

Literary Texts and Critical Thinking

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Abstract- The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of using literary and non-literary texts as supplementary reading in a class focusing on critical thinking. The study used a pretest-posttest, experimental design with a quantitative design. Thirty advanced level students participated in this 20-session study. The students were matched according to their previous term grades in English, and assigned randomly to an experimental and a control group. The experimental group read literary texts; short stories, as supplementary reading while the control group read non-literary texts as supplementary reading. The teaching method for these two groups was similar. Quantitative results from a *t*-test analysis showed the development of critical thinking ability in both experimental and control groups. However, when the gains between pre and posttests between the two groups were compared, the results revealed significant differences. The experimental group performed much better than the control group in the post-test phase.

Keywords- Critical thinking; Literary texts;

1. Critical thinking

Educators have long been aware of the importance of critical thinking skills as an outcome of student learning. Despite widespread recognition of its importance, there is a notable lack of consensus regarding the definition of critical thinking. The purposes of this literature review are to (a) explore the ways in which critical thinking has been defined by researchers, (b) investigate the teaching implications to promote critical thinking, and (c) learn how valuable is literature in promoting critical thinking.

1.1 Definition of critical thinking

1.1.1 Theoretical background; The literature on critical thinking has roots in two primary academic disciplines: philosophy and psychology (Lewis & Smith, 1993). Sternberg (1986) has also noted a third critical thinking strand within the field of education. These separate academic strands have developed different approaches to defining critical thinking that reflect their respective concerns. Each of these approaches is explored more fully below.

1.1.2 The philosophical approach; The writings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and more recently, Matthew

Lipman and Richard Paul, exemplify the philosophical approach. This approach focuses on the hypothetical critical thinker, enumerating the qualities and characteristics of this person rather than the behaviors or actions the critical thinker can perform (Lewis & Smith, 1993; Thayer-Bacon, 2000). Sternberg (1986) has noted that this school of thought approaches the critical thinker as an ideal type, focusing on what people are capable of doing under the best of circumstances. Accordingly, Richard Paul (1992) discusses critical thinking in the context of “perfections of thought” (p. 9). This preoccupation with the ideal critical thinker is evident in the American Philosophical Association’s consensus portrait of the ideal critical thinker as someone who is inquisitive in nature, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded, has a desire to be well-informed, understands diverse viewpoints, and is willing to both suspend judgment and to consider other perspectives (Facione, 1990).

Those working within the philosophical tradition also emphasize qualities or standards of thought. For example, Bailin (2002) defines critical thinking as thinking of a particular quality—essentially good thinking that meets specified criteria or standards of adequacy and accuracy. Further, the philosophical approach has traditionally focused on the application of formal rules of logic (Lewis & Smith, 1993; Sternberg, 1986). One limitation of this

approach to defining critical thinking is that it does not always correspond to reality (Sternberg, 1986). By emphasizing the ideal critical thinker and what people have the capacity to do this approach may have less to contribute to discussions about how people actually think.

Definitions of critical thinking emerging from the philosophical tradition include:

- “the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism” (McPeck, 1981, p. 8);
- “reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1985, p. 45);
- “skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it 1) relies upon criteria, 2) is self-correcting, and 3) is sensitive to context” (Lipman, 1988, p. 39);
- “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or conceptual considerations upon which that judgment is based” (Facione, 1990, p. 3);
- “disciplined, self-directed thinking that exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thought” (Paul, 1992, p. 9);
- thinking that is goal-directed and purposive, “thinking aimed at forming a judgment,” where the thinking itself meets standards of adequacy and accuracy (Bailin et al., 1999b, p. 287); and
- “judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe” (Facione, 2000, p. 61).

