

From Critical Thinking as an Input to Critical Reading as an Output

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Abstract

This article attempts to clarify the relationship between critical thinking and critical reading and its impact on teaching a written material in the literature class. Moreover, this interplay permits EFL teachers to be cognizant of the criteria of selecting the reading material that fits the students' needs and interests. More importantly, this paper aims to bridge the gap between critical thinking and critical readings in terms of the ability to analyze, evaluate and read between lines. This implies to state that critical reading is a very important skill in the teaching of literary texts in a joyful atmosphere.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical reading, literary text, enjoying literature

Résumé

Cet article tente de clarifier la relation entre la pensée critique et la lecture critique et son impact sur l'enseignement d'un matériel écrit dans le cours de littérature. En outre, cette interaction permet aux enseignants d'EFL d'être au courant des critères de sélection du matériel de lecture adapté aux besoins et aux intérêts des élèves. Plus important encore, cet article vise à combler le fossé entre la pensée critique et la lecture critique en termes de capacité d'analyse, d'évaluation et de lecture entre les lignes. Cela implique d'affirmer que la lecture critique est une compétence très importante dans l'enseignement des textes littéraires dans une atmosphère joyeuse.

Mots-clés: pensée critique, lecture critique, texte littéraire, appréciation de la littérature

المخلص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى توضيح العلاقة الموجودة بين التفكير النقدي و القراءة النقدية و مدى فعاليتها في تدريس النص الأدبي. هذا التداخل بين المفهومين يعمل على مساعدة أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في تحديد بدقة المعايير اللازمة لاختيار النص الأدبي الذي يتلاءم مع متطلبات و احتياجات الطلبة. كما ترمي هذه الورقة إلى تصنيف الفجوة بين التفكير النقدي و القراءة النقدية التي تمكن الطالب من تحليل، تقييم و قراءة ما بين سطور نص أدبي. و من خلال هذا نستطيع أن نعتبر القراءة النقدية الوسيلة الأنسب لتدريس النصوص الأدبية الانجليزية في جو ممتع .

الكلمات المفتاحية : التفكير النقدي، القراءة النقدية، النص الأدبي، الاستمتاع الأدبي

Introduction

Theoretically speaking, reading is a receptive skill used to acquire information from a written material. It is based on two fundamental dimensions:

- Thinking dimension because a reader should be able to understand and to think about the information from a reading passage.
- A cognitive dimension because the reader should be able to analyse, to evaluate and to contextualise information of the reading passage.

This explains the claim of Crystal (1992) in which the process of reading is considered as the ability to understand and to grasp the meaning of a written material. Likewise, Moon (2008) clarifies the relationship between reading and critical thinking with "the mutual reinforcement" (p.10). In the following explanation of Paul et al (1989), it appears that critical thinking is mostly correlated with the student's ability to read critically through asking themselves some critical questions. Paul and his follows point out that

"therefore, critical readers recognise that reading a book is reading one limited perspective on a subject and that more can be learned considering other perspectives. Critical readers ask themselves questions as they read, wonder about the implications of, reasons for examples of, and meaning and truth of the material. They do not approach written material as a collection of sentences but as a whole,

trying out various interpretations until one fits all of the work, rather than ignoring or distorting statements that don't fit their interpretation.” (p.429)

Discussing the nature of the relationship between critical thinking and critical reading, it is necessary to inquire about the technique used to combine both skills in application. Most studies consider “the literature circle” as a best technique to examine the impact of this relationship on the students’ academic achievement.

1. Critical Thinking Definition

Theoretically speaking, three major academic approaches are taken into account in defining critical thinking. The two first approaches are philosophy and psychology according to Lewis and Smith (1993) and the third aspect is education according to Sternberg’s (1986) view. Amalgamating the three aspects do show some controversies views as regard the nature of critical thinking but despite the existing disagreement, a common core does exists. The area of agreement between the three approaches emerge the following features:

- ✓ The willing of : - analysing arguments
- evaluating and judging
- making inference through inductive and deductive reasons
- make a decision and solve problems

2. Critical Reading Definition

Three major debatable issues are considered in defining critical reading including: what does it mean? How to teach it? And what students will be able to do? In the first place, some scholars support the idea that the more students are familiar with the material, the more they are able to understand its difficulties. In this context it is necessary to mention Micheal Warners’s (2004) study on critical reading by which critical reading is defined as “the folk of ideology of a learned profession, so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it” (p.14). Moreover, he supports terms such as “critical distance”, “self conscious stance” (p.20) and both of them describe the nearby distance that should be between the reader and the text. In the second place, most of educators try to simplify teaching critical reading by modeling it according to their students’ needs and interests. This idea is argued by Robert Scholes’s (2001) definition “simplifying and clarifying the ways of reading we have already learned to use” (p.215). In this respect, there were some educators who created their own ways to teach critical reading like Donahue (1987a) who suggests a sequence by which “students write an initial interpretation followed by multiple rereading, while reading considering along the way how prior assumptions about reading shape these interpretations” (pp.5-9). Also, Salvatori (2012) proposes the “Conversations” by which “students are asked to write responses to texts and then to write reflectively and evaluatively about their response” (p.447). In the third place, Salvatori, Arlen Wilner and Patricia Donahue define critical reading in terms of what they want their students to do. For instance, Donahue (1987b) wants her students to pass “kind of misreading” in order to be able to contextualise the language of “wild dialogue” (p.2) While, others such as Chick Nancy.L, Holly Hassel and Aeron Haynie (2009) focus on “reading complexity” (p.402) by asking students to re-read and revise their interpretations in order to develop complexity and multiple interpretations.

