

# Post-Colonial criticism in ELT reading: Encouraging a critical response towards literature

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Many English literary texts employed in ELT reading classrooms are saturated with Western cultural values, which, if not explicated properly, can confuse students who may come from very different cultural backgrounds (Widdowson, 1990). Moreover, English literature often produces a specific and stereotypical way of thinking about and perceiving non-Western cultures (Pennycook 1998; Phillipson, 1992), and some concern is held by ELT teachers on the possible effects these texts may have upon students of English as a foreign language (Sell, 2005; Torikai, 2011). In light of such concerns, this paper advocates using a wide range of global literature in ELT reading classes, while interpolating a mediated Post-Colonial and Reader Response approach. The paper further outlines educational methodology that might encourage Japanese university students to apply Post-Colonial and Reader Response criticism to both authentic texts and graded readers.

## English Literature in the ELT Classroom.

Introducing authentic works of English literature into an ELT reading classroom can be beneficial for a wide variety of reasons. Such materials can afford English language students the chance to understand other cultures at a deeper, more satisfyingly complex level because literature itself tends to possess subtlety, richness and uniqueness (Brumfit, 2001) that might not be found in English language textbooks. Due to the profound and serious range of ideas found in classic literature in particular, authentic texts dating from centuries past can often connect old themes with new, and broaden and deepen our students' understanding both of previous ages and of subjects related to the present time. For example, using selections of Wordsworth's nature poetry, which criticize the growing industrial materialism of early 19th century Britain, can add a deeper historical and critical perspective to ELT discussion classes which centre on modern phenomena such as globalization. Reading authentic English literature also presents students with the opportunity to understand how the English language is used in a variety of specific contexts and can convey genuine, authentic cultural

enrichment whilst training the mind and sensibility (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000).

Despite the many positive skills and insights students can gain from reading literature, many English reading students face difficulties in moving from basic decoding of texts towards fluency. These obstacles may include a lack of textual and cultural background knowledge, which is often regrettably glossed over in the classroom in favor of teaching information retrieval skills that "exclude the cultural values and identities, or expressive and aesthetic characteristics. . . . quite simply because these are now seen as surplus to practical requirement" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p. 357). This runs the risk that many reading students will be alienated or confused by the cultural content in authentic literature due to it not matching their own social and cultural schematic knowledge (Widdowson, 1990). If learners cannot understand or process authentic texts then, as Waring observes, "the text is noise and frustrational...and not instructional but interfering with instruction" (Waring, 2006, p. 1). A more serious growing concern amongst teachers and scholars is that, due to many English literary texts being saturated in

Western values, reading students may potentially be encouraged to “analyse and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 241). Western literary cultural values emanate in part from the establishment of the literary canon, but also from the specific historical and geopolitical processes which underpin its formation, such as colonialism (Pennycook, 1998). This article will first discuss these two important factors during the following two chapters, before proceeding to address the more practical ways in which a critical approach towards such literature can be encouraged in ELT reading classrooms.

### **The Western Literary Canon and ELT Texts**

The type of literature introduced and taught to students in ELT reading classes often conforms to a Western centered, elitist and canonized standard, exemplified by F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (Leavis, 1950) in which he identified Anglo-American writers such as Eliot, Austen, and Henry James as the bearers of great and immutable values. The literary canon has since begun to suffer attacks on its credibility due to accusations of perceived elitism and dogmatism (Brumfit, 2001), but despite this growing criticism the images of various literary figures from the Western canon, such as Dickens, Austen and Shakespeare, still pervade the content of ELT communication textbooks such as *Headway* (Soars & Soars, 2005). At a tertiary level in Japan many reading textbooks focus chiefly on Western literary texts to the exclusion of global literature selections. Of particular note is the reading textbook series *Discovering Fiction*, which affords space for a large selection of American writers, such as Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Ray Bradbury, and Shirley Jackson (Kay & Gelshenen, 2001) yet there is no place for international writers such as Marquez, Mahfouz, or Lao She. While it should be conceded that the textbook *Literary Odysseys* (Ziemer, 2000) has previously attempted to include multicultural selections of literature, this volume failed to be embraced or used widely by teaching institutions, and has now regrettably fallen out of print. English may enjoy the status of a widely used global language,

but the previous textbook examples are perhaps symptomatic of the general lack of focus on global English literature in many reading programs.

