

INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES TO HEIGHTEN INDONESIAN STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN READING ENGLISH CANONICAL TEXTS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on how to motivate my struggling students for whom English is a second language when they read canonical texts written in English. Students in English departments are required to read English canonical texts, but most of them find this task very challenging. One strategy teachers can use to motivate students to read is to pair the English canonical texts with young adult texts. Important in these instructional choices are the pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities. Pre-reading activities are intended to prepare readers to enter the story world. During-reading activities are important to make students understand the stories better. Some of the during-activities include using role plays and teaching media to increase students' understanding of the characters and the plots in the books. In the post-reading activities, students can write journals or quotes they find interesting from the book. Giving students more varieties in book choices and activities can, hopefully, make them independent good readers.

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INTRODUCTION

Appropriate instructional choices in teaching reading can heighten students' motivation and engagement for reading. In this paper I discuss instructional choices I can make to heighten my Indonesian students' motivation and engagement in reading English canonical texts in the future. I begin by describing the context and then I discuss what I mean by the English canonical texts. In the next section, I describe the observations I have made about my students' understanding of and response to canonical texts written in English. Following this section, I describe what research says about reading motivation and engagement and their connections to reading for understanding. After all these discussions, in the last part of the paper I describe instructional choices I can make to heighten my students' motivation and engagement in reading English canonical texts.

THE CONTEXT

In general, Indonesians start to learn English after graduating from elementary school. As a foreign language, English is given for about two to three hours a week in junior high school. In senior high school, the portion of English students have depends on the students' major. High school has three majors, namely science, social studies, and language arts. Students who major in science spend the least time to learn English while those who major in language arts spend the most time to learn English. When students graduate from high schools, their knowledge of and competence in English are not the same. Those who major in language are supposed to know English better than those who major in science

and social studies. But that is not always the case because many students learn English in out-of-school courses. When they are in university², only those enrolled in the English Department study the English language intensively, including English literature and/or linguistics. Students majoring other than English only learn the English language in the first two semesters. Most of students enrolled in the English Department want to be competent in English as a means of communication. After they graduate, they become English teachers, businessmen, journalists, radio and television broadcasters, etc. For them, the English language is the passport to many job opportunities.

All students in the English Department have to take the Introduction to English Literature and the Introduction to Linguistics because these two courses are parts of the core curriculum. However, only those who are in Literature Section³ study English literature more deeply. As a teacher in the English Department of a small private university in Indonesia, I teach the English literary canon to students and the courses I teach are English Prose and Drama. The curriculum for the English Department in Indonesia lists many of the English and American literary texts to be taught. The texts range from old English to modern English periods. In addition, students also study English Drama and English Poetry.

² The term “college” is absent in Indonesia. In Indonesia, in enrolling a university, students already choose their major or department, even for undergraduate programs.

³ English Department in Indonesian universities has two sections, Literature and Linguistics. In the sixth semester, after students have finished their language skills courses, the Introduction to English Literature, and the Introduction to Linguistics, they have to decide whether they want to focus on English Literature or Linguistics.

The task of teaching English canonical texts is not an easy job. The lack of resources and the students' low motivation and engagement in reading those texts---which, in turn, affect their response and understanding of those texts---are two problems among many that we encounter. With the background I have mentioned above, I have to teach the English literary canon to students who may have different motivations in learning English and, definitely, who have different levels of competence in English. Before I discuss this in more details, in the following section I describe what I mean by English literary canon for the purpose of this paper.

THE ENGLISH LITERARY CANON

The English literary canon has more than one definition. Fowler emphasizes that the literary canon is “the literature we criticize and theorize” (1979:97). However, according to Fowler, we only capture “sizable subsets of the writers and works of the past” (1979:97). For many English teachers in the U.S., the English literary canon is refers to good literature or classic literature, or “traditionalist texts that have withstood the test of time” (Stallworth et al. 2006:479). Meanwhile, for Bloom (1994) and D'Souza (1991), the English literary canon includes works for preserving traditional western society (cited in Godina 1996:544). And according to Gallo the English literary canon is “the classics, which are about adult issues, written for adults, to be enjoyed and not tested” (2001:34).