However, other scholars attempt to define critical reading in a general way, for instance in Pirozzi’s definition (2003) critical reading is described as “very-high level comprehension of written material requiring interpretation and evaluation skill and it also entails using reference to go beyond what is stated explicitly, filling in informational gaps, and coming to logical conclusions.” (p.325); in the same line, Kurland (2000) claims that critical reading is “a careful, active, reflective and analytic reading”

3. Techniques of Critical Reading

During the English literature class, it has been observed some prominent problems happened to students when they are engaged in reading classes. For this aim, scholars as Axelrod and Cooper (2002), Hall (2004), Barton-Arwood et al (2005) and others propose some instructional strategies to help teaching critical reading. Most of them agree that these strategies should emphasise the

development of particular skills including annotating, previewing, contextualising, analysing, outlining, summarising, paraphrasing, questioning and reflecting. Not far from this view, Kuta (2008) suggests a list of strategies which considered by most researchers the most purposeful list in the critical reading field. Those strategies are recapitulated as follows:

- ✓ *Annotating*: it focuses on reading reactions and questions about the text.
- ✓ *Previewing*: it involves getting an overview about the text structure, cues, pictures and so forth.
- ✓ *Scan and Skimming*: it aims of looking for the gist or main idea of the text.
- ✓ *Facts Vs. Opinions*: it requires to seek concrete evidences, opinions, values or beliefs that can be argued.
- ✓ *Drawing Conclusions*: it focuses on clarifying clues in the text and thinking of predictions.
- ✓ *Monitoring*: it tests the understanding of the text meaning.
- ✓ *Summarising*: it aims to write a short paragraph presenting the main ideas of the text.
- ✓ *Paraphrasing*: it requires rewriting a short paragraph restating and clarifying the main ideas using readers' own words.
- ✓ *Synthesising*: it is to select ideas and to combine them with different texts.
- ✓ *Questioning*: it is based on asking set of questions and to answer them after finishing the last step. (Kuta, 2008)

Regarding the skills of these strategies, it is clear that there are three steps in critical reading. The first step is pre-reading which contains: annotating, previewing, scanning and skimming. The second step is reading the text which includes facts vs. opinions, drawing conclusions and monitoring. The last step is after reading that implies summarising, paraphrasing, synthesising and questioning. These steps are mentioned in Tovani's (2000) description of the reading process:

- ✓ Set a purpose for reading (Before reading a text), preview the text before reading, pay attention to print features and text structures.
- ✓ mark the text while you read, make connections between the text and reader personal experience and knowledge.
- ✓ Monitor your comprehension of the text; summarise the key points when you finish reading.

4. Developing Critical Thinking through Reading Literature

It is argued by many educators that critical thinking and reading are related to each other in terms of the needed skills and abilities. As, Brown (2001) and Day (2003) describe this relationship with "a strong connection between reading and thinking". From another angle, Carter and Long (1991) declare that the exposure of students to read literature in an academic setting will help students in working with a literary work using what they acquire as critical concepts, literary conventions and metalanguage. In this respect, they state:

"involves reading literature within an academic, institutionalised setting for the purpose of abating qualification in literary studies. It involves a considerable baggage of critical concepts, literary conventions and metelanguage and the requirement is often that students should showanability to use such terms and concepts in taking writing abou literature."(p.3-4)

The impact of reading literary texts on developing critical thinking becomes clear in most of recent research. This impact seems to be positive because by reading, students will use their critical thinking abilities. They will be able to interpret, to analyse and to synthesise. Here are some benefits of reading literary texts on the development of critical thinking skills:

- According to Lazer (1993), reading literary texts will help students to make hypotheses and to draw inference.
- According to Brandt (1990), reading literary texts will increase the students' metacognitive and affective abilities in terms of thinking about the text's structure, the plot, characters and the hidden meanings.
- According to Hayhoe and Parker(1990), reading will invite students to use their thinking abilities and to become independent readers;

- According to Zyngier (1994), reading fosters the students' language skills, namely speaking and listening.

There are numerous benefits of reading on the enhancement of critical thinking, but the problem is that what kind of literary text is adequate to be read? And what are the criteria for selecting a reading material?

