

The Effect of Literature on Enhancing Critical Thinking

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Abstract: Significance of literature teaching in improving academic skills is echoed in not few studies, of which reference can be made to McKay (1982). Besides, critical thinking is widely considered as a vital skill (Dewey, 1933; Facione, 1990) and a correlate of academic performance (e.g. Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012). This study investigated the effect of teaching poetry on students' critical thinking abilities. To this aim, a total of 60 students, at two classes, one control group and one experimental, at high intermediate level participated in the study. The students in the control group were taught poems for 10 sessions. Besides, both classes were given Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, Form A (WGCTA-FA) at the beginning and end of the term. The results of CTA were submitted to SPSS version 16 and analyzed through paired T-test. The results of the control group, showing a significant difference between the two administrations of the CAT, indicated the role of literature as a recourse in enhancing critical thinking of the students at high intermediate level.

Key words: Critical thinking, literature teaching, resource

1. Introduction

There have long been discussions if literature should be used in language teaching or not. However, literature teaching has recently been advocated for enhancing academic skills and cultural knowledge. Moreover, critical thinking is deemed a vital academic and social skill which, once developed, can be transferred to different areas. It deserved mentioning that critical thinking skills are integral parts of transformational pedagogy which aims at having a more just society. However, some literature consider critical thinking as incompatible with Asian culture. Considering the significance of critical thinking and the potential of literature teaching in promoting academic achievements and cultural knowledge, this study, using an experimental design, considers the effect of literature teaching on critical thinking ability of high intermediate level. In this regard, the following research question is proposed:

Is there any difference between the critical thinking abilities of students who receive literature teaching?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Thinking

Learning to think, the central purpose of education (Dewey, 1933), is considered to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment ending in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, it also involves conceptual and contextual basis of those judgments (Facione & Facione, 1996). Similarly, Watson and Glaser (2002, in Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011) associated critical thinking with inferences drawn from factual statements, recognition of assumptions, interpreting whether conclusions are warranted or not, judging conclusions as relevant to given statements, and evaluating arguments.

Pally (1997) considers transformative pedagogy as a research area defining critical thinking. It assists students "examine the deep meanings, personal implications, and social consequences of any knowledge, theme, technique, text, or material. Critical thought about a subject reveals its internal structure and its connections to self and society" (Shor, 1992, p. 169, in Pally, 1997, p. 259).

2.2. Critical thinking and empowerment

To Facione (1990), CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in personal and social life. Thus, educating good critical thinkers "combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society" (Facione, 1990,

p. 2). Davis (2003) believes that developing critical thinking and analytical skills results in student empowerment. Similarly, on the significance of critical thinking, Facione (2007) rightly states that “Teach people to make good decisions and you equip them to improve their own futures and become contributing members of society, rather than burdens on society” (p. 1). Likewise, Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 20) states that the primary concern of teachers “should be the depth of critical thinking rather than the breadth of content knowledge”.

According to Giroux (1997), critical thinking, a political act, is linked to consciousness, praxis, and emancipatory behavior. More than an interpretative tool, it is placed within a radical nation of interest and social transformation. In this regard, Benesch (1993) believes that, rather than simply higher order thinking, critical thinking is considered a “search for the social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and an orientation to transform learning and society (Brookfield, 1987; Giroux, 1978; Moriarty, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987; and Wallerstein, 1983)” (p. 546).

2.3 Critical thinking and disposition

To define disposition, Facione (1992, p. 10) states that it is “a probing inquisitiveness, a keenness of mind, a zealous dedication to reason, and a hunger or eagerness for reliable information”. Facione (1990) also argues that “a critical spirit suggests a positive effect that transcends normal thinking and can assist us in transforming our thinking” (p. 13). Regarding educating critical thinkers, Facione (1992, p.25) is of the idea that “it combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society”. Believing in the uselessness of teaching critical thinking without creating the inclination to use it, Halpern (1999) adds that critical thinking is “an attitude or disposition to recognize when a skill is needed and the willingness to exert the mental effort to apply it” (p. 72).

