CRITICAL RACIAL LITERACY AWARENESS THROUGH AMERICAN LITERATURE: APPLYING THE SYNECTICS MODEL

By Titis Dewi

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Abstract: This study is aimed at describing the literature learning process through a Synectics Gordon teaching model in a class of Literary Appreciation. It is projected to promote literacy through implied and embedded values, particularly in regard to critical racial literacy through Asian American literature. This case study involves a lecturer and students in a Literary Appreciation course in an English department. The data were collected through observations and interviews. The implemented stages of the Synectics teaching model are: Describing the topic, Describing personal analogies, Identifying compressed conflicts, and Re-examining the original topic. Due to the time constraint, only one stage—Creating a new direct analogy—was elicited. The results suggest that the reading strategies i.e., shared reading aloud and visualization, enhanced students' understanding of the story and elicit powerful emotions about the literary work. The findings of the study also imply that Gordon's Synectics model aids in raising students' awareness of racism and other associated social issues by allowing them to put themselves in the shoes of persons from various racial origins. Implementing the same method, this study recommends adapting local/ national literature in varied classrooms.

Keywords: Asian American literature, Critical racial literacy, Reading strategy, Synectics model

INTRODUCTION

Social issues, such as discrimination, racism, and pluralism, have been widespread concern to people around the globe. Any member of a minority group residing in a community could face the problem. Discrimination is defined as the unjust, unfair, or detrimental treatment of a person on the basis of a protected characteristic or characteristic (Freeland et al., 2022). Racism is the relegation of people of color to lower status and treatment on the basis of erroneous ideas about their inherent inferiority, as well as the unjust treatment and oppression of people of color, whether or not it is intended. Racism is typically systemic and structural, as opposed to always being conscious, purposeful, or explicit. Systemic and structural racism are kinds of racism that are prevalently and completely ingrained in and throughout systems, laws, documented or unwritten regulations, entrenched practices, and established beliefs and attitudes that produce, sanction, and sustain widespread unequal treatment of people of color. They are indicative of both ongoing and historical injustices (Braveman et al., 2022).

In the workplace, discrimination affects hundreds of millions of individuals. This breaches a fundamental human right and has broader social and economic repercussions. Prejudice impedes chances, wastes the human potential necessary for economic development, and exacerbates social conflicts and disparities. Combating prejudice is a crucial component of fostering decent work, and success on this front has consequences far beyond the workplace. Despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws, social difficulties have shadowed persons in certain situations. Workers who have been unjustly treated on the basis of their race, gender, religion, or national origin are protected by antidiscrimination law. However, potential plaintiffs must be aware of and able to prove discriminatory treatment in order to use these safeguards (Pager & Western, 2012).

Particularly, in Indonesia, social issues still haunt the society. Although the biggest problem in Indonesia is poverty, disputes over religion, ethnicity, and race are real problematic practices that should be taken into account. Discrimination, racism, and pluralism could happen in sectors of life such as education, social, politics, and so on. Indonesia is an ethnically, racially, culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse multicultural nation. This diversity presents an obstacle to the creation of a harmonious society. This is due to the fact that there is still a great deal of violence and prejudice against specific groups in society; this is what will lead to social tensions that will intensify in the Indonesian multidimensional crisis (Windar et al., 2022).

In addition, discrimination against women is one of the most pressing societal issues in Indonesia. Violence committed against a woman as a result of a value system that positions women as weak and inferior to men. There are still a significant number of individuals who view women as marginalized, oppressed, exploited, and enslaved by men. In today's society, violence is essentially unavoidable, and violence against women continues to occur frequently at all times (Noviani et al., 2018).

Regarding the social issues on a global scale, discrimination against blacks is not merely an issue that contradicts the fundamental values of justice and opportunity equality in the United States. It explains a major percentage of the black-white health disparity and has very significant health repercussions (Bleich et al., 2019).

In addition, 3% of Asians reported encounters with discrimination in the healthcare system. At least one in four respondents have reported encountering prejudice in employment (27% job applications, 25% equitable pay/promotions), housing (25%), and social communication (35 percent microaggressions, 32 percent racial slurs). Both East and South Asians were more likely than whites to claim institutional discrimination, whereas South Asians were more likely than whites to report microaggressions in unadjusted models. In adjusted models, Asians were more likely than whites to report skipping health care and housing services owing to discrimination fears (McMurtry et al., 2019).

