

Promoting EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills through Literature Reading

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ملخص

يسعى التعليم الجامعي جاهدا منذ عقود إلى ترقية الفكر النقدي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وفي هذا المنحى يحاول هذا المقال تعريف الفكر النقدي وتحديد كيفية تشجيع هذا النوع من التعليم لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ليحفزهم على إصدار الأحكام النقدية أثناء معالجة المؤلفات الأدبية. وتتبنى هذه الدراسة بعض الطرائق والتقنيات التي من شأنها مساعدة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على ترقية التفكير المؤسس على الأحداث والمفاهيم، وذلك بالاعتماد على تصنيف بلوم والخبرة المكتسبة في القسم للتحقق من مدى فعالية المطالعة الأدبية في ترقية قدرات الفكر النقدي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وعليه تم دمج بعض النشاطات التطبيقية في تصميم دراسة فهم النصوص لاختبار فعالية مثل هذه النشاطات من خلال تقييم أداء المتعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفكر النقدي، قدرات الفكر النقدي، الأحكام النقدية، المطالعة الأدبية، ردود الأفعال الشخصية.

Abstract

Developing EFL learners' critical thinking skills has been set as a primary goal in higher education for decades. In this vein, the present paper attempts to explain and describe what 'critical thinking' is and how educators can encourage the kind of learning that stimulates EFL learners' critical judgments while processing literary materials. The rationale behind this idea is to introduce some practical approaches and techniques that would help EFL learners develop the ability to reason with facts and concepts. Based on Bloom's Taxonomy and

classroom experience, the present paper investigates the effectiveness of promoting EFL learners' critical thinking skills through literature reading. Some practical activities are incorporated into reading comprehension course design to examine and test their efficacy through learners' performance.

Key words: Critical thinking, Critical thinking skills, Critical judgment, Literature reading, Personal responses.

Résumé

Le développement de l'esprit critique chez les apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL) a toujours été l'objectif principal de l'enseignement universitaire depuis des décennies. Dans ce sens, le présent article tend à définir 'l'esprit critique' et à expliquer comment les enseignants peuvent encourager ce type d'apprentissage qui stimule les apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère à formuler des jugements critiques lorsqu'ils traitent des ouvrages littéraires. La logique qui sous-tend l'idée est l'introduction de certaines approches et techniques ayant pour objet d'aider les apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère à développer leur faculté de raisonnement basée sur faits et concepts. En se basant sur la taxonomie de Bloom et l'expérience acquise en classe, cet article essaie d'examiner l'efficacité de la lecture littéraire à promouvoir les facultés de l'esprit critique chez les apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère. Par conséquent, certaines activités pratiques ont été intégrées dans la conception du cours de la compréhension de texte en vue de tester leur efficacité à travers l'évaluation des capacités des apprenants.

Mots clés: Esprit critique, Facultés de l'esprit critique, Jugements critiques, Lecture littéraire, réactions personnelles.

Introduction

A significant proportion of research revealed that to succeed and become competent, learners should process the needed critical thinking skills and use them in their daily lives, which may allow them to organize and evaluate the information they receive from reading material. Researchers have mentioned a number of critical thinking skills that EFL learners should possess, such as being able to evaluate discussions, explain information, and test hypotheses (Watson & Glaser, 1991), distinguish facts, determine right answers from wrong answers, determine right resources, and the ability to make predictions (Beyer, 1995), solve problems, and evaluate performance (Billy, 2001). Furthermore, critical thinking skills have been found to influence EFL learners' achievement and motivation (Jennifer & Jeffry, 2001). For this sake, some practical approaches and techniques are being discussed in this article to make EFL learners more aware of what is involved while processing literary work and making critical judgments. Within this context, the present article further highlights the effect of using literary reading material in EFL classroom for promoting learners' critical thinking skills.

1. Definition of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a mode of thinking that enables people to analyze and examine ideas of a topic, and then synthesize this into a process of decision-making (Paul & Elder, 2008). In Educational settings, teachers are supposed to help and guide learners to become better critical thinkers through teaching strategies (Halpern, 1999). Critical thinking elicits problem solving, creativity, and decision-making (Pithers & Soden, 2000). Gunn (1993) defines critical thinking as the mental process to evaluate individual thinking based on established evidence and laws. Elkins (1999) further asserts that critical thinking may involve various components such as

imagination, analytical, and cause and effect relationships. In this regard, critical thinking can be defined as a dynamic and reflective process that involves being able to analyze and criticize information objectively, and explore opposing views, eventually leading to a conclusion based on evidence and careful thought. Based on the review of previous research, few studies discussed the importance of developing and enhancing learners' critical thinking skills.

