

LET'S TALK AND TOLERATE: STRENGTHENING STUDENTS CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH LITERATURE CIRCLES

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Abstract: Putting more attention on teaching language skills, the use of literature in EFL classrooms is often abandoned. While essentially, exploiting literary texts in some advanced EFL courses, serves a variety of purposes, dedicated to encourage interactive and communicative classes for language learners at different levels of proficiency. Literary texts often offer cultural explorations through the embedded cultural contexts in the stories. Indeed, exploring literary works provides an exercise in cultural relativity, so that students are more aware of the cultural differences presented in various contexts. Both teachers and students need to get involved in class discussions and activities which are created to support deep exploration of cultures in the texts. This paper reports on the use of literature circles in an advanced EFL classroom to reinforce students' cultural awareness through the examination of classic literatures as well as contemporary realist fiction. The two genres of literatures also bring about multicultural issues which are worth noting in an attempt of developing students' cultural awareness. In the research, it is further found that distributing students in small discussion groups has encouraged more "talking" and improved students' written responses. In addition, teachers discovered that cultural values and attitudes are easily transferred through the characters in the literary works.

Keywords: *literature circles in EFL classroom, classic literatures, contemporary realist fictions.*

MARI KITA BICARA DAN MENOLERANSI: MEMPERKUAT KESADARAN BUDAYA SISWA MELALUI LINGKAR SAstra

Abstrak: Pengajaran bahasa Inggris di kelas-kelas *EFL* lebih sering terfokus pada pengajaran keterampilan berbahasa, dan cenderung mengabaikan penggunaan karya sastra berbahasa Inggris. Padahal, penggunaan karya sastra di kelas-kelas bahasa Inggris memiliki potensi besar yang ditujukan untuk membuat kegiatan pembelajaran lebih menarik dan interaktif. Karya-karya sastra umumnya menawarkan pemaparan budaya dalam bentuk konteks kebudayaan dalam alur ceritanya. Selain itu, mengkaji karya sastra juga melatih pemahaman akan budaya, dengan demikian peserta didik akan lebih peka terhadap perbedaan budaya yang tersaji dalam berbagai bentuk konteks cerita. Keterlibatan dan interaksi antara pengajar dan peserta didik dalam proses pembelajaran di kelas dapat menjadi daya dukung yang sangat baik untuk eksplorasi budaya yang lebih mendalam dalam kajian teks-teks sastra. Makalah ini menyajikan bagaimana penggunaan *Literature circles* di kelas *EFL* dapat mendorong kepekaan budaya siswa melalui eksplorasi karya-karya sastra klasik dan juga karya-karya sastra remaja kontemporer saat ini. Kedua genre karya sastra tersebut juga membawa isu-isu

multikulturalisme yang sangat berguna untuk membangun kepekaan budaya peserta didik. Penelitian ini juga memberikan pengetahuan bahwa dengan pembagian kelompok-kelompok diskusi kecil, peserta didik didorong untuk lebih leluasa “berbicara” di kelas tentang sebuah karya. Selain itu apresiasi peserta didik terhadap karya sastra melalui tulisan juga menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan. Temuan lain juga menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai dan sikap budaya dapat dengan mudah disampaikan melalui karakter-karakter yang tersaji dalam bentuk karya-karya sastra.

Katakunci: “*literature circles*”, *karya sastra klasik, karya sastra remaja kontemporer, isu-isu multikultural, kepekaan budaya.*

Reading in an EFL classroom presents challenges for both teachers and students. Choosing the appropriate reading materials to give to students can be a long argument, since teachers need to consider how to engage young people in literary reading. What is more is that in an EFL classroom context, where most students are non-native English speakers, reading a piece of work in English may give them difficult times. The unfamiliarity with the language structures, vocabularies, and perhaps, the culture can be a demotivating factor for these young students.

