

Teaching Religious Tolerance Through Critical and Evaluative Reading Course for English Language Education Students

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Abstract: Religious tolerance is crucial for bridging a good intercultural interaction among people from different religious backgrounds. In the context of teaching, the critical and evaluative reading course is one of the courses that can facilitate students to foster their religious tolerance. This research aims to investigate the implementation of critical and evaluative reading course in building students' religious tolerance. Taking the case at UIN Raden Mas Said, this descriptive research collected the data through interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings showed that the fundamental aspects for practicing reading comprehension in critical and evaluative reading course are multimodal text materials addressing religious, cultural, and value practices and beliefs taken from various media, printed or online. The teaching strategy was reading to learn to help students build critical thinking. The students were able to perform religious tolerance understanding during the study period. It implies religious tolerance can be cultivated through reading courses using multimodal texts that can help students in their daily intercultural interaction practices.

INTRODUCTION

Religious tolerance is a current issue discussed on various occasions, such as seminars (national or international), conferences, and many more discussion forums. Tolerance is one of the good characteristics and always gets more attention nowadays. Banks (2006) emphasized that tolerance is an attitude of respecting all forms of difference in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and ideology. Tolerance becomes knowledge that can be used to foster harmony among citizens who have diverse backgrounds. According to Banks (2006), tolerance can be a glue for diverse citizens because there is an attitude of accepting and making differences as social capital to carry out social, economic, political, and cultural development. From the idea of tolerance, the community can cooperate positively in various fields so that tolerance will erase all forms of prejudice, hatred, and mutual awareness of those diverse

communities. This view is based on the opinion that poorly managed differences will cause conflicts. The tolerance of every citizen will distance the community from conflict.

Learning tolerance is born because tolerance is not obtained naturally; it needs to be learned and taught (Ferrari, 1976). Everyone has the perception of what is captured by his senses. It is a guiding learning process to recognize differences comprehensively and how to deal with them in daily life (Avery et al., 1997). This learning directs the emotions and attitudes of students when facing intolerant situations and how to control themselves when dealing with conflicts (Berggren & Nilsson, 2015).

It is derived from the Latin word *tolerantia*, meaning meaningfulness, relief of patience, and tenderness. UNESCO defines tolerance as mutual respect and acceptance amid cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and human character. In general, tolerance refers to an open, airy, voluntary, and gentle attitude. Therefore, humans as social beings who have relationships with others must be arranged according to existing norms and mutually agreed upon to establish harmony and peace. Religion, as a guide to sacred behavior, directs its believers to respect others, but often reality shows the opposite situation. Religious believers are more interested in emotional aspects. The attitude of religious tolerance should have been implemented early, starting from the family, community, and school environment.

In a multicultural country, what drives unity and tolerance is nationalism. Nationalism itself, according to Anderson (1983), can be formed by several things: language, culture, and education. The role of language in the formation of tolerance and nationalism is that of speech identity. Language in the context of the nation reflects ideology, culture, and acceptance of differences. Furthermore, language can reflect what extent a person is tolerant of others (Van Dijk, 2001).

Learning is an essential process of life, including learning languages. Regarding tolerance, learning foreign languages is important to increase religious and cultural tolerance in global communication, especially English. Therefore, the role of language teachers is essential in managing the teaching and learning process, which can facilitate students' beliefs and practices of tolerance reflected in lesson plans, teaching and learning activities, learning materials, and evaluation (Sholeh et al., 2022). They need to implement methods and strategies in delivering the concept and information. Moreover, the effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers in the classroom can make a positive difference in their students' lives because language learning depends on how it is presented to the learner. A teacher has many

options when choosing a strategy to help the students increase their skills. It can also lead the teachers to select the appropriate materials for the students, including materials that can support the cultivation of tolerance beliefs and practices.

There are numerous factors to consider in choosing methods and materials for language learning, such as age, level of education, level of proficiency, school facilities, etc. Teaching English to learners in higher education brings several positive impacts. Usually, the students have learned English at a previous education level. They are also fluent in using technology and have better critical thinking skills. It provides the opportunity for English educators in higher education to include various sources of learning and multimodal texts in the teaching and learning process to sharpen students' critical thinking and build their belief and understanding of the global issue of tolerance as well as other issues. It can be implemented in all skills, and reading is one of the convincing skills for the mentioned purpose.

Alderson and Urquhart (1984) state that reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important in academic studies, professional success, and personal development in many parts of the world. This is specifically true of English because much professional, technical, and scientific literature is published in English today. Emphasizing the importance of reading, Farhady (1998) argues that since the language of science and technology is often English, reading in English has received priority among other objectives of English language teaching. He reasons that the main goal of teaching English in many countries, especially within the educational program, is set to improve the student's reading ability to extract incoming information from the English sources in their field of study. Carrel (1988) claims that reading is the main reason international students learn English.