1.1.3 The cognitive psychological approach; The cognitive psychological approach contrasts with the philosophical perspective in two ways. First, cognitive psychologists, particularly those immersed in the behaviorist tradition and the experimental research paradigm, tend to focus on how people actually think versus how they could or should think under ideal conditions (Sternberg, 1986). Second, rather than defining critical thinking by pointing to characteristics of the ideal critical thinker or enumerating criteria or standards of “good” thought, those working in cognitive psychology tend to define critical thinking by the types of actions or behaviors critical thinkers can do. Typically, this approach to defining critical thinking includes a list of skills or procedures performed by critical thinkers (Lewis & Smith, 1993).

Philosophers have often criticized this latter aspect of the cognitive psychological approach as being reductionist—reducing a complex orchestration of knowledge and skills into a collection of disconnected steps or procedures (Sternberg, 1986). For example, Bailin

(2002) argues that it is a fundamental misconception to view critical thinking as a series of discrete steps or skills, and that this misconception stems from the behaviorist’s need to define constructs in ways that are directly observable. According to this argument, because the actual process of thought is unobservable, cognitive psychologists have tended to focus on the products of such thought—behaviors or overt skills (e.g., analysis, interpretation, formulating good questions). Other philosophers have also cautioned against confusing the activity of critical thinking with its component skills (Facione, 1990), arguing that critical thinking is more than simply the sum of its parts (Van Gelder, 2005). Indeed, a few proponents of the philosophical tradition have pointed out that it is possible to simply “go through the motions,” or proceed through the “steps” of critical thinking without actually engaging in critical thought (Bailin, 2002).

Definitions of critical thinking that have emerged from the cognitive psychological approach include:

- “the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts” (Sternberg, 1986, p. 3);
- “the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome” (Halpern, 1998, p. 450); and
- “seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth” (Willingham, 2007, p. 8).

1.1.4 The educational approach: Finally, those working in the field of education have also participated in discussions about critical thinking. Benjamin Bloom and his associates are included in this category. Their taxonomy for information processing skills (1956) is one of the most widely cited sources for educational practitioners when it comes to teaching and assessing higher-order thinking skills. Bloom’s taxonomy is hierarchical, with “comprehension” at the bottom and “evaluation” at the top. The three highest levels (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) are frequently said to represent critical thinking (Kennedy et al., 1991).

The benefit of the educational approach is that it is based on years of classroom experience and observations of student learning, unlike both the philosophical and the psychological traditions (Sternberg, 1986). However, some have noted that the educational approach is limited in its vagueness. Concepts within the taxonomy lack the clarity necessary to guide instruction and assessment in a useful way (Ennis, 1985; Sternberg, 1986). Furthermore, the frameworks developed in education have not been tested as vigorously as those developed within either philosophy or psychology (Sternberg, 1986).

1.2 Teaching implications to promote critical thinking

According to Ennis (1989, as cited in Abrami, et al, 2008), there are four instructional approaches in the teaching of critical thinking including: general, infusion, immersion, and mixed approaches. In the general approach, critical thinking is one of the course objectives; however, there is no specific content for critical thinking. Still, there are some tasks that demand students to think deeply. The infusion approach encourages students to think deeply about the content or the subject matter of the course; moreover, the critical thinking skills are made explicit. The immersion approach also requires the students to think deeply, but the critical thinking skills are not made explicit. The mixed approach includes the general approach with either infusion or immersion approach.

In the teaching of literature to promote critical thinking, Langer (1991, 1998) proposes that the questions posed to the students during discussion are critical to students reasoning and thinking. As previously stated, reading comprehension involves two purposes; literary (aesthetic), and informative (efferent). Good teaching should encourage students to focus on both stances of reading. However, the problem of literature teaching results from an ignorance to aesthetic reading (Langer, 1991). She also points out that literature is often taught as if there is one correct answer. Consequently, teachers should pose questions that focus on aesthetic stance where students have opportunities to go beyond initial understandings and consider multiple perspectives as part of the process of developing interpretations. Thus, teachers should begin with horizons of possibility, inviting students to explore a particular issue, discussing their initial impression among peers, and leaving the students with the notion that multiple interpretations are to be expected and that ambiguity and reconsideration are encouraged.