Indeed, adolescents’ motivation in reading is somewhat low and complex. The problem with low reading motivation is commonly found among young adults all around the globe (Brozo, Shiel, and Topping, 2007/2008). However, Crumpler and Linda (2011) disputes that given the fact, teachers, librarians, or researchers in adolescents’ reading interest should define new parameters as to considering “the unique characteristics of adolescence, their varied developmental characteristics, how they define reading, how they participate in reading as socially and culturally positioned people, and how they perceive their access to and comfort with unfamiliar ideas and perspectives represented in literature” when they design a set of reading material for adolescents.

When the problem addressed is reading motivation among adolescents, then the

solution may repose in selecting the apt reading materials. There are plenty of choices lie ahead, yet the preference of using either classic or contemporary fictions is a never ending toil. Some educators believe that the classic literature will benefit young students in that it offers cultural and literary heritage (Bushman, 1997). Others argue that contemporary fictions are far more realistic in themes and characters that adolescents can relate strongly to the stories. Yet, whichever literatures picked for in-class reading, teachers must be able to bring them for literary discussions with the students. More importantly, it is expected that such in-class literary discussion will shape students to be life long readers who are able to appreciate the reality of human diversity and to have empathy with people of other cultures. Since the purpose for educating young adult students is to help them meet the needs of emotional and social development, as well as intellectual growth.

Therefore, this paper endeavours to explain the use of literature circles, in an EFL classroom for young adult students, and to explore the extent to which the activities strengthen students’ cultural awareness.

Cultural Awareness and Young Adult Literature

In an advanced ESL classrooms, as Gajdusek (1988) believes, literature has wider potentials that had been discussed since decades ago. She goes on to argue that

literature serves great stimulus for writing and composition. Literature gives contexts to its readers, as to providing background information or clues to the ideas delivered in the texts. More to that, literary texts are considered able to help their readers to experience “the wishes, dreams, and problems of people around the world and discover that all people share a need for love, hope, and security”(Santino in Smith & Wiese, 2006). Readers are open to discuss the values and the historical background from cultures all around the world. Stories then do have multicultural benefits carried within the elements, a potential that both teachers and students should acknowledge and make use of.

In an attempt to define authentic multicultural literatures that represents cultures of different ethnic groups, Noll (2003) argues that a good multicultural literature must have the “capacity to break down negative stereotypes and encourage understanding and appreciation of different cultures”. Chosen carefully and utilized properly, literatures can be the right tool to pass on cultural values and history of the target language to students in an EFL classroom. These texts are cultural artifacts and through their linguistics clues, they allow students to experience cultures in a multi-dimensional way without physically visiting the actual settings.

Using literatures for young adults students in an EFL classroom is suitable to cater to their characteristics. Travers & Travers (2008) employ a developmental approach in addressing young adult readers needs of literatures for their age. They use the framework of “Biopsychosocial” characteristic to categorize the kind of literature that precisely represents adolescents life. Since young adult literatures may also function to transmit cultural knowledge and make the cultures

accessible to young readers, then stories presented must have correct representations carried through the characters. This is particularly done to avoid vexed perceptions and resistance toward such cultures and society identified in the novel (Moecharam, 2008). Therefore, a good literature for adolescent readers must help them assume a more multicultural experience and gain a meaningful understanding of themselves and others.

Selecting Appropriate Books for Young Adults

Describing Young Adult literature requires several considerations, since it is a crossover between children’s literature and adult literature. For the importance of this research, a definition from Campbell (2004) is taken. Campbell states that a novel or literature for young adult readers should have five distinct elements, those are:

- The main protagonist must be a teenager
- No adult’s or child’s perspective or point of view.
- A teenager’s point of views and focalizations in the narrative.
- A plot driven with a minimum of description
- Priority to immediacy and brevity

From the elements above, it is easy to recognize that a novel is categorized into young adult literature mainly by looking at the main teenage characters in its narrative. Recognizing the character focalizer in a story can also help readers to identify that a book belongs to a piece of literature for young adults.

