
Teaching Semiotics to Promote Students' Critical Thinking in the Reading and Writing Class

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Abstract: This study aims at stimulating students' criticism when reading and writing. Reading should not be passive since it needs critical thinking to understand the text. What is presented in the text describes a discourse; therefore, the students should communicate with the text to get the points. The discourse relates to context and a text is a media to cover. As the media of the discourse, text encourages students to think critically in order that they can give some comments and inputs after reading. The comments and inputs, then, are manifested in writing so it shows a complex activity which contains students' comprehension. In other words, writing becomes an indicator to evaluate the result of the reading activities which have been completed before. Semiotics is one important thing. It presents signs and symbols providing certain meanings both explicitly and implicitly. Students create their interpretations with different views which is based on what they think. Critical thinking takes its role in observing the signs and symbols distributed elsewhere in the text. The process of making interpretation is a way to communicate with the text because they are certainly engaged when exploring ideas and connecting among information then developing into a written form. This study takes the students of Pre Advanced Reading and Writing in the third year of Ahmad Dahlan University, Yogyakarta.

Keywords: semiotics, critical thinking, interpretation, reading comprehension, writing skill

1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesian students tend to ask rather than find something by themselves. When doing some tasks, for instance, they normally get confused to finish and look at other works to check whether theirs are correct or not. The problem doesn't lay on the tasks but on language awareness in reading the instruction in particular, thus, it influents the understanding of how to complete them. Another case is when students wanted to confirm the lecturer's desk. They preferred asking to read the lecturer's name holder that has already been set on each table. The other example is finding location on a map. The map is always set in front of the building or rooms. Some students would rather ask someone first to show a certain building or room than looking at it. This phenomenon has really been a classical issue since the weakness of reading habit dominates reading awareness. This situation contributes to the weakness of students' critical thinking.

One way to measure it is writing. After getting the main points of a text, they have thoughts in mind. Reading, then, is an active skill instead of passive one. It doesn't stop only on reading activity, however, it continues to writing activity to bring out thoughts in the form of writing. Students produce some works by their own from their arguments. Productive skill means thinking critically when writing so it links to what they have read from the

writer's ideas then develop them into a new text consisting of students' critical thinking after adapting and adopting a text, therefore it matches with its context since a text is developed with context. Writing activity, consequently, should meet with this requirement. These process, then, results active readers. These statements are clearly supported by Wallace (2003:15).

The reader was active in the pursuit of meaning, as opposed to earlier accounts of the reading process which talked of reading, along with listening, as a 'passive skill'. It was assumed that meaning was there within the text for the taking. The shift in emphasis from a passive, acquiescent reader to an active one led to the use of rather aggressive metaphors. The reader was described as 'extracting' meaning from texts – rather like teeth! Just and Carpenter express it thus: 'the main goal of a comprehended, of course, is to extract information from the prose he is listening to or reading' (Just and Carpenter 1977: ix). While even relatively recent accounts of the reading process continue to draw on this and similar metaphors (Nuttall (1996), for instance talks of 'text attack' skills), the ground has shifted in L2 as in L1 (first language) reading theory to talk of reading as interactive rather than

active. What the readers bring to the text is as important as what they gain from it.

The researcher has been teaching reading and writing for almost five years and his finds missing link, that is, critical thinking. The students are still lack of analysis in the activities. The researcher usually got missing information when checking out their works. He assumes that students are familiar with multiple choice questions whose options have been available already then they just choose the best one based on their understanding. This seems to be much of speculation since the answers are served although there is one correct choice. He is not saying that multiple choice questions are not helpful but finding problems should be introduced first. After this step, they are directed to get solution followed by arguments. Therefore, lecturers should stimulate their arguments by provoking braveness to reveal original opinions that are possible to support the facts in the text inside the frame of its context. They encourage them to connect ideas in the text to their background knowledge for the argument is personal. Nothing to worry about being correct or wrong (Barnet and Bedau, 2011:73-74).

When we think seriously about an argument (not name calling or mere rationalization), not only do we hear ideas that may be unfamiliar, but we are also forced to examine closely our own cherished opinions, and perhaps for the first time really come to see the strengths and weaknesses of what we believe.

In practice, of course, someone's argument usually advances reasons for a claim in opposition to someone else's position or belief. But even if one is writing only for oneself, trying to clarify one's thinking by setting forth reasons, the result is an argument.

What the researcher usually finds that students are afraid of making mistakes when exploring opinions. That becomes the primary obstacle to improve criticism, hence; most of them feel pessimistic in quoting statements from information they heard, read and watched on television, printed and online media. While the news provides unlimited issues that they can likely be accessed anytime. The researcher must have been pushing hard in the class to convince them that they are not alone in giving opinions because many people say everything outside there.