Langer also proposes that teachers should keep the notion of horizon of possibility in mind as she stated, "Horizon of possibility thinking was also often used to pull students back into thinking about the topic at hand, particularly when their attention wandered" (p.6). She further suggests teacher let students work in groups with other students, when they read and discuss certain issues so that they collaboratively explore possibilities of alternative explanations and interpretations. As a consequence, a teacher's role is at the heart to provoke critical thinking when teaching literature. Langer lists several principles of instruction that encourage students to explore possibilities.

First, students must be treated as thinkers. Therefore, students should be invited to share their response in their reading, discussing and writing. They should be allowed to raise questions, to introduce new ideas, to hear others, and to think beyond their interpretation.

Second, teachers should encourage question generating because reading usually provokes questions. Students should learn to raise questions to explore horizon of possibility. These questions might focus on motives,

relationships, or feelings. Langer points out that question generating is a desirable behavior, indicating that students are pondering and exploring uncertainties of literature.

Third, classroom meetings are times to develop understanding, not a time for teacher to check what students have understood. After initial reading, students need to discuss the ideas among friends so as to explore further possibilities by reworking their interpretations, raising questions, making connections and gaining deeper understandings.

Langer states, "it was quite clear to both the teacher and the students that ideas change during literary discussions and that class meetings are the times to explore multiple interpretations, to challenge one's own as well as others' ideas, and to reach a fuller understanding of the complexities of the piece" (p.9). Halpern (1989), states that the teaching of critical thinking should promote metacognition. During the discussion, metacognitive monitoring is promoted. Metacognition is to know about what we know. In group discussion, students can monitor their thinking process, check that the discussion is going on for an appropriate goal, ensure accuracy, and make decisions.

Then, the teaching environment should support the students to explore, rethink, explain, and defend their own understandings. Students can first share their initial impressions, and discuss their ideas among friends to ponder and refine their interpretations.

To sum up, critical thinking is higher-order thinking. Some elements of critical thinking include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Students should be encouraged to write about topics they know well. Therefore, writing in response to reading literature can give them the chance to think critically while using their life experiences.

1.3 Values of literature in promoting critical thinking

It is believed that reading literature can promote critical thinking. Hall (2005) proposes that the process in literature reading is different from reading other text types, and it helps promote critical thinking. He further points out that reading literature tends to be slower as readers are more careful and more thoughtful. Langer (2000) points out that readers of literature often look behind and beyond the text, and they tend to hypothesize about possible future developments. Students, then, can develop the analytical and interpretative thinking that is required in their writing from reading literature (Vandrick, 2004). The unique advantage of literature is that readers are able to create an internal meaning, and this is the way we interpret things (Gajdusek, 1988). Additionally, reading literature demands a search for meaning and it provides students with a useful tool in language learning- that is the ability to interpret a discourse (Spack, 1985). This skill is valuable to learners because they can use it in both inside and outside the learning situation. In reading literature, students can respond to the text critically (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000).

This encourages aesthetic reading and also leads them to point-driven reading (Hall, 2005). As a consequence, students become active and meaning making learners.

Researchers agree that in reading literature, readers learn to make an inference since description in literary texts is not visualisable or directly stated (Hall, 2005).

Consequently, readers learn to expect ambiguities and difficulties, and that the purpose of the texts will not be immediately clear. At this point, literary reading is considered bottom up_ process, and it encourages reflective thinking (Hall, 2005). It is open to more than one correct interpretation. Thus, literature is a powerful material for thoughtful analysis (Alvermann & Phelps, 1998). Alvermann and Phelps report that their students find reading literature helps them think and criticize the current social issues because literature provides multiple perspectives. Thus, it creates the exploring of multiple perspectives and sensitivity to others_ points of views. Therefore, they discover discrepancies, contradictions, and differences of interpretation, and they have to decide what the accurate information is.