Based on the elaborated statements of social issues above, the world of education through literature learning needs to play a role in building students' awareness of discrimination and racism practices in this world. By discussing literary works with certain scopes as one of the alternatives, students could develop their critical racial literacy. Critical Racial Literacy is an approach in education to build insight of students to be aware of identity, treat other people from different backgrounds well, and to be more careful to behave in a society.

As a study paradigm and approach, racial literacy has flourished since its introduction at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In education research, racial literacy has been employed as a basis for empirical study and as a broader notion influencing education practices (Laughter et al., 2023). Racial literacy is the comprehension of how race and racism impact the economic, social, political, and educational lives of individuals and communities. It includes the ability to engage in knowledgeable and relaxed conversations on race and racism. Critical racial literacy emphasizes comprehension of how systematic racism operates. Systemic racism is rooted in institutions including education, work, housing, health care, religion, the media, government, legislation, and the justice system. In order to prevent racism in educational and familial contexts, critical racial literacy requires praxis (reflection and action). Racism can be purposeful or inadvertent, which is a fundamental tenet of critical racial literacy.

According to Mosley Wetzel & Rogers (2015), racial literacy is a result of the fields of critical race theory and whiteness studies scholarship (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, 2008; Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2004). Racial literacy is a process of interaction where the framework of race is used as a lens to examine social and legal processes, explicating the relationship between race and power, and taking into account mitigating factors like gender, class, and geography, according to Guinier (2004) in Mosley Wetzel & Rogers (2015). As noted by Mosley Wetzel and Rogers (2015), critical race theory's about the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies and economic outcomes based on race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Tate, 1996) are closely related to racial literacy. Racial literacy is therefore a discipline that emphasizes how language and power

provide some people access to resources while denying others from political, social, and economic benefit (Laughter et al., 2023).

In educational research, racial literacy has been employed as a basis for empirical study and as a broader notion affecting education practices (Laughter et al., 2023). Critical racial literacy as a humanizing epistemology requiring parents and educators to perceive, refute, criticize, and synthesize the structure of race in daily life, advancing toward actions, curriculum, communication, and restructuring of oppressive institutions that enable us to achieve equity (Nash et al, 2018).

The relationship between critical language awareness and racial literacy is the topic of this case study. In a literacy practicum, we examine how a White preservice teacher investigated race and racism and engaged her young Black pupil in a conversation of "whiteness" and "blackness." As educators of literacy, we instruct preservice teachers on how to conceptualize, implement, and investigate literacy activities. This research focuses on a teacher education program housed at a private Midwestern university and guided by the concepts of socially fair education and inquiry. As a cohort, students studied three literacy courses. Two literacy courses were located at an urban primary school in the Liddell area, where African American families fight for fair education, housing, and jobs despite reform efforts such as school desegregation (Briggs, 2005; Jargowsky, 1997; Morris & Morris, 2002; Wells & Crain, 1997; Wilson, 1996 in Mosley Wetzel & Rogers, 2015). We set our practicum at the school on purpose to present students with experience that may encourage them to teach in urban schools after graduation, whereas in the past, many graduates preferred to teach in affluent or middle-class suburban situations. The community school was located less than ten miles from Ferguson, Missouri, in a district that was on the verge of losing accreditation and had chosen a limited curriculum. The district was under pressure to reform or face state takeover (Mosley Wetzel & Rogers, 2015).

There is a widespread silence in literacy study regarding racial issues, particularly among young people and white individuals. This article demonstrates that young white children can and do discuss race, racism, and antiracism as part of their reading curriculum. Utilizing a reconstructed framework for analyzing "white talk," one that draws on whiteness studies and critical race theory literature and critical discourse analytic frameworks, we explain how white second-grade kids and instructors discuss race. This study adds numerous contributions to the body of knowledge (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

This essay investigates how three culturally significant teachers in New York City public schools challenged the conceptions of race and racism brought to the study of history and contemporary culture by low-income adolescents of color. The study revealed how teachers employed continuous and planned instruction about race (Skerrett, 2011 in (Epstein & Gist, 2015) to deepen and challenge their students' conceptions of race and racism (Epstein & Gist, 2015)

To teach literature, lecturers may adopt an appropriate teaching model. In teaching literature, stimulating and enhancing student creativity are prominent. One of the teaching models used in teaching literature is a Synectics Gordon model. William J. J. Gordon and George Prince developed the Synectics model in 1960 (Gordon, 1961 in Joyce & Weil, 2003), which is a novel and inventive method for resolving problems. Gordon and Prince were engaging in highly successful and effective brainstorming activities; Synectics has become a technique that people can use to surmount obstacles by engaging in brainstorming while performing difficult tasks. Using Synectics also enhances problem-solving abilities because it encourages creative thought and imagination.