The other case is comprehension questions. They are normally adapted from the implicit information mentioned in the text. The students are passionate to get over the questions. However, they stop working when they are to analyze explicit information. What unmentioned is actually mentioned but it needs extra treatment to show the answer. The students' ability to connect among ideas distributed around the text is badly needed beside linguistic competence mastery as well.

Therefore, an alternative way to solve those troubles is supposed to be initiated. Teaching semiotics, in this case, can be the one solution to help students in eliminating their difficulties.

2 SIGN: SEMIOTICS IMPLEMENTATION IN READING AND WRITING CLASS

We are living in the world that represents signs. They are around us. What is appeared says more than what is spoken sometimes and it involves many aspects to understand the real meaning. If we are in the air conditioning room, hospital, hotel, toilet, airport, school etc., we will normally find no smoking symbol. Cigarette which is crossed is a symbol. It means that you are not allowed to smoke cigarette there since smoking can disturb and even worsen others' health or it can damage the device system. When the officer is checking out our carriers at the airport and find gas fire, for example, he will ask us to take it out then give it to him and throw it into the dust bin. What he did remind us to leave aside the gas fire since it is explosive material that can possibly explode in low pressure, shaking, and hot temperature. The meaning of no smoking symbol and the notice from the officer at the airport are signs. Both cases don't need excessive words to deliver the message. Simple symbols and gestures explain more than just verbal communication. They can be an effective way to build self-awareness through effortless action but they are straight forward.

It has already been argued that in human societies, language clearly plays a commanding role and is generally taken to be the predominant means of communication. But it is also clear that human beings communicate by nonverbal means and in ways which must consequently be said to be either non-linguistic (although the mode of language remains formative and dominant) or which must have the effect of 'stretching' our

concept of language until it includes non-verbal areas. (Hawkes, 2004: 101)

Another expert, Danesi, describes that semiotics relates to the meaning behind what is stated, demonstrated, written or symbolized. The researcher often keeps silent while looking at them when his students are rowdy or says: "Could we continue the lesson?" and the class becomes noiseless anymore. If there is a student who is careless or doesn't focus on the lecture, he usually points him out to answer one or some questions from him. Sentences are not also syntactically written when sending him a short message. Almost all of them prefer making abbreviation to composing full words then the researcher replies it in complete alphabets instead of reducing characters. The purpose is to show them how to write good sentences when sending a message to their lecturer to avoid ambiguity and redundancy. Afterward they respond it in more well-organized structure as showed by their lecturer.

Semiotics is the science that attempts to answer the following question: What does X mean? The X can be anything from a single word or gesture, to an entire musical composition or film. The "magnitude" of X may vary, but the basic nature of the inquiry does not. If we represent the meaning (or meanings) that X encodes with the letter Y, then the central task of semiotic analysis can be reduced, essentially, to determining the nature of the relation $X = Y$ (2004:3)

The researcher experienced those cases with his students and become good examples of teaching semiotics mainly in reading and understanding the *sign*. That is what semiotics deals with. What the researcher did is an approach to communicate with his students. He thinks that *sign* says complete information in the simple manner but powerful. A communication with direct instruction so far does not show the effectiveness yet in the result. It is sometimes more complicated and a lot of repetitions. This situation recommends the researcher to discover an alternative way in delivering a message.

The examples can be an entry point to introduce various kinds of signs in the classroom. Students are asked to write other examples of sign happened among them. It could be self-experience or phenomena they probably see around. The next step is writing the meaning of the signs they have already found. During this step, let them obtain self-argumentation in interpreting the signs. After it is done, a lecturer guides them how to write critically by making connection between object described representing the whole context, *signifier*, and the given meaning, *signified*.

The basic unit of semiotics is the sign, defined conceptually as something that stands for something else, and, more technically, as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept. The sign is this unity of word-object, known as a signifier with a corresponding, culturally prescribed content or meaning, known as a signified (Berger, 2010:3)

Sign, in this occasion, can be manipulated to be implemented in reading and writing activities. Based on the researcher's experience, students will stop reading every time they find unfamiliar words then look for the meaning on the dictionary. They do that until the time runs out before gaining the points of the text and they are hard to develop ideas into writing since it is preceded by reading first. Reading is not translating a word by word; however, it is a mental process that needs critical thinking. Giving reason to their opinions belongs to critical thinking activity; therefore, the result of the works represents the ability of elaborating opinions from the background knowledge and the facts in the text.

The researcher provides selected materials concerned with the signs. The figures below are the examples followed by the semiotics analysis.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



2.1. Semiotics analysis

Figure 1

It is earth with a thermometer in its mouth. The temperature reached the highest level so it looks faint and bad. This situation illustrates that earth now becomes hotter and hotter. If the children are getting sick, Mom will take the thermometer to see the temperature of the body. The higher indicator level is, the worse the condition will be. Then a doctor's advice is required to make it normal.

