Literature from a Critical Perspective: Food for Thought

Literatura desde una perspectiva crítica: alimentos para el pensamiento

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the need to enhance critical thinking via means of literature within the contexts of English as a foreign language in higher education, the current paper seeks to delineate critical thinking in terms of four points: higher-order thinking skills, critical reading and writing, strategies for discussing literature in the English classroom, and research studies of interest and relevance to the concerned field. To maximize effectiveness, the current paper concludes with several recommendations for researchers to take into consideration.

Keywords: Critical thinking, higher education, literature, contexts of english

RESUMEN

Inspirado en la necesidad de mejorar el pensamiento crítico a través de la literatura en los contextos del inglés como lengua extranjera en la educación superior, el presente artículo busca delinear el pensamiento crítico en términos de cuatro puntos: habilidades de pensamiento de orden superior, lectura y escritura críticas, estrategias. para discutir literatura en el aula de inglés y estudios de investigación de interés y relevancia para el campo en cuestión. Para maximizar la efectividad, el artículo actual concluye con varias recomendaciones para que los investigadores las tomen en consideración.

Palabras clave: Pensamiento crítico, educación superior, literatura, contextos del inglés

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INTRODUCTION

Several skills of critical thinking are essential for university students to make sense of what goes on in class, of what they hear when they attend classes, of the kind of assignment they receive, and of the language task they have to perform. What is it, then, that critical thinking refers to, and in what sense is this type of thinking different from other types?

Critical thinking can be defined as being aware of one's thought and reflection on the thinking of the self and others (Semerci & Elaldi: 2014, pp. 317-333). The difference between thinking and critical thinking can be likened to the difference between walking and dancing, while the former is learned naturally throughout the course of a young child's life, the latter requires effort to learn (Gelder: 2005, pp. 41-48; Ritchhart & Perkins: 2005, pp. 775-802). Kagnaritch et al. suggest that there are several kinds of critical thinking which are important for students to enrich and upgrade their knowledge (Kagnaritch et al.: 2007, pp. 2-9). One kind is analytic, which refers to the sort of thinking that allows students to appreciate the nature of a proof when it is offered to them and enables them to see the things in terms of their categories and the implications of the things they are learning about. The second kind of thinking is dialectical, which makes it possible for students to see the position in relation to another, to see from different perspectives, to respond to different contexts, to tolerate ambiguity and multiple meanings, and to appreciate complexity; controversy; challenge; and dialogue. The third kind of thinking can be termed figurative or metaphorical, which refers to seeing events or things as pointing to something else. According to the author of the current paper, critical thinking entails looking beyond visible surface matters, enquiring about seen and hidden purposes. It requires gathering relevant data and assessing the gathered data in terms of authority, validity, and reliability.

Urged by the significant role of both critical thinking and literature in shaping and polishing today's generation's knowledge; skill, and attitude, the current paper seeks to shed light on critical reading and writing, strategies for augmenting critical thinking via literature, and research studies of use and interest to the concerned field. The paper concludes with some recommendations for researchers and instructors to consider.

METHODOLOGY

English as a foreign language (EFL) classes do not usually aim to prioritize the enhancement of critical thinking. However, the integration of critical thinking with language skills such as reading and writing should receive more attention (Kagnarith et al.: 2007). What does critical reading in EFL contexts involve? Wallace explains that critical reading involves questioning what is being read, not accepting the printed words at face value, but adopting an attitude of waiting and skepticism (Wallace: 2003). Critical reading does not privilege an author's communicative intent; instead, it is concerned with effect. The aim is not to converge with the author but to challenge the schemas called up by the text. The critical reading emphasizes communally negotiated responses by which texts are jointly interpreted through talk around the text. There is a need to shift focus constantly between the micro features of texts to the macro features of the contexts in which texts are interpreted. Attention to detail allows us to offer plausible interpretations of texts, providing warrants for our views. Meta-level awareness of literacy practices and texts is more readily achieved when students are provided with linguistic tools to articulate, more precisely, impressions that may be noticeable to them at a fairly high level of generality. Wallace proposes a framework for a critical analysis of texts. The framework is based on three main aspects: field of discourse (ideational meanings), the tenor of discourse (interpersonal meanings), and mode of discourse (textual meanings).