Similarly, Langer (1991, 1992) proposes the term “horizon of possibility” as reading literature explores emotions, relationships, motives and reactions. Thus, readers sometimes need to ponder on the situations, and sometimes they need to rethink their own interpretations. Sometimes we use psychological response, and other time, they use political or mythic stance toward the story situations. Then, our ideas shift and swell; therefore, there are possibilities of multiple interpretations, expanding the complexity of our understanding. This is what is called horizon of possibility because reading literature proceeds at two levels. First, readers consider new ideas to make sense of the whole, but at the same time they use the new ideas to reconsider the whole as well. Langer (1992) states,

“There is an ever-emerging horizon of possibilities that enriches the reader’s understanding. Readers clarify ideas as they read and relate them to the growing whole; the whole informs the parts as well as the parts building toward the whole”. (p.4)

Readers of literature also think beyond the information and the particular situation. They use the text to reflect on their lives, other people’s lives, and human situations and conditions. Therefore, literary reading explores horizons where uncertainty is normal, so readers explore various possibilities in this process. This proves that reading literature has an important role for in-depth learning, critical reflection, and decision making. Hall (2005) explains that literature reading helps promote critical thinking because it activates readers_ prior knowledge and integrates new information with the existing knowledge as he says,

“Successful comprehending reading

requires active filling in of _gaps_ by the reader, inferencing, and the knowledge that helps readers fill in the gaps was proposed to come from experience, theorized in the 1970s as “schemata” and related ideas. Different schemas will result in different representations”. (p.99)

Writing in response to reading literature can lead to critical thinking in many ways. First, when students read stories which are relevant to their interests, the stories can arouse their responses to the text; therefore, it stimulates critical enquiry. Second, journal writing in response to reading literature gives students opportunities to express their ideas freely.

Students can discuss a character’s conflicts or problems and use their life experience to interpret the text. Third, they can share their opinions in a group discussion. Then, they can evaluate their own thinking and compare and contrast their peers’ ideas. As a consequence, students learn to think reflectively and perceive from what other people think. Then, students learn to understand the logic of argument, listen attentively, debate confidently, and to become life-long independent learners.

In summary, reading literature has a lot of benefits for students. It can motivate students to read and write, and it promotes critical thinking. When students enjoy reading stories, they are motivated to respond to the texts. Therefore, they tend to think critically to the texts, and this skill is valuable to learners because it is a crucial component in writing and they can use it both inside and outside the learning situation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research question

In order to obtain the aim of the study, i.e., the impact of using literary texts in developing critical thinking ability, the following question was raised by the researcher:

Does instruction of literary texts have any effect on the development of critical thinking ability of Iranian EFL learners?

2.2 Statement of the hypothesis

Accordingly, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

H0: There is no significant difference between the critical thinking ability of the group having studied literary texts and that of the control group.

2.3 Participants

Two advanced classes of 15 students at Zaban Gostar Language School in Babolsar were selected as samples of this study. They were all females and had an age range of

19-27.

2.4 Data collection procedures

The data were collected after the following procedures:

1. The students enrolled in the course were asked to participate in the study. The Critical Thinking Questionnaire was administered to the students at the beginning of the experiment in both classes.

2. During the 20 sessions of the instruction, students in both the experimental and control groups were taught the textbook “*Summit 1A*”.

3. In the experimental group student were given a short story each session, while in the control group, they worked on a non-literary passage taken from the book “*Active Skills for Reading 4*”. The supplementary reading passages for both groups were of the same difficulty level.

4. The same questionnaire was given on the last session of the term.

2.5 Instruments

This study used a pre-post, experimental design to test the hypothesis. The instrument was a questionnaire given both at the beginning and end of the term.

2.6 Materials for the experimental and control groups

Both the experimental group and control groups used the same textbooks: *Summit 1A*.