One of the subjects in literature learning is Asian American literature. In this subject, the students study literary works written by Asian authors or the setting of the story is in America. The lecturers could employ critical racial literacy to help students to analyze and discuss the short story about social issues found in the Asian American Literature. Through critical racial literacy, the students' awareness of social issues can be built. In the literature learning, the lecturers could provide literary works such as poems and short stories to present the minority issues, discrimination happening in a society.

METHOD

This is a case study that collects data through observations and interviews. Case studies focus on an "individual unit," or what Robert Stake (2008, pp. 119-120) refers to as a "functioning specific" or "bounded system" in Denzin & Lincoln (2009). If you decide to conduct a case study, you are not so much making a methodological decision as you are deciding what is to be studied. The individual unit may be studied in a variety of ways, including qualitatively or quantitatively, analytically or hermeneutically, or through a combination of these approaches. Case studies provide greater detail, richness, completeness, and variation - i.e., greater depth - for the unit of study than cross unit analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009).

The participants were a lecturer and 30 students taking a course on Literary Appreciation Class in one of university in Yogyakarta. The observations were conducted in two meetings when the class read a Ken Liu's short story Paper Menagerie that explores social issues such as racism, discrimination, and alienation. The interviews were conducted to explore more about the data collected from the observations. The field note from the observations and interview transcripts were then analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This is a case study aiming at describing the literature learning process through a Synectics Gordon teaching model in a Literary Appreciation class. The main objective of the lesson was to promote racial literacy to students through Ken Liu's short story "Paper Menagerie." The participants were the first-year students of English department taking a course on Literary Appreciation.

Shared Reading Aloud and Visualization

The first meeting started with the lecturer facilitated a shared reading of Paper Menagerie. It is a short story written by Ken Liu, an American author of Chinese descendant. The short story Paper Menagerie is about a bi-racial child named Jack, whose white father and Chinese mother immigrated to the United States. Jack's mother constructs an origami menagerie for him as a child, and when she breathes into it, the animals come to life, jumping, and playing with him. After an altercation with a classmate who makes fun of Jack's Chinese heritage, Jack discards his menagerie and rejects his mother, who becomes increasingly mute. As Jack matures, he distances himself from his mother until their relationship is strained and uneasy. When his mother dies, however, Jack discovers that she has been writing letters in the paper of his menagerie and has been struggling to tell her own narrative. The short story explores complex concepts such as immigration, cultural identity, alienation, discrimination, and racism.

The students took a turn to read aloud to the class. They were encouraged to read expressively with intonation. Following the instruction, the students used their voice to emphasize certain words. They used a range of different tones, low- and high-pitched tones, to describe happy, sad, calm, or anxious situations, in order to better illustrate the story. They used their voice to convey the emotional tone of the story. The lecturer involved in this study shared her perspective and experience related to shared reading and reading aloud.

> *"....in my teaching experience, reading aloud animatedly never fails to engage my students, brings the class to life, and help the students to understand and feel the story better. I just love using reading aloud in my classrooms."*

The lecturer also encouraged the readers and listeners to visualize the story in their mind. Visualizing the events described in the text is vital in building coherent mental representation of the text (Koning & Schoot, 2013). The students as readers were encouraged to not solely depend on the words, they read but also to use their imagination to create non-verbal representations of the text. I invited some students to describe their experience when they visualized the story.

"...when I imagine the story in my mind, I see a beautiful Chinese woman with her slanting eyes and long dark hair sitting on a chair and smiled. She wore a Chinese traditional dress." (Student 1).

Another participant also described the experience:

"...visualizing the story in my head is just really interesting. While reading the words, I can see the sad face of Jake's mother. I can see how her shoulders hunched. I can see her sad eyes when her white neighbors ignored her presence. I can see her defeated eyes when eventually her beloved son also ignored her completely. This brought a lot of emotions in my heart as I remember how I treated my own mother," (Student 2).

The interview responses demonstrate that visualization could also enrich the reading experience. Both students spoke about how they were able to imagine the story vividly in their minds as they read, which helped to make the story come to life and elicit powerful emotions. Student 1 explained how they were able to picture the character's facial expression and body language, which increased the scene's impact and relatability. The student's statement that she felt feelings in her heart also revealed a strong emotional connection to the story, which raised the possibility that students' personal experiences influenced how they interpreted and interacted with the text.