Considering the concept of genre, critical reading requires examining generic conventions in a text. Adequate awareness of the role genre plays in forming what is known as textual content means recognizing that the particular meaning a text creates is not original but is constructed by exploiting conventional resources. This element of convention exists at the level of individual sentences. It also exists in terms of ideas and overall schemas (Rahman: 2018, pp. 01-12). According to Redenius and Skaar, critical reading includes analysis and evaluation before, during, and after reading (Redenius & Skaar: 2017, pp. 20-42). Students are required to make judgments about the validity, authenticity, and accuracy to prove they are critical readers. Chikalanga thinks that in making inferences, the reader should perform two operations: text-connecting and

slot or gap-filling (Chikalanga: 1992, pp. 697-709). Text-connecting engages the reader in finding logical relations between propositions or events expressed in a text, while slot-filling engages the reader in completing missing information by recourse to knowledge about the world. There are, thus, two broad categories of inferences: text-based and non-text-based.

Relating the discussion to critical writing, it is obvious that writing in a foreign language can be demanding for most learners (Zainal: 2017, pp. 8929-8933). Yet, it should be the instructor's mission to overcome obstacles through means of effective teaching and active learning, amongst other means. An essential component in the teaching of critical writing is ensuring a critical perspective (Paltridge: 2004, pp. 87-105.). From a critical perspective, classroom tasks aim to make visible the social construction and transmission of ideologies, power relationships, and social identities as a way of helping students to make choices in their academic writing through reflecting on who they are and who they want to be. Critical academic writing classrooms engage students in the types of activities they are likely to have in academic settings, inviting them to analyze; synthesize, and evaluate.

Serrano et al. state that in a composition classroom based on Critical Theory, both teaching and learning are seen as constructs: rhetorical, political, and often oppressive representations of social relations. Students are asked to explore implicit constructs in their local environments whilst engaging in intellectual interrogation of constructs through reading and writing texts. This type of writing pedagogy is often unsettling for students since it requires active involvement in exploration that does not fit exactly into the objective, product-oriented classrooms with which students are familiar (Serrano et al.: 2018, pp. 9-21).

Taken in sum, critical reading and critical writing comprise a number of skills, amongst the most prominent of which are text analysis, reasoning, inference, deduction, problem-solving, and decision-making. Critical reading of literary texts is an advanced stage of reading comprehension during which the reader reads between and behind the lines, avoiding literal interpretations of texts. Critical writing of literary texts, on the other hand, reflects an eloquent language style worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Obviously, EFL learners cannot read and write critically in the absence of sufficient background knowledge about key concepts, ideas, and issues.

RESULTS

This part of the paper highlights a number of proposed strategies, activities, and procedures within the area of enhancing critical thinking skills via means of literature. Tosuncuoglu argues that students should be explicitly taught how to think critically. Thinking critically is a combination of knowledge, skill, and attitude (Tosuncuoglu: 2018, pp. 20-28). The more practice in how to think critically, the better the output. Instructors, therefore, need to provide a conducive environment in which students are allowed to express their thoughts flexibly. Among the strategies that can be employed are ensuring versatile perspective, raising questions, working collaboratively, and using background knowledge.

Critical discourse analysis views discourse as a form of social practice whereby language use is regarded at the same time as socially influential and influenced. Another characteristic of critical discourse analysis is that it is committed and engaged, thus intervening in social practice. The critical approach to language and literature studies emphasizes the development of students' capacities to examine and judge the world carefully and, if possible, to change it (Zyngier and Fialho: 2010, pp. 13-33; Cots: 2006, pp. 336-345). Accordingly, students should be trained in the skill of judging the world around them thoughtfully. Yang and Chou estimate that it takes students longer than one academic semester to cultivate critical thinking skills, as students need to experience the phases of acquisition and transfer (Yang & Chou: 2008, pp. 666-684).

