

Fostering EFL Learners Critical thinking through group discussions in literature classrooms.

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الملخص :

مناهج التدريس التقليدية في الأدب لا تشرك الطلاب في نقاشات جادة ومنتبهات للأدب بشكل نقدي. يسأل المرء ما إذا كان المتعلمون على استعداد لتطوير جهاز تحليلي مهم. على الرغم من المجموعة الكبيرة من أبحاث التفكير النقدي في مجال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، إلا أن الدراسات التجريبية ذات الصلة لا تزال ضئيلة. بالنظر إلى ذلك ، تستكشف الدراسة الحالية كيفية تطوير التفكير النقدي لدى الطلاب من خلال مناقشات جماعية في الفصل الأدبي. تتيح المناقشات الجماعية للطلاب الاستجابة للنصوص الأدبية بقدر ما يتعلق الأمر بفهمهم وتوقعاتهم ، والتي يمكن أن تكون فردية أو جماعية. يقوم المعلمون بمساعدة وتوجيه المتعلمين من خلال قراءتهم للنص لتمكينهم من اتخاذ قرارات بشأن قراءتهم

Résumé :

Les approches traditionnelles de l'enseignement de la littérature n'entraînent pas les étudiants dans des discussions sérieuses et attentives sur la littérature de façon critique. On se questionne quant à la volonté des apprenants de développer un appareil d'analyse critique. La présente étude explore la façon de développer la pensée

critique des étudiants par le biais de discussions de groupe en cours de littérature. Les enseignants assistent et guident les apprenants dans leur lecture du texte, ce qui leur permet de prendre des décisions concernant leur lecture. Les discussions de groupe permettent aux étudiants d'EFL de tester la fiabilité de leurs décisions et de leurs arguments.

Mots clés: pensée critique, enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère (EFL), analyse littéraire, enseignement de la littérature

Abstract:

The traditional teaching approaches to literature do not engage students in earnest and attentive discussions of literature critically. Considering this, the present study explores how to develop students' critical thinking through group discussions in literature classroom. The teachers assist and guide the learners through their reading of the text enabling them to make decisions about their reading. The group discussions allow EFL students to test the reliability of their decisions and arguments.

Key words: critical thinking, EFL teaching, literary analysis, teaching literature

Introduction

The ability to think critically is one of the primary goals of higher education in the 21st century. According to Lipman (2003), critical thinking is linked with language teaching and learning as well as with

our daily life. In this case, teachers need to provide students with the opportunity to think freely in accordance with their interests and abilities. Similarly, the EFL classroom provides multiple opportunities for teachers to enhance the development of students' thinking skills, especially in literature classroom. One method capable of attracting the students' attention is group discussion, by which it is believed that students can interact with teachers and each other more deeply. The benefits of literature for developing students' critical thinking skills and creativity have been highlighted by a number of researches (Alvarez, Calvete, & Sarasa, 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Bobkina & Sarto, 2012; Ghosn, 2002; Van, 2009; Yaqoob, 2011). Thus, according to Lazere (1987), literature is an academic subject that "*can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking*" (p. 3). This paper aims at first to demonstrate how to enhance EFL learners' capacity to think critically in literature classroom, and be more confident confronting infrequent questions and real life situations.

1. Critical thinking:

One clear definition of critical thinking has not been established, yet various scholars gave it different definitions. For example, Elder and Paul (1994) assert that critical thinking denotes the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking, and be able to analyze it. Another definition by Lohani et al. (1998) claim that critical thinking is the constant and conscious observation analyzation, reasoning, and evaluation of any given data.

However, Bloom’s taxonomy of critical thinking is the widely acknowledged among educators and scholars as an outline for socio-cognitive presence in classrooms. Hence, in this paper, Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom et al., 1956) is selected as a theoretical framework as it describes clearly the characteristics of higher order thinking skills. Additionally,

Bloomian Taxonomy and critical thinking:

Bloom’s taxonomy is perhaps the most well-known example of critical thinking. It is a hierarchical representation of cognitive skills that helps teacher teach, and learners learn. Bers (2005: 16-17) claimed that “ because critical thinking takes place when learners operate in the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation phases, Bloom’s taxonomy can be considered as an assessment of critical thinking”.



Fig.1 Bloom’s Taxonomy (revised) cognitive skills

The model provides a structure that allows teachers to present a lesson to a group of students who have varied needs and abilities. This model supports the need to differentiate the curriculum so all students are able to participate in the same content area during a lesson. The structure allows the teacher to accommodate a variety of students’ needs by applying the appropriate questions and activities.

Specifically, teachers will be using Bloom's taxonomy as they explore concepts related to higher-order thinking and the relationship between language and cognition. It serves as a model that assists educators in presenting ideas and concepts at varying levels of thought. It outlines six types of cognitive thinking skills, ordered from the least to the most complex: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bissell & Lemons, 2006).

Critical thinking is most likely to take place when educational system goes for the six levels. "If teachers are going to help learners develop problem solving and reasoning skills, they must use activities and tasks that require higher-order thinking skills" (Himmele, 2009:83). One classroom activity that would help students' performance is group discussion that brings them to a new level of thinking through analysis, evaluation and interpretation.

Group discussion in literature classroom:

1. Group discussion:

For years, teachers dominate in classroom teaching and the teaching process is merely the passing the knowledge from the teacher to the students. Freire (1970) distinguishes between banking education and problem posing education.