Young Adult (YA) literature has gained an extraordinary readership in recent years. Publishers are aware of this trend, thus they filled the shelves of local book stores in Indonesia with translated novels for adolescent readers. Some books presents

common teenage themes, which talk about love, peer and friendship ordeal, family relationship, while others present a more complicated issue such as queer themes. The popularity of contemporary novels verify the fact that young adult fictions can accommodate reading experience, which put young adults as social and cultural subjects. They also consist of a number of different genres that “serve unique purposes and satisfy individual reading choices” (Butcher & Hinton, 2010), such as contemporary realist fiction, fantasy, adventure, mystery, horror, humour, etc. Several famous titles which have been translated into Indonesian are *The Twilight Saga*, *Harry Potter series*, *The Hunger Games Chronicles*, *Gossip Girl*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and so on. To add more, the appeal of those YA literature is then supported by the popularity of its movie version and television series among young adult viewers.

While the literary quality of the literature is certainly variable, its range of social issues and aesthetic forms makes it not only pleasurable reading, but also culturally significant. Lecturers of literary and cultural studies are including young adult literature in their syllabi, responding to a large interest toward YA literature among their adolescent students.

Despite the fact that the scholarship on Young Adult Literature has gained in rank and sophistication, there has been no

extended exploration of its pedagogy at the college level, particularly those done in EFL contexts. In this case, theoretical perspectives and classroom practices are deemed as important, for the sake of illuminating the concerns of young adult literature and culture and how they can be introduced and explored to best effect. Such notions have never been so imperative in EFL classroom, where challenges and obstacles in using literature are far more factual for both teachers and students. In fact, incorporating YA literature gives benefit to students majoring in education programs as they explore the potential of literature to be used as teaching materials.

To use literature in EFL classroom, educators must know how to evaluate and select appropriate literature, so that it can be incorporated into the lesson plans. For the purpose of this research, selecting literature is done by applying a developmental approach to literature for young adult was employed. To borrow Travers & Travers’ term, “Biopsychosocial” approach, the texts were carefully selected by considering young adult students characteristics in EFL classroom. Below is the table adapted from Lerner & Galambos (cited in Travers & Travers, 2009) to describe some of the biological, psychological, and social characteristics of students between the age of 15 – 19 years old:

BIO	PSYCHO	SOCIAL
Active pubertal changes Growth spurt occurs Health may be an issue Sex becomes a key part of their lives Emotional problems can accompany changes	Abstract thinking progresses Adolescent egocentrism is apparent Problem-solving skills improve Imaginary audiences exist Cognitive demands intensify Academic pressures increase	Identity/identity confusion Sexual behavior commences Relationships (peers, family) change Mood changes frequent Antisocial behavior apparent School performance intensifies

The table indicates that understanding the state of young adulthood should begin in “biology and ends in culture” (Petersen in Travers & Travers, 2009). This means that although adolescents’ physical growth instigates the process, their experiences with diverse types of relationships, their perception of sexuality, and their seemingly constant search for identity, strongly shape the nature and direction of their behavior.

Young adults’ relationships with their parents, in this specific phase, are going through some changes that may range from normal, every so often difficult or complex interchanges, to those that sadly contain no affection, and perhaps even mutual dislike. Many YA literature authors address issues on miscommunication between teenagers and their parents in their novels, predominantly those belonging to realist genre, for instance J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. In the story, the main adolescent character, Holden Caulfield, describes a warm yet frustrating parent-adolescent relationship. Often times such young adults are portrayed as troubled teens. Along the lines young adult literatures offer a plot to put out such problems that talk directly to adolescent readers.

Young adults concern about sexuality have repeatedly appeared as themes in this type of literature, as more and younger adolescents are involved in sexual behavior. Adding in themes about teenage sexuality in YA literature, to some extent, prepares adolescents for experiences they may have now or in the future, so that they can also show consideration for the differences among them. Travers & Travers (2009, p. 287) mention several writers for young adults, Nancy Garden and M.E. Kerr had published novels for young adults that broke new ground about a same-sex romance between high school students where the plot presented complex moral issues to the

readers for their consideration. Author Laurie Halse Anderson is known for her novel *Speak* where the female adolescent character deals with the sexual abuse happen in her school. Such plot opens a space for discussion among readers, leaving them to ponder about the moral choices that the characters had displayed.

