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## Deconstructing Text: Facilitating EFL Student Critical Reading

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### Introduction

Developing English as a foreign language (EFL) students' criticality in reading has been a major issue at school. Scholars have worked hard to arrive at a promising resolution to the matter. One step is to look back at the root that potentially initiates the problem by redefining what critical means. Instead of relying on Higher Order Thinking (HOT) cognitive steps, reading should require students to extend their learning activity by connecting a text's meanings with values or norms a group of society adopts (Benesch, 1993). The end goal of critical reading should be directed to enable students to build their critical stance towards a text (Simmons, 2018) by focusing the investigation on the interrelations of language and power (Behrman, 2006). This interrelation of language and power is the essence of critical literacy (CL). Irrespective of the claim that there has been no formula for implementing CL at school (Luke, 2000), the construct of CL in EFL started to gain deep attention among researchers to develop a sound ground for its practice.

Studies on critical literacy involving EFL students show that they can analyse texts to reveal the contesting ideologies. More specifically, Ajayi (2015) finds that the respondents can make critical intertextual connections between texts and their lived experiences to make new meanings. Her study used feminism-related texts to explore how students developed their critical reading skills to reveal the texts' ideology. They were analysed and interpreted to uncover the unequal structures that place a particular subject in a disadvantageous position. Additionally, interest plays a crucial role for readers to interpret texts critically (Ranieri & Fabbro, 2016). They also find that with the interest of reading, respondents can connect what they know and what the text conveys through critical reflection.

Besides the reader's interest, another influential factor determining the key to success in challenging a text is the mastery of metalanguage (Alford & Kettle, 2017). With the introduction of useful terms in critical literacy in the classroom, Alford and Kettle's respondents showed that they can disrupt a text, by uncovering power dominating the discourse. As most of the respondents taught were refugees from other countries, this topic enables them to critically position themselves relative to the text (Alford & Kettle, 2017). Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, and Ryan (2017) also revealed a similar finding. Using a binary approach, students shift their stance from responding to a particular case of sexuality as "the way things have always been" (p.18) to a more critical response by relating the issue to the power structure in society. Issues discussed in the previous studies deal with feminism and sexuality which have become the world's concern

in an effort to increase awareness of those belonging to the disadvantaged groups about their rights for equality.

Irrespective of the use of intriguing issues for critical reading, however, teaching critical EFL reading needs a breakthrough which will facilitate student learning activities. The breakthrough proposed in this study is bringing in deconstructive reading techniques normally used by literary critics in appreciating a literary work. By practicing deconstructive reading in an EFL classroom, the advantages are twofold, namely: to facilitate students with experience of criticising a text and to provide the experience of appreciating a literary text in an effort to practice their aesthetic reading. The objectives of the current study, thus, are set to explore students criticality in analysing deconstruction and its interpretation from a text.

## Literature Review

### Critical Reading as Thinking and Acting

Both thinking and acting critically on a text are essential elements of critical reading. While thinking of a text critically means questioning its logic in terms of identifying and analysing facts and opinions, acting critically to a text refers to the ability of readers to engage with the text politically to unveil dominant discourse, potentially bringing injustice (Bacon, 2017) to a particular group. In other words, critical reading is no longer activities within the realm of cognition. It, however, requires an action to establish social transformation and social justice (Wallace, 2020). In order for critical reading to be successfully performed, critical thinking must be a prerequisite for readers prior to interpreting the text's hidden agenda.

Critical action to a text is initiated within three processes: critical reflection, dissenting opinions (Phillips & Guilherme, 2004), and different standpoints (Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017). Critical reflection is a point where the process of intertextual reading between text intersects with reader experiences. The intertextuality facilitates readers to weigh the values of text with their own lived ones. Personal experiences are constructed due to interconnecting relations with their social environments. During the reflection process, the readers feel the text and personalise its meanings, resulting in their opinion of the text.

Once the meaning of a text dealing with power contestations is unveiled, readers will be able to address their dissenting opinions. These dissenting opinions lay a foundation for the readers to resist the text. Resisting a text means mobilising all their resources, such as critical thinking skills, personal experiences, and individual knowledge (Esquivel, 2019), to disentangle power relations in the text.