For English teachers in Indonesia, the English literary canon may mean all the above: we teach students “sizable subsets of the writers and works of the past” that we think “are good or classic literature” or “traditionalist texts that have withstood the test of time” such as *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel just to name

some examples. Different from Gallo, we teach the English literary canon to be tested also. By the English literary canon, I do not mean to refer to classical works of literature written in English by British authors only but also works written in English by American authors and some works by Russian and Norwegian authors in the English version. For example, works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, and Henrik Ibsen are parts of the English literary canon.

THE ENGLISH LITERARY CANON AND MY STUDENTS

In Indonesian universities, English literature courses have many requirements and prerequisites. Prior to taking these courses (English Prose, English Drama, and English Poetry), students should have passed the following courses: Reading Comprehension I, II, and III; English Grammar I, II, and III, English Composition I, II, and III, Listening Comprehension I, II, and III, and the Introduction to English Literature. All of these are taught in English and focused on English language texts. In addition, students should also have taken Book Report I and II in which they read abridged English texts that are part of the English literary canon and write summaries of and their reactions to the works they choose.

In my observations, my teaching English literary canon in the past did not always work well. In literature classes there should be exchanges of ideas, both between students and teacher and among students. Students should have read the required reading(s) before class. I always wanted my class to be ‘noisy,’ in which students could jump in any time to express their ideas during class discussion to show that they were engaged and motivated. Instead, I often found that the classes I taught were quiet: students were looking at me and looking at each other without any uttered words. They did not read before the class. This made us, students and me,

frustrated. Despite the situation, we had to move on because they had to pass the final exam.

FACTORS OF UNSUCCESSFUL TEACHING

On reflection, I thought about three factors that made the teaching unsuccessful. First, it concerned the book choices. Due to limited resources, I could only give books available in our libraries and in my personal collections to my students.⁴ In our collections, there are Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, Warton's *The House of Mirth*, Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and some other books by Hemingway, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Miller, and by some more other authors. We also had some anthologies. In addition, we had a small collection of Russian and Norwegian literature in the English version. Those mentioned are difficult books---even for some American students (Simon 2008, Porteus 2009). In American context, Simon argues that the difficulties of texts considered to be part of the literary canon lie in their "unfamiliar context with little connections to students' life" (2008: 134).

The unfamiliar context with little connections to students' life is the second factor that made my classes dull. Many of my students had difficulties in trying to connect the English canonical texts they read to their lives and their background knowledge. Research shows that students' background knowledge is crucial to understand the texts they read (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000,

⁴ Unlike in American universities in which books are abundant, in small private universities in Indonesia books are scarce. Many English teachers, including myself, use books from their personal collections. For us, English teachers in Indonesia, to buy new books written in English is a luxury. Usually those who have an opportunity to study abroad buy new books for their own collections.

L’Allier and Elish-Piper 2007). This difficulty made them passive readers and they expected the meaning to “come out of” the texts they read (Wilhelm 1997).

The third factor is the language. Because English is not our native language, many of my students still struggled with it. They read the texts word for word, which is not a good reading strategy to understand the meaning of a text because, as McElvain argues, “good second language readers do not read word for word, but use their background knowledge and various strategies such as predicting and confirming to comprehend the text” (2010:180). Many of my students did not do this. Even though they have passed the courses of English skills, many of them still had to learn harder to understand the English literary canon.

In addition, they also had to know about the English (social) history and culture (if the required books are written by American authors in American setting, students had also to know about American history and society). These complexities made them not interested in reading the required books even though I told them to read texts to pass the final exam.⁵ However, only a few would read the required English canonical texts seriously.

