REINTERPRETING STUDENTS' EVALUATIVE COMMENTS: A REPLY TO BASTHOMI

Miftahul Huda

MTs Nurul Jadid, Paiton, Probolinggo, e-mail: mr_mifta@yahoo.co.id

Abstract: This essay is intended to critically reinterpret Basthomi's interpretation of his students' evaluative comments upon his teaching performance. Basthomi's argument that the students of *Speaking I* have misunderstood his typical question implicitly reveals his unreadiness to treat a textualized utterance in the sphere of speaker–listener communication, suggesting that the meaning of his utterance is merely what he means by it. This article is built on a premise that the students' interpretation resulted from their comprehensive understanding of *the said*, i.e. the lecturer's utterance, and *the unsaid*, which might be construed from his unspoken daily performance in the classroom. This notion also strengthens the presence of intertextuality process in the students' comments since the comments resulted from their previous "reading" of a large number of different "texts", both spoken (*the said*) and unspoken (*the unsaid*), provided by the lecturer. With this in mind, there is no reason to view the students' evaluative feedback as indeterminate and tentative; rather, it should be seriously taken into account since their feedback might help him, and any lecturer in general, to improve his future teaching performance.

Keywords: teaching performance, evaluative comment, the unsaid, the said, intertextuality, tentativeness, indeterminacy.

In my reading of Basthomi's sinuous article entitled *A Critical Moment in the Teaching Profession: A Discourse of Tensions* (Basthomi, 2007), I am shoved to criticize some of the fragmentized issues, which, to my point of view, need to be *re*-deconstructed. My present discussion will be focused on how the concept of the *said* and the *unsaid*, Kristeva's coinage of *intertextuality*, and the students' evaluative feedback should be viewed within the context of classroom interaction of teaching and learning process.

Basic to my critical response here is my appraisal that Basthomi, throughout his entire article, has attempted very hard to be so objective in criticizing the students' evaluative comments that he has no clear discretion on which side he is actually standing, either the proponent or the opposition of the students' feedback, as well as either he supposed *the unsaid* more important than *the said* or he thought conversely. However, heeding the clues he left in his writing can provide me with scattered yet obvious evidence of his position toward the issue.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISCOURSE

As Basthomi stated explicitly, his article was intended to present some possible interpretations on the post-activity evaluative comments of the students taking *Speaking I* and those taking *Discourse Analysis* toward his teaching performance. Based on the difference of the data provided by the students, in which the former group, unfortunately, gave negative comments while the latter did the positive ones, Basthomi seems to experience –what I typically characterize as– a "psycho-academic dilemma." on one side, he, as a human being, psychologically feels either trepidation or equanimity upon reading the comments. on the other side, he is academically demanded to treat the students' "uninstitutionalized" comments unexaggeratedly, realizing that those comments are given by the students who are neither expert judges nor qualified evaluators. Such a dilemma, in turn, interferes his absurd view upon the students' comments: they are considered so indeterminate that he recommends other lecturers not to be impulsive toward them, but they are not to be deemed so futile that, as he persisted, they should not be totally ignored.

Furthermore, Basthomi identified that the students' comments, either positive or negative, were rested on their (mis)understanding upon what he had selected to say (*the said*) and what he had left unspoken (*the unsaid*). He suspected, in one way or

another, that the students of Speaking I had failed in catching *the unsaid* and, thus, they came to a *misleading* interpretation –this is to euphemize *inappropriate* with what he actually meant to say– upon his opening question "What can we do today?" The students of Discourse Analysis, however, were (considered) successful in exceeding beyond the said to comprehend the unsaid so that they can understand his utterance *correctly*. With this in mind, it is obvious that Basthomi perceived the unsaid, as the main element to understand an utterance, is more important than the said; otherwise, the listeners, like his students of Speaking I, might come into unexpected interpretation.

