

A CRITICAL MOMENT IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION: A DISCOURSE OF TENSIONS

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Abstract: This article presents some interpretive understanding of a critical moment in my teaching profession. Different from the widely conducted Classroom Action Research (CAR) which tends to be focused on the very practice of teaching-learning activities in the classroom, the article refers to post-activity evaluative comments from students as data to start the discussion. The students giving the evaluative comments were participants of my course units of *Speaking I* and *Discourse Analysis*, Undergraduate Program, English Department, Faculty of Letters, State University of Malang, Indonesia. In the light of Ortega's concept about the "exuberances and deficiencies" of utterances and the notion of "the said and the unsaid" of discourse, the article interpretively assesses the tensions instead of unidirectional-deterministic understanding of the seemingly-simple-yet-complex teaching-learning activities. The article also argues that students' evaluative feedback as discourse bears paradoxes, indeterminacy, and tentativeness. The corollary is that teachers need not be impulsive and, instead, need to be open to students' evaluative feedback, be it positive or negative.

Keywords: critical moment, teaching-learning profession, deconstruction, exuberance, deficiency.

Some concerns about what a teacher does in the classroom, particularly in the Indonesian context, have been formally articulated through some methodical undertaking of classroom action research (CAR) projects (e.g., Rachman et al, 2003; Kweldju, 2003; Ainy, 2003; Laksmi, 2006). However, such an "academic formality" seems, to some extent, to have been too deterministic and simplistic in presenting some understanding of a certain phenomenon. As I understand it, the introduction of CAR in the Indonesian academic sphere has been intended to enhance the teaching-learning quality across the country. Yet, to the extent of my reading of some CAR reports in the forms of published articles, I have had the impression that results of CAR tend to be positive. A pertinent and critical question to raise is why the results tend to be so. One possible answer is that CAR assumes that the teacher-researcher should have a solution to her or his teaching problems before embarking on the CAR project. Hence, the solution is, right from the beginning, assumed to work well, if not to be a panacea, to solve the classroom teaching-learning problems. Another possible interpretation is that the teacher-researcher is not ready yet to disclose possible negative results of the application of her or his solution to the problems. In other words, both the initial assumption on the part of the researcher and the researcher her/himself

are not set to deal with possible negative aspects of the research; the assumption does not allow for negative results and the teacher-researcher is not (probably) ready to face and report on the negative sides of the research. In brief, reports of CAR tend to be monolithic; all are about good effects of teaching practices of the teacher-researcher.

In response to the situation outlined above, the present article critically reviews my own teaching practices in the second semester of the 2006/2007 academic year. While teaching practices, particularly under CAR reports, tend to be presented in a neat way, suggesting that meanings of phenomena are easy to tease out in a linear-deterministic way, the current article addresses the paradoxes of a "simple" phenomenon of students' evaluative feedback. Whilst CAR, particularly the (quasi) experimental ones, tends to be, in my impression, "conducted *on* the students" [emphasis original] (Allwright & Bailey, 1991:200), I would rather depart from this situation. I would refer to issues which surfaced upon the completion of my teaching practices; thus, I did not conduct any formal research project "on" my students.

To my teaching practices recently at the English Department, State University of Malang, Indonesia, I received comments from two groups of undergraduate students. The first group was composed

of two parallel classes of students undertaking *Speaking I* and the other was of a group of students taking an introductory course of *Discourse Analysis*.

By and large, the comments can be divided into two—negative and positive. The negative comments came from the participants of *Speaking I* and the positive ones were written by students in the *Discourse Analysis* class. Some of the instances (other instances will surface as the essay unfolds) of the negative comments include such samples as follows:

- (1) *Pengajar kurang persiapan dan kurang yakin dengan apa yang akan diajarkan; dia selalu bertanya, "What should we do today?" ...* [The lecturer was not well prepared and was not sure what to do; he always asked, "What should we do today?" ...].
- (2) *Pengajar tidak kreatif dan menyerahkan kegiatan kepada mahasiswa, seperti ketika akan menentukan kegiatan untuk fun activities ...* [The lecturer was not creative and was dependent on the students to decide the activities ...].
- (3) *Pengajar cenderung memperhatikan mahasiswa yang dikenal saja. Dosen hendaknya tidak hanya memperhatikan mahasiswa yang dikenal saja ... kasih kami yang kurang dikenal kesempatan ...* [The lecturer's attention was focused on the students he knew well. The lecturer should not have focused his attention only on the students he knew ... he should have given us opportunities ...].

