

CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM THROUGH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The development of learners Critical Thinking (CT) is considered to be one of the most important skills in today's fast pacing world. It has also been regarded as the mainstay and an important component of literature teaching. However, this is one of those areas that was mainly overlooked in eastern culture in general and in the EFL classrooms in particular. Thus, we aim to assess the effectiveness and usefulness of the use of poetry in fostering learners' critical thinking skills.

Methods. To this end, to foster learners' critical thinking skills, a poetry programme was specifically designed to draw learners' attention to the significance of CT. Through a case study approach, a poetry programme with a focus on culture-specific information was incorporated into the course. Four female students were engaged in a number of tasks in which they gradually learned to think critically through reflecting on and evaluating the assigned poems. A checklist was generated and used to observe and rate students' CT before and after the intervention through teacher diaries.

Results. Analysis of the case study data indicated that students' CT had improved and they developed good critical habits as a result of their involvement in the intervention. Due to the application of poetry based teaching, the ability to critically assess the ideas presented during the classes and to express one's opinions was significantly improved among the study's participants.

Conclusions. The conducted study allowed us to conclude that poetry could be regarded as a useful and effective source for developing critical thinking skills among students.

Key words: critical thinking skills, literature, poetry, modern education, transversal competencies, life skills

INTRODUCTION

The necessity of developing students' critical thinking (henceforth CT) ability has grown over the past decades both as a primary life skill of the 21st century and an indispensable ability in the context of higher education. Numerous studies have been conducted on the necessity of teaching critical thinking to improve personal, social and educational skills (Braun, 2004; Brečka & Hašková, 2020; Fisher, 2001; Gadušová et al., 2021; Shcherbiak, 2020; Valentová et al., 2020; Willingham, 2007), but the first serious discussions on critical thinking were initiated by John Dewey (1916), who highlighted the concept of critical thinking skills and its place in education. He asserted that critical thinking starts with students' engagement with a problem. Robert H. Ennis (1985) defined critical thinking as the ability to skillfully draw inferences, judge the reliability of sources, distinguish between facts and opinions, determine causes and effects, make comparisons, recognise frame-of-reference and its impact on judgment, and numerous other abilities. Some scholars elaborated on the concept by illustrating that students' natural curiosity needs to be evoked and this, in turn, contributes to learning and the development of critical thought (Bean, 2011). Others proved the necessity of critical thinking in the context

of analytical competencies (Tkáčová et al., 2021a), people's moral formation (Králik & Máhrik, 2019), media literacy (Tkáčová et al., 2021b) as well as important priorities of education within intercultural literacy (Bursová & Janus, 2021; Kondrla, 2021; Tkáčová, 2021; Tkáčová & Králik 2021). In all these studies, critical thinking is considered an essential aspect of interpersonal interaction (Tvrdouš et al., 2021) and wide social existence in an environment of a changing culture, educational priorities, arguments and values. Additionally, Robert Pithers and Rebecca Soden (2000, p. 238) also argue that:

Critical thinking involves being able to identify questions worth pursuing, being able to pursue one's questions through self-directed search and interrogation of knowledge, a sense that knowledge is contestable and being able to present evidence to support one's arguments.

All of the above-mentioned definitions suggest that CT can begin with an individual's intent to answer a question or to solve a problem through analysing different options and choosing the most logical and appropriate one(s). The use of literature for developing students' critical thinking skills has been documented in a number of studies (Alvarez et al., 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Yaqoob, 2011). However, even though CT has been recognised as a higher-order thinking skill that can be developed through incorporating literature (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004), there is a paucity of research on using poetry as a special form of literature and the effect it might have on the said development.

Using poems in language teaching has yielded many benefits from both linguistic and literary perspectives. With regard to poetry, Abraham Panavelil (2011) claims that using this literary form in the language classroom is one way of showing how real-life language is used. In fact, one of the difficulties the learners of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) face in language learning is their lack of exposure to the native language. Gillian Lazar (1993) states that in EFL environments access to authentic spoken language is rare and difficult; consequently, students resort to written English and literary texts as they consider it a source of valuable authentic content. Many studies show how poetry-based activities contribute to the development of grammatical knowledge, vocabulary enrichment and retention of lexical items, pronunciation improvement, and enhancing writing and reading skills (Harmer, 2010; Hughes & Dymoke, 2011; Kırkgöz, 2008; Lazar, 1996; Nation, 2005; Panavelil, 2011; Pushpa & Savaedi, 2014; Scrivener, 2011). They have also been reported to be beneficial in providing a rich source for language input (Duff & Maley, 2007). Poetry also enhances literary appreciation through developing learners' cross-cultural awareness (Lazar, 1996), creates social connections among students (Chanmann-Taylor et al., 2016), and improves learners' expressive abilities (Iida, 2016). It has also been shown that using poems fosters a more personal involvement in the language class so that learners feel