The rest depended on what I would say in the class; or, they relied on those who read the texts. This situation happened from year to year. They lacked motivation for reading the English literary canon so that they were not engaged in reading the required books. This resulted in their low understanding of the books. Or, it could be that because they could not understand the books, they had low motivation and engagement to read them.

⁵ Passing literature courses is the requirement for writing the final paper (mini thesis).

TEACHING STRATEGIES I HAD

Before we started to read the required English canonical texts, I explained to students the background information: some biographical background of the author, when or in which period the texts were written, and the social and cultural background of that time period. I also cited what I found to be interesting parts of the texts. I did these all with the expectation that they would help students to be interested in the texts and so that they had some ideas about what to expect during their reading. I usually also divided students into small groups and assigned each group with some chapters. Each group had to be responsible for and lead the discussion of the chapters they read. The problem with this strategy is that each group told me that there were always students who did not contribute to the group at all. Thus, this strategy did not always work either. When every member of a group did not understand what they had read, I turned to other groups to express their ideas. But because other groups were not responsible for those chapters, they were not ready. Only those who were really motivated would read and contribute to class discussion. I discuss this more thoroughly in the following section.

READING ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

To understand literary works they read, students have to become engaged readers; and to become engaged readers, they have to have motivation. O'Brien et al. point out that "The role of motivation in engaging struggling readers is almost universally acknowledged as a crucial issue" (2007:52). Motivation may come from students themselves or it may come from other people (teachers, parents, or peers). According to Guthrie and Davis (2003), motivation which comes from students themselves is called intrinsic motivation and this is the highest level of motivation. Engaged readers do have this intrinsic motivation because they

read out of curiosity and personal goals. Achieving students usually have this intrinsic motivation so that teachers do not have to tell them to read. On the other hand, struggling, unengaged readers may not have intrinsic motivation and teachers have to work hard to persuade them to read. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) contend that motivation influences whether engagement with the text happens. When students are engaged with the text, the result is strong comprehension because they think as they read. Brozo et al. (2007), in their study about variables that have the most impact on reading performance in three PISA⁶ countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and The Republic of Ireland) found out that the more engaged students read, the higher reading achievement they have. An indication of higher reading achievement must be strong comprehension.

To enhance students' motivation to read, one of the first things for teachers to do is to give them diversity of reading materials (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000, Bean et al. 1999, Brozo et al. 2007). By giving students the diversity of reading materials, teachers may meet their individual student's need because every student may have different tastes and likes. However, giving students diversity of reading materials may still not work for all students when among them there are resistive readers, or students who actually are able to read but choose not to (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000).

Regarding ELLs reading texts in English, research shows that diversity of reading materials has a crucial role in heightening their motivation in reading (Freeman and Freeman 2009). In engaging them in reading, there are some engagement models of instruction that teachers can apply, such as "knowledge goals, real-world interactions, interesting texts, support for student choice, direct

⁶ Program for International Student Assessment

strategy instruction, and collaborative activities” (Freeman and Freeman 2009:80).

Even though Freeman and Freeman discuss ELLs in American schools, I believe that the recommendations also apply to ELLs in countries in which English is a foreign language such as in Indonesia. Teachers of English in Indonesia, with limited resources, should be able to engage students in reading the English literary texts. What Freeman & Freeman recommend about the engagement models of instruction should become our consideration, even though, for instance, it is a great challenge to relate 16th or 17th century English literary works to the lives of Indonesian students in this 21st century. Regarding this, Ernst-Slavit et al. (2002:116) raise such questions: “How do we help Ana learn about such complexities ...? How can she begin to understand 16th century English when she is confused by 21st century English?” Or, in Porteus’s (2009:16) words, “How can we help to make a connection between a one-hundred-year-old novel and a sixteen-year-old student?” This is one of the major issues for Indonesian students (even though they are no longer teenagers) in learning English and reading English literature: they have to understand 16th century English while they are confused by 21st century English. This is a really challenging task for us to motivate and engage them in reading the English canonical texts.