The dissenting opinions lay a path for a reader to evaluate the idea in a text differently. This evaluation is a point where a reader acts by voicing his or her different standpoints. At this stage, he or she can both communicate the meanings of the text with his or her own voice and make judgments about which meanings influence his or her decision.

### Deconstructing a Text

A text which is considered neutral works its way by normalising specific insight (Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, & Ryan, 2017) to represent a particular dominant ideology. This normalised text is considered to be neutral and represents truth. Such things as a man is strong and a woman is weak are values commonly accepted in society. Strong becomes the absolute referent of a man while weak is the absolute one of a woman. The absolute referents construct a stable concept about men and women which is unshakeable, unquestionable, and timeless. Such a concept in deconstruction theory is named transcendental signified (Janks, 2012). Deconstruction exists to challenge this transcendental signified.

Any violation to the existing transcendental signified is a deconstruction. By deconstructing the transcendental signified, the hidden agenda behind the deconstruction can be interpreted. Within the discourse of gender, for example, deconstruction is used to challenge the concept of masculinity and

femininity when especially a man is deconstructed to show his feminine characterization and a woman to show her masculinity.

This deconstructive reading is beneficial to facilitate critical reading activity in EFL contexts as it can help a student interpret a text. The interpretation is initiated from analysing the existence of a transcendental signified and observing within a text how it is deconstructed. When the deconstruction is identified, further interpretation to the deconstruction can be performed. The interpretation is personal in nature and provides any individual student with the opportunity to explore and connect his or her own lived experiences with the text (Prasasti, 2021).

## Method

This is a multiple case study involving a group of EFL university students working out two critical reading tasks. As Stake (2005) suggests, each task worked out by students was considered a case and with more than one case to study, the results provide a more comprehensive understanding of the students' ability in criticising a text. There were two cases investigated in this study. Case 1 was comprised of a task requiring students to read a short story entitled *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. The students had to analyse the deconstruction in the text and to interpret the meaning of each deconstruction found. The time allotted for this task was two weeks. Similarly, case 2 consisted of a task to read another short story entitled, *A Tale of Two Sisters*. At the end of each task, a meeting was conducted to discuss the results of the student work. Works of the students from those two cases were the sources of data of this study.

## Context of Study

The respondents were 30 university students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) who were in their semester four and had completed programming language skill-related courses. They also have had an orientation about teaching English under the TEFL course. Most of the students were Balinese speaking the Balinese language as their mother tongue and Indonesian language as their second language normally spoken at school and in other formal situations. They also had learned EFL for at least eight years. The course in which the study was taking place was Prose. This course is part of a few literature-related courses of which the goals are to aim at enabling students to appreciate literary works, especially Prose, and enabling students to design literature-based teaching materials for the EFL programme. During the first half of the semester, this class engaged with appreciating some works of narratives. The appreciation was in the form of learning activities such that students practiced their aesthetic reading and, at the same time, performed a critical text analysis. It was during this first half-semester that the study took place.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The forms of data collected were two written tasks in response to two tasks of narrative analyses. The two analyses tasks required the students to analyse a short story using the deconstructive technique to reveal the deconstructed transcendental signified and interpret its meaning.

The process of analysing data consisted of two steps. The first step was to evaluate whether the student could identify the correct deconstruction in the text. The deconstruction revealed had to be able to prove its binary opposition. The second was to analyse the student interpretation of the identified deconstruction. Data dealing with the meaning of deconstruction was analysed based on three processes, namely: critical reflection, dissenting opinions (Phillips & Guilherme, 2004), and different standpoints (Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017).

## Findings

Findings in this section are divided into two subsections: Case 1 and 2. Each case presents findings dealing with the first objective of the study, namely: the identification of deconstruction. The findings dealing with student interpretation of the identified deconstruction is provided in a different subsection: Student interpretation.

### Case 1: The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Findings in this first assignment show that students were able to analyse the deconstructions and give meanings to the revealed deconstructions. The deconstructions revealed by the students are deconstructed Benjamin Button and deconstructed medical personnel as shown in scripts 1 and 2.

