

Essential Ways to Build Students' Critical Thinking in Literature Classes

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Abstract: *Critical thinking skill is considered one of the most important factors of teaching and learning in 21st century. It enhances students to think deeply and find proper solutions for different types of issues. Critical thinking is closely linked with the cognitive skills; it helps students to identify the problems and then confronts the learners with the best possible solutions. What makes students able to be problem solvers and critical learner is reading. Since language learners deal with different types of reading, it would be more effective if language teachers choose literary texts as a tool to build students' critical thinking skill. Literature genres encourage the learners to foster the causes and effects of each point in a text and not to limit their understanding by yes or no. To conceive the importance of building students' critical thinking through reading literary texts, this study was done. In addition, this paper examines the importance of critical thinking and the role of the literature teachers on developing students' critical thinking skill. Some essential methodologies and perspectives will be introduced to see what other researchers found about the issue.*

Keywords: Critical thinking, cognitive skills, literature reading, different genres, problem solvers

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning literature should be varying and developed as the technology improve day by day. If we think about traditional learning and teaching literature, we would think about lecturing and asking subjective questions. Although these methods can have their own values, students would not have any chance to analyze arguments, make inferences, use reasoning and think to solve the problems. Since teachers deal with different types of students with distinctive learning styles, it is much crucial to make the literature courses interesting and upgrade students' critical thinking. Based on the expectations of the higher educational institutions, teachers need to apply such strategies to further societal roles of the learners too. This seems a bit challenging but not impossible. It requires appropriate techniques to be used to meliorate students' capacities. Mulligan (2011) states that effective teachers need to be creative and flexible. It is exactly true because creativity makes the learning environment stimulating and the learners enthusiastically learn. Thus, the purpose behind writing this research article is to explore essential strategies of teaching literature and discuss how such strategies can develop students' critical thinking skill.

2. Literature Review

General ideas on critical thinking

According to Ennis (1985), critical thinking is the ability to decide what to do and what to believe; it also enables the learners to compare different thoughts, make inferences, judge about reality or unreality and distinguish between fiction and nonfiction dexterously. According to Hayes (1990), making decisions would be possible if we are able to analyze and evaluate, so critical thinking helps students to be evaluators and problem solvers. These points are mostly used in literature courses; thus literature reading would be the best option to build students' critical thinking skill. Lau (2011) states that critical thinking is the way that someone thinks logically and clearly. It comprises "thinking precisely and systematically, and following the rules of logic and

scientific reasoning, among other things" (p. 1). In order to help students to think systematically and logically, teachers need to train students to be critical thinkers. Paul and Elder (2007) believe that students who are critical thinkers they are capable of accumulating relevant information and are able to evaluate and conclude effectively. Critical thinkers are open with new ideas and they are ready to communicate with others and have possible solutions for different types of issues. Paul and Elder (2007) also state that critical thinking is "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-correcting thinking" (p.4).

According to Scriven and Paul (2003), critical thinking stimulates students to identify questions and lead them to find reasonable responses; in addition, it helps them develop arguments. The authors also add that critical thinking entails constant self-reflection. Hayes (1990) believes that students should learn and practice the ways how to understand and evaluate others' thoughts in order to develop their own ideas. This means that students would be critical thinkers if they concern with enough reading and that could be reading literature.

Moreover, Smith (1990) states that critical thinking involves cognitive skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. The author adds that interpretation helps students to characterize information, and capture the contents of different text types, and analysis refers to categorizing the components of texts and to understand relationship among ideas. The author further writes that inference is about recognizing results in texts, and the result can be the outcome of the opinions and the information from the text. He adds that explanation involves the ability to justify and establish consequences as well as providing details; however, evaluation is relevant to common sense on the appreciation of ideas, strategies and masterpieces, and self-regulation is the process of monitoring on our own thinking. In short, these elements of cognitive skills make students able to be critical thinkers.

The above definitions illustrate the same ideas that teachers need to know if they aim to better help the learners to be evaluators, decision makers and life-long learners, they should take some strategies in to account to train students' critical thinkers. As teachers, it is one of their main responsibilities to help students develop their thinking skills in order to be able to understand different dimensions not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom. The dimensions that can be built through critical thinking cover social, political, and cultural issues.