Intended as a practical and pedagogical classroom tool for critical analysis of texts, Hyatt presents a critical literacy frame (Hyatt: 2005, pp. 43-59). The critical literacy frame allows analysis of text from a micro lexico-grammatical level and macro semantic and societal levels. Similarly, Setyaningsih describes how critical literacy is related to such issues as identity, power, critical awareness, and empowerment in EFL education and suggests a pedagogical framework for empowering EFL students (Setyaningsih: 2019, pp. 297-307). Adopting a critical literacy frame is expected to enlighten EFL educational practices in the following areas: helping students to celebrate their multiple identities as well as understand the changing face of the world,

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empowering students through challenging unequal power relations, and raising awareness about how to reflect critically on the world and the word. In Idnani's opinion, instructors aiming to augment students' critical thinking skills should focus on creating a class environment that emphasizes speculation, using tasks that require analyzing content whilst at the same time developing learners' oral and written language skills (Idnani: 2017, pp. 403-405).

Ntoulia asserts that schema theory occupies the center of the current understanding of cognition in that schemas receive, sort, classify, and hold information (Ntoulia: 2020). Schemas are acquired and extended as the result of vicarious and direct experiences. Two kinds of knowledge reside in schemas: text knowledge referring to the information accumulated through a reader's experience, and world knowledge, referring to the information accumulated through day-to-day experience. To be in an excellent position to bridge the schema gaps and prepare students for increased independence, instructors have to know each and every student so that they can design a variety of appropriate activities. A "say, mean, matter" strategy can be applied to enhance critical thinking skills via literature. Activities based on this strategy are a three-column chart with the three headings: say, mean, and matter.

Esplugas and Landwehr believe that a successful literature class is a class in which the instructor enables his/her students to exercise their critical reading skills in interpreting a text (Esplugas & Landwehr: 1996, pp. 449-461). By applying specific cognitive strategies in a systematic manner when analyzing literary works, students learn not only to substantiate their interpretations through well-reasoned arguments but also to become aware of the reasoning process itself. Through character analysis, theme analysis, and narrator analysis, instructors should seek to integrate critical thinking skills into linguistic and literary analyses of a literary work.

As far as literature instruction is concerned, Collins mentions that when literature is approached from a problem-solving perspective, students should be asked to evaluate evidence; draw conclusions; make inferences; and develop a line of thinking (Collins: 1993, pp. 510-516). In order to become critical thinkers, students should learn how to value their own thinking for them to compare their interpretations with others. Seeking to boost critical thinking skills through story reading, Commeyras introduces a critical-thinking reading lesson format to use with stories in the basal reader: a dialogical-thinking reading lesson (DTRL) (Commeyras: 1993, pp. 486-494). The format aims to engage students in reasonable reflective thinking so as to decide what they believe about a story-specific issue. A "DTRL" encourages students to return to the text to verify information, consider multiple interpretations, identify reasons to support interpretations, and evaluate the acceptability and relevance of alternative interpretations.

Shannon is of the opinion that conflict within and among voices in a classroom is a fact of life because we are not a homogeneous society with one set of interests (Shannon: 1993, pp. 86-94). Voice is a social, not a personal matter for individuals. When developing democratic voices, instructors and students should place their experiences at the center of the curriculum and ask how they wish to live together. This will enable all concerned parties to examine the linguistic, historical, scientific, social, artistic, economic, spiritual, and emotional factors.

Taylor et al. portray a number of elements to include in a critical language awareness syllabus, namely, social awareness of discourse, whether spoken or written, critical awareness of diversity-related to language varieties, and consciousness of and practice for change (Taylor et al.:2018, pp.1-14). Valuing the role novels play, Marschall and Davis emphasize introducing novel strategies to enhance critical reading while relying on the re-examination of fundamental questions. Critical reading must be clearly defined, methods for teaching in terms of the definition must be developed, and methods of testing in terms of the definition must be created. (Marschall & Davis: 2012, pp. 63-68)

To end with, this part of the paper describes a number of strategies, activities, and procedures which EFL practitioners can use for the enhancement of critical thinking skills through literature. These are critical discourse analysis, critical literacy frame, schema theory-related activities, problem-solving techniques, DTRL strategy, voice enhancement strategy, and suggestions for critical and social awareness of discourse. All these strategies, activities, and procedures, if appropriately implemented in accordance with instructional aims and students' academic levels, are expected to yield the acquisition of critical thinking for lifelong learning.