Instances of the positive ones include comments such as the following:

- (1) *Pengajar sangat menguasai materi dan kadang penjelasannya sangat canggih dan agak membuat bingung but it's challenging ...* [The lecturer's mastery of the course materials was immaculate and sometimes his explanation was too sophisticated, but it's [sic] challenging ...].
- (2) *Pengajar sangat cerdas dan membikin iri dan gak yakin apa saya dapat menirunya ...* [The lecturer is quite smart, which makes me envious and I feel unsure if I can be like him ...].
- (3) *Dosen ngajarnya asik ...* [The lecturer taught intriguingly ...].

Relevant to the instances above, interesting questions to raise include "What has happened and why could these two kinds and opposing comments take place?" These questions will be central to this paper; however, they will not be addressed immediately. Before venturing further with some sorts of critical interpretation of what has happened in my classes and in my teaching practices, I would like to recount what happened to me inside as I received the comments. For sure, and human enough, upon reading the negative comments, I felt some trepida-

tion pounding in my chest and, conversely, as I was reading the positive comments, I felt the equanimity in my heart. These all have led to a sort of balanced equilibrium; the somewhat (psychologically) wrecking negative comments were neutralized by the more soothing positive comments. However, to some degree, the negative comments seem to have been triumphant over the positive ones, for they were produced by two groups of students undertaking the same course of *Speaking I*, whereas the positive comments were written by only one group of students. This situation insinuates that the negative comments seem to have a sort of reliability, albeit in a limited sense, whereas the positive comments lack such a qualification. I can add that the reliability was limited in the sense that I did nothing regarding the grouping of the students. In fact, the number of participants in the two classes of *Speaking I* altogether and the number of students in *Discourse Analysis* class were equal.

I would assume that teachers, just like me myself, might be trapped in feeling the uneasiness or become too big headed upon reading students' negative or positive comments respectively. But, what we need to do as teachers, I believe, is to critically see how and from whom the comments come. Despite the fact that some of the comments seem to have the qualification of reliability, for they have been produced in a sort of unanimity by a number of students, they have been produced by students who are unlikely to be considered as expert judges. Students' comments need to be seen as one among various aspects to be evaluated for comprehensive evaluation of the overall failure or success of the administration of the classes.

In addition, even though students' comments do not fall into expert judgment, their values are not to be ignored, for students are the consumers of teachers' teaching services. In fact, students constitute one element in the wholesale teaching-learning processes in the class with and from whom teachers also concurrently learn. This point is even more crucial in the context of state owned educational institutions in the Indonesian context. To the best of my knowledge, students' comments have not been institutionalized as one of the critical factors which can hold or dispel individuals to work as state governmental officials or civil servants in Indonesia. To say it in another way, students' comments have not been effective enough to really shape the teachers' performance. I have never heard any appointment of favorite teachers or lecturers/professors on the basis of students' selection. This is different from what has been going on in Australian universities where we can find an entitlement as "best

professor” on the basis of students’ guild’s polling. Possibly, one of the factors why we have not had such an entitlement is that we have not taken students as individuals with mature evaluative capacity. Our assumption about students’ roles in the teaching-learning process might have been too belittling.

THE SAID AND THE UNSAID

The situation above has triggered my faculty to try to find ways of explanation for the purpose of the betterment of my professional career in the coming future. Also, the situation has reminded me of the nature of discourse that it is bound to be composed of “the said and the unsaid.” Just like when we collect data for research, we are not entitled to present the data in its entirety in writing a report of the research. We are bound to select what to present thus we say it (the said) and what we leave thus we do not say about it (the unsaid). So, the students are always bound to select what they want to say and what not to say. In other words, the negative comments were possibly not the only qualification which could apply to me in the whole range of my teaching practices in the two classes of *Speaking I*. This also holds true with the class of *Discourse Analysis*; there were possibilities that some negative qualification also applied to my teaching in the class of *Discourse Analysis*, although they have been expressed in a way that made them mount to two polarities—negative and positive.

Using the same framework, when students perceived my typical question opening the class “*What can we do today?*” as a sign of unpreparedness on my part, they did not attend to the possibility that I was actually 100% prepared. They might only have been engaged in understanding the “said.” When students perceived my teaching performance in *Discourse Analysis* class as positive and perceived my sound mastery of the course, they might have been obliterated from seeing my possible doubts, my uncertainty and insecure feelings about some concepts in the area of *Discourse Analysis*—the “unsaid.” To tell the truth, I have felt to be more prepared to teach *Speaking I*, for, to me, it does not really charge me with hard working of reading a wide range of sources to make some kind of intellectual digestion before coming to the class. This has been significantly different from my perception about handling *Discourse Analysis*. However, to refer to the notion of binary opposition (O’Sullivan et al., 1994), my feeling of preparedness for *Speaking I* has probably led me to carelessness and my feeling of being charged for *Discourse Analysis* has allowed me to be careful in handling the class.