comfortable in expressing their ideas (Hess, 2003). The special feature of the poetic language, in which grammar and lexis are manipulated to suit the orthographical and phonological congruence and is characterised by the presence of various deviations from standard norms of language, has also been addressed in research as it makes this particular genre special to many language learners (McIlroy, 2013). What is also worth mentioning at this point is the issue of loanwords in the learners' mother tongue as having an influence, albeit indirect, on students' comprehension of the text (Welnitzova et al., 2021), as well as the impact of fluency level on the readability of the text (Welnitzova et al., 2021), which can be considered a factor that either enhances or lowers the effectiveness of using poetry in foreign language education. Finally, the introduction of poetry into the regular EFL course can significantly increase students' creativity, which is considered a key factor in successful teaching and in the development of CT skills (Lewandowska, 2015).

The above-mentioned advantages of introducing poetry in the EFL classroom and its effectiveness in several different areas of language have been addressed in research; however, the potential of poems to foster CT development has not been realised so far. In other words, little is known about how effective they might be in fostering CT in EFL learners. Thus, this study is an attempt to investigate the use of poetry as a means of enhancing CT in learners. The research question that guided this study was as follows:

To what extent does poetry help students to enhance their critical thinking ability?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate whether the use of poetry enhances learners' CT skills. Semi-structured interview transcripts, the students' reflective journals, students' written products, and teacher's diaries were collected over a semester for data triangulation. Data coding guidelines for qualitative research were employed, and the triangulated data were cross-examined to answer the research question.

Participants

The participants were four female sophomore students who were enrolled in an English poetry course but accepted to meet once a week outside of the class hours to work on improving their CT skills. Their age ranged from 18-20 and they all liked poetry. They volunteered to participate in the study and were informed about the procedures of data collection including semi-structured interviews, reflective logs and written assignments. Their consent was obtained and they were ensured to remain anonymous in the research.

Instruments

Several research instruments were chosen by the authors of the study to be employed in order to answer the research questions regarding the effectiveness of poems in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. These were: reflective logs, semi-structured interviews and teacher diaries. All of them were considered appropriate in gathering qualitative, in-depth data from the participants who willingly decided to take part in the study. Moreover, the data triangulation allowed for a more reliable outcome of the research. Each of the tools is described in detail below.

Reflective Logs

Students were asked to keep reflective logs for each of the poems they read. This meant that students were invited to share their ideas about the introduced theme and to discuss any experiences they had in relation to it. To ensure that students understand the purpose of reflective logs, some cues were provided by the teacher in the form of questions to ponder upon and to personalize the topic.

Semi-structured Interviews

One of the ways of obtaining information that provides a window to people's minds is to interview them. Thus, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participants to corroborate the results gathered from other sources. The interviews were recorded and transcribed so that coding could take place. The results gathered were analysed through recurring and intensive readings to identify common themes and possible discrepancies in the responses.

Teacher Diaries

After every class time, the teacher reflected on the class activities and students' responses and, using a checklist, took note of students' skills and reactions. This was an effective means of keeping track of students' progress. Moreover, it provided an opportunity to put students' work under scrutiny and observe and understand their challenges and struggles. The information was also used for planning the next class activities and making some adjustments that were considered necessary.

Poems

Finally, to develop students' worldviews and sharpen their skills of observation, analysis and critical thinking, the teacher chose 10 poems to develop students' ability to express their opinion, argue their case, initiate and sum up ideas, and justify their opinions with evidence or proof. The poems were used to engage students in activities that activated their higher-order thinking skills such as logical reasoning, evaluation, analysis, drawing inferences, and synthesis and were the basis for the data gathering.

