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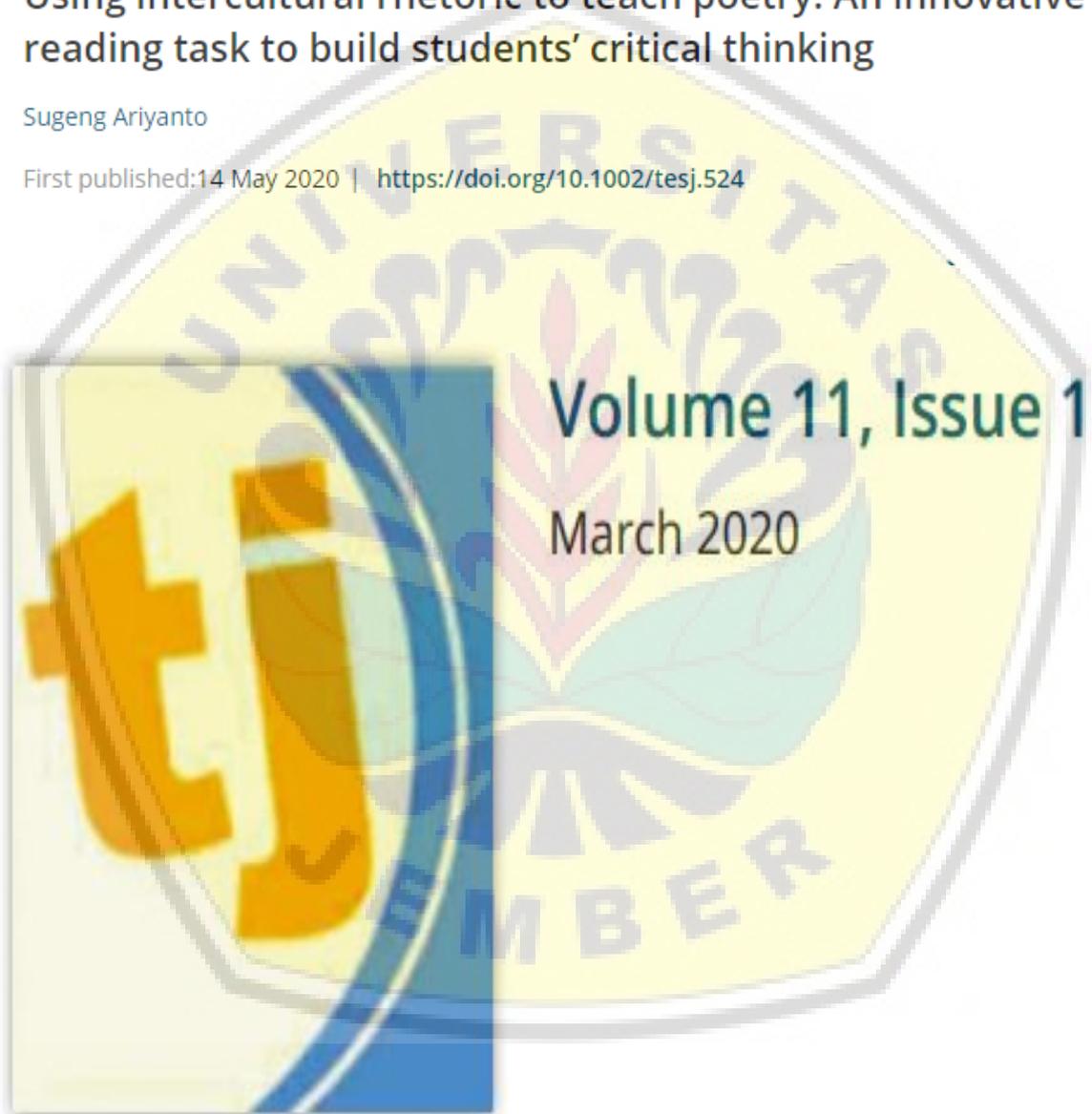


CLASSROOM EXPLORATIONS

## Using intercultural rhetoric to teach poetry: An innovative reading task to build students' critical thinking

Sugeng Ariyanto

First published: 14 May 2020 | <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.524>





# Using intercultural rhetoric to teach poetry: An innovative reading task to build students' critical thinking

Sugeng Ariyanto

Universitas Jember

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Intercultural rhetoric (IR)—the study of written discourse between and among individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Connor, 2011)—in the teaching context described in this article deals with the treatment of poetry as written discourse for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students. As readers of specific poems, the students were asked to interpret the poet's rhetoric. This activity requires critical thinking (CT), which is challenging because students have to go “beyond the level of literal comprehension to a comprehension of the more complex and subtle features of a literary work” (Lim & Tan, 1990, p. 1). In other words, the students may experience difficulties with this task if they do not think critically while reading poems.

## 2 | TEACHING CONTEXT AND REASONS FOR INNOVATION

The context where this study took place suggests that university students in Indonesia are faced with the ideological values of *Pancasila*, or Five Principles (the Indonesian state philosophy), and their primary concern is to improve their CT. Critical thinking (CT) requires the ability to understand speaker or discursive (writer) meaning rather than language meaning. However, the focus on university-level English instruction on the literal meaning of a text and answering comprehension questions can obstruct critical thinking unless students are introduced to a reading challenge such as that provided by poetry. As a result, students may experience little progress despite effort and hard work in reading poems.

To help university students become critical thinkers, I introduced an innovative IR reading task to develop students' CT skill at an advanced EAP level. The task was geared towards helping students understand a poet's ideas in an IR context. As the students made sense of the poet's ideas, they were guided to question the basic assumptions of their society (Hashemia & Ghanizadeh, 2012), including who wrote the poem in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), as in Indonesia (Collins, 2017), as well as in the context of English as a second language (ESL), as in, for example, Singapore.