In the traditional view of education, teachers are pillars of knowledge; they know everything and students know nothing. Teachers deposit knowledge in students and never ask them to question that knowledge. Students in this model are receivers of knowledge. They receive, memorize and repeat. They are not asked to relate this knowledge to the current problems and injustices

in society with the aim of improving the society. Accordingly, they get a passive role in this view. Freire (1970) refers metaphorically to the traditional view of education as *banking model of education* because it is like depositing of money in a bank.

As an alternative to the *banking model*, Freire (1970) proposed a problem posing education, which can lead to critical consciousness. Group discussion, therefore, would make the teaching of literature more interactive and would allow the students to develop their analytical skills.

Group discussion is a technique in which students work together in small groups to reach the same purpose. Small group discussion, which usually consists of four or five students, is regarded as a potential solution to modify the format of large classes (Jones 2014).

The purpose of the collaborative learning concept as well as the grouping and pairing of students' is to achieve critical thinking during the classroom. Burke (2011) stated that an important focus in pedagogical change is active learning, which consists of collaborative learning or small group work. According to Beebe and Masterson as cited by Burke (2011), the benefit of group discussion is that it provides more information, and greater resources from different backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, group discussion can stimulate creativity and foster students' comprehension.

On the other side, learning by using the group discussion method is related with the teacher-student relationship. Students can learn many things that can help in improving their critical thinking skills through group discussions. Dikici and Yavuzer (2006) as cited by Karami, Pakmehr and Aghili (2012) considered that,

compared with individual activities or competition, the outcome of learning collaboratively is better.

In addition, previous researchers' findings have exposed that in the higher education system there is a positive result of collaborative methods on the cognitive levels of the students and their abilities to learn (Jacobs, Ott and Yvonne Ulrich 1997; Celuch and Slama 1999 cited by Karami et al. 2012).

Literature classroom:

In explaining the benefits of integrating literature in the language classroom, scholars point to the value of the literary text as an effective stimulus for students to think critically and express their feelings and ideas in a non-native language. Therefore, group discussion can be the perfect match to enhance student's critical thinking during classroom interaction.

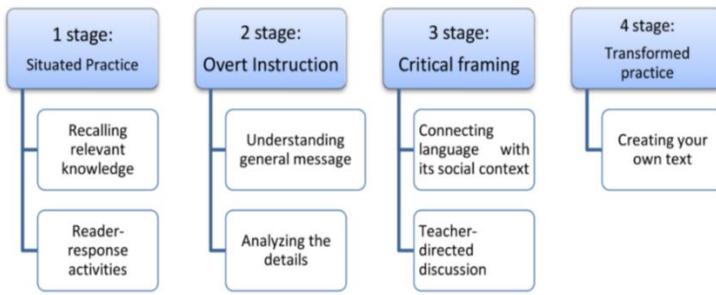


Fig.2: Pedagogical application of the model of teaching critical thinking skills through literature (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016)

The four-stage process, represented in Figure 2, describes a learning process, suitable for the application of the model of teaching critical thinking skills in group discussion. The first stage comprises a set of pre-reading activities aiming to activate students' schemata of the

topic. Students read the text and share their ideas, feelings, and experiences. The second stage deals with the general comprehension of the topic, conducted through general comprehension questions and discussion activities. The close reading of the text provided in this stage helps students to understand the inner logic of the literary text. The third stage deals with the students' conscious attention to relationships between linguistic forms and socio-cultural contexts. The writer's attitude, point of view, and intentions are explored through the analysis of the lexical and structural choices of the text. Finally, the fourth stage includes the creation of students' own texts that may include reshaping the original texts within the same mode or shifting from one mode to another.

Although group discussion is the focus in this paper for the enhancement of student's critical thinking, teachers' questioning and guidance in the classroom environment is also of a great importance.

Teachers' questioning and students' critical thinking:

In classroom setting, teacher's discourse has vital role in language learning since the teacher controls the topic of discussion to reach the aims of the objectives of teaching and learning process. One asset of teacher discourse is teacher's question. As Adedoyin (2010) stated that 'teacher's questions are of significant values for many instructional purposes, eliciting students' reflection and challenging deeper students understanding and engagement in the classroom.

In group discussion, the role of the teacher cannot be neglected. Without the teacher's guidance, the most effective activities may be useless. Instead of waiting on the platform or doing his own job, the

teacher should be the organizer and coordinator of a group discussion class.

Although the students are supposed to be the main participants of the classroom activities, the teacher should be fully prepared, for it is the teacher who indicates and stimulates the whole learning process by his background knowledge (Liu & Dai, 2003). Group discussion poses higher requirements for the teachers for they should cope with the unpredictable situations in classroom. The teacher should continuously keep an eye on the development of the task and supervise each group member to make sure everyone is actively involved in the discussion.

The focus of the teacher should be put on how to design the whole process, analyze the students, set the goal, select the task, assess and grade the students and make sure the teaching process is progressing according to the expected schedule.

Conclusion:

In EFL literature classes, fostering student's critical thinking is one of the teacher's roles and tasks. Stimulating thoughts make students become aware of the potential of vocabulary that they are going to use. In every language context, students activate the known vocabulary. Speaking, reading, listening, and writing skills help students to enhance their communication. Through critical thinking, students learn independently and make their own decisions in various tasks.

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