Procedure

One session per week was devoted to what was called *Poetry Appreciation*. This was an optional class, to be held once a week outside of the regular class time, and four students agreed to participate. In these classes, the students worked both individually and in groups. Each time, the students had a poem to read, and afterwards, they were supposed to think about its main theme(s), and finally were expected to analyse it critically. The poems were sent to the students the day before so that they could read them prior to the class. In the class, the teacher first asked the students about their immediate emotions evoked by the poem and expected them to explain their answers. The teacher listened to students' ideas without saying anything. Then the poem was read and all of the crucial issues connected with it were introduced; after that, cues were provided and questions were asked and the students were expected to present their opinions to the class. After listening to all of the students' comments, the teacher asked them to decide whether their arguments were sound and convincing. Since critical thinking involves asking *why* or *how* questions about the text, the teacher explained that engaging critically with a text means that they should not take anything at face value.

Through different tasks, students practised their inferential skills for example by reading lines of the poems critically to try to discover the underlying meanings and main themes. At this point, students worked individually and later on in groups. They were guided to think of two inferential questions to ask their peers. This exercise intended to teach them to read between the lines and find the underlying meanings of a text. Then, in the end, they were asked to write a short paragraph in which they made some changes to the poem, in the way they envisioned it. In other words, they tried to recreate the poem by applying a new perspective to it.

To help them develop their ability in evaluating the poem, they were required to judge the merit of the text by saying whether they liked/disliked the storyline and why, or what the special merits/demerits of the text were. This was done to help them to learn to be self-confident and value their own opinions. This activity also combined individual and group work. After the classwork, students were told to keep a reflective log in which they recorded their evaluative comments.

At the end of the study, some complementary information was gathered through a semi-structured interview. Students were interviewed individually and their responses were recorded for further analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to examine four female students' progression toward developing critical thinking skills through engaging them in poetry reading and analysis. The results revealed that five focal factors led to the develop-

ment of CT through the use of poetry. Some of these factors were related directly to the poems and some others were not. These factors were learners' interest in the poem, learners' willingness to participate in evaluating the poem, the poem's particular structure, learners' linguistic proficiency, and external push and support provided either by the teacher or peers. The cross-comparison of the data gathered through different sources yielded the following results.

Results of the Semi-structured Interviews

The analysis of the content of the transcribed data allowed us to discover some recurring themes which are presented and discussed below. Verbatim quotations are used to report our findings, and the decision was made to leave them without any alterations from the original data produced by our participants.

In the semi-structured interviews, students were asked a general question first about their experience in this class. Interestingly, all the participants unanimously expressed that they found the class quite useful and they had never engaged in anything like this so willingly before. One of the students said:

[1] *I don't know if it was because very good poems were selected for this class or was it because of the activities we engaged in, I personally couldn't help staying silent.*

Other students had similar responses, and we believe that this can be linked with the attractive nature of the poems. The fact that they are broken down into short sentences in each line, which comes one after the other, and since the meaning is completed gradually, is of importance here. This has been documented in the literature that the distinct nature of the poems makes them attractive to many language learners (McIlroy, 2013). In fact, this was also confirmed when we ask another question that was directly related to the use of poems for the purpose of the study and asked them to express their feelings about this genre as compared to the narratives that they have used in their reading classes. Students' responses confirmed the appropriateness of poetry for this purpose which was consistent with studies that reported the benefits of poetry due to its linguistic and literary features (Harmer, 2010; Kırkgöz, 2008; Panavelil, 2011; Pushpa & Savaedi, 2014; Scrivener, 2011). Moreover, some of the students stated that the use of poems enhances their appreciation of literature mainly because through evaluating and critically analysing the themes, their cross-cultural awareness was also raised which was consistent with Lazar (1996) and improving learners' expressive abilities (Iida, 2016).

Another question that students were expected to answer was related to their ability to make inferences and evaluate what they read. We asked them to compare their initial attempts and skills in critical thinking with the ones that took place during the last classes. Amazingly, again, all four participants were of the idea that their engagement in activities and tasks

helped them immensely in developing such skills that, in the beginning, they either lacked or were in the possession of a very basic level. One of the participants said:

[2] *To be honest, at first, when the teacher asked us to think about the poem and the theme it wanted to convey, I mostly focused on the surface meaning of the words, chunks or sentences. I didn't know that I could dig into some deep layers that were unknown to me unless I tried to read between the line.*

And she continues:

(...) and one thing that made the activity interesting was that the poem did not contain very long or complicated sentences and this made it easier for me to read and re-read several times without getting tired to figure out the underlying meaning.