Essential ways to build students' critical thinking

There are several ways that teachers can use to build students' critical thinking. Paul (1984) believes that literature classes can provide effective ways to develop critical thinking among students for literature study necessitates intellectual judgments and enhance students to think and to speak logically. Hakes (2008) suggests that poetry and prose are the best examples to be taught to train students to be critical thinkers. In addition, the author believes that through applying two ways teachers can introduce literature students to critical thinking. The first way is "to wait until a point arises where it is natural to introduce the idea" (p. 122). The second way is by introducing the topic and then students apply the points to the texts that they are reading.

Teaching literature makes the body of knowledge (Hayes, 1990). Through literature, students will be able to recognize and deal with different text types, and they will have a foundation to make decisions about what they are reading. Hayes (1990) adds that reading literary texts reveals students' reasoning process. I do agree with the author and believe that literature texts are designed in a way that teachers can make lots of questions from each section and asking questions itself is the best way that helps students to think and express their thoughts, in case the questions should not be yes/ no questions as students need to think about causes and effects rather than state or being of the points. To do this, applying Bloom's taxonomy would be much more effective. Schmit (2002) suggests the same idea and adds that critical thinking in literature classes would be practiced effectively by asking questions. And the questions should be ordered from focusing on content matters to interpretative ones. The best way is to ask students to discuss about the facts, then discuss about them and analyze specific points. After that they should be asked to draw inferences and make their own judgments.

Since literature study deals with reading short stories, novels and dramas, students can think critically about each scenery and such kind of readings cover enough why and how. And such questions lead the learners to discuss on social and moral issues. Ritchhart and Perkins (2008) state that thinking routines are the main classroom instruments that can help the learners think deeply and perfectly. The authors believe that thinking routines lead students into deeper reflection on questions that should be explored in details by asking how and why. Arend (2009) adds that instructors should be enough careful regarding interaction with the learners because the way that a teacher interacts with the pupils is the main factor. Another way which is proposed by Day (2011) is using group work for the purpose of building critical thinking. Providing collaborative strategies pave the ground

for the learners to explore their ideas and come to conclusions by the help of each other, and they will be trained critical thinkers. As Paul and Lazar (1993) state that students who are critical thinkers ask logical questions, they are able to collect relevant information and can evaluate well, and they are able to solve complicated problems.

In addition, reading literature makes students able to observe and evaluate various thoughts and they would confront with ideas which differ from their own. According to Butterworth and Thwaites (2013), by explaining the way that students think and generalize causes and effects of literary texts, students become aware of concepts and patterns of reasoning. Alwehaibi (2012) finds that engaging students to compare and contrast, determine parts-whole relationship, determine the reliability of sources, casual explanation and prediction would be effective in stimulating critical thinking.

Teaching elements of literature is the other way to build students' critical thinking. As elements of literature has several parts, each can influence the learners' higher level thinking, and this will cause them to think critically. Let's consider characterization in stories. As I have experienced teaching literature, students can think critically about how well the author defined the characters; if they were the authors how would they develop the characters and how they describe the nature of the characters. These questions help students to be critical thinkers and make them capable of discussions inside the classroom. According to Peterson (1986), providing literary reading helps students to imitate what they learn from reading and this will also help them to apply what they learned in their real life as well.

Smith (1977) introduces three types of interactions that occur inside the classrooms and can have effective outcomes in critical thinking. First, faculties can reinforce the pupils with encouragement and through using students' generated ideas. The more teachers ask students to develop their own ideas, the better they will produce their thoughts. Secondly, he adds that students should participate in classroom activities and they should be asked cognitive questioning system. Third, student interaction plays essential role in building critical thinking. Astin (1993) adds that not only classroom interaction builds students' critical thinking, but also providing detailed critiques and positive feedback can have crucial roles on pupils' critical thinking. As an experienced teacher I can state that providing critique is mainly possible in literature classes. In this regard teachers should be much careful of using such strategies or methodologies which can address students' thoughts and encourage them to critique on specific themes.