The first meeting ended while the story was halfway read. The lecturer commented that "reading aloud and shared reading is surely consume a lot of time, but it is worth it." The lecturer then assigned the students to continue reading aloud and visualizing the rest of the short story at home and drew what they imagined. An example of the student's drawing result is presented as follows.

Figure 1: A student's visualization result

I then invited the student who drew this picture to describe what she saw in the story.

"...when I picture the words in my mind, I see colours and shapes. My most memorable part of the story is when the animal toys made by colourful paper run around a room. I pictured the scene as very lively. That's why I drew this part of the story. Usually, I found reading as very boring. But by visualizing and then drawing the story make my reading experience much more interesting." (Student 3).

Students who use the approach of visualizing to improve their reading comprehension create pictures in their minds as they read a text or tale (mental image). The student's comprehension of a story or material is improved by developing these mental images (Mackey, 2019).

Promoting Racial Awareness in Literature through Synectic Model

On the second day of instruction, social issues especially racism embedded in the short story were explored. To explore the racism and other social issues found in the short story, the Synectic Gordon Model was used. Gordon (1961) in (Joyce & Weil, 2003) states that Synectics model is designed to increase problem solving capacity, creative expression, empathy, and insight into social relations. The Synectics model had six steps: Describing the topic, Creating direct analogies, Describing personal analogies, Identifying compressed conflicts, Creating a new direct analogy, and Re-examining the original topic. In this section, those learning steps used in the second meeting were described and analyzed.

1. Describing the topic

The lecturer started the meeting by asking the students "how did you feel right after completing reading the short story?" Most of the students described their feelings regarding the story with "so sad", "frustrating", "I was so angry at the way the mother was treated" and "Jack should've treated his mother better". The lecturer then continued asking "why did you feel sad and angry for the mother? What are the issues?" The students were invited to write down the issues in no more than two words in the whiteboard. The followings are the words that most students wrote down on the whiteboard: *discrimination, cultural differences, language barriers, racial prejudice, alienation, oppression, identity crisis, and racism.*

2. Creating direct analogies

The next learning step identified through the observation is the lecturer invited the students to create direct analogies. The lecturer asked the students with question "When you hear the word 'race' what colours come to your mind immediately? Choose one colour" The students submit their answers through Padlet, an online whiteboard. The list of the colours is as follow: *black, white, golden, brown, bronze, yellow, and red.*

3. Describing personal analogies

The third learning step is creating personal analogy. Making personal analogy requires students to empathize with the objects or concepts being compared. In the second step, the students had chosen a colour they associate with the concept 'race'. In this step, the students were asked to identify themselves as their chosen colour. The students were instructed, "Be a black colour. What do you feel? Be a white colour. What do you feel? Be a brown colour. What do you feel? Use the template *"as a ...colour, I feel ..."*.

There are some interesting personal analogies the students made. The highlighted personal analogies are described in the following:

(1) *As a black colour I feel so angry because of the prejudice and discrimination I get.*
(2) *As a white colour I feel frustrated sometimes because I am accused of being racially insensitive and discriminative.*
(3) *As a brown colour I feel confidence because I am exotic.*
(4) *As a white colour I too feel insecure because of financial difficulties*
(5) *As a black colour I feel confidence because I am smart and have beautiful voice.*
(6) *As a golden colour I feel secure because I am rich. Hehe.*
(7) *As a brown colour I feel not confident because I am short.*

Those are some interesting personal analogies made by the students. In this step, students attempted to put themselves on each colour's place. Different emotions were expressed through the personal analogies; some convey pride and confidence, while others convey anger and frustration. For instance, Students (1) and (2) highlighted the various forms of prejudice and discrimination that different colour might deal with. Student (1) expressed rage and irritation at the discrimination they experienced as a black person. On the other hands, student (2) felt

frustrated at being accused of racial insensitivity as a white person. Other students demonstrated pride of their identity such as being exotic, intelligent, and talented. Through this step, it is expected that students could empathize with different races and colours.

4. Identifying compressed conflicts

After creating personal analogies, the lecturer invited the students to identify the conflicts found in the previous step. The lecturer said, "Let's take a look at your responses. Can you pick two words that argue with each other?" Some of the students' responses are presented below.