SEVERAL INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

Looking back to my teaching English literary canon to my Indonesian students, I realized that the limited resources I had did not make my teaching generate a maximum result. It is true that in the end, students had to be able to “say something” about the required books because they had to pass the final examination. But I wanted them to do more than just passing the exam. I wanted them to be motivated and engaged readers. Even if they just wanted

to pass the exam, according to Freeman & Freeman (2009) I have cited above, they should have been motivated by this “knowledge goals,” because needed to have a good score. Any literary text I gave to my students should have made them motivated. But that did not always happen. I had (and still have) to learn more how to motivate my students.

By limited resources, I did not only mean the choices in literary texts to be given to students, but also the strategies of teaching I applied. For the latter, I did not have any professional resources to consult with. My colleagues and I had a lot of discussion about how to teach students better, how to motivate them to read more, and how to make them understand better the texts we gave to them. We taught students based on how we were taught. Of course we learned a lot from our former teachers and we always learned from our interactions with students both inside and outside the classrooms, but they were not enough. We needed to update our methods and strategies of teaching literature. But, again, we did not have recent research from which we could learn (I often imagined our having good libraries, including online professional journals). The research I have been studying while I am a doctorate student at the University of Iowa, therefore, gives me invaluable information about how to make instructional choices and apply them to my teaching in the future, even though my students, at some points, will always have problems with English. But at least, I can work better in how to motivate them to read and how to engage them in reading the required texts. In what follows, I lay out instructional choices that I can make and apply to my teaching later.

DIVERSITY OF READING MATERIALS

Research shows that successful teaching in reading starts with the diversity of reading materials (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000,

Bean et al. 1999, Brozo et al. 2007). It is imperative for teachers of literature---if they want to engage their students in literary texts---to have various texts. Learning from my past teaching, in the future I plan to give students more various texts, even though I have an assumption that the curriculum of the English Department will still remain the same---we still have to give students the English literary canon.⁷ However, I feel I need to make changes even though I agree with Simon (2008) that challenging texts are necessary for students to successfully negotiate academic literary tasks. On the other hand, what Wilhelm argues that we do not need “to stuff Shakespeare down their throats like castor oil so they’ll hate it and never want to read him ...” because “... we want to develop readers who love story and language and who will want to read and go to Shakespearean plays in the future” (1997: 145) is more applicable to my students. Therefore, when I return to my university teaching position, I will not only give my students challenging texts (i.e. the English literary canon), but also more recent literary texts which are less challenging, whether in content or in language. In particular, I will give my students what in the U.S. is called young adult literature. According to Gallo (2001), there are hundreds of young adult books of good quality written by great writers.⁸ I can pair a literary text for young adult and a text that is considered as a part of the English literary canon. According to Porteus (2009), pairing a young adult book with a classic means

⁷ When I left for the U.S. in 2006, the English Department curriculum had no room for literary texts other than the English canonical texts.

⁸ Gallo (2001) contends that the followings are great writers: Richard Peck, Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, Norma Fox Mazer, Caroline Cooney, Bruce Brooks, M. E. Kerr, Alden R. Carter, Will Hobbs, Walter Dean Myer, and many new writers. Not everybody should necessarily agree with him about great young adult books and great writers. Each of us may have different criteria for great books and great writers. Nielsen & Donelson (1993), Carlsen (1980), and Cart (1996), for instance, also have their criteria for the characteristic for the best of young adult literature.