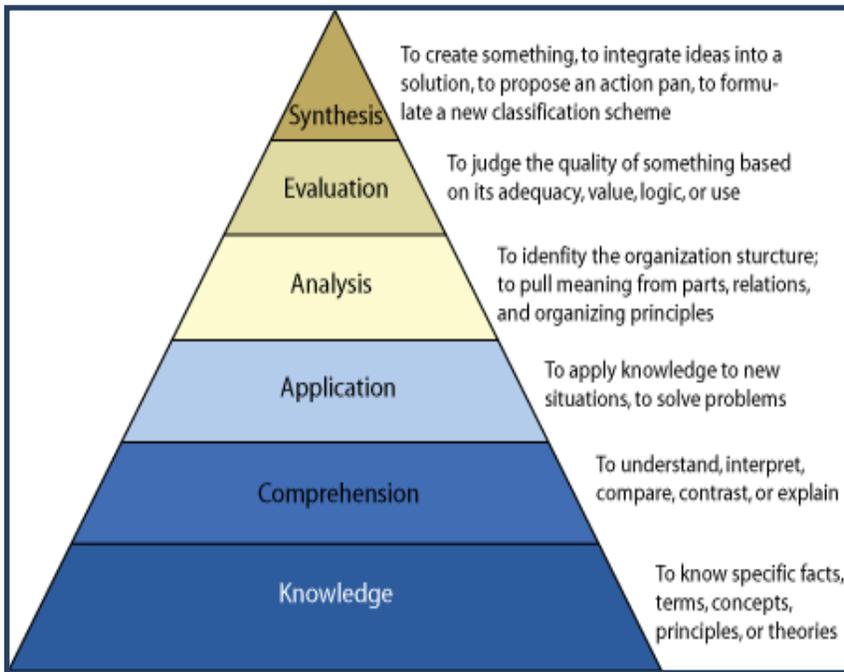
2. Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills represent a person's ability to assess knowledge, facts, and accuracy in any topical analysis in regards to evidence that it supports to attain accurate findings in clear and logical ways. Thus, developing EFL learners' critical thinking skills has been set as a primary goal in higher education. Scholars and educators (Braun, 2004; Halpern, 1998; Kegan, 1994; Klaczynski, 2001) assert that developing critical thinking skills are essential to help learners "*know how to learn and how to think clearly*" (Halpern, 1998, p.450) and "*make purposeful judgments about what to believe or what to do*" (Facione, Sanchez, Facione, & Gainen, 1995, p3). In this context, a significant proportion of studies revealed that with good critical thinking ability, learners can be well equipped and better prepared to face challenges, make the right decisions, build an integrated personality capable of participating in a society, share different point of views and ultimately solve national problems. Some scholars further argue the validity of teaching critical thinking skills in an EFL context (Atkinson, 1997, Davidson 1998; Kubota, 1999; Day, 2003). They maintain that any citizen is obliged to cope with the international trends and prepare himself / herself with skills that help him / her learn how to learn, and thus compete and exercise his / her rights and responsibilities.

In the past two decades, some scholars and educators have highlighted the importance of critical thinking instruction. Some have made efforts to collaborate critical thinking training in content-based courses in primary, middle and secondary education. Recently, some have implemented critical thinking pedagogy in higher education.

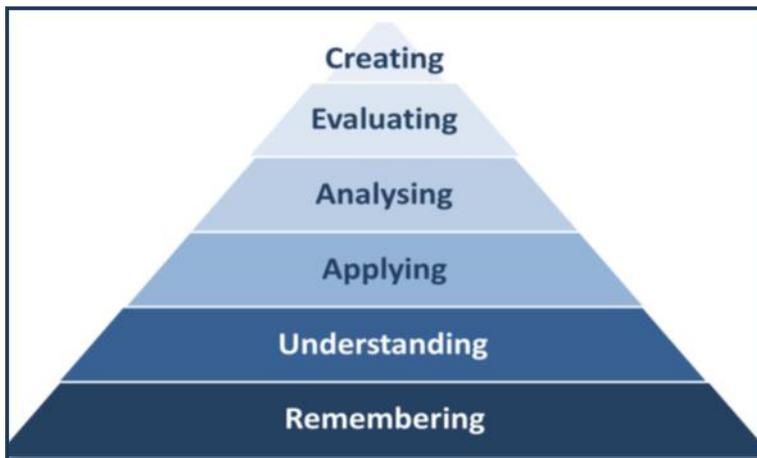
3. Critical Thinking and Bloom's Taxonomy

