

Exploring the Potential of Literature in Shaping EFL Learners' Critical Mind

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper seeks to examine the usefulness of literary texts in enhancing the students' critical abilities. It also attempts to shed light on the way literature leads students to think, reflect, question and analyse what they read and respond to it critically. This study addresses the following questions: What importance can be accorded to literary texts in developing critical thinking? How can literature reading re-shape students' critical mind? Are literary texts worth reading for improving critical thinking? To find answers to these questions an experimental study was undertaken with a sample of Algerian EFL undergraduate students at Mostaganem University. The results obtained from the fieldwork analysis reveal that the literary discussions provided in literature classes, student' written assignments and the oral exchanges about a literary text contribute to the progress of the students' analytical skills and help them to shape their own critical mind. Yet, in order to enhance EFL students reading strategies, the reading atmosphere should be facilitated by the teacher and used as a free discussion ground where learners can freely debate, question and interpret. So, Literature does not only imply telling stories, it is telling a story which can create a feeling, an impression, develop ideas, and comment on a specific culture or a human behavior.*

KEYWORDS: analytical, critical, culture, literary texts, mind, thinking.

1. Introduction

The 21st century learning requires critical thinking as one of the main goals to develop students' capacities. Literary reading can be an effective medium to develop it. Reading a literary text, realizing its comprehension and interpretation requires the use of analytical skills, deep thinking and constructive opinions. To undertake such tasks students need to explore literature works. The common problem with our EFL students is their

unwillingness to deal with literary text and their propensity to prefer other texts than literary ones.

The present study attempts to map out the potential of literary reading to enhance students' critical skills, enlarge their savoir and boost their debate and discussions strategies in the EFL context. This article seeks to examine how a literary reading experience leads the EFL learner to be a critical thinker. It is hypothesized in this study that literary texts can be an effective tool that improves students' communicative skills and thus critical competence. Putting this in mind, experimental reading sessions have been designed with a sample group of 24 EFL learners at Mostaganem University.

This study would contribute in helping teachers and learners to rethink on the usefulness of literary texts. Teachers are invited to explore some reading activities that would be helpful in developing their students' mental and critical thinking abilities. Moreover, EFL learners would develop positive attitudes and minimize their boredom and disinterest in the literature class.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Literature: Conventional Use

Under the 20th century paradigm, the literary language was superior to spoken language" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). With the appearance of communicative approaches to language learning that focus the development of communication competences in the target language, there has been a shift of interest towards the use of literary texts so that students would be able to express their ideas and opinions in *the* target language.

Collie & Slater (1987) state that using literature has become quite central in language teaching, they see that the inclusion of literature within FL classes offers an opportunity for learners to discuss, explore, and critically reflect on themselves in relation to others. Therefore, creating such a dynamic context can boost up critical thinking abilities as well as maintain a learner-centered approach. In the same line of thought, Hall (2005) points out that literature has witnessed a renewed reconsideration with the progress of communicative approach in language teaching as it presents an authentic learning material. *Further*, Hall adds that literary texts expose students to real conversations that that

can be found in real life context. These dialogues and conversations create an atmosphere in the classroom for using language which the learner might need in the society.

Similarly, Ghosn (2002) and Van (2009) point out that literary texts are very motivating regarding their authenticity and the meaningful context they offer. In doing so, different practitioners and teachers acknowledge the usefulness literary texts in shaping students thinking by engaging them in real discussions. The byproduct of this will improve their general cultural awareness and stimulate their creative and literary imagination.

Literary texts give the opportunity to shape different interpretations and opinions gained from the literary reading experience. This provides the students with the opportunity of a real motivation and interaction between the learner and the text (Widdowson, 1982). Moreover, a literature class is based on meaning generation in which “the reader is placed in an active interactional role, working with and making sense of the (literary) language” (Brumfit, 1986, p. 15). In doing so, the literature teacher should help the student to discover the meaning of the text by himself.