“easing the pain of the classics.” For example, I can pair Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* (1967) with Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). Each book is about the lives of an African-American boy but the two main characters in the books live in different eras and places and both of them struggle for life. Reading these two books, students will learn interracial relationships in American society in different settings of time. I can also pair John Clinch’s *Finn* (2008) with Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Finn* “provides a back story for Twain’s original novel, with language that older teens will find more accessible than Twain’s dialect” (Porteus 2009: 17). Another example is to pair Suzanne Selfor’s *Saving Juliet* (2008) with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Reading *Saving Juliet* will add students’ background knowledge of life in Elizabethan times which is really important in understanding the context of the classic tragedy (Porteus, 2009). This way I hope my students will be interested and become more engaged and motivated to read the English literary canon.

BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER-READING ACTIVITIES

Research shows that the success of teaching reading also depends on the strategies teachers use with their students before, during, and after reading (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000, Simon 2008, O’Brien et al. 2007, L’Allier and Elish-Piper 2007). These researchers proved that good strategies worked well in engaging even resistive and struggling readers to become engaged readers. Therefore, I want to apply this to my teaching in the future.

In general, these researchers agree that what teachers do before, during, and after reading is very crucial for the success of the teaching. What I mean by “success” in this case is not for the teachers’ sake, but mainly for the students’. With good or appropriate strategies, teachers not only make good readers better but also make struggling, unengaged readers engaged. The goal of

reading literature in the end is not only to make students understand the literary texts they read but also to create meaning out of them (Wilhelm 1997, Tovani 2000). Both Wilhelm and Tovani agree that the background knowledge of students play a crucial role in making meaning. With such a goal, it is important for teachers to have a good plan in the first place.

Tovani (2000) suggests that teachers establish expectation before the teaching begins. In Indonesian setting, this is usually a top-down approach, i.e. teachers expect students to do whatever teachers plan. There is only a little room for students to express what they want or what they expect. This is a common practice and I admit that I did this too. However, I learn from Tovani that it is very crucial for teachers to listen to students' expectation in the first place. By listening to students' expectation, teachers can make any necessary plan for the success of the teaching. In pairing *The Contender* and *The Black Boy*, for instance, I can ask them what they expect from the two books. On the other hand, I can tell my students that they, in addition to enjoying the stories, also need to pay attention to the similarities and differences of the two texts.

After listening to students' expectation, the next step is the pre-reading activities. Many researchers recommend various interesting pre-reading activities. In general, the pre-reading activities are aimed at preparing students to reading the text(s) or, in Wilhelm's (1997) words, to enter the story world. According to Wilhelm, if students fail to enter the story world, they will fail in their reading because they will not be able to create meaning from what they read. Simon (2008) suggests that in teaching complicated texts such as the English literary canon, teachers use role-play as a pre-reading activity. Simon asked her students to pair up acting as Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden in the beginning of *The House of Mirth* to enter the story world. She did this because many of her students considered that the opening of *The House of Mirth* is difficult to understand. Meanwhile, Good Reads: Reading Guide

(n.d.) offers a different activity, i.e. thinking about a book. In this activity, teachers need to ask students to look at the book cover and title. Teachers can further ask students to predict what kind of book they are going to read, what the book will be about, and also ask them to brainstorm the meaning of the word used as the title of the book. In Simon case, for example, she could have asked her students to think about the meaning of the word *mirth* used in the title of the book. In my case, I can ask my students to think about the meaning of the word *contender* and to think about the phrase *black boy*.

Research shows that during-reading activities heighten students' motivation and understanding of the book they read (Wilhelm 1997, O'Brien et al. 2007). They suggest that drama or dramatization of stories is good way at this stage to make students enter the story world and understand the stories more deeply (in this case, Wilhelm is different from Simon because he uses drama as a during-reading activity). In addition, Wilhelm (1997) also suggests that art is a good activity to make students engaged with and understand the stories. Meanwhile, Good Reads: Reading Guide (n.d.), calls the during-reading activities as "working with the book." At this stage, teachers can ask students to pay attention in detail to characters, plot, and setting of the story. Teachers can create clue charts for each element. For the discussion of characters, teachers can create a chart about "what the writer tells us, what the characters say, do, and think, and what others think and say about the characters" (Wilhelm 1997:2). For the discussion of plot and setting, teachers can make similar charts with different clues. In asking students to fill out the charts, teachers need to make sure that students understand what plot and setting are and why they are important to the story. I can use these strategies to make my students more engaged and motivated in reading both *The Contender* and *The Black Boy*.

