Outside the Classroom Thinking Inside the Classroom Walls: Enhancing Students` Critical Thinking Through Reading Literary Texts

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Abstract

Developing critical thinking is one of the crucial objectives of university education worldwide. However, current research in the field suggests that university students in different countries of the world lack the ability to read in-between the lines and to think critically. Therefore, developing critical thinking skills in university students is of major concern in contemporary educational research. The following paper discusses the question of how to enhance students’ critical thinking through reading a literary text as it is in the essence of a literary text to challenge the critical thinking of the reader who, by means of differentiating between the denotative and the connotative meaning, finding correlations between specific events of the plot, identifying the tone of the text, etc. practices crucial critical thinking skills such as problem solving, decision making, interpretation, logical reasoning, and metacognition with the aim to uncover the message hidden between the lines. The present paper illustrates some specific strategies of practicing critical thinking which were employed in an American Literature Course. The paper suggests that because a literary text could be considered a reflection of the real, “outside-the-classroom” world, it can be an effective means of how to prepare students “inside the classroom walls” for outside the classroom thinking.

Keywords: Literature; American literature; critical thinking; critical reading; poetry;

1. Introduction

Ever since the world has turned into McLuhan’s global village, there appeared a need for open-minded and self-
possessed individuals who would be able to cope with the challenges of the newly established multicultural salad bowl. A full-meaning citizen of the global village is expected to discern, judge, explore, assess, and evaluate the “new world order” so as to communicate and reconcile the existent differences. These “great expectations” inevitably incorporate the necessity of individuals capable of critical thinking.

The rhetoric of the current educational reform proponents often calls for employing critical thinking and life-long learning into the educational process. University education is expected to be interconnected with “the outside world.” The interest in the topic resulted in the formation of two distinct understandings of the concept of critical thinking: critical thinking as a general and descriptive term and the capitalized form of the expression, Critical Thinking, which refers to an academic discipline. Universities in Central Europe and worldwide have been trying to incorporate critical thinking (both in its capitalized and non-capitalized form) into their syllabuses. The ability to think critically is especially significant for future teachers. Should future TEFL graduates become responsible for assisting new generations in learning how to think critically; then, critical thinking needs to be incorporated into their own university courses. My argument here is that especially the courses which focus on literature related subjects create an ideal setting for practicing critical thinking skills; for it is in the essence of literature to demand that readers read in-between-the-lines, make arguments and, thus, bring about their own interpretation of a given text. In other words, literature creates a possibility to practice outside-the-classroom thinking inside-the-classroom walls.

The paper is divided into three main parts; the first one explores the notion of critical thinking by comparing various authors concerned with the topic and by discussing what the concept of critical thinking includes; the second part looks into the relationship between critical thinking and literature. In the final part, I discuss the specific strategies of employing critical thinking into an American Literature Course as illustrated on an in-class discussion of Emily Dickinson’s poem, Because I could not stop for Death (Poem 712).

2. To Think or Not to Think: Understanding Critical Thinking

From etymological perspective, the term critical comes from the Greek word kritikos, which refers to the ability to decide, to discern and to judge. Defining the concept of critical thinking is not straightforward. Various authors suggest different standpoints toward the term. Butterworth and Thwaites (2013, p. 7) differentiate between “being critical” and “thinking critically.” Employing critical thinking, as they put it, “does not merely mean finding fault or expressing dislike” but “giving a fair and unbiased opinion of something.” As opposed to the impression given by many textbooks, the authors stress that critical thinking is not just directed at arguments but also “items of evidence, statements and assertions, explanations, dialogues, statistics, news stories,” etc. The objects of critical thinking are texts, be they visual, oral or written (both non-literary and literary). For Lau (2011, p. 1) critical thinking is a rational and clear thinking which involves “thinking precisely and systematically, and following the rules of logic and scientific reasoning, among other things.” Mason (2008, p. 5) asserts that critical thinking may refer to the skills of critical reasoning; to a disposition (in the form of a critical attitude or a moral orientation) or knowledge of a particular discipline in which one can “express a critical thought.” Obviously, the concept may either refer to a skill or to the result of applying this skill. Paul and Elder (2007, p. 4) infer that a critical thinker is the one who formulates relevant questions, the one who is capable of accumulating relevant information, and evaluating it in order to come to relevant conclusions. Simultaneously, a critical thinker is willing to accept alternative systems of thought and communicate them with others with the aim to find a common solution. For the authors, critical thinking is a “four-self-incorporating concept” as it is “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-correcting thinking.”

