

DISCOVERING MULTIPLE TRUTHS IN LITERATURE: THE KEY TO INCULCATING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing the educational potential of literature in teaching English is an effective method of language instruction. While the primary goal of such lessons is improving the students' language skills, teachers are granted an opportunity to engage students in earnest discussions of the chosen literary composition. The secondary, yet not unimportant, goal of language lessons thus forms for purposes of preparing young malleable minds for the perils of the World's pervasive ambiguity. Attaining critical thinking skills is the process of gradually learning how to discern the veracity of various factoids, individual stories, collective events and the deliberations of separate minds. Critical thinking translates to a decision on the shape of individual truth and the consequences that arise as a result. Literature's nature allows for multiple interpretations of a singular idea, emotion, consideration or action. The notion that reality is formed in individual minds is a central tenet in various schools of thought. Applying to that belief, reality and our perception of it is shaped by the lens through which we view it. Therefore, thorough and honest investigation of the written word may lead to different realizations of the world. Multiple interpretations gestate when thinkers apply their experiences and ideology on the same thread of words found in the pages of a book of poems or stories in prose. When confronted with a literary artwork, students must form judgments about the author's intent, the overall tone of the story, the characters' motivations and the values they express. The journey undertaken toward the truth will vary depending on the truth-seeker. The same story will provoke different opinions in most cases. The students' individual truths will clash to a minor or major degree depending on the compatibility of their experiences. The miserable Valjean, for instance, steals a loaf of bread and forces exclamations of disgust from certain readers due to the criminality of his ways. The majority, however, consider him a hero whose morality collides with the faceless laws void of humanity. Discovering the truth in words erected for progeny is a deeply individual exercise. The beauty and soundness of the revealed truth will depend on the conviction of the seeker. Well-nurtured truths stand tall in defiance against the ambiguity that surrounds us.

Keywords: multiple truths, literature, critical thinking

1. Introduction and Background

Utilizing the educational potential of literature in teaching English is an effective method of language instruction.

While the primary goal of such lessons is improving the main English language skills, teachers can also engage students in discussions about the chosen literary piece. The secondary goal of language lessons incorporating literary forms is attaining and nurturing the students' critical thinking skills.

Literature's nature allows for multiple interpretations of a singular idea, emotion, consideration or action. The notion of reality is formed in individual minds is a central tenet in various schools of thought. Applying to that belief, reality and our perception of it is shaped by the lens through which we view it.

Therefore, thorough and honest investigations of the written word may lead to different realizations of the world. The journey undertaken towards the truth will vary depending on the truth-seeker (e.g. Valjean's experiences).

The beauty and soundness of revealed truths depend on the conviction of their seekers. Well-nurtured truths stand tall in defiance against the ambiguity that surrounds us.

1.1.Key concepts: Critical thinking

Ennis (1985) as cited in Hayes (1990) defines critical thinking as reasonable and reflective thinking which is focused on deciding what to believe or do. In the context of literature teaching in English classes, Hayes (1990) says that students are expected to make decisions on:

- different story interpretations.
- the merits of an argument.
- what is moral or immoral.
- the veracity of the information they consume.

Therefore, according to Hayes (1990), critical thinking in the framework of literature should result in:

- drawing inferences,
- making comparisons,
- determining causes and effects,
- recognizing the impact frame-of-reference has on judgment,
- judging the reliability of sources,
- spotting over-generalizations,
- distinguishing between facts and opinions and more.

Scriven and Paul (2003) as cited in Khatib, M. and Alizadeh, I. (2012) defined critical thinking as an “intellectually disciplined process in which students actively and skillfully conceptualize, apply, synthesize, and evaluate information generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, and communication.”

For the purposes of this study, I have constructed my own working definition, based on the aforementioned. It is as follows:

Literary critical thinking is the ability to form individual truths about the author's intent, the overall tone of the story, the characters' motivations and the values they express, which has an impact on the student comprehension and interpretation of the literary work

1.2. Key concepts: Language Skills

Another important concept to do with this paper is the concept of Language skills. Language skills are in the focus of language acquisition as teachers' around the globe try to improve their student's language abilities. There are four commonly-accepted distinction of main language skills that help learners comprehend and produce the target language:

- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking
- Writing

These are especially important in the context of ESL/EFL teaching. English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language are specific types of use of the English language by speakers with different native languages.

