



The Effect of Applying Critical Thinking Techniques on Students' Attitudes towards Literature

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of implicit teaching of critical thinking and its practice on the attitude the participants hold towards the subject matter being taught. For the observation of the practicality of critical thinking in altering students' attitudes, 25 Iranian EFL college students -16 girls and 9 boys- were selected as the participants of this study, and the application of critical thinking techniques was operationalized during their English Literature course. A 20-item questionnaire was devised in order to measure the participants' attitudes towards literature prior to the beginning of the intervention and the same questionnaire was used after the completion of the experiment in order to examine probable differences in their attitudes towards the taught subject. Throughout the course, some promoted techniques by critical thinking advocates including identifying arguments, detecting evidence in its support, reasoning for held stands, and forming analyses were applied for 12 sessions. Statistical calculation of a paired samples t-test after the treatment indicted a significance increase in the participants' positive attitudes towards literature. The findings of this study are believed to be useful in encouraging the inclusion of critical pedagogies in academic systems for the goal of creating interest in students towards the subject matter.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical pedagogy, English literature, group discussion

1. Introduction

Emphasising the significance of the art of critical thinking dates back to the mid-1980s and it has since been attended to as a flourishing and promising field in social life and particularly educational contexts (Atkinson, 1997). Most frequently, scholars in the field of education have agreed on the focal role critical thinking can have in mental development, problem-solving competencies and heuristic abilities of learners and have devised a multitude of tasks and strategies for the promotion of these dispositions. Since the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching, a transition in learner/teacher roles has been highly promoted, through which the advantages of a learner-centred classroom and learning context would be highlighted. The role shifts advocated by the CLT was believed to occur by placing learners in the position of active participants in communication and learning, and the teacher as solely a facilitator, conducting learners towards the course's planned objectives. However, in reality, the implication of such learner-empowering practices did not take place instantaneously. In fact, to the present, still there is an out-weighting preference on the part of learners, educators, and educational administrators for conducts in which teachers are the core providers of information and knowledge, and learners rather passive and submissive consumers of it.

If we accept the definition of critical thinking provided by Paul and Elder (2005) as "the process of analysing and assessing thinking with a view to improving it", it immediately becomes transparent to us why in the above mentioned context of learning/teaching even the rudiments of critical thinking cannot be acquired and practiced. Much of what happens in a traditionally run classrooms severely impedes the process of nurturing learners to approach subjects, contexts and experiences critically. Our students are comfortably habituated to take in and memorise a course's content as put forth by the teachers; sadly the best their score-dominated courses have succeeded to do in training students as critical thinkers is teach them consider courses' significant points and teachers' interests and emphasised areas, which are believed to be included in the exams and scorings. The truth is that in spite of all developments in the field of critical thinking, instances of empirical and actual practices of it remain rare (Wolcott et al., 2002).

Aiming at changing the common mechanistic practices in classrooms and at paving the way for the introduction of critical thinking in learning contexts, educators and teachers need to understand the bedrocks of critical thinking and the beneficial role it can have in classrooms. Various scholars have attempted to provide a concrete definition of critical

thinking and to segment its components, resulting in an array of various proposed theorisation about its nature and underlying properties. Nevertheless, although variations in definitions of critical thinking differ slightly, virtually all of them converge on illustrating the general picture of its essence. Based on the commonalities amongst different approaches to it, critical thinking can refer to “the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome... It is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed... It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions” (Halpern, 1999. pp. 70).

Every educational system claims to have been programmed in a way that its ultimate goal is to empower learners to enhance their “higher-order thinking skills” (Willingham, 2007) and to help them excel beyond those deprived from the life-long influences and peculiar experiences of such a system. However, the truth is that within the routinized teacher-directed, score-oriented trends in our schools, school attendance and even academic success do not yield critical thinkers necessarily. It only seems natural then, that many courses are being designed these days with the main goal of enhancing students’ critical thinking abilities alongside other academic requirements (Noddings, 2006).

The present study aimed to examine whether implicitly educating learners to think critically could have the beneficial by-product of changing their attitudes towards the subject they were studying. The researcher was interested in observing if distancing learners from their habitual robotic manner of confrontation with subject matters and leading them towards a more critical view of them can affect their views about the subject.