2.2 Critical Thinking as a Competence

The demands of globalization have made the critical thinking a necessity for the development of a person’s intellectual growth. The EFL learner seeks to be a competent speaker and a critical thinker at the same time. Being a critical thinker implies the ability of the learner to analyse , question and solve problems. There have been a wide range of definitions to critical thinking. Facione (2000) refers critical thinking to the ability to judge and reflect on a behavior or a belief (pp.61-84). Cognitively, Willingham (2007) claims that a critical thinker can see the two sides of a subject, he can be open to a new belief that is different to his ideas, deduce, comment and bring evidence. Yet, it should be assumed that critical thinking does not necessarily imply criticizing.

Researchers in the field of critical thinking have identified some elements that shape critical thinking of a learner, open-mindedness towards others is one of the main elements that constitute our thinking, the willingness to be better formed and flexible and being able to express opinions and accept other opinions. (Facione, 1990).

2.3 Relating Critical Thinking to Literature

There are different strategies to develop critical thinking abilities of the EFL learners. One of these strategies is the implementation of literary reading in the learning process. Schmidt (2002, p. 117) states that critical thinking in a literature session can be practiced by asking questions, these questions lead learners to understand the outside world through characters and events. Wallace (1999) indicates that being critical implies the ability to question and analyse the underlined meaning and how it is used through language, it also focuses on the importance of considering the ideological dimensions of language as a part of everyday life.

From this perspective, being a critical literature reader consists of focusing one's own practices and bringing them along when confronting another culture and here the learner will better understand their own behavior and construct a consciousness about their own cultural identity. Literary reading makes learners understand and recognize the different facts of their society and express themselves consciously. Studying literature for an intercultural exchange teaches learners that emotions are diverse and at the same time unique to each person and so they could review their own perceptions as humans.

Critical thinking, therefore, is an important reading skill. Effective reading requires readers to read critically. As a reader, the learner questions the evidence that the writers presents through their writings. The question "Have learners read critically?" is important to be asked. Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2010) attribute critical thinking to the way of analyzing and evaluating thinking with the aim of making it better by keeping an open mind and constructive ideas.

3. Research Methodology

At the outset of this discussion, it would be suitable to revisit the aim of the current research so that the main objectives could be reconsidered, which in turn, would give the reader adequate justification as to why the current research design has been selected over any other.

3.1 Data Collection Procedures

To gather data for this study, a mixed method approach is used (quantitative and qualitative). The population addressed in this study is third year undergraduate students at Mostaganem University. A sample group has been chosen to realize some reading sessions. The reading sessions have been preceded by an attitude questionnaire and followed by an interview to find out more about practical issues encountered by the learners in using a particular literary text in the observed classes, to follow up some specific and interesting issues and in order to govern the data from experimental class observation.

The Reading Sessions were carried out to observe the students' reactions and progress in the literature class, and to examine their critical competences and responses to the foreign culture. The researcher in this experimental study has accounted for all the factors that may intervene in the study. The selection of the literary works is considerably related to the aims of the research questions. The following table summarizes the sample texts chosen for the study:

| Literary Texts' Title | Genre | Author's Name |
|----------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| The Boarding House/Eveline | Short story | James Joyce |
| The White Stocking | Short story | D.H Lawrence |
| Of Mice and Men | Novella | John Steinbeck |
| The Zoo Story | Drama | Edward Albee |
| The Room | Drama | <u>Harold Pinter</u> |
| At Grass | Poetry | Philip Larkin |
| Reasons for Attendance | Poetry | Philip Larkin |

Table 1: The Selection of the Reading Texts

The proposed activities for the classroom observation and experiment are quite varied, as they are associated to the research objectives and situation. Students of the experimental group mainly are exposed to a set of classroom activities (expression, communication, interpretation, diagnosis and construction of their own knowledge).

So, Discussions of the literary texts are based on asking students to relate some FL cultural practices to their native context and then to reflect upon them and compare. The researcher had to ask some important questions: “what do I want the participants to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of their reading of literature?” “The list of objectives determined by the researcher for reading literature:

- Enabling students to recognize the role literature plays in telling stories.
- Enable students to grasp some cultural features about the FL world through its illustration in the literary text.
- Develop the students' critical thinking competencies.
- Invite students to relate the content of the literary text to their own experiences and analyse it.
- Empowering students to develop discussion critical skills that enable them to converse with peers about the literature they read.

