Reading Literature to Enhance EFL Students' Critical Thinking

مطالعة او قراءة الأدب لتعزيز التفكير النقدي لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

This study examines the efficacy of developing critical thinking skills through reading literature. In EFL teaching, reading critically requires portraying how a piece of writing illustrates the main theme .Analyzing the components of any piece of literature including the subject, characters, plot and setting is a conventional activity for learners to be able to analyze and understand literary works.

The aim of this paper was to find out a relationship and a link between critical thinking skills and literature reading strategies. This study has a qualitative nature based on a descriptive method seeks to depict students' perceptions and skills while reading literature. The main findings revealed that through various reading strategies involving interpretation, inference, argumentation, evaluation and investigation of key-concepts found in texts, readers and students will be able at last to develop their critical thinking skills. Therefore, reading literature activity is recommended in EFL teaching to enhance critical thinking.

Keywords: *Critical thinking skills; EFL teaching; literature reading; literary works; reading strategies*

ملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث مدى فاعلية تطوير مهارات التفكير النقدي من خلال قراءة الأدب. في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، تتطلب القراءة النقدية تصوير كيف يوضح كل منتوج ادبي الموضوع الرئيسي. يعد تحليل مكونات أي قطعة أدبية بما في ذلك الموضوع والشخصيات والمؤامرة والإعداد نشاطًا اساسيا للمتعلمين حتى يتمكنوا من تحليل وفهم الأعمال الأدبية . الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو معرفة العلاقة والربط بين مهارات التفكير النقدي واستراتيجيات قراءة الأدب. تتميز هذه الدراسة بطبيعة نوعية و تعتمد على طريقة وصفية تسعى إلى وصف تصورات الطلاب ومهاراتهم أثناء قراءة الأدب. كشفت النتائج الرئيسية أنه من خلال استراتيجيات القراءة المختلفة التي تتضمن التفسير والاستدلال والجدل والتقييم والتحقيق في المفاهيم الأساسية الموجودة في النصوص ، سيتمكن القراء والطلاب أخيرًا من تطوير مهارات التفكير النقدي لديهم. لذلك ، يوصى بنشاط القراءة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتعزيز التفكير النقدي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *استراتيجيات القراءة ؛ أعمال أدبية ؛ تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ؛ قراءة الأدب ؛ مهارات التفكير النقدي.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Developing the EFL students' thinking competencies has been always set as a crucial aim in higher education. Even it has become even more essential in using this objective to enhance students' learning in the rapid-changing pedagogical contexts. Critical thinking skills can help them in making strong decision to learn new information quickly (Lau, 2011). Indeed, what strongly needed in this 21st century are critical thinking strategies (Kharbach, 2012) that will permit them to check the reading steps, to create presumptions and to discard different viewpoints. In literature, students ought to be aware of their interaction with any piece, which must be objective. It is often useful to consider a literary piece of writing as an actor that utilizes many skills to cajole the audience into his target views. In general, to examine the components of any literary work is a good action for learners of literature in order to criticize literature.

Thinking critically would aid readers of literature understand that literary analysis is not a random or a haphazard process albeit it involves meaningful and well-orderly cognitive processes. These processes would permit them to consider and rethink their own ideas and opinions. Processes would be regularly acquired to take a stand on their views; and ruminate over their impetuous steps, of both reflection and action, from the artistic perspective and the surrounded academic viewpoints. Also, thinking in literature can raise the need to draw attention to the use of language. EFL learners discern that language is a reflective choice of particular terms which intend to affect the readers with their meanings. However, if these ponderous words are not discovered, language would not emerge as a significant active tool (Meihami, et al., 2013).

1.Definition of Critical Thinking

There are numerous definitions of critical thinking as fields can differ. For instance, it can refer to reflective thinking that interests in deciding the believed act or something done (Ennis, 2013). It is the ability of examining assumptions, discerning implicit values, evaluating evidence, and assessing conclusions (Myers.et al, 2007). In general, critical thinking is an essential skill to foster students' thinking skill (Hashemi, 2011). Critical thinking is the capacity to think for person's self and responsibly make the decisions which influence one's life. Critical thinking is mainly critical inquiry, hence such critical thinkers examine problems, ask questions, provide new answers that challenge the status quo, or discover new knowledge, question traditional concepts, challenge previous doctrines, and finally to possess the power of analysis. The definition of critical thinking emerging from the philosophical convention includes "judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe" In the American Philosophical Association's consensus portrait of the one critical thinker is someone who is inquisitive in nature, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded, has a desire to be well-informed, understands diverse viewpoints, and is willing to both suspend judgment and to consider other perspectives (Facione, 2000, p. 61).Nevertheless, the cognitive psychological approach defines critical thinking skills as "seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth" (Costa,2016). They interest in the set of strategies within the phenomenon of thinking .Later, Came the educationalists, those working in the field of education have also took part in discussions about critical thinking. Their taxonomy for knowledge processing skills (1956) is one of the most broadly cited sources for educational practitioners when it comes to teaching and