Erikson (in Travers & Travers, 2009, pp. 288 – 289) notes *identity confusion* to indicate young adults’ “personal crises, doubts, and insecurities” which normally happens by the end of the young adult years. Existential query of “Who am I” highlights the plot in some young adult novels. The narrations are made complex by adding peer-pressure issues which lead to deeper emotional and physical problems experienced by the main characters. Erikson states that “adolescents yearn for stability in an age of change,.. and it is a time for testing both self and the world” (Travers & Travers, 2009, p. 289). In the search for identity, the adolescents often find that reading about these issues in their literature helps them understand that they are not alone in the problems they face.

Looking at the complexity of young adults characteristics from the “BioPsychoSocial” framework, selecting book for young adult readers can be tricky. Teachers will want to have books that can initiate immediate feedback from their adolescents students, books that presents the topic in which they are interested. The best practice is, as Broadus & Ivey suggest, to “run alongside the readers” (cited in Travers & Traver, 2009, p. 290). This technique allow teachers to informally research on their students reading preferences.

However, what often becomes an argument in book selection is to whether use canon/classic literature or contemporary fiction in the classroom. Crowe (2001) discusses the attack upon YA fiction which

is deemed as “bad literature” that fails to uphold moral values. On the other hand, classic literatures will strengthen young adults’ critical literacy, as well as maintaining good cultural heritage.

To accommodate the best practice in the classroom, this research selected texts which are categorized into classic literatures and contemporary realist young adult fictions. Those belongs to classics are *Rose for Emily*, *Sonny’s Blues*, *Rape Fantasy*, *A Man Who is Almost A Man*. Others belonging to contemporary fictions for young adults are *Speak*, *Am I Blue*, and *Winnie & Tommy*. Although, most of English classic literatures are intended for adult readers, it is believed that they carried multicultural issues which still appropriate to today’s kids and sociocultural contexts.

All of the texts were selected upon the main consideration that they carried multicultural issues. In her research, Lewis (2008, p. 285) mentions that talking about multiculturalism includes the talking about race, religion, sexualorientation, and social class. Two short stories, *Am I Blue* and *Winnie & Tommy* are distinctive, since they are categorized into Young Adult literature with LGBTQ (lesbian gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) themes.

Blackburn and Clark (2011, pp. 148 – 163) documented the hostilities that LGBTQ face in the United States and international school contexts. This situation is true in Indonesia as well. The strict the religious mandates that geared the Indonesian schools’ curriculum will have banned the using of such books and labelled them as “inaappropriate books”. The claim would have been that students did not and could not know about or understand issues of homosexuality. It would have seem that any issues on sexual orientation preferences should not be discussed in the classroom. While in fact, classrooms have the potential

to be a “safe” space to openly discuss such issues. Moreover, Blackburn and Clark argue that “literature study can be an important place to counter homophobia and heterosexism.” In open classroom discussions, students can be made aware of how to deal with LGBTQ issues in their daily lives.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles is an instructional practice that became popular since Harvey Daniels in 1994 published his book about in-class literature discussions (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). This practice is rapidly developed due to the fact that, as Rosenblatt (1978) believed, reading is transactional and that meaning is not only found in the text or a reader’s mind, but most importantly in the transaction between the text and the reader. Clarke & Holwadel had observed that using literature circles could help increase positive social learning opportunities in the classroom, where teachers moved away from the traditional teacher-centered instructions to student-centered instructions.