This point was mentioned by other participants as well, so it seemed to be one of the emergent themes of the interview and thus corroborating previous research on the nature of poems (McIlroy, 2013). Moreover, students' responses also confirmed the effectiveness of certain tasks used earlier in research on CT (Alvarez et al., 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016).

A recurring theme, mentioned by almost all participants, referred to the state of being confused about what to focus on in the poem and where to start the analysis within their first attempt. But this issue appeared to be less problematic in the next sessions as the students expressed that the mere practice of asking questions and reflecting on the underlying meaning, which was done in the class, was useful for learning what to write about. Additionally, they also stated the important role of writing integrated with reading to help them concentrate more and pay attention to details in the poems. This is consistent with previous research emphasising the effectiveness of combining reading and writing activities, especially logs for improving CT skills (Dincer, 2020; Khonamri & Farzanegan, 2015; Khonamri et al., 2020; Lyutaya, 2011).

What was also transparent in the analysed interviews were the students' opinions about the effectiveness of classroom tasks and practices which pushed them into and directed them towards using their critical and creative minds. They believed that engaging in the tasks which were planned to focus on one aspect of critical thinking in each session was effective in dealing with the reflective logs later on. One of the learners had specifically mentioned the role of working with peers in groups and the teacher's role in improving their confidence by providing much-needed support. This was in line with results referring to the usefulness of poetry in the creation of social connections among students (Chanmann-Taylor et al., 2016).

Results of Analysing Reflective Logs

Students' reflective logs, written on the basis of each poem that was introduced and practised in each class, were analysed to understand whether there were any changes in students' critical thinking skills. A total of 50 logs were analysed and the analysis revealed the following results. In their first log, almost all learners discussed the important issues connected with the studied poem, yet all but one participant were not able to express their critical thinking skills. Nonetheless, the first attempts indicate students' ability to understand what is important to notice in a text – in this case, it was poetry. Interestingly enough, from the second log onwards, students' reflections deepened and it was possible to observe the application of critical thinking skills in their responses.

Excerpt 1: *When I read the poem for the second time, I came to understand that I had missed some important point. I think these issues are so useful in anyone's life if we reflect on them more deeply. For example, I found out that hatred and aggressive behavior bind us...*

Excerpt 2: *I have never thought of love that way! At first it looked silly to me but on second thoughts, as I reflected more on what the author wanted to say, I changed my opinion. I saw that now I agreed with the author!! This was amazing! I have changed my mind after thinking more about the topic.*

Excerpt 3: *OMG!!! I never thought I would change my idea about something I believed was true. Now that I am writing this log, I see how reflection and hard thinking, as you told us, affect our understanding and seeing things differently. At first, I laughed at the idea but when I put myself in the character's shoe, my viewpoint changed. Of course, I cannot say that she did the right thing, but to me that was the only choice she had and if I were her, maybe under that condition, I would do the same thing.*

In two of the first logs, students had expressed their interest in the class and the reflective log activities and linked it with the fact that they worked on poetry. The choice of this particular genre can be linked with the increase in their motivation:

Excerpt 4: *I want to thank you first for choosing to give us poetry for developing our critical skills. I think things are a lot easier with poems because of the short lines and the rhyme, perhaps that attracts you and you don't want to quit.*

Excerpt 5: *First of all, I want to say thank you for this wonderful class. I really like that each session we read a poem and discuss it. You give us courage to be ourselves and be confident to talk about our opinions. I had never done this before and with poems I think it is a lot easier.*

What became transparent in students' responses was that in their later logs, they felt more comfortable with sounding out their ideas, which often enough were contrary to the ones presented by the author. That is, the more they developed their CT skills, the more confident they became in disagreeing with the author, which was a feature not observed either in their first logs or the first few sessions in the class.