2.4 Teaching literature in ELT

Distinguishing between the study of literature and the use of literature as a resource for language learning, Maley (1989) considers literature as a valid use of language. The intrinsic interest in literary texts can be a motivator for reading (Maley, 1989; Mckay, 1982). Moreover, an ideal tool for introducing cultural assumptions, literature brings about an enhancement in the respect for the students’ own culture, promoting creativity and tolerance of cultural differences (Mckay, 1982).

In presenting pros and cons of using literature in ESL classrooms, Mckay (1982) refers to structural complexity, uselessness in meeting academic goals, and cultural complexity of such texts as negative features attributed to it. Arguments for using it deal with the literary texts

enhancing academic skills specially reading comprehension.

Arthur (1968) emphasizes creating the literary experience for students, to be useful for teaching skills. There have been discussions on if literary texts should be used in ESL classes at all. In the same line, Gajdusek (1988) refers to limitedness of literary texts despite its usefulness. Gajdusek (1988) proposes an approach for using literary texts which makes students responsible for “building their successively more complex schemata (i.e. level of understanding)” (p. 227).

Accordingly, Oster (1986) argues that focus on point of view in literature promotes critical thinking which is important in traditional education systems unfamiliar with how to read, question, and analyze critically. Acknowledging the filtering due to the point of view of the writer and the effect of experience, cultures, and values of the readers, Oster (1986) argues that information, rather than being sacred, is man-made. Likewise, Spack (1985) argues that the study of literature, once excluded from ESL programs, has academic, intellectual, cultural, and linguistic benefits.

3. Methodology

Aiming at studying the effect of poetry on critical thinking, this study involved an experimentation as follows:

3.1 Participants

Using an experimental design, in the present study, two class at high intermediate level, with 30 students at each one, at an institute in Gonbad-e Kavos were chosen indiscriminately. The students were female students with ages ranging from 18-22. One class was used as the experimental group receiving the treatment which included teaching poetry for 10 sessions. the other class, the control group, received placebo.

3.2 Instrumentation

Unlike some of the tests such as Test on Appraising Observations (Norris & King, 1984) measuring only one aspect of critical thinking, Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Watson & Glaser, 1980), designed in five subsections, one of the most reliable and valid measures of critical thinking (Gadzella & Baloglu, 2003; McKown, 1997, in Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012), covers multiple critical thinking abilities (Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012). These subsections deal with drawing inferences, recognizing assumptions, making deductions, interpreting evidence, and evaluating arguments, each comprising 16 items with two to five alternatives. The appraisal can be completed in 60 minutes.

As for the statistics of the appraisal, the test-retest reliability of the original appraisal ($r = 0.81$) has been reported by Watson and Glaser (1980, in Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012). It had also been employed by many

researchers (e.g., Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010; Fahim et al., 2010 =85%) in Iran and the reliability coefficient of its Persian adaptation has been estimated by Cronbach’s Alpha ($\alpha = 0.85$) in Faravani (2006, in Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012). Moreover, Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2011) stated that the reliability of the Watson-Glaser test has been determined in three ways. Estimates of the test’s internal consistency, stability of the test scores over time and the correlation between scores on alternate forms. Testing stability over time indicated an acceptable level of stability (0.73).

Concerning the validity of the test, Hajjarian, (2008, in Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011) states that it enjoys all areas of face, content, criterion and construction validity. Reliability and validity of this test in Iranian culture is also reported by Mohammadyari (2002, in Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011). In her study, the reliability was found to be 0.98 and the results of the factor analysis provided some support for the inventory hypothesized structure (Mohammadyari, 2002, in Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011). Considering such estimates, the Persian version of the Watson-Glaser test was applied which resulted in the total reliability of 0.72.