Having said about my situation, let me now turn to my students. Participants of my *Speaking I* were students who were in the second semester of undergraduate studies while those of the *Discourse Analysis* were in their sixth semester of their undergraduate studies. This situation may lead to an interpretation that the first group of students was not really ready with a sort of independency in learning; they might still have expected that the teacher should decide what the students should learn instead of asking them about what to do. Deciding what to learn might have been thought of as the job of the teacher. They might have in mind that this is what distinguishes their learning in a college classroom from their own learning outside the classroom setting. To me, were this true, this seems to be part of the residue of their learning at the lower level of schooling in which it is normal that the teacher has a greater portion of discretion to set what the students should learn as well as what activities with which the students should engage.

On the other hand, the second group, due to their tutelage so far in the Department, has some sort of acculturation to some kind of independency and critical way of thinking. They might have been familiar with the notion that a teacher is also an individual human being who has the capability of mastering the teaching materials and also concomitantly is prone to imperfection. They might have been more tolerant to this situation and, therefore, they did not really attend to my doubts and my imperfectness in handling the class. They did not really bother if I could not handle some issues, for this is just normal and, in fact, constitutes a place of academic contestation. They might have been more capably comprehensive in seeing the said and the unsaid and in giving due evaluation of the two. Thus, they did not attend to the same problem about my typical question “*What should we do today?*” although I also used the question in the *Discourse Analysis* class. They seemed to deem this question as my idiosyncratic formulaic opening remark of the meeting session instead of a sign of unpreparedness.

Relevant to the foregoing discussion, there is a truism that what teachers have experienced as students or how they were taught influences how they teach (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). In this line, I would like to confess that I myself, when I was a student, did not really like English lecturers who frequently resorted to Indonesian expressions in the classroom. Frequently switching to Indonesian, in my view, was an indication of their poor mastery of English. Probably, due to this kind of conception, I did not really bother with attempts to make my English usage differently from one class to the other. I

have not tried to differentiate the classes, which has probably allowed me to make some adjustment of my English, whether it was in *Speaking I* or in *Discourse Analysis* class. As I remember, I tried to speak English the best I could so as to be as good a medium of instruction as possible. Possibly, this has to do with the positive and negative evaluation of my teaching in the two different classes; the students of *Speaking I* might have found my language hard to discern and the students of *Discourse Analysis* did not find any problem pertaining to my language. If this is the case, I have done injustice and their evaluation has done justice to my teaching practices. One comment in the negative category reads, “*bahasa Inggris dosen sulit dimengerti* [it was hard to understand the lecturer’s English (language)].” (We will come to this issue again later).

I mentioned earlier that when I read the students’ negative comments, I felt palpitated and when I read the positive comments, I felt psychologically uplifted. However, as an academic, I tried to put the issue into perspective so that I can see the issue in a critical and comprehensive way. At this juncture, it might be insightful to note Ortega’s observation (in Becker, 1996) that every utterance is deficient and, concomitantly, every utterance is exuberant. Every utterance, in this case, can be in the form of students’ written comments and my language in the class. One of the possible exuberances of the students’ negative comments is that they can induce negative feelings on my part even though the comments may have been intended to merely tell the factual condition of my teaching. When the negative ones were triumphant, they might allow for unproductive relationship in the coming semesters and would not be good for future meetings. There might be a sort of uneasiness which might influence my objectivity in giving mark to the students; I might become “stingy” in marking. The reverse might hold true with the positive comments towards positive feelings on my part; I might become too generous in giving marks.

In the same token, the students’ evaluative comments might have been due to the exuberances and deficiency of my utterances along the given courses of *Speaking I* and *Discourse Analysis*. Quite possibly, I did not really have control of the effects of what I was saying during the meetings with the students. Even though I did not mean to confuse the students, the deficiency and exuberances of my utterances might have confused them. In other words, the comments from the students should be read with care for any utterances or comments hold some kinds of exuberances and deficiencies. This also holds true with what the teacher says to them during interactions, be they in the class or outside the class. In

this regard, it is no wonder that one of the negative comments reads, “*dosen hendaknya tidak hanya memperhatikan mahasiswa yang dikenal saja* [the lecturer should not have focused his attention only on the students he knew ...].” This comment indicates that deficiencies and exuberances in my teaching (in a form of action) also cause some unintended impressions.