4. Research Findings

The attitude questionnaires were used to check students' perceptions about literature. Here are some of the questions which were addressed in the questionnaire:

Q1: How do you find the literature module?

There are students who opted for more than one possibility. Interestingly, we notice that 37% of the respondents find literature as an interesting subject, whereas 36 % of them s consider it as a difficult subject. Many students' answers were fluctuating between two possibilities; students who find literature appreciable but difficult confirm the research assumptions that students find difficulties when dealing with the literary text. So some learners appreciate literature but they still find it complicated. Equally interesting, 27 % of the informants think of literature as a boring subject; this might lead one to think that students have no interest and motivation towards reading literature as it might suggest that there is a problem in the teaching strategies used by teachers to enhance their literature teaching skills.

| Possibilities | NB | % |
|---------------|----|---------|
| Appreciative | 36 | 37.89 % |
| boring | 26 | 27.36% |
| Complicated | 35 | 36.84% |
| Easy | 06 | 09.31% |

Table 2: Learners' Attitudes

Q2: In your opinion, is there any relationship between learning literature and critical thinking? Please explain.

| Possibilities | NB | % |
|---------------|----|--------|
| Yes | 70 | 73.68% |
| No | 25 | 26.31% |

Table 3: Students' Responses to the Relation between Literature and Critical Thinking

Some of the respondents' comments were as follows:

- *When you read, you can speak about what you read and the story and its culture.*
- *Debating about what happens.*
- *Listening to others commenting on the text makes you ask questions.*
- *Writers invite us to be conscious.*
- *It includes different ideas, and visions.*

Most of the respondents expressed a favorable attitude towards the conception of literature as medium to develop their cognitive critical skills. Students were aware that studying literature is necessarily related to thinking, and that it is an important medium to explore the cultural aspects of the foreign culture. According to the results, more than 70 % of the students expressed their agreement that literature shapes their skills of criticizing and analysing. The responses provided by students affirm that they were aware of the role literature plays in exploring others.

An interpretation to these results might be that student's experiences with the literature reading along the three years affect their

attitudes; and the module of literature might be an opportunity to get in touch with the norms of the FL community. These findings are in conformity with Roberts (2010) who defines literature as writings that tell stories, dramatize situations, and represents ideas, it is an open window through which readers can explore different parts of the foreign world especially if a visit or a stay is impossible. One of literature's functions is that it pushes readers to think about what is different and shape their own perceptions without judging.

It might be said that students who agreed on the relation between literature and critical thinking, have personal interests to read about the events and themes portrayed in the text, and they know the function literature might have in helping them adopt and understand manners conforming to those of the foreign community.

Concerning the experimental sessions, the tasks developed around the readings consisted of three main stages. First, the pre-reading stage which aims to warm up the students, and this would give them insights about the literary text, the author and the writing era as it can serve as an effective procedure to check the learners' prior knowledge and cultural background. Second, the while reading stage provides a means to check students' comprehension and grasp of the basic meanings of the texts. At this stage, students are asked to analyze, interpret and evaluate the events in the reading text. All of them are required to participate in the class discussion whether they complete the reading or not. This technique might motivate them for further readings. Third, the post reading stage aims to make students interact with the work, construct meaning from it and discuss their opinions and personal views with each other. The written Assignment are used as a medium for checking the students' own understanding, which might not be expressed in the oral discussions, especially those passive learners who rarely take part in the oral discussions, they can express freely in a written form. It is important to mark that the researcher's focus is to highlight the main features raised in the experimental group sessions.

It has been noticed that students would appreciate the reading of a literary text and the literature module if they are familiarized with the aims of dealing with literature. Several students ask the question "Why are we studying literature?", unless this question is answered from the beginning of the literary class, their interest won't be gained.

Other questions can be addressed at the outset of a literature class like “what is literature?” Generally, students may find this question without any aim, but it is important as it can raise a discussion about how it functions. Students’ answers should be accepted and reflected on, the fact of giving the question with a title of a novel, poem or a short story can signal their readiness of answering or at least reflecting upon the question.