Discriminated vs discriminate
Not confident vs confident
Secure vs insecure

A student said that "I know that historically white oppressed the black. Black people are more prone to discrimination. However, it does not mean that white people do not experience discrimination. Asian people might feel insecure in some aspects but they also have many aspects to be proud of. One person can have a lot of feelings at the same time. The point is we have to empathize and be kind." The students' responses suggest that they were aware that everything should not be judged stereotypically and they were aware of the existence of conflicts and tensions, which can serve as a starting point for deeper reflection and analysis. The compressed conflicts between "discriminated" and "discriminate," for example, highlights the distinction between being the target of discrimination and engaging in discriminatory behavior. The identification of conflicts can be an effective way to promote critical thinking and engage students in discussions related to complex issues such as racism.
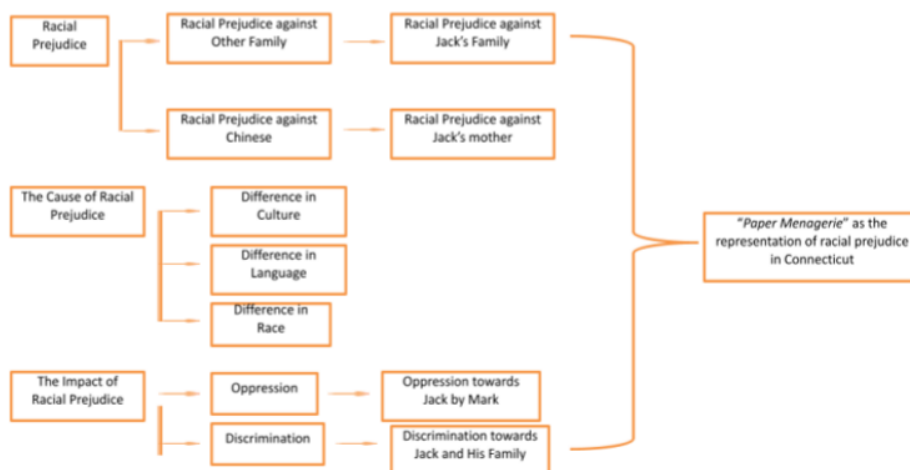
5. Re-examining the original topic

In this step, the teacher and students revisit the original topic which is about racism, drawing on the insights and perspectives generated in the previous stages. This stage allows students to deepen their understanding of the topic and to apply their new insights to other contexts or situations.

Re-examining the topic means that after making an analogy, the students keep trying to imagine being of another race that is different from them and attempting to imagine a feeling of being discriminated because of race, then they return to the original topic. In this stage, the lecturer asked the students "So, what do you think of racism?". The students' perspectives were influenced by the analogy and steps they had gone through. They were expected to freely respond to the topic, not limited to stereotypes.

Also, the students did mind mapping to build criticality at the end of the lesson. The students tried to analyze and classify the social issues in the short story: The Paper Menagerie. From the story, the students could express their analysis result through the mind mapping activity and a presentation in front of the class. From this figure, the students identified two social issues, namely racism and human trafficking in the short story. The critical racial literacy was manifested through the literature learning to raise student awareness of the racism, discrimination, and so on. The result is illustrated on the following mind map.

Main issues: Racism and human trafficking

Figure 2: The result of the student's mind mapping

CONCLUSION

This study aims to describe the literature learning process through a Synectic Gordon teaching model in a class of Literary Appreciation. The findings show that, in accordance with Nurkaeti et al., (2019) & Salas et al., (2021) shared reading aloud and visualization are implemented to engage students and aid in their understanding of the short story. The students' responses also highlight that by creating mental image as they read, as proposed by (Pițur & Miu, 2022), it makes the story come to life and elicits powerful emotions towards the short story. Then, utilizing Gordon's Synectic Teaching Model, it is preferred to examine racism and other social issues that are depicted in the short story and substantiated by Mahapatra (2004). However, not all phases of this model were implemented in the learning process. The lecturer skipped Creating a new direct analogies stage due to time constraint. The research results also highlight that the Gordon's synectics teaching model is useful for promoting students' awareness of racism and related social issues as they empathize with individuals from diverse racial backgrounds by envisioning themselves in their situations. The pursuit of racial literacy is often a lifetime effort, though, and that must be acknowledged. The results suggest that while education can be delivered in various ways, creative learning and teaching methods have been proven to successfully engage students during the classroom and encourage students to think creatively. The Synectics teaching model

provides ample opportunities for students to give responses that are creative, sometimes unexpected; not the narrow and predictable responses. This study recommends more studies on diverse classrooms featuring additional students and lecturers due to the study's limitations by adapting local/ national literature.

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