There are various post- or after-reading activities. L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) offers Alpha Boxes. Teachers provide students with boxes containing each alphabet. These boxes help summarize key ideas such as concepts, connections, and examples. This activity is especially useful when the required books are difficult or very difficult. Teachers of canonical literature can use this activity to help students remember characters, plot, setting, or important events in a story. Good Reads: Reading Guide (n.d.) offers two interesting post-reading activities, i.e. talking about the book and writing about the book. Teachers can ask students to write a quote or quotes from the book to talk or to write about. This activity is very important for students to remember important aspects of a story. I can apply these activities in teaching *The Contender* and *The Black Boy* or *Finn* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Saving Juliet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

In addition to the above activities, there is another important post-reading activity that teachers usually apply to the teaching of literature, i.e. ask students to make connections. Wilhelm (1997), Tovani (2000), and L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) suggest that students need to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections in order to make meaning out of the stories they read. For the text-to-self connection, for example, teachers can ask students to quote an event or a setting of a story and they can write “This reminds me of ...” In my opinion, this activity can be used as both the during-reading and post-reading activities, depending on the emphasis placed by the teachers. At this point, the background knowledge of students will have a great impact on how they can connect the text to their lives. Tovani (2000) argues that without connecting literary texts to their own lives, students will find it difficult to draw inferences because inferences cannot be found in the texts. Without drawing inferences, students will fail to understand the meaning of literary texts they read. This is an interesting option for my future teaching.

These pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities will be a great help for me to make my students more motivated and engaged. I did not recall I used these strategies in detail in the past teaching. But in the future, I will apply these activities in detail by having a good plan in advance. With a good plan in advance, students will know what to do so they can prepare well. They will be aware of the teacher's expectation and know what to expect from the teacher and from the texts. In addition, I may use the combination between what Good Reads: Reading Guide (n.d.) offers and what Wilhelm, Tovani, or L'Allier & Elish-Piper propose. I can ask students to think about the pair of texts before we start reading them, and then I can ask them to do role-plays to understand certain characters during our reading, and after we finish reading the texts, I can ask them to talk about the books, or to write about them, or to make any connections to their lives, to other texts, or to any thing that they think is important and/or interesting.

Having that said, I will have "something" I did not have in the past. In my past teaching, when the strategies I used did not work, the teaching ended up becoming a one-man-show: students asked me what they wanted to know or students expected me to know anything they wanted to know. There are times when teachers do not know what students want to know. Let alone, literary texts may have different meanings for different persons: everyone reading a literary text may come up with different meanings and understandings. I answered as best I could every time my students asked a question about our reading. Theorist or researchers do not recommend this one-man-show way of teaching. According to Wilhelm (1997), in this way I did not help my students become active readers. When students do not find the meaning of any literary texts they read by themselves, the teaching of literature fails. Now I have choices to heighten my students' motivation and engagement in reading the English literary texts (I no longer will restrict my teaching to texts that are part of the

English literary canon). By heightening their motivation and engagement, I want my students to become “Readers who know the power of the literary experience” (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 145). According to Wilhelm, these kinds of readers will always return to read literature and enjoy it. They are the kinds of readers every teacher wants to have.

CONCLUSION

This paper is both a reflection on what I did in the past and a reference for what I am going to do in the future as a teacher of the English literary canonical texts to my Indonesian non-native English speakers. The research I have been studying helps me to see what did not go well in my past teaching. At the same time, the research gives me confidence and hope that my future teaching should improve. The research especially provides me with invaluable information about what strategies students and I, as a teacher, should use in order that the teaching of the English canonical texts might be more successful.

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