MORE PARADOXES

To refer to a concept in literary studies, eminent in the deconstructionist view of (literary) text or discourse is the idea that text explains for itself in the sense of paradoxes and indeterminacy as well as temporariness of meanings (Abrams, 1981). Employing this framework, the following section will present a sort of paradoxes (which paradoxically might also at the same time constitute equilibrium of some equivocalness) of the discussion above; it will present additional properties to the preceding discussion (text) so that a fuller text will be arrived at and the text will (hopefully) explain for itself. In the foregoing discussion, I seemed to champion myself in my interpretation of the students’ evaluative comments of my teaching practices. Earlier, I mentioned that I was quite prepared to handle *Speaking I* in the given semester. However, I have not mentioned that I was ready only with regard to teaching materials. Some of the unsaid which has been left is that I did not feel at home with the teaching-learning activities for *Speaking I*. I have had the feeling that I am not rich with various teaching techniques necessary to run *Speaking I*. If this accounts for my failure to run interesting teaching activities so that the students found the negative sides of my teaching, the students were right with their comments.

However, keeping in mind about the said and the unsaid principle of discourse, the situation does not necessarily-readily mean that I was totally in a failure. The students might have learned positive values from my teaching as much as their negative impression about my teaching. They might realize the values of my teaching later, for at the moment of my teaching, some meanings might have not made sense yet to them. Some kinds of intertextuality taking place following my teaching which they experience might help trigger meanings of my teaching. Another piece of the students’ negative comments reads, “*cara mengajar dosen membosankan* [the lecturer’s way of teaching was boring ...].” In this regard, I am thinking of my frequently asking the students to construct dialogues on the basis of a certain topic. In conjunction with this, I also frequently supplied them with some expressions which,

I believed, were necessary for their spontaneity in their later speaking ability. Probably, this, in part, was the factor that made the students have the impression that my teaching was boring.

Another negative comment says, “*dosen kalau bicara sering tidak jelas* [the lecturer’s language was frequently unclear].” This is somewhat difficult to interpret. To me, it is not clear if *tidak jelas* [unclear] means unclearness in terms of voice volume, speed/slowness of speaking, timbre of voice, etc. What I can say is that I have never made any electronic recording of my own classroom talk. What I did was occasionally asking students if they understood my speech. To this question, I frequently received positive feedback. What was clear in my mind was that they tended to keep eye contacts with me, which, to me, meant that they were following the teaching-learning activities. In other words, I failed to catch the unsaid; the impression I had seems to exuberate and to be deficient at the same time. The exuberances and deficiencies of what came to my mind eventually led to the unclearness of my speech as perceived by my students. This situation implies that I should have checked if the students have understood well about my classroom English as medium of instruction. As well, I should also have made electronic recordings for corroboration of the students’ comments.

Intertextuality might help tease out this problem. A number of my colleagues have frequently remarked “Don’t mumble. You know, your voice is bass.” If this has some merit, the students’ comment about the unclearness of my speech might have been due to the timbre of my voice. Were this the case, I do not have any control of it and, to a certain extent, I have been quite conscious about this situation. This has, in fact, made me aware of the neces-

sity to check with the students if the volume of my voice was fairly easy to hear. As noted earlier, to this effort, I have received positive feedback. However, as also noted earlier, this situation has not, unfortunately, made me aware of the necessity to make electronic recording of my English in the classroom (for substantiation).

AFTERTHOUGHT

I have made some deconstructionist discussion of the possible interpretative tensions of the evaluative comments of my students, the comments being comparable to utterances which, in Ortega’s observation, always concomitantly have exuberances and deficiencies. Every utterance, including teachers’ language and action as well as students’ comment, is exuberant and deficient. In addition, the meanings of utterances, language, comments, and actions are temporary. How I saw my students’ comments upon receiving and reading them and how I see them now differ. The corollary is that, as teachers, we need not be impulsive in receiving the students’ comments; we need not develop negative feelings upon receiving negative comments from our students and need not develop over-excitement upon receiving positive comments. In other words, the meanings of the comments are bound to be tentative and contingent (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). We should not be trapped and thus compelled, on the basis of students’ comments, to provide only “fun” activities (seemingly students’ preference) at the expense of losing the substance the values of which the students might temporarily lose sight. However, since students constitute a crucial element within the system of teaching-learning processes, the students’ comments should not be deemed futile.

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