One of the renowned theory that has been viewed as representative of the educational perspective of critical thinking theory is Bloom's Taxonomy (Piaw, 2004). According to Bloom, there are six levels of critical thinking into which any cognitive learning experience may be categorized. These levels are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Yet, critical thinking is likely part of level six, evaluation, as it is this level that "*focuses on making an assessment or judgment based on an analysis of a statement or proposition*" (Huitt, 1998, p.2). The following diagram represents 'the cognitive domain' as identified by Bloom and the committee of educators in the late 1940s and early 1950s.



Bloom's Taxonomy (1956)

In the 1990s, some of Bloom's students led by Lorin Anderson revised the taxonomy so that it looks more like this:



The New Version of Bloom's Taxonomy (2001)

The table below shows the definitions for each level in the revised taxonomy.

Creating	Reorganizing and putting elements together to form a coherent new pattern or structure through designing, planning, constructing, inventing, devising, etc.
Evaluating	Hypothesizing and making judgments through checking and critiquing.
Analyzing	Breaking, organizing, structuring, outlining, and integrating different elements, determining how they relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.
Applying	Using a procedure through executing, or implementing
Understanding	Constructing meaning through summarizing, inferring, interpreting, comparing and explaining.
Remembering	Retrieving, recognizing, listing, naming, identifying, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.

The authors of the revised taxonomy infused the original taxonomy with additional complexity and nuance. While the original taxonomy suggests that learners should move from the simple recall or recognition of facts, as the lowest level, through increasingly more complex and abstract mental levels, to the highest order which is classified as evaluation, the revised one explains that learners may freely move up and down the chart. This freedom from moving systematically up the taxonomy gives much greater weight to teacher usage, and allows the categories to overlap one another. This revised Bloom's taxonomy proves to be a very useful tool that can be used in EFL classrooms to achieve better results.

In brief, Bloom's theory has been widely accepted and taught in thinking skill courses in all fields of education programs. Critical thinking pedagogy always refers to Bloom's theory, giving learners practice in some of the lower levels of critical thinking skills before moving them on to the more difficult tasks of the higher thinking processes (Piaw, 2004, p.80).

4. Critical Comprehension Strategies

A significant proportion of contemporary studies revealed that the strategies that make the biggest difference in regard to reading achievement include: higher order thinking skills, activating prior knowledge, relating ideas to text, questioning techniques, scaffolding exchange of ideas, thinking aloud, and conversations about reading. In this context, Stevens & Bean (2007) assert that "*Having critical literacy stance for developing learners' abilities when reading texts is an important aspect of literacy instruction*". When learners begin to foster their critical literacy abilities, they can learn how to read texts by taking different stances and considering what the texts communicate from different points of view (Behrman, 2006).

Teaching EFL learners to think while reading is referred to as critical reading. Critical reading stimulates learners to evaluate, predict, and organize ideas which support value judgment, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusion based on evidence.

5. Critical Thinking and Literature Reading

Reading literature is a complex process that requires EFL learners to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meanings of the text. While doing so, they need to demonstrate the following abilities: to construct meanings of the text. While doing so, they need to demonstrate the following abilities: to differentiate facts from opinions, to understand the literal or implied meanings and the narrator's tone, to locate details related to the issues discussed, to find out the causal relationship or the connections between the events or actions, to detect an inferential relationship from the details observed, to be perceptive of multiple points of views, to make moral reasoning and critical judgments. In a sense, learners are exercising what the critical thinking experts termed 'explanation', 'analysis', 'synthesis', 'argumentation', 'interpretation', 'evaluation', 'problem-solving', 'inference', 'logical reasoning', and 'application' (Brunt, 2005; Facione, 2007; Halpern, 1998; Lazere, 1987). All these abilities, in sum, are critical thinking skills. In this context, EFL teachers regard literary texts as an efficient source of unmodified language, often rich in multiple layers of meaning, and can provide more opportunities for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions, as well as, more language or literary practice. Rosenblatt (1995) pinpoints that literary texts represent a very important source of moral, cultural and aesthetic values, as well as an effective model of authentic language practice and usage. In the same view, Lazar (2000, 27) asserts that "*Literary texts are thus seen*

