

Forum report

The Author Isn't Dead, Just a Little Shy: Practical Criticism and Workshopping in the EFL Classroom

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In the context of higher education EFL in Japan, there is often an emphasis on criticality. Especially in the skill of reading, it is insufficient to read passively, and learners are encouraged to critically engage with texts through various reader response activities. Similarly, in writing classes – composition, academic or creative writing – educators often include peer feedback workshops in the classroom, requiring learners to read and respond to their classmates' writing to offer constructive criticism and assist with revisional decisions. Although peer feedback workshops can yield constructive learning opportunities, they may also present certain psychological obstacles for learners who are inclined more toward face-saving interactions and are unwilling to engage in Face-Threatening Acts such as negatively criticizing a peer's writing. Also, in a hierarchical society like Japan where many classes are teacher-centered, learners may feel uncomfortable in the perceived role of teacher when evaluating their peers' writing (Nelson & Carson, 1998). On a more acute level, interactions in workshops can demonstrate particularly negative tendencies. As Gross (2010) claims, "the bullying, the blandness and the babble, and the crucifying silences. . . All the worst things people say about writing workshops are, or can be, true" (p. 52).

This report looks to the concept of Practical Criticism as a possible solution for these interactive obstructions. Practical Criticism is a critical approach to reading that focuses on the text itself, independently and isolated from its social, historical and cultural context. For example, if an English translation of the short story *Rashōmon* by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa was set as a reading activity in a reading or literature class, students may approach the text influenced by their individual knowledge and preconceptions: They may have a formed consciousness of the narrative, the historical context and their implications to the narrative and its overriding moral. They may also approach the story with

predeterminations of Akutagawa as an author, with their attitude toward the author and his works informed by their individual reading tastes and educational experiences. However, if the text was anonymized and disseminated with no preceding focus on the historical and cultural context of the narrative, the learner can approach the text with a more "organized response" (Richards, 1929), or a deeper understanding of the text formed from their own perspectives, interpretations and life experiences.

The term 'Practical Criticism' originated from the title of a book written by the literary critic and Cambridge professor I.A. Richards. The book reports on psychological experiments Richards conducted with students of literature at Cambridge University. Richards was primarily interested in the readers' response to the text rather than the text itself (West, 2017). He provided students with five anonymous poems for a critical and evaluative response. The poems varied in quality, with one that was deemed "worthless" by Richards. Richards was surprised to note that students responded favorably to the poems without literary merit more so than the acclaimed works, and this encouraged him to conduct more experiments to collect a broader range of responses. The experiment was innovative in that it was an early example of empirical research in the field of literary studies.

Though the term *Practical Criticism* denotes the experiment and not an actual model from which to approach reading, it continues to inform English Literary Studies' curricula from elementary to higher education around the world. As a concept, or a framework from which ESL teachers may approach their teaching, Practical Criticism may be a practical solution to allow our learners to approach texts with minimal presumption. It encourages the learner to read closely and construct meaning through their individual interpretations. This in turn promotes learner agency

and slants the focus away from the idea of “right” or “wrong” readings that is perpetuated through exercises such as skimming/scanning and true/false questions and focuses on responses informed by learner identity. As such, there is vast pedagogical merit in applying practical-critical exercises in classes that focus on extensive and intensive reading.

However, as mentioned previously, the writing class that prescribes peer feedback may also benefit from this approach. In a culturally-situated learning environment that avoids Face-Threatening Acts such as criticism and negative evaluation, peer feedback workshops can often be exercises in futility, where overt praise and positive value judgements may not generate many revisional ideas. Outside of this generalization, learners may also approach a text with certain bias, willing to praise their friends' writing or remain silent when discussing a stronger student's work, while overly critiquing a weaker or less popular learner's writing. Learners may also approach a text excessively influenced by their reading tastes if the text is creative or their cultural and political beliefs if the text is expository when they are pre-aware of the text's author. A practical-critical approach – the anonymization of the texts, occasional distribution of non-student-written texts and the emphasis on individual and independent response – may help eliminate these problems.

Especially in a rapidly evolving era of education provision, where COVID-19 has forced many practitioners to embrace technology as a significant mode of teaching, the opportunity for students to submit their writing for anonymous peer review has increased. Though it takes significant bravery for a

student to submit their writing, it may create a community of writers and readers that can develop their writing voices, enhance their critical reading skills and constructively respond to peer-written texts with confidence.

Author Biography

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