3.3 Procedure and data analysis

This study is carried out using an experimental design. To this aim, two classes at high level were selected of which one was used as the experimental group and the other as the control group. the treatment included teaching one poem every session for 10 session. The control group received placebo. The critical thinking tests were given to both classes at the beginning and end of the study. It deserves mentioning that, due to the tests being time-consuming and taking 60 minutes for each administration, the students were allowed to take the tests home.

4. Results and Discussion

The difference between the score of students in two administrations of the test in the control group was also investigated through running T-test. The results of this test show that there is no difference between the scores of students in this test in two administrations.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Ad.1	40.0000	30	5.27845	.96371
	Ad. 2	40.8000	30	4.99931	.91275

Table 2. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Ad.1 & Ad.2	30	.936	.000

Table 3. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 2	Ad.1 & Ad.2	-.80000	1.86437	.34039	-1.49617	-.10383	-2.350	29	.026

To probe the difference between the critical thinking abilities of the students in the experimental group between two administrations of the test (i.e. at the beginning and end of the experiment), dependent T-test was run through SPSS version 16.

Table4. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Ad.1 & Ad. 2	30	.757	.000

Table 5. Paired Sample Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Ad.1	40.4667	30	5.08367	.92815

Ad. 2	47.7667	30	5.00126	.91310
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Table 6. Paired Sample Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Ad.1 – Ad.2	-7.30000	3.51499	.64175	-8.61252	-5.98748	-11.375	29	.000

As the results of the dependent T-test show, considering the obtained level of significance .00, it is argued that there has been a significant difference between the scores of the students in the experimental group in two administrations. Moreover, the reported mean shows an increase in the scores in the second administration. This indicates usefulness of literature in enhancing critical thinking abilities of the students in this experiment.

The findings of empirical studies on critical thinking signify its effectiveness on academic performance of which reference can be made to the works of Hashemi & Zabihi (2012), Fahim, Bagherkazemi, & Alemi (2010), and Fahim and Sa’ee pour (2012). This paper argues that critical thinking itself can be fostered through teaching literature. Accordingly, Topping, (1968, in Khatib & Shakouri Masouleh, 2012) argues that, rather than being excluded for being structurally complex and culturally remote, “its cultural load, structural complexity and non-normative use of language as claimed, is exactly what can be employed to enrich language teaching and learning experiences, and enhance critical thinking” (Khatib & Shakouri Masouleh, 2012, p. 7). Van (1009) and Khatib and Mellati (2012) also refer to the effectiveness of literature in developing critical thinking. Specifically, different genres of literature such as short fiction, drama, and novels respectively are considered useful in encouraging critical thinking by different writers (Arıoğul, 2001; Lenore, 1993; and Helton, Asamani & Thomas, 1998, in Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Likewise, Hakes (2008) is of the idea that poems, being argumentative, “making us see something familiar in a new way” (p.78), enhance critical thinking.

The definitions offered by Watson & Glaser (2002, in Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2011) and Halpern (2003) deal with thinking, interpreting, evaluating, and inferencing. Elsewhere, Pally (1977) classifies critical thinking in relation to three research areas, of which one deals with transformative pedagogy. On the other hand, Giroux (1997), Benesch (1993), Davis (2003), and Facione (1990) are of the idea that critical thinking is related to transformative pedagogy. Likewise, Moreover, critical thinking is considered incompatible with Asian cultural values (Atkinson, 1999; Ramanatan & Atkinson, 1999). Research report also indicate limitedness of critical thinking abilities in such contexts (Koupaee Dar, Rahimi, and Shams, 2010). However, considering the transferability of critical thinking abilities (Ennis, 1992, in Mason, 2008), once learned through reading literature, can be applied to

different areas. Moreover, regarding the significance of critical thinking (Kumaravadevelu, 2003) and its contribution to academic achievements, cultural knowledge, and transformative pedagogy, this paper argues for fostering critical thinking abilities through teaching literature. As advocated by Hakes (2008), this paper also argues for teaching students how to think critically. For this to happen, teachers should be encouraged to do so (Hakes, 2008; Khatib & Shakouri Masouleh, 2012).

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