

Inquiry Process through Literature in the EFL Classroom: A Broad Path to Work on Critical Thinking

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This article presents theoretical considerations about the inclusion of literary texts as a facilitative tool to develop critical thinking skills from inquiry process in a foreign language classroom. The rationale presented here may serve as a foundation for foreign language teachers who face the necessity of reformulating their objectives and instructional procedures to promote the development of language competency while fostering critical processes in students.

Key words: Literary texts, critical thinking skills, inquiry process, critical processes

Este artículo presenta consideraciones teóricas sobre la inclusión de textos literarios como una herramienta facilitadora del desarrollo de habilidades del pensamiento crítico a partir de procesos de cuestionamiento en un salón de lengua extranjera. Los argumentos que se presentan aquí pueden servir de base para profesores de lengua extranjera que enfrentan la necesidad de reformular sus objetivos y procedimientos de instrucción para promover el desarrollo de la competencia del lenguaje y, a su vez, fomentar los procesos críticos en los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Textos literarios, habilidades de pensamiento crítico, proceso de cuestionamiento, procesos críticos

Introduction

In the different educative contexts, it is generally thought that the learning of English as a foreign language implies unreal communication contexts. If we analyze English textbooks created for learning purposes, some of them consider the language, seen as a set of rules, as their principal objective. Consequently, in these cases, English is seen as an isolated subject whose topics of learning are mostly related to grammar. It would be necessary that we, as English teachers, try to find ways of teaching this language as a means of learning other subjects while having in mind our students' needs and interests. They are interested in learning a language if

they can use it in real life situations. Therefore, it is important to explore students' curiosity about the world so that the EFL classroom becomes alive and challenging for them. In this article, I will talk about the importance of including literary texts in the school syllabus.

Pineda (2001) defines specific teacher and learner roles during critical reading and thinking processes. It is the teacher's responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for criticism and discussion. The creation of tasks that imply higher-order thinking activities and critical reading depends on an active and participatory teacher. Teachers should guide students to construct meaning and to develop critical thinking by helping them to make connections between their background knowledge and the environment that surrounds them. Therefore, students will not be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge but as active members of a society.

The key to acquiring education is reasoning. If students do not think critically about their environment, it will be difficult to learn. Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) state: "We realized that one of the problems with our old models of curriculum as fact and curriculum as activity was that they were both models of how to teach, not of how people actually inquire about something they want to understand" (p. 257). Through our students' exploration of the world, questions arise and they want to investigate them. Hence, inquiry processes come and meaningful learning starts. Paulo Freire (as cited in Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) argues that inquirers are not only problem-solvers, but also problem-posers. Taking into account the statements mentioned above, I wonder: What pedagogical tasks are appropriate in the foreign language classroom if we think of our students as active participants? Is literature beneficial in regard to the introduction of critical thinking into the language learning process? Does it imply inquiry process?

Integrating Literature in the EFL Classroom

Since short stories usually have a sequence, this fact encourages students at all levels of language proficiency to continue reading them until the end to find out how the conflict is resolved. Elliott (1990), for example, affirms that literature motivates students at all levels and is "motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities" (p. 197). He stresses the importance of developing students' responses (individual and group levels) and competency in literature. In addition, one of the reasons Vandrick (1997) lists for using literature with students is that it motivates students "to explore their

feelings through experiencing those of others” (p. 1). Moreover, literature holds high status in many cultures and countries. For this reason, students can feel a real sense of achievement upon understanding pieces of well written texts. Also, literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books. As a result, instructors should agree that literary texts encourage students to read, and most literary texts chosen according to students’ language proficiency levels and preferences will certainly be motivating.

Literature takes readers to different worlds. When reading a novel, a story or a poem, readers have to deepen their knowledge on the different topics dealt with in that piece of literature. They cannot merely decode words to understand what they are reading; they must find a variety of bibliographical sources that give them important information about the contexts or voices presented there, and the inquiries that emerged from it. Harste and Short (1988) put it as follows: “When readers are given time to respond to a book, they make the ideas encountered in the literature personally meaningful and are able to extend those ideas in a variety of ways” (p. 191).

Moreover, literature could be a useful tool to start “the authoring cycle” (p. 262) explained by *Short, Harste, and Burke* (1996), in which students can build from the known by browsing, talking and listening. In the first stage of this cycle, teachers can present students a variety of provocative prompts based on life or personal experiences, so that the inquiry process can be built upon those prompts in order to support students in making connections to their previous knowledge. However, sometimes those prompts are not contextualized in a real task. Thus, literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers.

We, as EFL teachers, can pair literature and non-fiction books to have students listen to different authors’ voices about the same or related topics. This is what Camp (2000) explains as “twin texts”. Sometimes, the process of EFL learning is considered essentially piecemeal and superficial. It is to the contrary. When we engage learners in literature, they will focus their attention beyond the more structural aspects of the foreign language. They begin to inhabit the text when a piece of literature is explored and read between lines. They are drawn into the story, poem or book. Moreover, if learners can compare those issues mentioned in literature with facts mentioned in non-fiction books, the inquiry process would have a meaningful effect on them. Camp (2000) states: “The use of twin texts is a viable method for both teaching and learning critical reading and thinking skills” (p. 400).

Critical Thinking and Inquiry Process

A sense of wonder is the center for living through classroom inquiry, as Whitin and Whitin state (1997). All inquiry processes are born from wondering. So, careful observation, exploratory conversations, cooperative work, and critical uses of resources are connected strongly to the center of wonder. When reading authentic materials, as those offered by literature, readers find fundamental human issues which allow them to wonder critically about their world. For active, critical reading to occur, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry. Students must be encouraged to question, to make predictions, and to organize ideas which support value judgments.