assessing higher-order thinking skills. Bloom's taxonomy is hierarchical, involving "comprehension" at the bottom, and "evaluation" at the top. According to Kennedy et al (1991) the three highest strategies (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) are commonly said to demonstrate critical thinking. What is appalling, most researchers working in the area of critical thinking agree on the vital role of background information. They particularly see background knowledge very necessary if students are to demonstrate their critical thinking competencies (Willingham, 2007)

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have been interested in the importance of teaching critical thinking skills in EFL pedagogical settings (Atkinson, 1997; Davison, 1998; Kubota, 1999; Day, 2003). Albeit, both the regional or cultural sides have been dismantled, due to the fast information exchanges and economic discussions in the broad society. Every individual is compelled to cope with the international phenomena and prepare himself with capacities that will assist him to know how to learn. "Though there are some aspects of critical thinking that may be 'foreign' in non-Western context, if students are not exposed to these skills, they will be denied the opportunities to compete in the broad society" (Long, 2011). In the past two decades, some researchers and scholars have spotlighted the significance of critical thinking instruction. They made efforts to cooperate critical thinking training in basic courses and content-based courses in primary and secondary education programme (Yang & Chung, 2009). Further, they have adopted critical thinking pedagogy in education (Fang et al, 2008; Chang, 2006; Huang & Lee, 2004; Yang, 2005.) Nevertheless, the findings demonstrated that most undergraduates are not proficient in critical thinking unless they are awarded with a particular learning environment (Chang, et al,2007), provided with more time to think or granted with more modeling, practicing and reinforcement (Yang & Chen, 2008).The experts have explained that these negative attitudes are caused due to the students' prior learning behaviours and experiences which are mostly re-production-oriented ; they were never given the chances to question, explain, or assess the "knowledge" instructed inside the classroom. In addition, the teaching policy in the primary and secondary education received little guidance and instruction concerning teaching process of critical thinking and mainly, their teaching load and time constraint deprive them of the opportunity to fix critical thinking skills in their curricula (Chen, 2008).As a matter of fact, all the previous works highlighted that students are immature in critical thinking, and hence the issue of how to reverse their learning habits of minds by enhancing critical thinking competencies and nurture disposition toward critical thinking is surely of great interest.

II. Methods:

This study adopted the qualitative approach based on a descriptive method. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue, which will help, in the current study, to find out how EFL Students experience the use of reading strategies to promote their critical thinking. In addition, the descriptive method is selected to better describe the quality of reading literature and how reading literature skills would enhance the critical thinking skills. Description is chosen to determine the degree to which both variables are connected.

III.   Results and discussion :

1. Critical Thinking Instruction

According to Robinson (1987) the most pertinent skills that should be taught by teachers are those that build the effective thinking process, of information related to these operations, and attitudes that can enhance thinking (p.13) Instructors should know what characterize these

skills of thinking in depth; as they have comprehensively to be familiar with the subject taught and the associated fields in order to be able to ease these facets of criticism. Reviewing research articles and taking part in workshops and conferences on critical thinking, will aid in familiarizing colleagues and students with these skills. Ideally, they should change their courses and themes from the conventions of the teaching centered model into a conception of learning as a continuous and open cultivation of the psyche. It is therefore necessary for teachers to continuously ponder upon their instructional actions and engage in innovating their field-subject and own data to become active instructors. Costa and Lowery (2016) emphasized that "classroom time must be dedicated to teaching thinking skills directly as a reality in education." (p31) .Teaching the skills of thinking should be the result of several pedagogical fields; in addition, the classroom should be created for a studious environment for learning thinking operations. In addition, to ease critical thinking, students ought to undertake thought-developing activities that prompt them to be critical thinkers.

Further, Bevis (1993) explained that "critical thinking must be instructed in a reality context and must be instructed in methods that permit students to share ideas and feelings with each other around real matters."(p.32) .In a support for this view, the relationship between teacher and student ought to change from guide-to-follower to an equal one that involves working with each other. This relationship will promote a peer relation based on student centered way to learn (Profetto-McGrath , 2003) .Most importantly, Paul (2005) declared that the teacher should "elucidate mental worthiness of critical thinking, that are autonomy of mind, mental curiosity, bravery, modesty, empathy, unity, diligence, faith in reason and fair-mindedness" (p.29). If the teachers enhance critical thinking strategies, students will be committed to learn by "role modeling."