2.6.1 Supplementary material (short stories) for the experimental group: In the experimental group, students read short stories. The short stories were selected based on three criteria; firstly, the level of difficulty in terms of language and culture. Secondly, students’ interests were taken into consideration, and lastly the themes of the stories were appropriate for the students.

2.6.2 Supplementary material (non-literary texts) for the control group: In the control group, the students read non-literary texts such as news, ads, or articles. The texts were selected based on the level of difficulty and students and interests. The stages of learning and tasks were similar to the experimental group.

The reading materials for the experimental and control groups were parallel in terms of amount of reading, vocabulary and language focus throughout the term. The readability program SMOG, which is a computer program that evaluates readability of a text was used to ascertain that the texts from both groups were at the same readability level.

2.7 Data analysis

The process of data analysis was as follows:

2.7.1 Pre-test: Watson-Glaser’s Critical Thinking Appraisal questionnaire was given to the students of the two groups as the pre-test, and their means were compared with each other to determine the homogeneity of the students in their critical thinking ability. The results of the pre-test phase are given below:

First, the reliability coefficient of pre-test was calculated by Cronbach’s Alpha formula to see whether or not the test was reliable (Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability coefficient of the pre-test

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.818	80

Then an F-test was run in SPSS software to compare the variances of the experimental and control groups on the pre-test (Table 2).

As displayed in Table 2, the F-observed value was 1.12, which was lower than the critical value of F, i.e. 1.74. It was concluded that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their variances. In other words, the two groups belonged to the same population.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and F-test of the pre-test

Group	N	M in.	M ax.	Poss ible max.	Me an	Std. Devia tion	Vari ance	F- te st
Experi mental	15	18	36	42	25.97	5.278	27.852	1.12
Contro l	15	18	38	42	25.78	5.590	31.254	

Consequently, an independent sample t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the two groups on the pretest. As displayed in Table 3, the t-observed value was 0.430 which was lower than the critical value of t, i.e. 2, at 68 degrees of freedom.

Table 3: Independent t-test of the pre-test

Independent samples test										
		Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig .	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Low er	Upp er
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	1.12	.359	.430	68	.168	.19	1.361	-2.129	3.301
	Equal variances not assumed			.430	67.916	.168	.19	1.361	-2.129	3.301

	assumed								
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Thus it could be claimed that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their critical thinking ability prior to the administration of the treatment to the experimental group. The mean scores for the experimental and control groups were 25.97 and 25.78 respectively.

2.7.2 Post-Test: The third set of calculations included another t-test to see if there was any significant difference between the performances of the participants in each group on the post-test. The results are reported in Table 4. The descriptive statistics calculated for the post-test are given below:

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of the post-test

Group statistics								
	Group	N	Min.	Max.	Possible max.	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Post-test	Experimental	15	22	39	42	30.8857	4.09822	.69273
	Control	15	17	37	42	26.1429	5.49408	.92867

The t-observed value was 4.094, which was higher than the critical value of t, i.e. 2, at 68 degrees of freedom. Since P was lower than 0.05, therefore the hypothesis was rejected with 95% confidence.

Table 5: Independent t-test of the post-test

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	1.80	0.13	4.094	68	.000	4.74286	.23599	2.43096	7.05475
	Equal variances not assumed			4.094	62.892	.000	4.74286	.23599	2.42755	7.05816

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According to the above-mentioned statistics, the difference between the means of the experimental group, 30.88, and the control group, 26.14, was significant, i.e. 4.74. It means that the experimental group performed better in the post-test due to the treatment they had received.

3. Conclusion

Based on the results, it was concluded that the experimental group performed better due to the application of literary texts employed as treatment. As the experimental group had a better performance on the post-test, the null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

“There is a significant difference between the average critical thinking ability of Iranian EFL learners who are taught literary texts in comparison to those given non-literary texts. In other words, employing literary texts leads to a significantly better performance of the students in terms of their critical thinking ability.”

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Vitae

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