What all the above mentioned definitions have in common is that they interconnect two distinct elements of critical thought – the skill of critical reasoning (the ability to infer judgements, evaluate, assess, etc.) and a moral disposition (willingness to accept new ideas, concepts, and viewpoints). The crucial question of employing critical thinking in the educational process is, therefore, how to incorporate both aspects of critical thinking inside the classroom. In this context, Crawford (2005) differentiates low level and high level questions and objectives that the teacher can use during the lesson. While low level questions are just concerned with memorising and remembering facts, the high level ones support evaluating information and creating new ideas. The author suggests a hierarchy of six levels of thinking that go from low level teaching questions and objectives (remembering, understanding) to
higher levels (applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating). While strategies applied to low levels include rehearsing, rewriting and rereading information to be remembered; high level questions encourage students to ask how and why something happened, to compare, evaluate and draw conclusions. These questions “typically require the use of mental strategies associated with critical thinking” (p. 5), such as analyzing, making judgements, recognizing differences, seeking information but also logical reasoning linked to drawing objective conclusions and making future predictions. All of these strategies meet the criteria of active learning based on the assumption that learners learn more fully and efficiently in active classes in which they are invited to think about the discussed problems and apply them to “outside-the-classroom” situations.

Still, current research shows that in many countries worldwide, students on different levels of education do not learn how to think critically. According to Arum and Roksa (2011, p. 114), an extensive research carried out from 2005 to 2009 at 24 U.S. colleges and universities showed that “many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their journeys through higher education.” With a sample of more than 2, 300 students who participated in the research, the authors observed “no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students” (p. 116).

As the present paper discusses the interconnection of critical thinking and reading literary texts in case of Slovak university students, it would be appropriate to mention the research performed by PISA which found out that the average Slovak student scored 472 in reading literacy, which is lower than the OECD average of 497. The low results in reading literacy had also been achieved in the previous years. A prominent Slovak scholar in the area of education, Miron Zelina attributed the 2009 low score to the fact that most Slovak teachers did not develop critical thinking, creative and interpretative skills in their students (TASR, 2009).

The gap between the educational “inside-the-classroom” situation and the criteria for “outside-the-classroom thinking” can be easily bridged through reading literary texts. Literature (be it prose, poetry or drama) is a reflection of the outside world. It mirrors the outside reality within a single text which can be used in many different ways within one lesson. Simultaneously, reading a literary text may involve high levels of thinking such as analyzing, evaluating and creating and thus it challenges the reader who is expected to use critical thinking strategies so as to interpret the text. Moreover, a single literary text offers multiple, sometimes mutually distant, interpretations. As a result, the learner is encouraged to accept alternative ideas and opinions. Thus, both the skill of critical reasoning and the moral disposition to accept different points of view are exercised.

3. Reading Literary Texts to Improve One’s Critical Thinking

In his 1967 influential essay, a French literary critic Roland Barthes proclaimed that the author died so that the reader could live. Assuming that the author is just a “scriptor” who produces the text but does not give it its ultimate meaning, Barthes, in fact, shifted the responsibility of unravelling the mystery of the text to the reader and his or her interpretation. It could be added that by shifting the responsibility of interpreting the text to the reader, Barthes was also challenging the reader’s critical thinking skills as the process of reading requires the process of interpretation and critical thinking. The recipient is expected to identify the difference between the denotative and the connotative meaning, to associate particular parts of the plot, to give meaning to words and, all in all, to produce his or her unique interpretation of the text.

Literature and critical thinking are not “two islands” but “simply different coastlines of the same one” (Hakes, 2008, p. xi). In an inspiring work When Critical Thinking met English Literature, Belinda Hakes gives numerous practical examples of how to employ critical thinking in teaching English literature, be it prose poetry or drama. All in all, she distinguishes two distinct approaches of introducing literature students to critical thinking: “One is to wait until a point arises where it is natural to introduce the idea” (p. 122). The other way is to begin with the critical thinking (the teacher first introduces some aspects of critical thinking and then students apply these points to literary texts). In other words, the teacher either proceeds from literature to critical thinking or from critical thinking to a literary text (from critical reading to critical thinking or from critical thinking to critical reading).