Therefore, learners take part of their own culture, their ethnicity and origins but they should recognize the difference, and shape a critical and objective vision about them. Indeed, to understand a culture is to see it from the angle of its natives. In doing so, the cultural exchanges explored through literature tend to shed light on humanity issue and encourage the idea of exchange with the other and develop discussions about the differences.

The results have revealed that attitudes towards literature gain a fluctuation from appreciation to rejection. In fact, for the success of the reading experience; learners should be conscious that literature is mainly related to EFL issues. One implication highlights the importance of integrating the literary knowledge that makes use of any genre. The following points might be relevant:

- The work on literary texts boosts up students analytical skills; discover the author universe even if this universe is foreign to that of the learner.
- Reading literary texts leads learners to compare two different cultural backgrounds. This comparison develops his or their critical abilities. The differences that learners observe enhance their consciousness about the features of their own world. The cultural bridge found when reading is not an end but it should be the inspirational starting point that pushes the learners’ to reflect on what they read.

Considering critical thinking as one of the important aspects in an EFL context, it requires taking into account the students’ different opinions and view about the text. Meanwhile, it is important to approach a literary text with its culture. The cultural knowledge in this study is viewed then as a pedagogical aspect that allow learners to contextualize their learning. Teaching critical thinking through literature can be a motivational aspect for learners to discover and debate what is new and

different. Thus, this study indicates that reading is a medium of observation, analysis and reflection. Decoding some cultural behaviours and understanding them is in fact investing with one's critical skills. It is important to focus on the culture of the learner and provide him with the opportunity to generalize the past experiences. Yet, meeting stereotypes cannot be avoided. The following steps can be taken by the teacher to help students overcome these stereotypes:

- Providing learners with information about the target culture. The teacher can ask them to do a research about the country of the reading text, customs of its people and their beliefs. Here learners will gain insights and thus explore the differences with their own culture.
- Giving examples about behaviours in the target culture from the reading text. For instance, the teacher can ask learners to select a passage in which they find a cultural practice different from their own practices and discuss it in class (men women relationship , religion, love ...etc.)
- Trying to understand the native patterns seems to be a good activity that makes learners imagine or answer the question "what if ". This allows learners to analyse the behaviour from their own angle and thus they will be actively involved within the story's events and characters.
- Pushing students to make their own deductions about the differences that exist between their own behavioral feature and those of the foreign culture. They need to observe, reflect on and thus shape their own thinking.
- The teacher should make learners aware that tolerating differences is a must in a literature class otherwise students will feel uninterested in reading or discussing a foreign behavior found in a literary text.

- Discussions about a cultural issue in a literary text are easy to raise and do not require much planning. 30 minutes per session are quite enough, especially that EFL undergraduate students are in need of this kind of tasks. Yet, it is necessary to consider that reading in the class should be consolidated with prior reading at home either through preparing an overview about the story or through a proof reading.

The treatment procedure has demonstrated that whatever the literary genre is, the author, the level or the length of the text, the literary text seems to be an interesting medium to develop some literary and culture competences and openly discuss cultural and social issues. Even if the teacher opts for a short story, a poem or any other genre, he or she can integrate his learners if the activities are adapted according to the text and his or her students' level. The experimental study demonstrates that learners at the undergraduate level can appreciate explanations about the reading material only if teachers do not push them to know too many details about the author, the literary movement of the text or any other complex themes. They need a repetitive reading and activities that shape details of the literary text. One should mention that these details imply the vocabulary exploitation, culture and the underlying messages of the text.

Further, the study has revealed that the literature teacher is an important mediator who contributes in shaping his learners' cognitive critical capacities. He should bear in mind that there is no "correct" or "set" answer in literature, and that every opinion can be accepted and validated. For example, when asked, "Who is the most important character in *Of Mice and Men*?" There may be several valid responses. Another instance in the texts of Joyce is the implicit criticism of the social values of the Irish society.