Introduced by Bloom et al. in 1956, thinking skills, called *Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain* (cited in Orlich et al., 1990), include both lower-order and higher-order thinking¹. Depending on students' level of proficiency, instructors can activate students' lower-order or higher-order thinking. Beginners, for instance, should be able to recall information and respond to questions about dates, events and places. Thus, when questions about characters' names, setting and plot of the story are asked, they will have no difficulties responding to the questions. This is level 1 of the taxonomy—*knowledge*. As students become more proficient in the language, they can move to level 2—*comprehension*. On this level, they must demonstrate their comprehension by comparing, interpreting, giving descriptions and stating main ideas. When students become even more proficient, they move to level 3—*application*. On level 3, students try to solve problems by using the knowledge they have about the story. On level 4—*analysis*—students must have reached the high intermediate level of proficiency to succeed. The reason is that students must analyze, compare, contrast, explain, and infer facts/ideas about the story.

When reaching an advanced level of proficiency, students can synthesize and evaluate what they read, which are the last two levels of the taxonomy (*synthesis and evaluation*). Teachers can then ask questions such as: How would you change the plot? What would happen if . . .? What changes would you make to solve . . .? Do you agree with the actions. . .? With the outcomes. . .? Why did they (the character) choose. . .?

1 Higher-order thinking skills are considered relatively complex cognitive operations—such as concept formation, analysis, and problem solving—that commonly employ one or more skills. Lower-order skills, on the contrary, mean memorization of facts, paraphrasing, summarizing, or drilling on the basic skills such as grammar and punctuation.

What choice would you have made...? (Bloom's critical thinking questioning strategies).

Literature can be used to share reading experiences from students' inquiries. When we, as teachers, work from our students' wonderings, we allow them to feel like the center of the learning process. The shared inquiry requires that the teacher shares the control for shaping the teaching/learning process with students by inviting them to take active roles in the discussion. They are also encouraged to play active roles in planning and implementing classroom experiences (Thomas & Oldfather, 1995).

Critical thinking implies that readers are actively and constructively engaged in the process of reading. They are continually negotiating what they know with what they are trying to make sense of. The role of background knowledge and the students' ability to draw upon it are essential to critical thinking and learning.

Connections between Literature and Critical Processes

The inquiry process can be developed through critical reading since reading skills rely on the capacity to think productively and go beyond words. Students may be encouraged to interact with others with the purpose of learning to explore a text in a deeper and more analytical way. A piece of literature or any other kind of text has multiple readings that allow students to broaden their vision of the world.

Literature is authentic and genuine material. By that we simply mean that most works of literature are not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language, in this case, English. Through the reading of literary texts, students have to cope with language intended for native speakers and, in this way, gain familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode. In the second place, as it is important to consider that the world of a novel, poem, or short story is a created one, it allows putting into practice the process of inquiry. It offers a vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be described. Readers can discover their thoughts, feelings, and customs. This vividly imagined world can quickly give the reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society.

This way, the reading of literature brings to learners' minds different wonderings and inquiries about their own world and the world of others. If we are going to start the inquiry process from the known, it is important to select books which are relevant to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learners.

Proficiency level has, obviously, to be considered, so the use of reading comprehension strategies might be required to help students in the process of getting the text meaning across.

Discussing pieces of literature gives readers time to become people who think critically and deeply about what they read. Students' reflections are deep when we teachers involve them in the inquiry process. Through this process, teachers hope that students will become less dependent on others' opinions and, therefore, more interested in and more able to assess other perspectives.

They also need the opportunity to respond to literature in a variety of ways. Students who have to accomplish a range of tasks and activities centered on a literary text, often as a shared activity in groups, may come to be more familiar with that text. This sharing of ideas will cause students to reflect on the opinions they have and the inquiries they make about the pieces of literature they read, hence, getting them to develop autonomy and independence when learning a given subject.

Pedagogical Implications

It is not an easy task to incorporate higher level thinking skills into the classroom, but it depends on teachers' commitment and responsibility. To get students to participate in the society they live in, they must have experiences which prepare them for life. In order to become critical thinkers, it is essential that students learn to value their own thinking, to compare their thinking and their interpretations with others, and to revise or reject parts of that process when it is appropriate.

A classroom environment which is student-centered fosters student participation in the learning process. Learning that is both personal and collaborative encourages critical thinking. Students who are reading, writing, discussing, and interacting with a variety of learning materials in a variety of ways are more likely to become critical thinkers and learners. Critical readers are active readers: they question, confirm, and judge what they read throughout the reading process.

Critical reading would appear to come before critical thinking: only when we have fully understood a text (critical reading), can we truly evaluate its assertions (critical thinking). Teachers who encourage pre-reading discussions to help readers activate prior knowledge set the stage for critical reading. They help students identify purposes for reading, formulate hypotheses, and test the accuracy of their hypotheses throughout the reading process. In addition, asking

students to examine their own reading and learning processes creates the awareness necessary for critical reading. Post-reading activities that extend texts provide an opportunity for teachers to check for learning. Transforming ideas from reading into artwork, poetry, or essays is an evaluative, interpretive act that reveals the students' level of understanding.

This pedagogical proposal can be further explored and refined through the guidance of EFL teachers. I certainly believe that there is a variety of possibilities to be explored in our EFL classroom, and the connection between literature and critical thinking is just one of them. As educators, I think that it is important to start changing the objective of our English classes and re-orienting the methodology to promote the development of communicative competency while helping our students become citizens engaged in a society that seeks critical minds.

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