Other researches conducted to measure the benefits of using literature circles as instructional practice had found that students’ comprehension is increased as well as their higher-level of thinking and their quality responses to texts (Almasi, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Sweigart, 1991). It is also discovered that using literature circles could help increase “positive social learning opportunities in the classroom” (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999), which becomes the primary key success of this instructional practice. Literature Circles offer the potential to promote reading for enjoyment by binding the social networks that exist within the peer group in the classroom. Moreover, such approach to the teaching of literature promotes reading as an active and desirable social activity, rather than a private and

individual one (Allan, Ellis, and Pearson, 2005, p. 3). Going over the advantages that literature circles provide, it is high time to introduce this instructional practice in EFL classroom in Indonesian context to improve students literacy level. In college level, the approach is expected to be best explored with the using of Young Adult Literature.

METHOD

This research sought to trial and describe young adult students experiences in literature circles in Indonesian EFL classroom. It is also aimed to identify the impact of literature circles in strengthening the cultural awareness of young adult students through experiencing classic literatures and contemporary realist fictions.

To achieve the goals, qualitative research approach had been employed, paying particular attention to collecting information on the setting up of literature circles and the impact of literature circles in reinforcing their cultural awareness. Data were collected from students written responses toward the given literary texts and a set of questionnaires that students answered. The subject of the research involved 70 Indonesian university students, taken from two classes taking *Exploring Prose* course. These students are majoring in English Literature, however to put it in Indonesian context, they are studying English as a Foreign Language. Thus, the context of the research is more focused on the teaching of English as a Foreign Language.

Modifications in the practice of literature circles were also done, to facilitate the characteristics of EFL students. Instead of reading books, the choice of texts given in the practice were mostly short stories. Most students find that books are too lengthy. Thus, to avoid students' de-motivation in reading, short stories were chosen. In this

stage, however, students were not yet given the opportunity to choose their own piece of literature, and class discussions were still lead by teachers and worksheet questions. The latter steps were taken to mark the initial phase for further reseaches in the pedagogy of young adult literature in college level.

There were three areas for which qualitative data were collected:

- a) Students responses to the literature circles.
- b) Students attitudes to reading classic literatures and contemporary realist fictions.
- c) Reported changes on students' cultural awareness.

The teacher was asked to keep a journal that noted her observations, questions, thoughts and any issues that came to pass as she prepared for, introduced, managed, observed and evaluated the activity. To put in the picture of how the activity was implemented in the classrom, a content analysis of the teacher's journal entries was conducted. The teacher was also interviewed to support the findings retrieved from the journal entries.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the course, the teacher used short stories to teach discussion skills and key concepts for literary analysis before introducing literature circles to the class. She modeled literature circles by means of reading a short story to the class. Using power point presentation, she introduced elements of fictions. She then invited students to provide basic analysis of the literary elements from the discussed story. At the time she coached the students by prompting guiding questions to lead to an enthusiastic discussions in small circles. Students had the freedom to create their own circles, which mostly were based around commonalities that they had primarily established inside and outside the

classroom. The teacher let the students to choose their own members of the circle to develop a feeling of cohesion. This strategy was successful since the members of the same circle shared the same interests, thus were able to build a positive relationship in the discussion. The long term objective of this activity is to push students in the right direction for establishing and maintaining a community of learners.

In the end of every discussion, the teacher asked the students to write a literary response to the discussed works. For students, writing response serves several functions, those are to explore ideas, record observations, experiences and understanding. This way the social experience that they had during literature circles activities is well-recorded.

As reflected in their written responses, most students were able to record their peer-lead discussions in an organized manner. They included personal point of views, enriched with the point of views of other members of the circles. In regard to the choice of texts, many students provided better written responses to contemporary realist fictions, most explained that it was due to the fact that they were able to relate better to the contemporary fictive characters and issues. The advantage of small group discussion also drew students upon their experiences outside of the of the text and involved them in comparing events or characters in a story with events and people known personally to them. At times, discussions were done to point particular page numbers in the texts or to highlight a word choice. The purposes of this activity were to take delight in the craft of writing and to share a feeling of joy, humor, or fear with other readers. Many students shared their emotional responses particularly to literature with LGBTQ themes. Understandably, these responses were shared

by explicit references to one's own identity and sexuality. At this point, students made meaning from the texts and extended one another's understandings of the texts. Some discussions about LGBTQ issues were heated up, particularly when many conversations highlighted the distinction between queer and straight people, and a few conversations were even grounded in homophobia. Despite the urging arguments, the fact that the students could respond openly had created a space for them to see connections across their experiences, and explore the meaning of the texts more deeply.