Excerpt 6: *I disagree with the author. I think he is only writing about some cliché things. Things that we hear or say or do every day without thinking about whether we believe in it.*

To sum up, the analysis of the learners' reflective logs indicates that poetry, as a particular literary genre, is an effective means of enhancing learners' CT skills. This was similar to Mohammad Khatib's (2011) and Panavelil's (2011) research findings in which the benefits of using poetry were identified. The CT skills that learners have used in their logs show their ability to think outside of the box, to be able to determine the literal and figurative meanings quite easily, use their reasoning skills well and solve problems easily, make fair judgments, and connect the poems to their personal experiences.

Results of Analysing Teacher Diaries

To obtain information from different sources, teacher diaries were also analysed for both corroborating previously found themes and for finding new and emerging ideas that were perhaps left unmentioned by the participants. While analysing the teacher's session diaries, we were able to observe that most of the themes explained above were observed by the teacher as well. What was interesting, however, was discovering the link in the teacher's observations concerning students' high proficiency level and its influence on the development of their CT skills. The teacher observed that students did not struggle with the surface meaning of the poems when they were asked to read them and express their understanding of what the poet intended to say. This, in the eyes of the teacher, was a very important factor facilitating the next steps of CT skills development. This emerging theme was one of the novel findings of this study because, to the best of our knowledge, no other studies have so far reported this. Therefore, this could be a topic ripe for further research in this area.

Furthermore, the teacher has also observed the participants' immense interest in poetry, as they all seemed to like to read and analyse poems and were quite interested to work on all of the works introduced to them in this class. They expressed their positive inclinations both verbally and non-verbally, through their enthusiastic faces and gestures and eagerness to volunteer to read the poems aloud.

The teacher's diaries also illustrated another interesting and important issue. The teacher closely observed what critical thinking skills students used in the class activities and the ones they used most in their reflective logs. She noted that learners were able to determine the literal and metaphorical meanings quite easily, solve problems and use reasoning skills well, find the relationship in the expected details, identify connections between events, make fair judgments, and apply what they have learned from the poems to their personal experiences. This was consistent with what Chi-An Tung and Shu-Ying Chang (2009) highlighted about critical thinking skills.

It was also congruent with the critical thinking skills which were reported to be required to work with literary texts in the EFL classroom. As Jelena Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova (2016, p. 685) stated, CT skills “can be broadly defined as a set of processes whose main dimensions include the interpretation of the world, self-reflection, intercultural awareness, critical awareness, reasoning and problem-solving, and language use.” Overall, the results revealed that five focal factors led to the development of CT through the use of poetry in this study. The factors which were directly related to the use of poetry were learners’ interest in the poem, learners’ willingness to participate in evaluating a poem, and the particular structure and nature of poems being rhythmic and short. Other factors that seemed to have facilitated the development of CT skills in this study were learners’ linguistic proficiency, and external push and support provided either by the teacher or peers.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the data revealed the great potential of working with a poem to foster critical thinking skills. The results illustrated that poetry could be regarded as a useful literary genre that can be incorporated into English language learning classrooms to enhance learners’ CT skills. Of course, it is important to note that the sheer inclusion of poetry in the language classroom in the traditional sense and using conventional procedures that focus on the literal meaning is not likely to bring forth much change in learners’ CT skills. However, the inclusion of tasks that direct language learners in a step-by-step manner towards the development of critical abilities can certainly be of great educational value.

The study has confirmed previous research findings pinpointing that literature in general and poetry, in particular, have the capacity to increase learners’ motivation and self-confidence in critically analysing and evaluating texts and relate them to what they already know about the subject matter and the world by engaging their experience and emotions. In addition to the benefits reported in the literature for the use of poetry including the development of the language skills, poetry-based activities and tasks done in a collaborative manner, and reflective writing practice was shown to be effective ways of empowering learners. In the present study, it was observed that they learned to personalise the information and critically evaluate the values of what was said through reasoning.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that this study was a response to the gap identified in the EFL context, and the results are merely suggestive, by no means should they be considered conclusive and/or generalisable. Further research, with the application of a larger sample and by employing a different design is recommended to corroborate the results obtained in this study. This empirical evidence is crucial for further research on the topic

(Akimjakova & Tisovicova, 2017). To conclude, reading literary texts like poetry is one of the effective ways of helping learners to improve all aspects of language as well as learning to think critically and enhance the elements of critical thinking skills. Literature-based reading is regarded as having an important role in the development of critical thinking ability and this study showed support for the inclusion of poetry in the EFL classrooms.

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