The process of teaching English in ESL/EFL setting varies as a result of the student population, teaching setting and teaching goals. ESL teaching is conducted in a country with a predominant English-speaking population while EFL is conducted in a country where English is not the dominant language.

1.3. Key concepts: Literature

As this paper's main focus is on literature and it's influence on student's critical thinking skills, one cannot go deeper into this paper's aims and objectives without defining literature in this context.

The classical (amalgam) definition (deemed incomplete by the authour of this paper) defines literature as a body of imaginative works in the form of poetry, prose and dramatic texts distinguishable by the aesthetic excellence of the execution and intention of the author.

Depending on the scope, literature can be further chategorised as:

- The entire literature of humankind
- The literature of different peoples
- The literature of individual authors

The “modern and hollistic” definitions of Literature are as follows:

“Literature encompasses every voiced experience expressed in any form. Sermons, speeches, films, memorials, music, spoken word, comic strips all fall under the umbrella of literature. The shifting of trends resulted in the Academy awarding the Nobel Prize in literature to Bob Dylan, who is one of the most prominent cultural figures of today.”

2. Methodology

This paper's aim is to qualitatively describe and assess the potential benefits of implementing literary texts in the EFL/ESL classroom with regards to improving the students' critical thinking skills

This paper will solely focus on descriptive, qualitative data that will hopefully result in better understanding of the benefits of implementing English literature in curriculum for English classes in N. Macedonia. Although a further research is expected to be conducted in the autumn of 2019, when the school year begins, this paper will focus on literature review on the benefits of literature and the multiple truths in it, in regards of developing students' critical thinking skills.

With this in mind, the main objectives of the further research based on this paper are as follows:

Objective 1: To examine whether or not the proposed activities motivate students to draw inferences from their past experiences?

Objective 2: To explore whether or not students started valuing and viewing literary pieces as mirrors of their own lives?

Objective 3: To examine whether or not students have become more aware of the connections between literature and life now?

Objective 4: To inspect whether or not students react to literature both logically and emotionally?

3. Results of the literature review

Chi-An and Shu-Ying (2009) conducted an in-depth study and consulted various researchers finding that literature reading nurtures critical reading since students have to:

- Recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences to construct meanings of the text.
- Differentiate facts from opinions.
- Understand the literal or implied meanings and the narrator's tone.
- Locate details related to the issues.
- Find out the connections between the events or actions.
- Detect an inferential relationship from the details observed.
- Be perceptive of multiple points of views and
- Apply moral reasoning and fair-grounded judgments.

"The setting and the language of a literary work provide readers with a variety of real-world scenarios to construct meanings of self and life incrementally." "A piece of literature is a mirror of life and a world reconstructed." "By investigating into its plot, thematic development, and the interactions of the characters with others and the milieu, readers are exposed to multiple points of view and thus compelled to think and rethink their own ideas and actions." (Chi-An and Shu-Ying, 2009, p.292)

Literature's nature relates it directly to reality. One could say that literature has an even more powerful and significant role in life, because it may become the tool to criticize life (cf. Madondo, 2012).

"Critical Literacy as an approach to teaching literature develops the potentialities of each individual in such a way that the educated individual is able to make informed judgments and think critically"

"Pedagogic practices in the teaching of literature should encourage learners as future leaders to explore various sources of knowledge that would enable them to learn to reflect critically on the society in which they find themselves" (Madondo, 2012, p.34).

"Another line of argument that supports the constructive role of literature in fostering critical thinking and reading comprehension is that it invites learners into the world of problem solving. Problem solving requires analysis, synthesis and evaluation of different aspects of the same or different issues." (Khatib & Alizadeh, 2012, p.576).

"Literature among other text types is fertile with ideas to critically look at."

"Critical thinking is the cornerstone of education."