Critical reading and critical thinking should not be confused with each other. While critical reading should be understood as an active reading which enables the recipient to find specific information in a text; critical thinking,
on the other hand, enables readers to reflect on what they have read. Greenall and Swan (1986) and Scull (1987) suggest various specific techniques and strategies of enhancing critical reading such as extracting the main ideas of the text, reading for specific information, understanding text organization, checking comprehension, inferring, dealing with unfamiliar words, linking ideas, etc. In contrast, Schmit (2002, p. 117) assumes that critical thinking in a literature class can be exercised through questions that the teacher asks as our understanding of the outside world “is shaped by the questions we ask.” Drawing on Bloom’s taxonomy, the author suggests that to practice critical thinking, the questions asked by the teacher should be thoroughly ordered from the ones focusing on content issues to the ones aiming at interpretative issues. Students should first discuss the “facts of the text” (the time when it was written, particular parts of the plot, the narrator, etc.); then the discussion should move to the analytical phase when specific elements of the text are closely studied so as to “identify meaningful components of the text” (p. 108); in the final stage students bring about their own interpretation of the text drawing inferences between the text and the outside world. Thus, the lesson moves from knowledge, comprehension and application to analysis, synthesis and evaluation. This follows Crawford’s categorization of low levels and high levels of thought; first, students practice critical reading and then they proceed to critical thinking about the text that they have read. Though critical reading and critical thinking about literature are two distinct concepts, they cannot be separated from each other.

4. “Because I Could not Stop for Text”: Connecting Critical Reading with Critical Thinking in an American Literature Course

In the last part of the paper, I am going to discuss some specific strategies of how to move from critical reading to critical thinking, which were successfully used in the American Literature Course designed for students specializing in teaching English language and literature. To illustrate the movement from critical reading to critical thinking, an in-class discussion of Emily Dickinson’s well-known poem Because I Could not Stop for Death will be explored in more detail.

In the first phase of the lesson, which focused on understanding the text and its structure, the students were divided into groups of three. Each group received an envelope with the poem but every stanza was written on a different piece of paper. The students were asked to put the separate parts into the right order. By arranging the split parts, the students became familiar with the structure of the poem whose leitmotif was the movement from the poet’s life in this world through “the fields of gazing grain” to the poet’s new eternal home which is compared to the “swelling of the ground.” In each stanza, one or more keywords were underlined, which helped students put the parts into the right order. Once they were ready, the students were asked to listen to the recording of the poem to check if they got it right. Since no one in the class was a native English speaker, listening enabled them to get to know the specific rhythm of the text. The activity was subsequently followed by low level questions focusing on the comprehension of the text, on Emily Dickinson as a poet, the time when the poem was written, the structure, the tone, etc. All problems discussed in the initial phase of the lesson emphasized objective aspects of the text. The students did not yet discuss their personal attitudes at all.

In the next stage of the lesson the discussion moved to the application and analysis. The students were asked to find correlations between the structure of the poem and its meaning. They interpreted the symbols in the poem (school, the fields of gazing grain, the setting sun, gossamer etc.). Simultaneously, they analyzed the specific style of the author, who often used capital letters and dashes at unexpected places, and they tried to interpret specific formal features of the text. Moreover, they discussed the author’s image of death so as to find out if it had a symbolic meaning. In addition, special connotative meanings of certain key words in the poem were discussed. All of these questions and activities focused on higher levels of thought in Crawford’s understanding, that is application and analysis.