According to Wu and Wu (2008), literature courses would be enjoyable if teachers implement student- learning approach in their classes. Distinctive activities can make the class exciting and students will gain profit when they are actively engaged in learning process. Hay (2004) proposes comprehension strategies in teaching poetry. She believes that teaching poetry is the best way which students practice communicative learning process in the class. Reeves (1972) states that poetry is the best way to improve students' critical thinking, but teachers should be careful about students' needs, interests and their level of knowledge as there are

different types of poetry. Teachers need to decide what to choose for whom to be understandable. Otherwise, the learners will not be able to analyze and think critically to get the meaning and the message.

3. Research Method

The method for this research article is library method to understand what other scholars think about Essential Ways to Build Students' Critical Thinking in Literature classes. The method helped the researcher to get preliminary ideas on the chosen topic. Different related books, research articles and reliable sources were used to reach the point. In addition, the researcher has used her personal teaching experiences to enhance readers' understanding toward essential ways to build students' critical thinking through reading literary texts in ESL classes.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Since this is a library research, only related books and research articles were used in order to collect data. After finding the materials on essential ways to build students' critical thinking in literature classes, the main points were highlighted and reviewed. As teaching differs in every context, those points were selected which academically fit into Afghan context.

To analyze the data, the researcher used some specific steps including categorizing and coding. To provide coherent and smooth paper, the whole information from the books and research articles were categorized based on the topic. Then, they were included in different parts of the article. Another way which was used to analyze the data is coding. The concepts were identified appropriately and relationship between them were found through coding.

5. Result

The results achieved from this study seem interesting and are presented according to different authors' ideas on essential ways to build students' critical thinking through reading literary texts. Based on the researcher's experiences and reading different sources, it was clarified that students will be encouraged to strengthen their critical thinking in literature classes by using specific strategies which were mentioned above. Reading different sources on the topic revealed the idea that literature classes are concerned with distinctive types of imaginative texts and creative thinking, that is why literature teachers can pave the way for the learners to be critical thinkers. Since literary texts underlie comprehensive and varied inferences, teachers would creatively provide essential tasks to improve the learners' critical thinking. The tasks will not only help the learners to be critical thinkers, but would also be the effective tools to learn the structure of the language enthusiastically.

6. Discussion

After reading many reliable sources it was clarified that literature classes are the best settings for the ESL learners to build their critical thinking skills. Every step of the literature

classes is concerned with distinguishing types of questions; whether the texts are fiction or non-fiction, teachers can provide bunches of open ended questions to stimulate the learners think and then talk. As Schmit (2002) states that literature reading helps the learners to evoke, re-claim and reproduce their gained knowledge and experiences to construct meanings for what they read. Moreover, literature texts are the effective reading sources that stimulate the learners to explain, analyze, synthesis, argue, interpret, evaluate and state their own reasons. In addition, applying effective ways in literature classes would train students to provide logical reasons for what they want to prove. Those learners who are able to do the above skills are called critical thinkers, and the ways which are applicable can be applied in literature courses of study. As Lazere (1987) argues 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).

7. Conclusion

The study provides different authors' ideas on building students' critical thinking skill through literature reading. Based on their perspectives, literature reading reflects on students positively to predict, evaluate, state their own ideas logically and provide reasons for each point of the text. This can be done if the literature teachers apply effective strategies of teaching, consider the learners' needs and motivate them to think deeply rather than answering only by yes or no. In other words, teachers play crucial role on training students to be critical thinkers. Specific ways of teaching and the varieties of thoughts which were included in this study could be the best guidance for the literature teachers who aim to train the learners vigorous members and life-long learners, for critical thinkers do not only learn effectively and act dynamically inside the class, but also can be the active social members outside of the classroom too. The study also provokes that critical thinkers are the individuals who are capable of making judgments, communicating differently and have high level of self-confidence. Thus, the genre of literature would be the best choice for training the individuals to be critical thinkers rather than those who memorize and do not answer to the challenges of the issues outside of the classrooms.

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Author Profile



Laila Nadir has been an associate professor in the English Department in the Languages and Literature Faculty at Kabul University since 2007. She completed her undergraduate studies at Kabul University in 2006. In 2013, she got her MA degree in TESOL. She has been teaching different courses like Literature, Reading, Oral and Aural Skills, and Methodology in the English Department. In addition, teaching ESP or English for Specific Purposes is one of her achievements that she has initiated in Engineering Faculty at Kabul University. Teacher training and material designing are her key experiences, and she has been conducted several professional