2. The Importance of Literature Reading

Literature can be helpful in the language learning process owing to the personal engagement it fosters in the reader. Once the student reads a literary text, he/she starts to inhabit the text. They are drawn to the work. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the literature. The students become enthusiastic to find out what happens as events and actions unfold toward the climax; they feel close to particular characters and share their emotions. This can have favorable effects upon the whole language learning process. At this junction, the prominence of a literary text choice is in relation to the needs, expectations, and interests, language level of the students. In this process, they can remove the identity crisis and develop into extroverts.

Additionally, EFL teachers should adopt an interactive, learner-centered method toward the understanding of a literary work. In reading class, discussion begins at the literal step with direct questions of fact examining setting, characters, and plot which can be answered by specific reference to the literary work. (Silverman, 2016) .Secondly, students ought to shift to the inferential phase, where they have to make interpretations concerning the characters, settings, and main themes, and where they produce the author's point of views. Next, they should be working cooperatively to share their assessment of the work and their personal reactions to its characters, its main idea(s), besides to the author's point of views. Indeed, it would be timely for them to share their reactions to the work's cultural themes and challenges. Finally, at the third phase i.e, at the personal / evaluative phase, students will have to think creatively about the literary work and employ their problem-solving skills (Brunt, 2005).

3. Critical Thinking Instruction through Literature Reading

Reading based on literature influences greatly the development of critical thinking. A reader is going to explore different themes within a piece of literature, find meaning to key concepts, then establish relationships between them and other literary works with entirely different themes. Literature reading is essentially linked to the basic skills of critical thinking due to the following reasons. First and foremost, the cognitive method of reading literature which needs analytical thinking strategies.

While reading literature, readers require recalling, retrieving and reflecting on their prior knowledge or background to establish meanings for the text. In doing so, they have to differentiate reality from imagination; to understand the implications and the narrator's tone, to use every tiny detail related to the written concepts, to find out the relations between the events, to make moral reasoning and legal-grounded comments, and most of all, to apply what they have learned from this practice to other domains i.e. the real world activities. These processes and others are what the critical thinking experts grouped into "explanation," "analysis," "synthesis," "argumentation," "interpretation," "evaluation," "problem-solving," "inference" "logical reasoning," and "application" skills (Brunt, 2005; Facione, 2007; Halpern, 2005).Lazere (1987) had highlighted that "literature is the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking"(p.3) .Next, the subject matter, the place, the period of time and even the used language of literature offer readers with many real-world scenarios to establish new meanings. By examining its plot, theme, and the discussion of the characters with others and the settings, readers are exposed to multiple opinions and hence compelled to think and rethink their own thoughts and interpretations. Expectantly, if they are good readers, they will see their weaknesses and they attempt to improve. Thus, it is more than helping readers to solve problems and develop critical thinking skills.

A good literary work intends to assist readers learn to change and improve through challenging a text and consequently achieve self-direction, open-mindedness, self-confidence, prudence and truth-seeking which are essential to develop critical thinking (Facione, 2000).

4. Developing Critical thinking through Critical Reading

The process of reading literary works differs from reading other document types since it assists in enhancing critical thinking skills. The method of reading literary texts differs from reading texts. Readers, while reading literature, become more self-contained and more thoughtful (Hall, 2005). Langer (2000) claimed that the readers of literature should always try to understand "meanings beyond the text, and they tend to speculate on potential future developments. Students, then, can develop the critical which is required in their writing from reading literature" (p.11) Also, researchers have observed that in reading literature, readers learn to make an inference. The process of reading any literary text is considered as a 'bottom up' approach which requires the reader to reflect and develop critical thinking skills. It will surprisingly be possible to have more than one implication (Hall, 2005).In fact, reading literary documents help students to understand and analyze the social as well as political subjects as presented in several views and visions within. Critical readers hence will discover variances of interpretation, and they will be asked to argue what the closest meaning is precisely.

When reading critically, students are likely engaged in problem-solving tasks of literary works through resolving conflicts. Ghosn (2002) claimed that "children's stories abound with

noticeable conflicts for readers to sympathize with, and that authorizes them to empathize with characters encountering hard conflicts in precarious settings."(p.172) .The teacher on his part would encourage the readers to imagine the real scene after analyzing the components of a literary work including the themes, symbols, motifs, and characters .Reading critically develops students' skills and enhances competencies that are required to be applied in real life contexts

IV.   Conclusion:

In short, since the current objective of effective education is teaching and learning how to think analytically, EFL learners should develop their critical thinking competencies and learn how to apply those skills into their learning tasks. This review tried to establish the interrelationships between literature reading and critical thinking, and also, to find out how could this latter promote effective language learning. In the same vein, this paper recommends teachers of literature to integrate critical thinking skills into their academic environment to ensure better reading comprehension of literature.

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