Last, the class moved from critical reading to critical thinking. The students were encouraged to express their view of the poem; to say whether they agreed with the author’s image of life and death; to specify what they liked or did not like about the poem; to argue why they would or would not recommend the poem to somebody else. Since Emily Dickinson did not give titles to her poems, as a part of the creative phase, the students were asked to come up with their own title of the poem and explain their decision. Then, a role-play followed in which the students acted as literary critics working for Atlantic Monthly (one of the most influential literary journals during Emily Dickinson’s life) and wrote a letter to the poet explaining why they wanted or did not want to publish her poem in the next issue.
of their magazine. Since the students were not native speakers of English, the last part of the lesson was dedicated to
the analysis of the Slovak translation of the text. Because translation is, in fact, a specific interpretation of the text,
the students compared the source text with the target text so as to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with the
interpretation suggested by the translator.

As an alternative, Emily Dickinson might be compared to Walt Whitman who lived approximately in the same
time as the belle of Amherst but whose vision of the world significantly differed from the one portrayed by
Dickinson. The students might be asked if, for example, they feel to be closer to Whitman or Dickinson; whose
poem they would accept for publication or which author they would prefer to invite for dinner.

As we can see on the examples mentioned above, literary texts offer various ways of how to exercise critical
thinking. What all of them have in common is that they seek student’s evaluation, assessment, critical judgment;
their personal response to the text. The crucial difference between literary and non-literary texts is that literary texts
may result in different interpretations. Sometimes, the number of readers equals the number of their interpretations.
If the teacher is willing to accept various different interpretations, he or she is, in fact, encouraging students to think
critically. All in all, reading literary texts corresponds with all three definitions of critical thinking as suggested by
Mason (2008). The first definition (perceiving critical thinking as a practical reasoning) refers to the use of higher
levels of thought; as in the process of reading, analysis, synthesis, interpretation as well as one’s own creativity are
practiced. Second, literature provides an ideal setting for formulating a certain critical attitude or a moral orientation;
thus, literary texts also create the concept of critical thinking as a disposition. Last but not least, Mason stresses that
critical thinking represents knowledge from a particular field or an area in which a person can formulate arguments
and express critical thought. By following the foregrounded bottom-up structure, students are encouraged not just to
come familiar with various layers of the text and its crucial literary elements, but they are also invited to express
their own unique views stemming from their own interpretation which, as they learn, may differ from person to
person. If we, then, rewrote Emily Dickinson’s original words:

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me –
and applied Roland Barthes’ “death-of-the-author” concept into the text, the newly created verse would be an
accurate description of critical thinking stemming from reading literary texts. The poem could go like this:

Because I could not stop for Text -
It kindly stopped for me as a Reader–

For it is the reader who gives meaning to words; as it is the man who gives meaning to the world; and, synthesizing
the previous two concepts together, since literature is a reflection of the outside-the-classroom world, then it should
be the teacher who could (for example by means of using literary texts) encourage outside-the-classroom thinking
inside-the classroom walls.

5. Conclusion

Literature is a sort of a microcosm which reflects the macrocosm of the real world existing outside the paper or a
page of a book. Analogically, a classroom is also a microcosm which should reflect the macrocosm of the world
existing outside its walls. The contemporary world (no matter if it is labeled as a Melting Pot, a salad bowl or a
McLuhan’s global village) is in need of individuals capable of making judgments, assessing and communicating the
differences and accepting alternative opinions. Should these individuals be able to compete on the job market, they
need to be aware of their own thinking. Unfortunately, many schools still exist and operate only within the limited
territories of their single microcosm. They still focus too much on remembering and memorizing and do not answer
to the challenges of the world outside their walls; the world which is not looking for passive adherents of existent
thoughts, but the world searching for active and full-meaning individuals capable of critical thought.

As literature is a reflection of the outside world, it is an ideal means of how to bring outside the classroom
thinking inside the classroom walls. The characters in a given book correlate with real life people; their standpoints and philosophical views can be identified in real life; the language that they use mirrors the language of people in a real street; the ambiguities often found in a literary text resemble the ambiguities in real world. Consequently, thinking about a literary text is a reflection of thinking about real-life situations. Literature is “a powerful motivator” (Duff and Maley, 1990, p. 6) because it discusses themes to which readers/learners bring their personal responses. Employing higher levels of thought and thinking to a literature class brings in the element of critical thought. Literature may thus serve not only as a means of practicing critical reasoning and building up one’s knowledge of the subject but also as a means of forming critical dispositions and moral attitudes that are willing to accept alternative systems of thought without which the contemporary world would not be able to survive.

References


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