Reading can become a means not only to build students' comprehension of English texts but also to encourage their critical thinking toward certain phenomena, including the issues of religious tolerance. Amidst the rapid development of social media and information technology today, everyone can make content and express their thought. Some of the contents contain intolerance issues. In this case, students should be encouraged to respond critically to any issue. The State Islamic University of Raden Mas Said (UIN Raden Mas Said) is one institution under the Ministry of Religious Affairs Republic of Indonesia that always promotes tolerance and religious moderation. It is reflected in the courses that should be taken by the students, such as religious moderation. In fact, religious moderation and tolerance can be promoted in other subjects, such as the critical and evaluative reading course for English Language Education

students at this university. This study explores the implementation of the critical and evaluative reading course and the students' perception of religious tolerance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Notion of Reading Skill

Reading is sometimes erroneously called a passive skill because the reader does not produce the message in the same sense as a speaker or writer. However, it is generally argued by the cognitivist that reading is not a passive skill, and many scholars also sharply reject the traditional view about reading. In this respect, reading comprehension is a complex cognitive ability requiring the capacity to integrate text information with the reader's prior knowledge, resulting in the elaboration of mental representation (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Afflerbach, 1990). Urquhart and Weir (1998) stated that "reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via print" (Carrell & Grabe, 2002). Carrell and Grabe (2002) declare that this definition does not reveal all the components required during the cognitive reading process. They state that a definition of reading requires phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels. The readers should also be engaged in goal setting, text-summary building, interpretive elaboration from knowledge resources, monitoring and assessing goal achievement, making adjustments to enhance comprehension, and repairing comprehension processing as needed.

In the same line, Richards and Renandya (2002) assume that there are several reasons for the fact that reading receives a special focus in many second or foreign language situations. First, many foreign language students often consider reading one of their most important goals. They want to be able to read for information and pleasure, for their career, and their study purposes. In fact, in most EFL/ESL situations, the ability to read in a foreign language is the most important goal of language learners. Second, written texts serve various pedagogical purposes. Extensive exposure to linguistically comprehensible written texts can improve the process of language acquisition. Good reading texts also provide good writing models and opportunities to study language (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and idioms). Reading, then, is a highly valued skill by students and teachers.

The Importance of Critical Reading

One of the categories of reading skills is critical reading skills. It helps students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read (Hudson, 2007). When teachers expose students to critical reading skills, they will also make students see the cause-and-effect or comparison relationships in the text or adopt a critical stance toward the text. Teaching critical reading skills will also encourage the students to be critical thinkers (critical reading will come first before critical thinking). Students must fully understand a text they would analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Then, the students would think critically about the text – choose or reject the ideas put forward, agree or disagree with the issues, and most importantly, the students know the reason(s) why they do it.

Teachers need to teach critical reading skills to help the students use context and knowledge to comprehend what is read (comprehension skills) or see larger sentences as wholes, a process that assists students in reading fluently (fluency skills) (Hudson, 2007). Teachers know that most students can read, but our main concern is whether the students can understand the text critically, like “reading between the lines” or “reading for deeper meaning”. If teachers could help the students to develop critical reading skills, the students would have good reading comprehension skills and could be successful in schools. Students with good reading comprehension skills could perform well in any subject/course because they have developed critical reading skills to understand and analyze texts. Further, implementing critical reading courses will foster students’ critical thinking skills in seeing issues and phenomena in society, including current issues on tolerance and religious moderation. Reading courses with thematic texts about religious moderation values is considered a significant strategy for internalizing religious moderation and tolerance among higher-education students (Nirwana, 2022).

Related Previous Studies

Previous studies on a similar topic to this research are mostly discussed under the issue of religious moderation, whereas religious tolerance is one of the elements of religious moderation. The study about instilling religious moderation in ELT courses is not new. Nirwana (2022) and Nirwana & Darmadali (2021) have reported that ELT courses effectively build students’ religious moderation. In those studies, it was performed in a thematic-reading course and a cross-culture understanding course. Furthermore, Miftakh & Wachyudi (2020) confirmed in their study that ELT could teach students tolerance by providing learning

materials that contain intercultural content. Another study about students' critical thinking skills in higher education showed that most university students possessed positive perceptions and attitudes about critical thinking. Still, their ability to reflect critical thinking didn't correspond with their perceptions and attitude (Din, 2020). Seeing the gaps from the previous studies, this current study is focusing on the implementation of teaching religious tolerance through critical and evaluative reading course. This course wasn't much explored in the previous studies as well as the strategies to build students' critical thinking by addressing tolerance issues.