### **'Self' and 'Other' in Western Literature**

A dearth of global literature in many reading textbooks may be partly attributed to the argument that the ELT industry is subtly shaped by the ideology of colonialism (Phillipson, 1992). This discourse, which was influenced by the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, served to enforce an ontological division between 'self' and 'other'; Enlightenment culture represented Western progress positively whilst conferring an inferior status on the rest of the world (Pennycook, 1998). Cultural demarcation between 'civilized self' and 'savage other' meant that other parts of the world were judged by Europeans to be in need of the West's guidance, and early British poetic explorers such as Sir Walter Raleigh (Hill, 1965/1972) used these beliefs to justify the need for colonial expansion whilst later British explorers such as Stanley championed Western colonial 'civilization' as a force for good (Sherry, 1971). Colonialist discourses can be further discovered in the literature of prominent Western writers who are often read by students in English reading classes; literary depictions of civilised Western 'self' and savage 'other' can be found in works by Defoe, Melville, Conrad and London. More specifically to Asia, stereotypical depictions of the Orient in Western literature as exotic and mysterious (which attained a vogue of considerable intensity during the 19th century), can be located in publications as varied as Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850/1996), Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816/1996), Orwell's depiction of Myanmar in *Burmese Days*, (1934/1967), and Gide (1902/1960) and Kerouac's (1965/1995) accounts of North Africa. These kinds of representations still pervade popular contemporary literature, such as Alex Garland's *The Beach* (1996/1997), where the East is depicted as an exotic playground which conveys the promise of adventure. This genre tradition of writing has in turn influenced Western cinematic depictions of different parts of the world, further establishing rigid lines between 'us' and 'them' (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003).

A Western-centric representation of the East can even be located in ELT textbooks, such as *Headway*, which includes a reading feature on the explorer Marco Polo's 'discovery' of China, and then juxtaposes this with another reading exercise featuring a Western backpacker exploring the Far East (Soars & Soars, 2005). In this sense, ELT can be argued to project values historically connected with imperialism, as the commercial exploitation of the English language has a long and honourable history (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004), exemplified by the British Council's 1983 admission of "exploiting English" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 144). Because of this history, some ELT teachers feel concern that, by introducing Shakespeare, Dickens or Hughes into an ELT reading class, they are in some manner contributing to linguistic and cultural imperialism (Sell, 2005), whilst some maintain that all authentic culture should be kept out of the ELT classroom, (Torikai, 2011) due to its perceived hegemonic properties. Yet keeping students away from authentic Western culture appears impossible in an age when students often choose to gain on-line and TV access to this culture during their leisure hours. Perhaps, in the long run, teaching culture at a deeper, more critical level may instead be more profitable because students require a great deal of cultural education in English classes to achieve a deeper level of communicative competence and fluency (Kramsch, 1993). This necessitates engaging with foreign cultures and literary texts more rigorously and critically.

### **Teaching Global Literature**

In seeking to promote a more critical student response to authentic texts, the central problem for ELT reading teachers is in assessing what the intended culture of a text should be, and how they should attempt to teach it. With economic power looking to slowly switch from West to East, the culture students are encouraged to learn will not perhaps be of much use in the immanent future, and it may be more productive to introduce learners to other cultures through English. This will entail teaching literature from many diverse parts of the globe, such as Asia, the Middle East and Africa, whilst there is

also no reason why Japanese students should not read selections of their own literature in English classes, and compare these texts critically with British, American or global texts. Yet faced with a restricted, culture-specific choice of textbooks and materials (Flavell, 1994), teachers may need to accept more personal responsibility in terms of leading students to diverse literature, and this will in turn necessitate instructors possessing both a zest for reading and a critical expertise of multicultural literary texts. A multicultural approach to teaching literature in ELT should ideally avoid cultural bias and instead expand to represent many varied parts of the globe, affording students the chance to enjoy a broader, deeper, more profound vision of the world.

### **A Reader Response and Post Colonial Critical Approach**

An English reading program that provides a multicultural selection of authentic literature will also require the development of student literary critical competence. The major obstacle to this approach is that literature is still chiefly employed in some Asian countries such as Japan in a top down, efferent approach (Rosenblatt, 1938) to develop intensive reading skills, improving reading speeds, and for grammar translation purposes. To avoid being confused or locked out of the text, students need to be encouraged to critically engage with literature by critical comparison with their own culture and individual identities. Encouraging students to develop a personal reader response towards authentic texts is advocated by a number of scholars (Rosenblatt, 1938; Scholes, 1985,) who note that the reader's interpretative process is central to the creation of meaning, but, in addition to teaching such reader response, teachers should also seek to equip students with a deeper knowledge of the ideological values of the text itself, and the cultures it both embodies and represents. Teaching a post-colonial approach to reading can help shed light on various cultural discourses that underpin literature, such as representations of identity, self and other. Using reader response and post-colonial critical readings might potentially enable reading students

unacquainted with foreign cultures to more smoothly process culture-specific schematic knowledge encountered in such texts and yet also compare and contrast it with their own.

### Using Mediated Classroom Materials

With these critical reading aims in mind I decided to teach reader response and post-colonial reading approaches to my Japanese university literature students during the 2012 autumn semester, and I chose specific vocabulary to both explicate this difficult content and to also hopefully encourage a critical response. An academic word list was not consulted in selecting vocabulary, as it was felt that this would be too general for the purposes of scaffolding critical theory and instead specific terms were chosen which related to reader response, such as 'visualise', 'picture', 'imagine', 'relate', and 'infer'. Vocabulary which related to post-colonialism included terms such as 'stereotype', 'representation', 'self', 'other', and 'reinforce' and 'subvert' 'colonialist ideology.' These terms were introduced to the students through the distribution of vocabulary reading sheets, and also, to maximise student opportunities for memorisation, recycled in subsequent classes (Nation, 2001; Waring, 2006) in the form of reading and writing activities. Audio-visual media such as short examples of movies were used in conjunction with the vocabulary reading sheets to aid student familiarisation of textual content (Lonergan, 1984), whilst images such as optical illusions, works of art and cartoon *manga* were further used to explicate meaning.

