

**A CONTACT ZONE  
(A STORY FROM AN ENGLISH LITERATURE CLASSROOM IN PADANG)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores my role as an English literature teacher working within the globalizing pressures of the Western knowledge invested in the IR 4.0. It partially takes the form of an autobiographical narrative in which I reconstruct moments that have shaped my professional identity. I apply storytelling not only as a way to ‘speak back’ to the hierarchical structure of power perpetuated in English (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989; Parr, 2010) but also a way to speak back to my own habitual practices as a teacher in a university in Padang. Switching between English, Bahasa Indonesia and Minang, my account reveals my efforts to give meaning to my work. It concerns, rather, how English constitutes our world-providing us with a heightened awareness of language in the ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991), where we can use language without being ruthlessly subject to it. This has meant negotiating a pathway between the imperialist baggage of English, the nationalist project of Bahasa Indonesia, and the values of community and belonging associated with Minang language. Rather than offering a conclusion, my story remains open, revealing my continuous attempts to allow the young people in my care to understand themselves- who they are and who they will become?*

**Keywords:** *autobiographical narrative, a contact zone, storytelling, to speak back*

**INTRODUCTION**

This article takes the form of an autobiographical narrative inquiry in which I reconstruct moments of my professional practices that have shaped my professional identity. It might be read as a ‘self-study’ (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Zeichner, 1999; Loughran & Northfield, 1996) that captures the impulse behind my study and the textual politics I want to enact within it. The data for the study comes from my autobiography. Switching between English, Bahasa Indonesia and Minang, my account reveals my efforts to give meaning to my work. It

concerns, rather, how English constitutes our world-providing us with a heightened awareness of language in the ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991), where we can use language without being ruthlessly subject to it. Pratt (2011) adds that in the contact zone *disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination*” (p. 7). This has meant negotiating a pathway between the imperialist baggage of English, the nationalist project of Bahasa Indonesia, and the values of community and belonging associated with Minang language.

A crucial dimension of this interpretive study is the way that the ‘I’ of this inquiry is always located in an ensemble of social, political, cultural and historical relationships and thus always represents a particular standpoint on the world (Said, 1979). I choose storytelling to deliver this essay because “stories are not simply a form of knowing but a vital means of making the world human to us” (Doecke, 2013, p.11). Through storytelling I am able to ‘speak back’ to both the hierarchical structure of power perpetuated in English (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989; Parr, 2010) and my own habitual practices as an English teacher in a university in Padang. ). Instead of showing my bias, my autobiographical narrative provides ‘a standpoint’ (Said, 1991, p.4) with respect to major ideological issues, revealing how my life and beliefs were shaped by the circumstances that I have lived and experienced.

September 30th. 2009 was the day when Padang was hit by this phenomenal disaster of 7.9 magnitude earthquake. More than one thousand people were killed and injured, hundreds of houses and offices were damaged, schools were ruined and so were our classrooms at Universitas Negeri Padang. We had to study in tents and emergency classrooms we called *kelas darurat* which looked more like barns except that they had chairs, tables and whiteboards. And it was still clear in my mind that semester my students were in the middle of completing their reading of the play *Macbeth* written by William Shakespeare in my *Drama* class and the novel *Wuthering Heights* in my *Prose* class. Who would not know William Shakespeare? Who would not know Emily Bronte? They are known as the writers whose works are highly valued as belong to the English canons (Nugroho, 2014).

It was not easy indeed to push my students to read works like *Macbeth* and *Wuthering Height* and to actually then talk about them in the class. Even after allowing them to use Bahasa Indonesia so that they could articulate their thoughts and feelings in a language that was closer to them, I found that there was still hesitancy in their voices. It was obvious that they did not finish reading the texts I had assigned them with any degree of comfort or understanding. Some did not even try to read the text. Jayakaran (1993) argues that non-

native English speakers often face difficulty in comprehending native or English literary texts because they are loaded with many unfamiliar foreign cultures.