Related to the above case, Basthomi also spoke about the possibility of the Speaking I students' lack of readiness with an independent learning –a point which I don't totally agree because their comments were given after they attended one whole semester of the class, which means that they function as evaluative feedbacks of the teacher's continuous performance, instead of as a sign of their own (un)readiness for independent learning– since they tended to wait for the teacher's decision on what they should learn. This did not occur to the class of Discourse Analysis whose students, he argued, had been more capably comprehensive in seeing the said and the unsaid on his typical opening question. The second group were independent because, according to Basthomi, "They seemed to deem this question as my idiosyncratic formulaic opening remark … instead of a sign of unpreparedness."

He also confessed that the motive of the students commenting his lack of clearness in teaching might be explained through intertextuality, i.e. that because he, as a number of his colleagues have frequently remarked, has a bass voice and, unluckily, has never made any electronic recording. Quoting Abrams' –or more generally the objectivists'– idea that text explains for itself (Abrams, 1981:37), he further committed that he did not feel at home with teaching and learning activities of Speaking I albeit he defended that he did not totally fail because the students might have learned valuable things from his way of teaching later. Above all, he realized that the students' various comments might have been due to the exuberances and deficiencies of his speaking, two elements which unavoidably exist in any utterance (or, any text in general).

Finally, he asserted, as what I have noticed before, that the students' evaluative comments, which are indeterminate and temporary, should nei-ther be taken into account so seriously that teachers need not be impulsive in receiving the comments nor be deliberately thrown away. Facing this sway idea, a "whodunit" sort of question unavoidably teased my mind: How should the students' evaluative comments be treated?

SOME COUNTER REMARKS

The foremost point to notice here is how the so-called *said* and *unsaid* should be viewed within the context of communication. As an idea is uttered by using a language as its medium, what is explicitly said, for me, is as important as what is left unsaid. The real being of language is that into which people are taken up when they listen to a certain utterance–what is said. This fact is not contentious because language is used for describing ideas, "outwarding" the "inward" (Austin, 2004:55-56). A linguistic utterance, at least here and there, simply functions to textualize the abstract concepts (Widdowson, 2007:7). Therefore, there is no way of preferring one to the other. Viewed linguistically, it is quite unwise for Basthomi to judge that the students of Speaking I have interpreted his typical question "What can we do today?" mistakenly only because they, as he accused, only took what was verbally spoken –*the said*– into account and failed to comprehend his unspoken concept –*the unsaid*. Thus, the lecturer's opening question, when it is approached "objectively" in isolation from any external references (Abrams, 1953:26), must undeniably reflect an idea that he did not prepare any fixed material for the students.

Unlike Basthomi who viewed that the students of Speaking I merely understood the said and failed to catch the unsaid, I myself believe that they had successfully interpreted his typical question based on those two aspects respectively because, later in his writing, Basthomi himself has gently conceded, "I am not rich with various teaching techniques necessary to run Speaking I." To me, such poor condition had been textualized through his intricate but stimulating question, "What can we do today?", symbolizing that he, due to his poverty in teaching technique, had no fixed material to offer to the students and wanted them to self-design what to do in the classroom.

Based on the preceding preposition, I suppose that the students' negative comments, like "the lecturer was not well-prepared and was not sure what to do", are based on their understanding on both the said and the unsaid. Quite understandably, IF ON-

LY the students of Speaking I had understood solely the said and ignored the unsaid, they would not have been able to give such comments because, according to Gadamer (1976:67), the said has no truth in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid. And, only when what is unsaid is understood along with what is said is an assertion understandable. In short, in my point of view, even the negative comments given by the students of Speaking I resulted from their comprehensive understanding on what is said, i.e. the teacher's uttered question, and what is unsaid, which might be indicated from his unspoken daily poor performance in the classroom.