METHODS

The researcher used descriptive qualitative design in this study because this study focused on the procedure of teaching religious tolerance through critical and evaluative reading in the English Education Program Study at UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta. The researcher observed and explained the phenomenon as clearly as possible without manipulation. Therefore, the appropriate design that could be used in conducting this research was descriptive research. The descriptive method checks the status of groups of humans, an object, conditions, thoughts, and events that will occur (Sugiyono, 2008). The data were collected through direct observation, interviews, and documentation.

The researcher observed the teacher's strategy in teaching religious tolerance through the critical and evaluative reading course. In this case, the researcher observed whatever the English teachers did during the teaching and learning process. The observation was done in class 2C, consisting of 31 students, seven boys and twenty-four girls, in which the teacher often promoted and presented learning materials and activities regarding religious tolerance. The researcher also conducted interviews and document analysis to enrich the data. The data were analyzed using several steps: data reduction, presentation, and verification. The trustworthiness of the data was performed by data sources triangulation and theoretical triangulation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Teaching Religious Tolerance Through the Critical and Evaluative Reading Course

The critical and evaluative reading course consisted of 14 meetings in one semester. Every session is held for approximately 100 minutes or two credits. This course is taken by the

second-year students of the English Language Education study program of UIN Raden Mas Said. Here is the list of teaching materials being delivered for one semester.

Table 1. Teaching Material

No.	Meeting	Teaching material Description
1	I	Introduction and learning contract
2	II	Pre-test
3	III	Critical thinking and critical & evaluative reading
4	IV	Facts and opinions (distinguishing facts and opinions from the text)
5	V	Author's opinion (evaluating an author's opinion, justifying opinion, and hasty generalization.
6	VI	Meaning (analyzing connotation and denotation)
7	VII	Tone (finding out the author's intention and author attitude when writing the text)
8	VIII	Bias (finding out the bias of the author)
9	IX	Implication and inference
10	X	Definition (implicit definition and explicit definition)
11	XI	Theme (theme of the text)
12	XII	Critical reading on fiction texts
13	XIII	Critical reading on non-fiction texts
14	XIV	Post-test and material review

In teaching religious tolerance through the critical and evaluative reading course, the lecturer used the strategy of reading to learn. Reading is essential to language instruction at every level because it supports learning in multiple ways. First, reading to learn the language means reading material is language input. By giving students a variety of materials to read, instructors provide multiple opportunities for students to learn new vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and discourse structure as they occur in authentic contexts. Second, reading for content information means in the language classroom, instructors give students both authentic reading material and an authentic purpose for reading. Third, reading for cultural knowledge and awareness means reading everyday materials that are designed by native speakers, which can give students insight into the religious tolerance and worldviews of the people whose concerned with tolerance and/or intolerance. When students have access to newspapers, magazines, and websites, they are exposed to tolerance in all its variety, and monolithic cultural stereotypes begin to break down.

When reading to learn, students need to follow several steps. It is started by figuring out the purpose of reading by attending to the parts of the text that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignoring the rest. This selection enables students to focus on specific items in the input and reduces the amount of information they must hold in short-term memory. Then, comprehension checking is performed while reading and when the reading task is completed. The material for the discussion session from the course is texts related to the tolerance and

intolerance situation in Indonesia and around the world. During while reading activity, the teacher presented the text from social media. She took from Twitter tweets by someone. Here is one of the teaching materials. The tweet shows the statement against Eidul Adha. Despite respecting the religious practice, this content protests this practice as animal cruelty and barbarism.



Figure 1. Teaching material from Twitter

Teaching religious tolerance through the critical and evaluative reading course started with a brief explanation of bias. Then the lecturer asked the student to read and learn about the information implicitly or explicitly written in the text. After that, the students were asked to explain the case, information, or data from the text. Lastly, the students were asked to reflect on their statements or argument (whether they were in a pro, contra, or neutral position about the case from the text).

Here tolerance issues don't address Muslims to non-Muslims, but also how non-Muslims don't respect Muslim values. These issues have become the concern of applied linguists in recent years (Yaghi & Ryan, 2022). In facing the fact, the critical and evaluative reading course tried to ask the students to analyze the issue comprehensively rather than being reactive and emotional. The choice of the appropriate learning materials which convey multicultural aspects will effectively support the learning activity (Setyono & Widodo, 2019; Sholeh et al., 2022).

The lecturer found that social media provided abundant learning materials addressing tolerance issues. In this case, the critical and evaluative reading course tries to build the students' ability to react critically to what is being read through the steps that have been explained. This act establishes a relationship among personal values, reading contents, and personal attitudes and standards (Din, 2020). These findings supported the previous report that religious moderation and tolerance can be instilled through the courses at university (Nirwana & Darmadali, 2021).

The Students' Perceptions of Learning Religious Tolerance Through Critical and Evaluative Reading Course

In this research, the researcher also interviewed the students about religious tolerance. This paper shows some interview results with students which underlie the knowledge of tolerance developed. What has been conveyed becomes the lecturer's asset in developing student tolerance knowledge that integrates nationalism and acceptance of differences. Behind the basic knowledge conveyed, students' curiosity about tolerance in more detail feels great. Their enthusiasm after the teacher gave a provocative introduction showed the potential for the formation of tolerance. This curiosity is very valuable because it is a prerequisite for the process of knowledge growth that will be carried out in learning.