as a resource one among many different types of texts which provide stimulating language activities.” Lazar further 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*” (Ibid, 1987, p.3). This is how, literature can act as a very powerful agent to develop and foster learners’ critical potentialities through engaging them to interact emotionally with literary materials. Savvidou (2004, 24) claims that “*learners are encouraged to express their opinions, feelings and make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those expressed in the text*”. Accordingly, selected texts should be of interest to learners so that they can interact with them and enhance their personal responses. McRae (1991, 97) confirms that a literary work that provides no reaction is counterproductive to learning. In fact, the subject matter, the setting and the language of a literary work provide learners 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, learners are exposed to multiple points of view and thus compelled to think and rethink their own ideas and actions. Of course, if they are successful readers, they will see their limitations and weaknesses and they will make efforts to change. It is more than just assisting learners in solving problems and developing critical thinking skills, an effective literary work aims to help readers learn to change and be better through challenging a text.

6. Critical Thinking Activities and Literary Material

Motivating learners to participate in class discussion and involving them in making personal judgments while processing literary texts remain one of the most prominent objectives of teaching literature in EFL classes.

Literary material actually being imaginative can provoke the learners' thought, reflection, associations, emotion, and various responses. In this regard, the teacher has to benefit from the multi-various richness of the literary work and center his/her course on stimulating the learners' responses (Rumelhart, 1987). Yet, he/she should provide them with necessary knowledge concerning moral issues, decisions, anticipation, expectation, and evaluation. This should ultimately be carried out relying on the main objectives set to the course and the general framework (thematic context) of the text and his author. Having a well organized set of learning objectives help teachers plan and assign appropriate instruction, design effective assessment tasks and techniques that enable learners ensure full understanding of literary texts. For instance, learning objectives following Bloom's revised taxonomy could be constructed as follows:

By the end of the course, learners should be able to:

1. Exhibit previous knowledge by recalling facts, terms and basic concepts.
2. Demonstrate understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, interpreting
and giving descriptions and stating main ideas.
3. Solve problems by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques and rules in a
different way.
4. Examine and break information into parts by identifying motives and causes; making

inferences, and finding evidence to support generalizations.

5. Compile information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern

or proposing alternative solutions.

6. Present and defend opinions by making judgments about information, validity of ideas or

quality of work based on a set of criteria.

In this context, reading course activities can be varied from the easiest and most simple to the most difficult and complex, that is those that require more reflection and thought. The following table suggests some examples of the questions that could be asked about the story *The Unicorn in the Garden* (Adapted from James Thurber, **Fables of our Time**).

Level	Cognitive Verb	Questions	To what degree can a student...
Higher Order Thinking Skills	Creating	Judge whether the husband's reaction was good or bad. Defend your opinion.	create, develop, and formulate a new product or point of view?
More Abstract	Evaluating	What does the husband mean	evaluate and judge a stand or decision?

		when he says: “We’ll see about that”? Justify your answer.	
	Analyzing	Compare this story to reality. What events could not really happen?	distinguish and contrast different parts?
	Applying	Demonstrate whether the husband and wife are in love with each other or not.	use and interpret information in a new way?
More Concrete	Understanding	Report the expressions used by the wife, then discuss them.	explain concepts or ideas?
Lower Order Thinking Skills	Remembering	List the items or expressions used by the husband to awake his wife.	recall, remember information?

A well-combination of the course learning objectives and literature reading tasks or activities, designed with Bloom’s taxonomy in mind, can promote EFL learners’ critical thinking while processing

literary material. The teacher is then expected to play the role of a mediator and initiator to help learners interact with the text more profoundly. In other words, the role of the teacher is limited to direction and stimulation, encouraging interaction in order to achieve a well-planned goal. Within this context, authentic literary material should be incorporated in EFL classes, and adequate reading techniques and activities should be used to promote learners' critical thinking skills and thus foster their natural acquisition of foreign languages.

Conclusion

In general, the present article has attempted to cover a general overview of critical thinking and Bloom's Taxonomy as a whole, then introduce some critical thinking skills in particular. Different critical strategies have been introduced to highlight their effectiveness in fostering EFL learners' personal responses, and awareness required to become proficient readers. Developing critical thinking skills is a fundamental objective in higher education and to achieve this aim, using literary material to encourage learners to think critically is highly feasible approach. For this sake, if possible, more time should be allocated for learners to respond to the questions marked and the activities designed by the teacher during the reading comprehension course. In this way, learners' critical thinking abilities can be sustained and further exalted over a long-term process.

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