That the students of Speaking I interpreted the lecturer's typical question mistakenly should not be viewed negatively in regard to what he intended to say because as soon as an idea, which is abstract, is textualized, it does not belong to the sphere of the *I* but in the sphere of the *We*. To speak means to speak *to* someone. In other words, speaking means placing an idea before the eyes of the other person to whom somebody speaks. The speaker has no single authority to interpret his/her own words because he/she has released the words before the public (the listeners). This is why Gadamer (1976:65) characterized a language to have an essential feature of "I-lessness", and Kristeva (1984) theorized this as a *sujets en procès*, subjects in process, speaker and listener, in which meaning is never fully and finally inscribed, but always emerging in the intersections of their dialogue. Basthomi's preference on the comments of Discourse Analysis students to those of Speaking I students implicitly portrays his unreadiness for such feature, showing that he is actually the proponent of I-fullness.

Furthermore, Basthomi's self-defense that his opening question merely functioned as an idiosyncratic formulaic opening remark –as what the students of Discourse Analysis correctly understood– and did not entirely mean that he was unprepared –as what the students of Speaking I mistakenly assumed– has also revealed his identity as an expressivist who contends that the meaning of an utterance depends on what the speaker intends to say (aside from the fact that he/she might have the unsaid). An utterance is essentially considered the internal made external, resulting from the impulse of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts of the speaker. The primary source and subject matter of an utterance, therefore, are the speaker's mind (Abrams, 1953:21–22). As the consequence, the expressivists believe that only the speaker knows the appropriate meaning of his/her

own utterance. It is based on the above assumption of "speaker-centered" meaning that Basthomi felt insecure when he read the misleading interpretation of the students of Speaking, I and he finally decided to correct such inappropriateness through his affirmation on the supposedly correct interpretation given by the students of Discourse Analysis.

As my above explanation suggests, Basthomi assumes that the meaning of his utterance is what he means by it, as though his intention determines how his words must be interpreted. It is quite apparent that he holds a long-standing linguistic theory concerning the role of the speaker's intention in the determination of meaning, belittling the existence of his own question (text), the circumstances which surround his words (context), and the students who listen to his utterance (readers). With this framework, he annihilates the possible presence of what is called "the intentional fallacy", i.e. that the meaning of his question is not what he had in mind at some moment when he was producing it, but what he succeeded in embodying the utterance (Culler, 1997:66). If the students of Discourse Analysis interpreted his typical question as what he intended to say, it is not necessarily because they were more successful in comprehending the unsaid than those of Speaking I were; rather, the members of the first group were more interested in what the speaker was thinking at that moment, while those of the second group paid more attention simultaneously to their own experience upon the speaker's teaching performance (context) and a property of the utterance (text), i.e. both how they understood the context and what *in* the text they *tried* to understand. Thus, again, the negative comments of the Speaking I students, for me, were based on their comprehensive understanding on the spoken text (*the said*) and the unspoken context (*the unsaid*).

Basthomi's critical discourse can also be viewed in terms of communicative approach. It is worth noting that certain aspects of communicative content do not need to be recognized as either part of what is said and what is unsaid. Rather, they constitute a middle empty ground between both areas. Therefore, any utterance, such as his question "What can we do today?", should be deemed to express an incomplete proposition. In other words, it is *sub*-propositional which cannot be evaluated truth-conditionally only based on his own interpretation (Huang, 2007:223). The question still needs to be filled in contextually to become fully propositional. This process of completing a proposition with other relevant propositions might lead us to speak about

intertextuality, Kristeva's conceptual theory on which Basthomi also established his opinion.

Saying that some kinds of intertextuality might take place later which could help the students trigger meanings of his teaching, Basthomi wanted to remind us that the concept of intertextuality might be applicable in the students' future life experience, neglecting the probable fact that the students' comments had resulted from their previous "intertextualized reading" upon large number of different "texts" (Culler, 1997:34), i.e. the teacher's classroom performance during the second semester of 2006/2007 academic year. This means that the students' negative comments did not result merely from a single question, "What can we do today?"; rather, they were constructed by mosaic of multiple quotations (Kristeva, 1980:66) provided by the teacher. In terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, the students must have considered prior texts as contributive codes which lead them to such negative interpretation. In this context, Basthomi's teaching performance in the classroom should be viewed as the largest series of "text" which complete his unspoken ideas (*the unsaid*), i.e. that he is truly unprepared for a fixed material of Speaking I.