From a set of workshop questions aimed to find out how students responded to literature circles activity, almost all students gave positive responses. They explained that small group discussions had encouraged them to talk actively about the literary works without any worry that their opinions would go unnoticed. The activity had certainly produced a positive discussion environment in the class.

The questionnaires also informed students improved enthusiasm in reading literary works. They responded well to both classic works and contemporary ones. Although a large number of students preferred contemporary works such as *Am I Blue* and *Speak* since they could relate better to the themes and the characters' experiences in the story.

Another set of questions were distributed to discover how much the students' sense of cultural awareness was improved. The experience of reading and discussing the works in small circles gave students new understanding of different values and cultures. Many of them agreed that the stereotypes presented in the stories through the characters could be a way to recognize and embrace differences. Through the theme and the characters of *Am I Blue*,

students learned the devastating world of homophobia, yet they also discovered how to tolerate gender differences in their surrounding area.

Some students related strongly to the character Miranda from *Speak*, as she faced the consequences of making a life-changing decision to be completely mute during her high school times, right after she experienced a sexual assault from her senior. Miranda, in her own way, taught the students to defend their positions in the matter of right and wrong.

Students claimed that they gained the knowledge of how society and values work when they read classics, such as *A Rose for Emily* and *The Lottery*. They understood the upsetting effect of a mispracticed culture, such as the lottery, which brought about decadence to the society's values. A slight issue of racism was able to identify from *A Rose for Emily*, as students examined Emily's relationship to her African American slave and developed sympathy toward the slave.

Generally, students displayed an increase in cultural awareness, particularly when they came across sensitive issues such as gender and personal beliefs. In particular, the instructions and activities designed had captured the students increased awareness of their own cultural biases, where they were, to a greater degree, able to recognize and reduce defensiveness about their own culture, that led them to increase their comfort levels when talking about different cultures and worldviews. The students also gained the knowledge of alternative ways to approach life and differences around them.

The purpose of cultural awareness is to have students develop empathy towards other cultures outside their own cultures. However, Kumashira (2000) cited in Lewis (2008, p. 288) disputes that:

empathy should not be seen as the ultimate goal of what he calls anti-oppressive education. Empathy leaves the self intact in that the "other" is seen as being like the self. The normative self, then—the dominant, unmarked self—does not change. Rather, the "other" is made to conform to or illuminate the self.

Through their experiences gained from the readings, the class discussions, and journal writings, the students are hoped to become subjects that bring about culture awareness in their surroundings.

CONCLUSION

As an instructional practice applied in an EFL classroom, literature circles do seem to allow students the space to talk about literature, and help to define themselves as critical readers with certain point of views. One of the most powerful aspect of this practice is that once it has been established, teachers will not have to go to the trouble of encouraging students to talk or respond in the class, since they will have had developed discussion as a habit. By participating in a variety of literature circle groupings, students learn that reading is a social activity which can benefit them a lot. Another point of interest is that the selection of literary works can be done to serve a purpose, in this case to strengthen students' cultural awareness. To do this, teachers should be able to evaluate literary texts that bear multicultural issues, which may present in the themes, or the characters.

This research strongly recommended the using of literature circles for teachers in EFL classroom, since it can develop students' skills in literary analysis, improve their attitudes toward reading, also help students reflect on their study. In practice, literature circles shape students' understanding of the lives around them, that will allow them

social and emotional ‘spaces’ to define themselves as readers.

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