The analysis shows that Benjamin Button's case is a form of deconstruction as he was born old with his grey hair and ability to speak fluently. This is in contrary to the common case of a normal baby. Students' analyses were done based on comparing a normal birth of a baby against baby Benjamin Button, as shown in script 1 taken from the work of a student nicknamed, Chanda.

Deconstruction of a newborn baby:

(+) Newborn Baby	(-) Benjamin Button
Look very young	Look like an old man
Cannot talk and walk	Can talk and walk
Does not have a beard	have a beard

Script 1

The analysis in script 1 shows that deconstruction is revealed by contrasting each pole: the normal commonly seen in a baby's birth against the baby Benjamin Button. Two parameters are utilised to base the contrast: look and physical ability. The majority of students' works reveal this type of deconstruction.

Irrespective of the first deconstruction, another type emerges due to different reading from two students, nicknamed Uli-Tri and Zeld. The deconstruction revealed is a physician helping Benjamin Button's birth, doctor Keene. Doctor Keene is another character deconstructed by the story. The following script 2, a response presented by Uli-Tri shows this.

Deconstruction of medical personnel

Common medical personnel	versus	Medical personnel helping Benjamin's birth
+ Polite		- Impolite
+ Friendly		- Annoying
+ Respect		- Rude

Script 2

Instead of focusing on the main character, the student analysed the text differently, resulting in a different deconstructed character, the deconstructed doctor Keene.

### Case 2: A Tale of Two Sisters

The result of the second task shows that there is only one type of deconstruction. The deconstruction revealed is the deconstructed two sisters, Bawang versus Suna, 'Onion' versus 'Garlic'. All students concluded that the two opposing sisters are the only form of deconstruction. Such deconstruction is the typical one emerging in the data as shown by a student, nicknamed Wisp, in script 3.

(Bawang)	versus	(Suna)
+ Hard worker/diligent		- Lazy
+ Kind-hearted		- selfish
+ Honest		- Liar
+ generous		- greedy

Script 3

Script 3 shows how the student compares the two characters by listing the opposing characters/personalities. Further analysis could have been followed by questioning why Bawang possesses such subordinating characteristics from Suna. Comparatively, the question 'Why is Suna revealed to have such antagonistic characters?' could have also been addressed in order to be able to unveil the other deconstructed ideology. Nevertheless, it seems the students did not ask further such critical interrogatives. Students would find it difficult to make meaning later in the interpretation stage with such a revealed deconstruction.

While two different ways of reading emerge in the first task, none of the students deconstruct the second story from a different angle. As shown in the scripts above, the single case of deconstruction can be a tell-tale sign that, for students, deconstructing a text is still a problem even when the story read is a folktale they are familiar with. A further meaning of the deconstruction from the student is presented in the following sub-section.

## Student Interpretation

Having identified the deconstruction from the texts assigned, the students had to interpret the identified deconstruction. This subsection deals with such findings by presenting the result of analysis of student interpretation using three parameters, namely: critical reflection, dissenting opinions, and critical standpoints, and followed by citation from the student interpretation (script 4 and 5).

Findings show the three parameters used to analyse data are identified in the student work, namely: critical reflection, dissenting opinions, and critical standpoint. There are, however, two different achievements in relation to student interpretation involving the two narratives. The result of interpretation in case 1 only reveals the first parameter, namely: critical reflection. In case 2, all parameters appear in the student work (including dissenting opinions and critical standpoint). Script 4-5 depict the results of student interpretations from case 1 and 2 respectively.

In case 1, a result of critical reflection from a student is presented in script 4. A simple critical comparison by a student, Uli-Tri, is presented in the script.

Medical personnel [in general]: a very patient, caring, and gentle person to everybody in the hospital  
 Medical personnel in the story: An impatient, disrespectful person who is harsh to Benjamin and his father  
 Script 4

However, the interpretation is not followed by the student dissenting opinion and critical standpoint. Further, interpretation about dominant ideology does not follow, either. The doctor must have had a particular ideology that had driven him mad after helping with the birth of Benjamin Button. Missing to interpret this dominant ideology is, we suspect, the cause of the absence of students' different standpoint.

In case 2, the three parameters (critical reflection, dissenting opinion, and critical standpoint) used to analyse student interpretations are all identified. Besides, the quality of interpretation is deeper compared to the previous work in case 1 as depicted in script 5, a response written by a student, nicknamed Dew.