Having experienced the horror of the earthquake that could have just taken our lives and the hard time we had to cope with afterwards like the inconvenience of our *kelas darurat*, the absence of the electricity, the heat and most importantly the loss of our loved ones, relatives and friends, I was prompted to reflect on ‘what’ and ‘how’ I had been teaching to my students. I was thinking whether it was still meaningful to teach the English canon when our daily life was in fact exposed to death threat every day? Through investigating my own syllabus, I realized that my early experiences of teaching English literature in my university can be taken as an example of how my efforts to teach were still governed by my willingness to privilege the ‘Western knowledge’ invested in the English canon that fulfilled my syllabus (cf. Cavarero 2000, p. 13) and ‘to uphold the status quo and perpetuate an exclusionary education’ (Miller (2009, p. 1).

I realized that I had actually reduplicated within my class the colonial legacy and the hegemony of English through my professional practices. Although the English canon depicts particular people and places, their canonical status means that they supposedly present a universal representation of human experience. By overloading my syllabus with the English canon and teaching the canon with the grain, I disengaged and denied the diversity of languages, dialects and cultures my students experienced in their everyday lives and brought into my classrooms. I failed to stimulate and develop my students’ critical awareness of their own uniqueness, their own identities as Indonesians, as muslims, as Minang people. For the sake of fulfilling the standard of an English literature classroom, I had prevented my students from making meaning at the interfaces between English and the many languages, dialects and cultures that make up their daily lives.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

When the earthquake happened, Andrea Hirata’s novel *Laskar Pelangi* (*The Rainbow Troops*) was a hit in Indonesia. The book, the song and the movie inspired readers across the Indonesian archipelago. This phenomenon of massive readership is remarkable in Indonesia where the educational system is not yet fully committed towards nurturing and enhancing a reading habit amongst its young generation. It confirms Benedict Anderson’s claim that ‘the vernacular press and literature play a significant role as agents for the emergence of an imagined community’ (1991, p. 44) especially in an archipelago country like Indonesia, where the approximately thirteen thousand islands that comprise this nation make it even

more difficult for the inhabitants to meet face to face and therefore, to know each other.

As the English version of the novel was not published yet, I read the original version in Bahasa Indonesia. I quickly became hooked by the story because the novel's simple conversational prose allowed me to feel as if I were present in the imaginative world that it evokes. A lot of powerful words, terms, sayings and expressions in Bahasa Indonesia and from the regional languages and dialects in Indonesia, such as Malay, Javanese, Palembangnese, that are scattered here and there in the novel, allowed me to see, touch, hear, taste and smell the imaginary world presented in it. Not to mention the presence of the many phrases in Arabic, English, Chinese and even Latin. The narrative is, indeed, a perfect example of how Indonesian 'heterogeneous' communities use languages in their daily interaction. I paused in my reading many times, reflecting on the richness of the language practices that make up and shape my daily life. Instead of hindering me from making sense of what I read, my encounter with how the messages in the novel are depicted through the close interaction between Bahasa Indonesia and the minor community languages and dialects and even English and Arabic helped enhance my understanding of how my identity was actually shaped by multilingual practices in my country. I wanted my students to read, experience and sail the ocean of language exposed by this novel.

My excitement and plan to teach *Laskar Pelangi* were however met with a complaint from my senior colleague who saw my intention as an act of betraying our holy English literature curriculum. This attitude occurred because Indonesian literature had always been viewed as 'the property' of the Indonesian Department, and was therefore, inappropriate to be taught to our English literature students. But looking at the huge number of people who were inspired by this novel, including myself, I could not but insert *Laskar Pelangi* into my syllabus. I wanted my students to experience the pleasure of reading literature by freeing them from the confines they used to find in my classroom. I wanted to move my teaching from the routines of translating and explaining difficult words for my students, where the meaning of the text was often reduced to a literal translation, limiting any opportunity to explore the range of meanings that a literary text can generate. I also developed the way I taught from teaching with the grains to teaching against the grains by implementing storytelling approach. This way I hoped I would be able to give my students more freedom to interpret the novel as well as relate to it.

My students' enjoyment and attachment to the novel was reflected in their efforts to read the novel willingly and with genuine interest. I did not once have to threaten them with due dates for completing their required reading. My students' enjoyment and attachment to

the novel was reflected in the lively class discussions we had. It warmed my heart to see them racing to grab the opportunity to extend their understanding of the novel to the class and to articulate how they felt about it. We frequently burst into laughter and even cried together when encountering words and phrases that meant so much to us. We forgot the heat. We forgot the look of our ugly classroom. And just as the rainbow warriors in the novel snatched joy out of their lives, so we too valued the opportunity we had to talk and learn together as we read this novel.