This part presents a number of research studies that have been conducted within related areas of study. To start with, Wiboonwachara examined the effect of question-based activities on students' critical thinking

skills alongside the subjects' opinions of the question-based activities (Wiboonwachara: 2019, pp. 12-23). A sample of forty-three second-year students majoring in English participated in the study. The study findings indicated that the critical thinking skills of subjects became higher after the implementation of the study at a 0.05 level of significance. Further, the subjects' opinions of question-based activities were also higher following the implementation of the study. The subjects became better aware of questioning in both academic and life situation contexts.

Tosuncuoglu applied a study with the aim of measuring participants' perceptions of critical thinking sub-dimensions, involving two hundred and twenty-two students at Karabuk University (Tosuncuoglu: 2018, pp. 20-28). The study results in relation to the variable of gender proved that there was no significant difference among the sub-dimensions of flexibility, perseverance-patience, open-mindedness, and meta-cognition. The study results also showed that senior-year subjects had more patience and perseverance in comparison to sophomore-year subjects with respect to the sub-dimension of perseverance-patience, indicating that subjects gained more patience and perseverance when the study level had become higher.

Yang and Gamble designed a study where two groups: experimental and control, were involved (Yang & Gamble: 2013, pp. 398-412). Experimental group students were engaged in critical thinking enhanced activities like peer critiques, whereas control group students were engaged in non-critical thinking enhanced activities. The findings revealed that experimental group students achieved a significant improvement in terms of English language proficiency when compared to the control group students.

In their study, Beachboard and Beachboard investigated the relationship between the assignment of higher-order thinking tasks and students' opinions of their institutions' contributions to their academic improvement and career preparation (Beachboard & Beachboard: 2010, pp. 53-71). The results showed that the extra effort made by faculty members to involve their students in higher-order thinking assignments made a difference regarding the enhancement of critical thinking skills.

DISCUSSION

Tung and Chang implemented a research study investigating whether literature would help weak thinkers to improve their critical thinking. The results demonstrated that literature played a positive role in helping weak students to enhance their critical thinking skills (Tung & Chang: 2009, pp. 287-317). Tung and Chang, therefore, recommend that more time be allocated for weak students to challenge their ideas at a deeper level. Additionally, group presentations should be used, and follow-up courses need to be designed in order for all students to promote their critical thinking skills whilst reading literature.

Moon et al. tested how domain knowledge, reading topic, and structural complexity affected the inference skill in relation to students' writing (Moon et al.: 2019). Three types of inferences were examined: within-text inferences, elaborative inferences, and incorrect inferences. Both high-knowledge and low-knowledge groups read three Spanish passages, each on a different topic and at a different level of syntactic complexity. The results revealed that high-knowledge readers generated a richer and more accurate mental model than low-knowledge readers did. In addition, the level of complexity and the reading topics indicated a complex pattern of influence on the generation of inferences.

Concerned with critical thinking and creative writing, Btoosh and Taweel introduced a pedagogy and theory of polyphonic voice in writing. Btoosh and Taweel introduced the term polyphonic in application to the literary voice in order to describe its multiple natures. To develop a polyphonic voice in writing, the researcher used a sequence of exercises that helped learners to move from the one-sided dominant voice to a voice that was capable of representing a variety of textual voices and textual selves by ensuring distance from the "true self" of the writer. The researcher also investigated the development of the concept of voice in writing through three major periods: Expressionism and Romanticism in the arts, as well as composition studies and Postmodernism. Based on this study, Btoosh and Taweel propose a postmodern critique of the authenticity of any single voice in writing (Btoosh & Taweel: 2011, pp. 205-228).

Involving a first-year composition class, Mathison-Fife studied pedagogies of critique, using the theme of utopia to involve students in cultural critique (Mathison-Fife: 1999, pp. 3437-3437). The description of the class was framed by the distinction between rhetorical positioning: how the course encouraged participants to orient

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themselves in terms of the audience as well as the purpose for writing, and critical positioning: how the course encouraged participants to orient themselves towards the focus of their critique and the critical discourse they used. The structure of the class resulted in the ability to reflect on one's own involvement with contradictory discourses and the articulation of questions that reflected intellectual engagement and critical positioning for some participants that included a deep awareness of discourse. The discussion of rhetorical positioning was on whether students recognized connections between classroom discourse and public discourse and whether they considered themselves as able to affect change through discourse.