Beyond my disapproval of some of Basthomi's notions, I somewhat agree with his idea that students' comments should not be totally rejected. Their comments, when they are deemed as evaluative feedback, are as fundamental component of human learning. The practice of effective feedback on performance evaluation is critical to the academic success of academics. The terms "feedback" here should be understood as the pathway that completes two-way communication (Nelson & Quick, 2000, p. 250), from a lecturer to students and, vise versa, from students to a lecturer. Thus, college professors might share feedback to help students improve their study habits, and students give feedback to help lecturers improve their teaching performance. Without evaluative feedback, individuals cannot evolve in ways that meet the standards of others. Within the Indonesian educational context, that a teacher receives feedback on her/his classroom performance, like that of Basthomi, is not really usual, and, accordingly, worth appreciating.

Students are actually an excellent source of feedback on a teacher's performance, arguably the best, because their information is based on a whole series of lessons rather than on isolated examples and they usually have a fairly clear idea of how well they are learning and why (Ur, 1996:323-324).

Either way, the students' comments are not always clear-cut on all issues, as there may be disagreement due to differing student personalities and needs, and some responses may be confusing or unhelpful. Nevertheless, there is usually enough consensus on major items to provide useful and constructive feedback that the teacher can use immediately to improve his/her teaching. I think each group of students in Speaking I and Discourse Analysis class has provided Basthomi with sufficient consensus feedbacks so that he can use them as considerable information to decide what he should do in either class later. If this is the case, students' feedback–based–evaluation is truly helpful in improving a teacher's performance.

EPILOGUE: REORIENTING THE ISSUE

Up to the end of this article, I have tried to offer some possible ways of reinterpretating the evaluative comments of Basthomi's students. That they have understood the said and the unsaid comprehensively and that they have employed the process of intertextuality in interpreting the teacher's utterance have triggered my conviction that whatever their feedback, either positive or negative, does not bear any paradox, indeterminacy, and tentativeness; rather, it shows their consistency in following any matters provided by the teacher in the teaching and learning process.

Reading the rhetorical way Basthomi writes his article, I believe that the students' comments have played their role very well in influencing his teaching performance. At least, their feedback has opened his eyes that he should, in the future, prepare more fixed materials for the students, treat the students of different levels appropriately based on their different language skills and knowledge, focus his attention on the entire students, and be more creative.

In short, the students' comments, either positive or negative, will enable the teacher to make accurate changes on his future performance. This notion is indisputable because feedback is deliberately used as a change strategy in educational settings to improve the performance of the receivers. The process of giving evaluative feedback from students to teachers tends to enhance rather than damage teacher–student relationship. That students' evaluative comments have not been formally taken as the basis of an institutional policy is another matter which does not annihilate the contention that evaluative feedback is beneficial to individuals' professional development.

REFERENCES

Abrams, M.H. 1953. *The Mirror and the Lamp*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Abrams, M.H. 1981. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt-Rinehart and Winston.

Austin, J.L. 2004. How to Do Things with Words. In Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N. (ed.). *The Discourse Reader* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Routledge Inc.

Basthomi, Y. 2007. A Critical Moment in the Teaching Profession: A Discourse of Tensions. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan,* 14 (3):135-139.

Culler, J. 1997. *Literary Theory: A Very Short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gadamer, H.G. 1976. *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Trans. & ed. David E. Linge). Barkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Huang, Y. 2007. *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kristeva, J. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language* (trans. Margaret Waller). New York: Columbia University Press.

Nelson, D.L. & Quick, J.C. 2000. *Organizational Behavior: Foundations, Realities, and Challenges*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western Publishing.

Ur, P. 1996. *A Course in Language teaching: Practice and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Widdowson, H.G.. 2007. *Discourse Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.