Having reflected on my experience reading and discussing *Laskar Pelangi* with my students, I then brought some Indonesian literary works but in English translation into my classrooms. So I taught *Halal* and *Becak* by Dewi Anggraeni, ‘Abus’ by Bondan Winarno, ‘Clara’ by Aji Seno Gumira, ‘A Roast Chicken’ by Gde Aryantha Soethama and so on. Being exposed to stories that provided insights into the lives of the Indonesian people in the English language, I wanted my class to become a vehicle for my students to imagine their country in a different way. I believed that the words and phrases that are left in Bahasa Indonesia in the texts would resonate in a very special way with my students. Even a single word like *bubur*, which means porridge, I believe would be able to bring my students to a halt in their reading, prompting them to imagine themselves in a world of thought and emotion centred on a particular situation in their own country – bringing in a sense of home with its particular sounds, smells, tastes and customs.

Through maintaining some of the Indonesian words and phrases such as *Putu*, *Ketut*, *Nyoman*, *Salak*, *Rambutan*, *bubur*, *tahlil*, *Assalamualaikum*, *sayur lodeh*, *sarung*, *kenduri*, *Idul Fitri* and so on, the stories ‘A Roast Chicken’ by Soethama and ‘Abus’ by Winarno, challenged my students to think more deeply about realms of experiences that could not be captured by the pretensions of ‘global’ English. These words would both heighten their sense of belonging to the cultural life represented in the stories and made them conscious of how that life nonetheless existed in relation to the Anglophone world by virtue of the very fact of occurring in English translations of these stories. Rather than nostalgia or homesickness, the translations had an estranging effect on me –not in a negative way, but in a way that heightened my awareness of my beliefs and culture in relation to other beliefs and cultures, other ways of imagining the world.

My decision to teach Indonesian literature in English reflects what Ashcroft et al. (1989) write about the role of translation in postcolonial settings:

One long standing aspect of the language issue, and one that is growing in

importance as we move into the twenty first century, is the translation of literary texts from local languages to world languages, particularly English...By creating a readership, post-colonial writings in English have opened up a space in which a vastly greater number of translated texts maybe circulated (p. 204).

To me, the argument by Ashcroft and his co-authors rings true to the nature of my own teaching context. Instead of shrinking my students' heterogeneous world, I had to open up more access for my students to see a bigger world - their own world which was already so complex and rich in diversity and those of others from various cultural backgrounds around the globe through English. This is the way I want to enable them to experience a sense of their cultures in a different way. I had relied long enough on the notion that sees non-native English literature as 'a threat to the standard version of the English language' (Talib, 1992, p. 51). Ashcroft et al. (1989) affirm that 'the translation of a large body of indigenous writing into English can be used as a cultural resource and then be fashioned as a vehicle of cultural communication, and perhaps a mode of cultural survival' (p. 205). For the Indonesian context, the translation of Indonesian literary works will create not only wider readership but also raise and promote the status of the Indonesian literature within the international world.

## **CONCLUSION**

My autobiographical narrative interrogates the values and beliefs that have shaped my professional life. It has indeed enabled me to identify valuable strengths from my lived experience, which has helped me to better understand myself, my students and my professional landscape. My engagement with literary works other than the English canon and decision to bring them into my classrooms to teach to my students who come from diverse cultural and language backgrounds have provided me with valuable and rich insights into understanding the colonial experiences in my own country. Non English canon has in fact become a source of inspiration for me to engage with the colonial legacy that is still operating in Indonesia.

By allowing not only 'English Literature' but also 'Literature in English' in English Studies in Indonesia, I believe we can encourage Indonesian students become active and interpretive students. The shift from privileging the English canon to appreciating non-English canon affects the traditional pedagogy of 'getting students to get the right answer' to 'getting students to use their own language'. Storytelling is then one alternative to empower students to not only practice their English but also make sense of what they study. The heterogeneous voices exposed to the students through the stories they read would help

students relate to their own lives and thus learn about themselves better- who they are and who they will become within the myriads of languages and cultural expressions that surround and shape their lives. It should be noted that there is no such things as ‘innocence’ reading (Nugroho, 2014, p. 36) as literature is imbued with an ideology.

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