ sociocultural or personal experiences, and empathising with what has been faced by the characters in the text. These three ways of responding to the text need knowledge repertoire retrieval and critical thinking activation. The knowledge repertoire and critical thinking ability work in concert when learners read the text and try to relate the textual world of the text with real-life experiences. Therefore, in providing critical responses, EFL learners were in need of going beyond comprehending the text by reading critically. In order to facilitate the critical reading, EFL teachers can promote aesthetic reading to prompt learners to ‘feel’ the text and eventually relate the text with their knowledge-based and experience-based elements outside the text as references to their responses.

The Author

Wigati Dyah Prasasti is a teaching staff member at English Education Programme, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana, Surabaya, Indonesia. Her research interests are in literary and critical reading in EFL contexts and literary criticism emphasising on the postcolonial theory.

Department of English Language Education
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Universitas PGRI Adi Buana
Jalan Dukuh Menanggal XII, Surabaya, 60234, Indonesia
Email: prasasti@unipasby.ac.id

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