Based on the interviews, it shows that students' acceptance of tolerance is quite positive. Students assess that the aspect of tolerance divides into three: tolerance among ethnicities, religions, and cultures. These three aspects often cause conflicts of intolerance in society. Student 007 believes:

“Cases of intolerance occur because humans cannot accept cultural, religious, or ethnic differences. It is also rarely taught in school materials that differences must exist and are absolute. Therefore, in line with this view, tolerance becomes very important. Tolerance must be accepted as knowledge to reduce hatred towards religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. Pledge as a nation is strong enough to be evidence in instilling an understanding of tolerance and rejecting all kinds of intolerant actions.”

Strengthening the opinion above, Student 019 explains:

“I agree with Student 007 opinion, the difference is destiny, and no one can change it, so all humans must respect differences in religion, ethnicity, and culture. These three things, if not transmitted within the framework of tolerance, will become a problem and often lead to conflict. Therefore, to prevent it all, every citizen needs to accept the idea of tolerance and develop it as identity.”

Tolerance of ethnicity, culture, and religion begins with accepting differences. This attitude is the root of a peaceful multicultural society formation. Intolerance negates the idea of acceptance of differences because, genealogically, they reject differences and demand uniformity. In addition, they also force opinions and unilaterally claim the truth. Outside their group are enemies that must be eliminated. The spirit of differences acceptance needs to be strengthened to build a harmonious society. The rejection of differences occurs because, generally, intolerance has taken control of the public mind. Therefore, learning critical and evaluative reading teaches acceptance of differences as the strength of students to play an active role as agents of tolerance in society. Student 011 argues:

“The difference cannot be denied, so there is no other way but to accept it. Rejecting difference means we oppose the decree made by God. The case in the text shows a group that opposes God’s decree. They are in the name of religion, but they forget that the difference they are mocking is the creation of their Lord. Conflicts in the name of religion, ethnicity, and culture place differences as objects that must be removed. It is not good for the future of tolerance and democracy in Indonesia and worldwide.”

Some cases in the text do explain intolerance in the name of religion. Although it is quite a sensitive theme, it is a fact that must be addressed. The opinion above, of course, is not discrediting any religion. It is self-criticism of the wrong way of religion. In a multicultural society, religious principles must be harmonized with the spirit of tolerance so that the case of intolerance in the name of religion is far from the lives of citizens. Student 009 argues:

“Differences sometimes limit the space for movement and community interaction. The spirit of uniformity of the differences arises because of desires not based on science, especially nationalism. They (intolerant groups) do not recognize the concepts of multiculturalism, nationalism, and humanism, so they do things instinctively contrary to these ideas. From this class, ideas are transmitted as knowledge that becomes a guide in later social life. I believe efforts to realize Indonesia without intolerance are still wide open”.

The text learned has created students’ critical thinking framework towards intolerance in the community. Students assess intolerance as a negative idea that is not appropriate for citizens. This intolerance causes negative things that will harm Indonesians or people worldwide if not immediately resolved. Those opinions become a reflection for all students who are anxious about the intolerance phenomenon. For students, things that must consider in preventing

intolerance are: (1) not being reactive to discourse, (2) rejecting the issue of racism, (3) confirming any news they received, and (4) independently taking a stand.

These findings are in line with the previous study reporting that the integration of religious moderation and tolerance values into ELT classes can improve the students' awareness and understanding of religious moderation and tolerance issues (Nirwana, 2022; Nirwana & Darmadali, 2021). It can be seen from several indicators, such as national commitment, accommodating culture, and against violence. To achieve this purpose, critical and evaluative reading course can facilitate the students to be more critical in addressing certain issues. Exposure to intercultural language learning materials can help students recognize other cultures, accept differences and be tolerant (Miftakh & Wachyudi, 2020).

CONCLUSION

To build religious tolerance, readers must critically evaluate all the texts related to the religious facts that spread on the internet or other media. Therefore, the critical and evaluative reading course is one of the important tools to build the religious tolerance character for the students, especially English Language Education students in UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, since UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta is one of the role models from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in religious tolerance campaign. This research shows that the media for practicing reading comprehension comes from multimodal texts, including online news and caption from several social media about religious, cultural, and value facts. In addition, the lecturer combines the tolerance-building character with the lesson. The students' perception has shown their acceptance of diversity and how to deal with that in the frame of tolerance. These conclusions show that students are generally better able to understand good religious tolerance during the study period. It can also strengthen religious beliefs and tolerance, providing different believers with understanding, confidence, and tolerance.

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