Interested in strategy use, Saito analyzed the learning effect of unknown word inference strategy on Japanese high school students (Saito: 1998, pp. 81-97). The control group was given the lists of unknown words prior to reading, while the experimental group was asked to infer the meanings of unknown words while reading. After the reading comprehension task, all the subjects took the unknown word tests. The results showed that the unknown word strategy was more effective in retaining the unknown words than the word list learning strategy.

Manning explored the relationship between critical thinking and attitudes towards reading, involving a number of community college students enrolled in a critical reading course. The study was conducted using two sections (Manning: 1999, pp. 2838-2839). One class was taught the regular curriculum along with instruction in five critical thinking skills, and the other class was taught the regular curriculum. The students in both groups were given a pre-treatment reading attitude assessment and a critical thinking test to determine if reading attitude and critical thinking skills were comparable. Post-treatment measures of reading attitude and critical thinking were analyzed to check if there was a relationship between reading attitude and critical thinking. The findings proved the absence of any statistically significant correlations between attitude towards reading and critical thinking.

All in all, the aforementioned studies are of use to EFL researchers and practitioners in the sense that they touch upon reality, enquiring and proposing. Considering what previous researchers have conducted, concluded, and recommended remains informative and enlightening.

CONCLUSION

The concept of critical thinking comprises dispositions and higher-order thinking skills. Dispositions can be considered habits of mind and attitudes, including a willingness to compromise, open-mindedness, flexibility, and respect for diverse opinions, amongst other characteristics. Higher-order thinking skills, on the other hand, include the ability to make inferences, utilize deductive and inductive reasoning, see between and behind the words, judge evidence, solve problems, make objective decisions, and evaluate complex arguments, amongst other skills (Al-Alami: 2013).

Critical thinking is required for literature studies. Literature reading, for instance, involves retrieving one's prior experiences to construct meaning. As students read a literary text, they need to understand both connotations and denotations, comprehend the literal and implied meanings, recognize the narrator's tone and attitude, and deduce the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items. Moreover, students need to discriminate between facts and opinions, locate appropriate details to find connections between events and actions, identify literary devices, perceive multiple points of view, and appreciate beauty depicted in content and reflected in language.

A purposeful course to focus on literature from a critical perspective should first expose students to the basic differences among paraphrasing, explicating, describing a text, and critical inquiry. The course should then expose students to the tools of literary criticism such as stylistic devices, literary concepts, genres, modes, and other descriptive means necessary to draw up a critique. To ensure quality outcomes, criteria are required to highlight the qualities of thought learners should strive to aim for, such as precision, relevance, inquisitiveness, validity, accuracy, logic, clarity, adequacy, depth, objectivity, specificity, and breadth.

Strategies, activities, and procedures aiming to foster critical thinking via literature should be of inspiration to students. Within the context of EFL in higher education, the author of this paper proposes adopting a six-

W model while portraying a literary text: who, whom, what, why, where, and when. Literature instructors are also advised to implement a seven-step reading approach when delineating a text: identify gist, analyze main ideas, interpret beliefs and occurrences, infer information implicitly conveyed, draw conclusions, assess attitudes, and evaluate language use. To boost critical thinking skills while discussing literature, the author recommends emphasizing essential elements of critical thinking activities like raising intriguing questions, welcoming divergent answers which are supported with evidence, and providing ample opportunities to judge the evidence.

Logically speaking, the responsibility of creating critical thinking atmospheres in the literature classroom highly falls on instructors' shoulders. What is more, the more effective practices students have, the more they are expected to acquire a repertoire of critical thinking skills that will equip them with sufficient tools to encounter the challenges of the current century confidently and persistently.

On a final note, developing critical thinking via literature should be amongst higher education institutions' priorities, for as is known, today's critical thinkers are tomorrow's health professionals and promising leaders. True, it is that for higher education institutions to empower EFL learners with critical thinking skills via means of literature is demanding in a number of ways. Nevertheless, if we do not experience authentic challenges in our journey to attain targets, hardly can we perceive the tasty seeds we plough!

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