Bawang or onion is symbolized with the colour red while Suna or garlic, just like its colour, is symbolized with white. This [relates] to the traditional belief in Bali and Indonesia in general in which the colour white is seen as the symbol of purity or [kindness] and holy. However, the story of A Tale of Two Sisters portrayed that being born earlier [and being white] did not [make a difference]. The wise and matured characters did not come from how old someone was. [B]esides that, the deconstruction in the story of A Tale of Two Sisters might also depict the jealousy that was often felt by older siblings towards their younger ones as the love they once received had been shifted to their younger siblings.

Script 5

Script 5 shows that the student critically reflects from the text and concludes that being white and older do not always mean more kindness and wisdom. Whiteness in Suna, the student analyses, does not represent common meanings of white in Balinese life value. Further, instead of judging that what Suna did is wrong, the student takes a neutral position by providing a dissenting opinion that possibly what Suna did might have occurred as a result of jealousy.

## Discussion

The results the students achieve indicate that bringing deconstructive reading technique into the EFL classroom is promising. Applying deconstructive reading means two things, namely: facilitating students to employ their critical analysis and substantiating their analysis meaningfully.

In the case of facilitating student critical analysis, findings show that students are able to employ the deconstructive reading technique with varying degrees. This means that, as the fact shows, there is only one variant of deconstruction identified, especially, from text 2 while the authors expected there could have been more.

Substantiating the deconstruction requires students to connect the text with their background knowledge, values embraced, and lived experiences (Prasasti, 2021). The capability of the students in giving meaning to the deconstruction will enable them to point their stance relative to the text. To achieve this, the students have to perform steps 2 and 3 of the deconstructive reading. The results show that the students could only perform the steps in the second text. The failure to perform the steps in reading the first text seems to be in connection with the genre of the text in that it is very imaginative and uncommon for the students. I suspect that to analyse such a text the students have to practice more with appreciating narratives.

Furthermore, lack of critical reading practices contributes to the creative ideas in constructing meanings. This in turn will limit the student ability in interpreting the meaning of deconstruction, especially in the case 1, the first text. Instead of liberating themselves from being framed by the idea in the text, the students were likely trapped by the thought that the idea in the text is illogical and impossible to occur in real life. In other words, the idea the first text offers is unfamiliar for the students. As a result, students fail to make a personal connection to the text (Ajayi, 2015).

Additionally, the students, having identified the deconstruction, struggled to interpret the meaning to propose a counter-narrative against the text. This fact confirms previous findings on readers struggling in interpreting a text (Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, & Ryan, 2017; Young, 2015). The findings also suggest that with little experience in criticising a text, the students cannot build a frame of analysis in which dominant ideology and power domination become the foundation.

This little experience needs more attention. This fact occurs because literacy practices, especially reading in the EFL classroom, are commonly dedicated to understanding texts, more specifically, identifying specific information and differentiating types of texts. This means that implicitly students are taught to accept facts from texts (Young, 2015). Even in an advanced reading class, students never practice challenging a text. This fact implies that students learn to accept any idea a text proposes.

## Conclusion

This study aims to investigate student critical reading facilitated by a deconstructive reading technique. Findings in this study suggest that the students are able to perform deconstructive reading technique when assigned to read two texts. Deconstruction, as a reading technique, has facilitated students' critical responses in reading narratives. The results of the study show that the students are able to perform deconstructive reading technique when assigned to read two different narrative texts by way of revealing two contrasting poles signifying deconstruction shown in the texts and presenting critical reflection, dissenting opinion, and critical standpoint as parts of critical reading.

Even though the three parameters of critical reading are not constantly present in all students' responses of the two texts, some of the students' attempts to voice their critical stance can serve as the point of departure for the continuing use of deconstructive reading techniques in reading activities, particularly the ones dealing with narrative texts. Therefore, the students need to be encouraged to exercise their critical standpoints when reading such texts. In order to facilitate students' critical expressions, EFL teachers can practice deconstructive reading techniques in EFL reading classrooms so that the students can first identify the two opposing stances pointed out in each of the narrative texts presented and later voice their critical reflections, suggesting their dissenting opinions, and expressing their critical standpoints.

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