Also, teachers should not focus only on one aspect of the text like the author's biography or the text themes and movement. Learners prefer some specific activities like loud reading, questions that focus on summarising the text events and whole class discussions. Taking notes during the literature class discussions should be also considered as one of

the important elements during any session. The results of the reading sessions have revealed that reading which does not touch the emotions of learners and their affection, brings them into boredom. For this reason, even if the reading experience seems to be a dull activity to learners, questions that push them to relate personally within the characters and the events would be helpful to elicit their personal feelings and emotions. The teacher should train his learners to explore the hidden messages and to react to them appropriately. In fact, this will help them to reflect on their own reactions and construct their own understandings about the text (Kramersch, 1998). Instances about these questions are:

- ✓ What do you think about the story?
- ✓ How do the characters' thoughts appear in the text?
- ✓ Do you think that this behavior would be acceptable in your own family?
- ✓ How do you find the character's' reaction in a particular situation?
- ✓ Can you give examples from your own context?
- ✓ How do you feel towards the character?
- ✓ If you were him, how would you behave? And why?
- ✓ Do you think that the love relations portrayed in the literary work are similar to the love stories in your culture?
- ✓ Suppose you were the author of the text, what would you change and why?
- ✓ Choose the characters that you liked most and provide adjectives that you think are appropriate to describe his attitude, personality and behaviour?
- ✓ What impression does the reading of the text create in you?

These questions can stimulate an attitude of questioning in the students to understand and tolerate the why of things. In her book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Kramersch (1993) focuses on the teaching of literary text in a whole chapter entitled "*Teaching the literary text*" (pp.130-176). She claims that creating a pedagogy of dialogue and conversation among learners helps to enhance diversity and awareness about the differences that exist between people. (p.131).

In the same line of thought, Ladousse (2001) pointed that literary reading stimulates the reader's emotional intelligence, and this makes literature adequate to the language classroom where the elements of

learners' emotional intelligence including self-awareness, empathy, and social skills have a positive effect on language learning process.

Therefore, these kinds of questions will enhance the learners' emotional interaction that requires stimulating his mental and affective capacities. Moreover, questioning his likes and dislikes after reading would make him feel responsible about his own reading. Further, it is essential to deal with literary text that suit the learner's needs and level. The literature teacher can start with short texts with simple themes. The goal should set on making learners able to enhance their reading process so that they will choose more challenging texts in their future readings.

Another important point raised by the experimenter is the strategy of "Literature Reading circles" that can contribute to the realization of the literary *Talk*. Literature Circles is a reading technique that helps learners to engage in cooperative exchanges and discussions. In this perspective, Daniels (2002) states that literature circles imply the reading by forming small groups which provide students with the opportunity of having a real interaction and discussion about their literary reading. In other words, literature circles can be motivating and appreciable at the same time, as it leads learners to show their competences. He goes further to add that effective literary circles require the students' participation in choosing the reading text, grouping them according to the text features , and allowing them to open discussion and questions.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the aim was to highlight the importance of reading in shaping EFL learners' critical cognitive abilities. EFL Students need to learn how to apply, analyze and evaluate what they read. These skills require more complex thought and cognitive engagement to enhance comprehension. So, In addition to speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, what learners need but often ignore is their critical thinking abilities. If the learners regard the literary text as a medium to think, they will be able to express their thoughts and ideas critically.

Besides, the literary text reading experience is not limited to a fixed methodology, it needs flexibility, and the teacher should opt for a coherent and selective approach that can push the learners to question things. It is therefore necessary to visualize the pleasure of the literary text reading as a starting point. A collective reading in a classroom is an

opportunity to share and exchange perceptions and thus activate students' analytical skills. It is also recommended for the literature teacher to privilege the relation text-learner, to make the learners work on the particularities of the text from their own perspectives. What is more, the reading process should seek more than comprehension and identifying meaning; it should imply the reconstruction of this meaning and engage the readers in their personal, logical, emotional and physical characteristics. That is why; the reading of literary texts has been favored by several scholars; as different aspects other than language can be improved within the literary material amongst which critical thinking.

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