5. Criteria for Selecting a Critical Literacy-Based Materials

To achieve positive results in the teaching process, it is necessary to choose tools and materials carefully. Indeed, the selection of literary texts for students is considered by McKay (1982) as the "key to success" in teaching literature in an EFL classroom. More importantly, a careful selection of the reading texts will motivate students to become excited about attending the reading class. Thus "careful text selection is fundamental to the successful use of any kind of representational material." (p.4), as McRae (1997) argues. For these aims and others, there are several criteria should be taken into account when selecting a text to be read by students.

Those criteria seem to be common between some educationalists such as Brumfit (1985) who suggests the criteria related to the "suitable linguistic level, cultural and social expectations of different groups of learners and length of the text, imagination and creativity." (p.109). Lazer (1993) stresses on the students' cultural, literary backgrounds and their linguistic proficiency; and then Collie and Slater (1994) consider the students' needs and interests, cultural background and language level." (p.6). Taking altogether these criteria, the present researcher summarises them as follows:

➤ *The Student's Cultural Background*

Taking into consideration the cultural factor, teachers should think about the negative effects of the chosen text on the students' social and political interpretations. The irrelevant text will not help students to understand and to grasp the true meaning of the text. So, to avoid such kind of troubles, it is very important to choose a text which is familiar with the students' culture in terms of its theme and source.

➤ *The Student's Linguistic Proficiency*

In this sense, McKay (1982) notes that "a text which is difficult on either linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits" (p.531); in other words, finding a text that matches the students' proficiency level indicates how much the teacher is aware of the students' level.

➤ *The Student's Literary Background*

The exposure of students to extensive and intensive reading classes in their mother tongues may help them to understand and interpret in a foreign language using the same conventions of reading. Besides, they will be able to achieve the same linguistic and literary competence degree as in their mother tongues.

➤ *Availability of Texts*

As far as the university library is the only one source close to the students, it will be better if teachers rely on it as a source of the lessons' tools. Thus, teachers should know the available books in the students' library by keeping in touch with librarians to provide them with the updated lists of books.

➤ *Length of Texts*

From the present researcher's experience in teaching literature, she always notices the students' reactions when they have a long text, and then their request whether the whole text is concerned or just a few selected parts. This case interprets that the length of text is another important factor that motivates students to read.

➤ *Exploitability of the Text*

Within this factor, it is useful to consider what Derrida (1976) thinks about the act of reading. Accordingly, "reading and interpretation are not merely acts of reproducing what writers express in a text." (p.157); this means that once students finish reading the text, they will be able to re-produce it according to their voice of understandings and interpretations. By being able to exploit the selected text, students will have opportunities to become creative, open-minded and critical thinkers. This fact seems clear through Elliot's (1990) focus on selecting texts that require the cognitive and the affective involvement of the students.

➤ *Fit with Syllabus*

The suitability of the syllabus seems to be the inclusive factor because it is inaccessible to choose texts that consider the students' cultural background and linguistic level and do not consider the syllabus' main objectives. Thus, when selecting a text to be read, it is useful to take into account the aforementioned factors and as well as the drawn syllabus' objectives.

Considering those criteria of selecting the suitable literary material for students, one major question should be raised by an EFL teacher that is: will students enjoy the teaching of literature in the classroom?

6. Defining Enjoying Literature in an EFL Context

Teaching literature is always related to the issue of pleasure and enjoyment which allows students to be motivated to deal with literary texts. In other words, the enjoyment of literature refers mainly to the extent of motivation considerations when teaching literature in the EFL classroom. Therefore, a definition of the term 'enjoying literature' is demanded for the sake of determining its sources and origins. The enjoyment of literature attributes the individual's satisfaction about the reading which should fit his/her interests and benefits (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). For them, the enjoyment of literature is beneficial to enhance the students' positive beliefs about literature, to facilitate the students' cultural awareness about the other cultures and to foster the students' self-confidence to participate later in the community affairs. However, Nell (1988) views the enjoyment of literature as the person's imagination ability to practice some specific roles and words. In the same vein, Grossman and Sachs (2007) note that "students help create a new approach to reading and enjoying literature assigned in school. Reading is about spending time with characters and entering a fictional world and playing with words and living through a story page by page." (p. 1), this means that the enjoyment of literature requires the involvement of imagination to test the events involved in the reading material.

Conclusion

To conclude, the good determination of main concepts of a notion prohibits the misuse of such thinking skill inside and outside the learning context. Taking altogether, it is argued that critical reading needs students to be able to contextualise, to analyse, to ask questions, to justify arguments, to evaluate and to interpret. This implies that critical reading is completely embedded in critical thinking. In other words, to achieve the aim of promoting the students' critical thinking skills, some important motivational and psychological factors that should be taken into account when teaching thinking skills in an EFL context. Thus, for reaching enjoyment in the classroom, it is very necessary to understand its purposes by which education is improved and qualified. Enjoyment ensures the life long learning and seeks purposeful learning opportunities.

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