From the rise of cognitive psychology and the ever-increasing conformation of EFL theorist and scholars to its premises, the dynamicity of the progression of learning through learners’ active cognitive processing has been emphasised (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Because of the congruence between the practices of cognitive psychology and those of critical pedagogy, critical thinking strategies and activities have been recently warmly received by some EFL teachers and researchers (Atkinson, 1997; Davidson, 1998). In this research too, EFL learners were chosen as the participants in order to examine not only the practicality of the implementation of critical thinking strategies in EFL contexts, but also to study the probable effect those practices can have on learners’ attitudes towards the course’s subject.

A critical pedagogy is designed to encourage students to attend to more than just the surface of what is presented to them, and to ponder over deeper realities and reasons. According to Brookfield (2012) one of the most fundamental and dominant steps in critical thinking is what he calls “hunting assumptions” through which we need to unseal our assumptions and then to judge their accuracy and appropriacy in specific instances and contexts. One of the fields in which this particular property of critical thinking can be operationalized with more freedom of manoeuvre is literature. As put by Lazar (1993), one of the peculiarities of literature, making it a suitable medium for language teaching is its special use of language. The language of literature triggers the functioning of readers’ creativity and imagination; not only does it contain an indirect style of diction that at times needs to be deciphered, but also it reflects many ideological and cultural aspects, needing readers to make the required inferences for shaping a schemata through which they can approximate their understanding to the intended meaning of the creator of the text. In such a context learners can unleash the overflow of their critical thoughts in order to speculate on the plausible argumentation which is implied, rather than directly stated. Therefore, the progression of both reading literature and critical thinking relies on successful cognitive processing of the text and hence reinforce one another.

Chan and Yan (2008) point out that there is a degree of relativity in the concept of logic and that as an aftermath the systems of thinking and reasoning of people from different cultural backgrounds might differ. They believe language to be one of the channels through which the held beliefs, logics and viewpoints of different people can be manifested. Similarly, Oster (1989) states that our cultures, experiences and characteristics act as “lenses” through which we observe the world, and form our systems of thought. She believes that literature, with its unique language and versatility of tones, themes and perspectives is a great tool with which we can cultivate our students to judge, view and think from different angles and perspectives. One of the basic skills accentuated in a critical pedagogy is the evaluation of acceptability of claims considering their context (Hughes, 2005). Hence, this skill can well be put into practice while tackling with the diversity of worldviews and ideologies in literature.

Moreover, as held by advocates of its use in language teaching contexts like Collie and Slater (1994), literature taps on “fundamental human issues”. Therefore, the familiarity and authenticity residing in literary texts and notions prepares a context in which essential elements of critical thinking, recognising arguments and assessing the credibility of arguments can be operationalized easily (Brink-Budgen, 2000; Bowel and Kemp, 2002). Then, if the primary aim of a critical pedagogy is to facilitate learning and higher-order thinking rather than merely providing students with knowledge on subject matters, literature appears to be a very appropriate and sound source to do so. To this end, in this study, the effect of performing critical thinking strategies and techniques by Iranian EFL learners in reading English literature was observed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twenty five Iranian undergraduate students - 16 girls and 9 boys- majoring in English Translation Studies provided the participants for this study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 and they were all in their fifth academic semester and constituted two intact classes. The selection of this group as the participants in this study was due to the fact that they were proficient enough to read English literature. Moreover, they had previously experienced courses on English literature and therefore their attitudes towards English literature had been to an extent shaped, and thus any probable

change in the attitudes of the students could be more confidently attributed to the application of the new pedagogy and teaching method.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1 As students' attitude towards English literature was to be observed, a variety of different literary texts were presented to them not to limit their experience with literature to a single genre. This selection consisted of 21 pieces of poem, 3 short stories, and 1 play all written by English or American authors.

2.2.2. In order to estimate students' attitudes towards English literature and to compare their attitudes prior to and after the completion of the experiment, an Attitude Scale consisting of 20 items in a Likert format was devised. This questionnaire comprised of items believing to reflect the participants' ideas, feelings and attitudes towards English literature, to which they had to determine their level of agreement. This questionnaire was administered twice, one at the beginning of the course and later after the completion of the experiment.

The Cronbach alpha reliability for the 20 items of the questionnaire was calculated to be .94, indicating a high reliability index. This was hoped to provide the researcher with a truthful account of the participants' opinions of and attitudes to literature in general.