"Critical thinking prepares us not to take things for granted and to attempt to unravel the hidden agenda of texts." (Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011, p.203)

"This exercise [engaging students in discussion] benefits students in two ways: firstly, it gives them an opportunity to express their own ideas about life and relationships, values and beliefs, and interests and dislikes; secondly, it

forces them to use a more complex set of structures and a more advanced range of vocabulary” (“Unit 5: Facilitating Critical Thinking through Literature”, n.d).

“Students in literature classes are expected to think critically and apply their critical and analytical skills to the texts they study.” (Kathib et al. 2013, p.3)

Furthermore, a recent study (Stefanova et al. 2017) found that students indeed have approached things with more advanced/developed critical thinking skills after the series of activities to do with literary texts in the EFL classroom in Spain.

3.1 Strategies for developing students’ critical thinking skills

There are multiple strategies that are sure to help teachers in their endeavours to improve their students’ critical thinking skills. Some of these strategies include

3.1.1. Discovering the students’ current views, values, beliefs and ideologies

Knowing the student, he/she works with is an imperative for every good teacher. By knowing the students, teachers can customize their lessons in order to fit their students’ unique needs. To get to know his students better, a teacher should know his students’ current views, values, beliefs and ideologies. Discovering this can be done by presenting them with invoking texts and posing simple questions, such as:

- Did you like/dislike the text? Why?
- What do you think about the setting and the story?
- Which characters are your favourites? Why?
- Do you agree with the character choices?
- What would you do different?
- If you were [character name] what would you have done different?

3.1.2. Applying different critical lenses

Instructing on applying a multitude of critical lenses on a singular literary piece can be done in order to help students inhabit a variety of perspectives; interrogate beliefs and ideologies; develop the ability to read resistantly and become enlightened witnesses; discover their own truth (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Willhelm, 2011) Some of the critical lenses that can be applied include:

- Reader-response – Meaning constructed by readers
- Archetypal perspective – Recognizing archetypal settings, characters, themes, etc.
- Formal perspective – Paying attention to form and convention
- Psychological character perspective – Examines the internal motivations of literary characters
- Biographical perspective – The impact of the author’s experiences on his/her work
- Historical Perspective – View the work in its historical and cultural context (social, political, economic, intellectual climate)
- Social class perspective – How our belonging in a certain social class affects our view of the world
- Gender perspective – How different genders view the world differently
- The deconstruction perspective – Questioning the social constructs

3.1.3. Inferring, collecting, understanding and synthetizing the various meanings of the text

This can be done through posing open-ended inferring questions to individual students or groups of students for purposes of revealing the truths hidden in a specific text. Furthermore, quoting the corresponding sections of the text and laying out the steps in the process of inferring the individual truths (meanings) can help as well.

Ultimately, students will be expected to collect the various truths and discuss any conflicting truths.

3.1.4. Constructing new truths through creative writing exercises

Writing excercises can help students develop their critical skills even further. Knowing this, the teacher can ask students to write the ending by providing the beginning sections of a literary piece or can ask them to create alternate endings to a given literary piece.

Infusing characters with new abilities, views and beliefs and exploring the consequences of such changes can also be done in order to encourage students to “think outside of the box”

3.1.5. Reflections on the improvement of the students critical thinking skills

Reflection and action upon it are cone of the crutial strategies that help teachers evaluate their lessons and what the students have learned in them.

By doing his own sort of qualitative evaluation of the study objectives, the teacher can discover whether or not the lessons have met the needs and whether or not he sees an improvement in the way students analyse a given literary piece in a critical manner.

4. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, this paper concludes that there are indeed numerous benefits of implementing Literature in ESL/EFL classes, one of which is developing students' critical skills. By proper instruction, students can be guided to discovering multiple truths in any literary piece thus becoming more critical readers themselves.

Different strategies can be employed to ensure students interact with literary text in a more critical, conscious manner. Prolonged use of such strategies will without a doubt lead to developing of their critical assessment skills.

Given the fact that in literature rarely is ever, is there an objective truth, this is considered a great way to guide students on a meaningful journey of discovering their own truth through the power of words.

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