The figure illustrates that earth is in a horrific condition caused by human errors. The context is global warming. It is the consequence of greenhouse effect, illegal logging, carbon dioxide emission, and other human errors which damage the environment. Those extend the ozone layers hole and the ultraviolet ray comes directly in earth. The climate change becomes a part of their contribution as well.

Stop damaging the environment now or the earth we are living in will be destroyed one day. Save earth, save the generation are the messages for us to keep the ecosystem balance for a better life.

Figure 2

The figures Rp.100.000. But it looks embarrassing since the figures in it are covering their faces with two hands. Those symbols lead the context to deflation. It expresses that Rupiah is down to the lowest level.

Rp.100.000 has the highest nominal in Rupiah. It illustrates that the economics condition is lowering. This situation, thus, arouses the increasing prices of goods. It is urgent, therefore, for the government to stabilize Rupiah into the normal level together with Bank of Indonesia in order to make the prices stable again. That is the hope of Indonesian people.

Figure 3

Sumatra and Kalimantan look like the misty islands because they are still covered by heavy smog. The context must be smoky haze in Riau. People have to use a masker to reduce too much smog inhaled. It must be bothered all daily routine activities because people breathe the smog in a whole day. It says: WISATA ASAP RIAU BUKA FULL 24 JAM NON STOP MINGGU/HARI LIBUR TETAP BERASAP (Riau Fog Tourism Destination. It opens during 24 Hours Non Stop. Sunday or the day off keeps fogging).

That is the heart-breaking warning in order that other people see and feel what is happening there. Moreover, the figure invites us to be empathic and the most important thing is that they need a quick solution from the government to get over the deadly disaster soon.

Figure 4

The figure demonstrates that someone is giving a stamp on a document. The context is the bureaucracy. It clearly explains the complicated bureaucracy for public services. The words say: HARUSNYA GAMPANG DIBIKIN SUSAH. TANYA KENAPA (It should be easy but it is created to be difficult. Ask! Why?).

It informs us that dealing with bureaucracy has to follow the long process while it can be short. People should knock many doors to finish a simple document. Therefore, it delivers a message: never make people hopeless when dealing with

bureaucracy, cut the useless steps then everything will be done easily.

3 CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking has many aspects to do. It is not only thinking but also involving knowledge and skills including reading and writing. Both skills illustrate process of attaining academic achievement. It is, therefore, important to motivate every effort to lead there. The effort seems challenging since critical thinking needs broader horizon and excellent competence. The lecturer should take care of this responsibility and go along with students.

Critical thinking means giving active responses. It engages many things to do. Students are demanded not only to understand but also do reflection. It also includes appraisal and review. The students should analyze and interpret the sign. After that, they will evaluate and appreciate their works each other. How can they manage ideas to get self-awareness belongs to critical thinking as well. We should also care of the issues. To improve knowledge and skills, they must act and practice a lot. In other words, critical thinking correlates to cognitive and mental process. Reading and writing are the media to implement those activities.

There is a range of other 'critical' words which need to be located in relation to critical thinking and its representation. It is a list that seems ever to expand at the present time – and we would skeptically suggest that it expands because the notion of something being 'critical' provides a 'good' higher education or academic connotation. 'Critical' adds the idea of the application of academic rigor to a subject without necessarily doing anything. All of the following words, for example, may be prefixed with the word critical:

<i>understanding</i>	<i>reflection</i>
<i>appraisal</i>	<i>review</i>
<i>analysis</i>	<i>interpretation</i>
<i>evaluation</i>	<i>appreciation</i>
<i>management</i>	<i>awareness</i>
<i>care</i>	<i>being</i>
<i>action</i>	<i>practice</i>

3.1. Critical thinking activities

Students are asked to:

1. Look at the each picture, then observe things and read words around it,
2. Determine the topic based on its context,

3. Understand signs revealed,
4. Reflect to get the meaning,
5. Interpret the signs based on the topic and context,
6. Evaluate the interpretation to make sure that each sign has been connected to the topic and context,
7. Appreciate the result to comprehend the analysis,
8. Manage the ideas to get the logical order,
9. Be aware of the interpreted meaning form the signs,
10. Be concerned with the issues,
11. Be yourself,
12. Act and practice what is understood about the issues.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Semiotics is the science of sign. Things around us are concepts and objects. It means that they have meaning. To get the meaning, we should have knowledge and critical thinking. Reading and writing are the active skills. To produce a language both involve critical thinking activities. Therefore, students must be taught how to analyze semiotics to improve their reading and writing skills.

The researcher has shown his experiences and the details of activities related to this topic. By implementing semiotics in the classroom, the lecturers will discover new experiences from they themselves and from the students. The researcher is quite sure that teaching semiotics is beneficial for students and lecturers, thus, he recommends it to be executed in the class with more fun activities.

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