### Two Classroom Examples of Teaching Critical Readings

The first task at hand was to encourage a student reader response to literature, and I decided to approach this through showing the class works of art. I used paintings with androgynous figures such as Carravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601), or ambiguous meanings such as Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), and the anonymous optical illusion *Young Girl and Old Woman* (1888) and these images were specifically selected to illustrate the idea that everything one sees can be interpreted in more than

just one way, and that perception therefore depends on one's personal response. Students were encouraged to use the reader response related vocabulary they had been taught to interpret and describe the pictures in terms such as how it influenced their opinions and feelings, what the picture made them visualize, whether they could relate the image to their life, a movie, or a book, and what they inferred the meaning and message of the image to be. This vocabulary was then used twice more: First when the students viewed and wrote their impressions of a series of recent movie trailers, and secondly when reading and reviewing the short story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) by Washington Irving. It was however stressed to the students that whilst they were being encouraged to give their personal response to literature they should base their responses upon evidence derived from the text, such as specific words, descriptions, events or conversations. At the climax of the *Sleepy Hollow* class, group discussions regarding the text took place, and students exchanged the ideas which they had generated through their reader response writings, moving from thinking to writing to discussion.

Having scaffolded a reader response approach to reading, the next stage was to introduce a more critical approach towards literature, so that students could combine their own personal impressions with a deeper cultural knowledge of texts. Post-colonial criticism was introduced by distributing simplified reading handouts containing some of the basic ideas and figures from colonial and post colonial criticism, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, and vocabulary which outlined post colonial critical theory was also included on the handouts. The notion of 'self' and 'other' as a set of created cultural dispositions in Western culture was explicated through using visual media. The students were shown the *Mosaic of the Battle of Issus* (100 B.C.), which depicts Alexander of Macedonia's battle with Darius the Persian King, and were supplied with some historical reading information related to the mosaic. Whilst introducing my class to the vocabulary 'self', 'other' and 'representation' the important point was made to the students that in this famous Western created mosaic Alexander



is represented as heroic, whilst the non-Western Darius is represented pejoratively as cowardly. These scaffolded vocabulary based ideas were then subsequently connected to much later historically pejorative examples of represented 'others.' I used paintings such as Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* (1824), and example video clips from the short documentary movie *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (ChallengingMedia, 2007) to illustrate how Western culture has negatively represented the Middle East over a long historical period up to the present. My students were then introduced to a further selection of pictures and movie clips, and were encouraged to use post-colonial related vocabulary to write about and discuss whether they contained cultural differences or stereotypes, representations of self and contrasting depictions of other, and whether the works reinforced or subverted colonialist ideology. Having become familiarized with these post-colonial critical ideas the students were then required to read over subsequent classes two different literary texts, one British and one Nigerian. Students first read and discussed the short story *Sredni Vashtar* by Saki, (Munro, 1911) which was scaffolded by distributing printouts of an online graphic novel of the text (Lauraneato, 2007) to smooth and simplify student comprehension, and in the following class read and reviewed *Dead Men's Path* by Chinua Achebe (Achebe, 1953/1973). These two texts were specifically chosen to be compared and contrasted for culturally thematic reasons; in the former text the ferret character Sredni Vashtar appears to personify an imagined Eastern religion as represented from a British perspective, whereas in the latter text British Christian missionary rule in Nigeria is represented from a Nigerian perspective. Having used reader response and post-colonial critical ideas to read and write about both texts, my students then participated in a longer critical discussion in which ideas generated by their writings were exchanged, and I encouraged their conversation to center specifically

on how the two texts represented Western and foreign cultures, and whether the two texts potentially reinforced or subverted colonialist ideology.

### Conclusion: Assessing a Critical Approach

I wished to test my students' ability to apply reader response and post-colonial criticism to literature, and in the final class examination they were required to use the terms they had learnt whilst performing a reader response and post-colonial critique of the latter two texts. However, as studies illustrate the importance of graded readers for both autonomous learning (Waring, 2006) and for creative enjoyment (Prowse, n.d.), my students were also given an extensive reading essay assignment in which they were required to write similar critical assessments of a graded reader of their choice. Corpora of student written responses to authentic texts and graded readers are currently under construction at the time of writing, and will be subjected to examination by the text handling package Wordsmith Tools 6.0. Whilst it is too early to draw any comparative conclusions regarding student responses to such texts, it is hoped that this collected data can be employed in the future as part of a longitudinal collection of student writings. This data can then be compared with examples of learner corpora from other institutions to better inform a future research article advocating a critical post-colonial approach to teaching literature. Yet it is argued that while literature is culturally charged, and contains differing and often stereotypical representations of other cultures, these factors shouldn't prevent teachers from introducing such authentic texts into the ELT classroom, and needn't obstruct students from engaging with them critically and creatively. Encouraging students to critically assess and compare wide selections of global literature within a reading syllabus is potentially beneficial in aiding students' broader comprehension of literature and culture.

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