2.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the course, the Attitude Scale was administered in order for the researcher to have an approximate knowledge about their attitudes towards English literature. The classroom routine was that each session the literary pieces about to be covered in the following session were assigned, and students then had a whole week to go through them, concentrate on the texts and write a commentary on each. They were asked not to seek any help from outside sources and just to focus their attention on putting down in words their feelings and thoughts about the literary text at hand.

It is noteworthy that these students' previous literature classes were mainly teacher-centred and the ideas and analyses taught by the teacher were to be accepted and memorised for the final evaluation of the course. Therefore, this was about to be their first experience of a literature class in which they were implicitly asked to attend to strategies of critical thinking and to evaluate each reasoning and argument on a multi-dimensional level before accepting it as correct.

In the classroom, the students were first asked to voice their opinions about what they believed the author was trying to imply in the lines of the text, and whether they had enjoyed reading it having understood the intention and content. As put by Brookfield (2012) the first step towards a critical rendering about a text is understanding the authors' assumption. Therefore, the class started with students' voluntary expression of their comprehension of the text and what they thought the author was trying to convey.

Group discussions were encouraged by the instructor as it has been emphasised in the literature that talking about views, opinions and perspectives in groups not only gives members an opportunity to talk about and clarify their own stands, but also to learn about others' viewpoints (Wallace, 2003; Rasool, et al., 2002). Thus, during discussions in the class about a particular literary text, students' were encouraged to freely talk about their own interpretations of the text and to provide others with reasons behind their understanding. This way, having heard about other interpretations and speculations, students were given a chance to re-examine or modify their initial statements, if they were convinced by other viewpoints. This collaboration in reading and interpreting texts gave learners a chance to test and evaluate their own reasoning and formulation of arguments and to compare their own logical and argumentative system with that of others. This is what Cottrell (2005) refers to as "critical analysis of other people's reasoning". Participation in these debates also had the additional advantage of conforming to another practice of critical thinking, that of selecting among alternatives (Lipman, 2003), as student eventually tended to agree on one explanation as the most accurate and valid. Some students were asked to read the commentaries they had written at home and to say whether they still have the same understanding of the text after discussions and exchanges of interpretations. Therefore the final formation of their analyses of a text was not complete before alternative propositions had been offered, and diverse views reviewed, and hence this was seen as taking another step towards a critical evaluation of and thinking about the text as suggested by Thomson (2002).

In support of their ideas and claims, students were asked to back their arguments with occasional reference to specific sections in the texts from which they had been led towards their held analysis so that their expression of ideas were not merely based on emotional perceptions but on factual evidence as well.

The instructor had assured the participants that all their views are welcomed, and that no negative evaluative judgements of them would be made either during the discussions, or for the final assessment of the course. This gave learners more confidence in the unimpeded expression of ideas without the apprehension of criticisms on the part of the instructor.

The abovementioned classroom routines based on whole-class discussions and collaborations went on for 12 sessions and afterwards the Attitude Scale was administered again. This was to check whether as a result of being exposed to a critical approach towards literature and personal involvement in critical thinking and arguments their previously held attitudes had changed at all.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

In order to examine whether there were any changes in the participants' attitude towards the subject after the completion of the experiment, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' attitudes.

3. Results

As indicated by Table 1 below, there was a statistically significant increase in the mean of attitudes after the experiment in. the mean increase in attitude scores was 5.68 with a 95% confidence interval. In order to find out the relative magnitude of the differences between means, the eta squared statistics was calculated to be 0.25, indicating a large effect size.

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre.Experiment	76.84	25	11.877	2.375
	Post.Experiment	82.52	25	9.687	1.937

Table 2: Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Paired Differences		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
			Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Pair 1 Pre.Experiment - Post.Experiment	-5.680	10.036	2.007	-9.823	-	-2.830	24	.009
						1.537		

4. Conclusion

A diagnostic look at the reasons why our children -creative, inquisitive and imaginative by nature- turn out to become passive receivers of knowledge only, will lead us to a closer examination of our academic system. We train our students to become competitor individuals, seeking opportunities to outperform classmates rather than viewing them as team members with whose help their journey towards academic and personal growth can be facilitated. As emphasised by Rasool et al. (2002) working with others and participating in collaborative discovery and problem-solving is a vital part of the process of learning. This fruitfulness in cooperation is what we are denying our students to gain through our stiffly product-centred classes and competitive academic courses.

Therefore, the first step in the attempt to nurture critical and analytical-thinking students is to implant a critical pedagogy and to prioritise personal heuristics of knowledge and information instead of teacher transmission of it. To this aim, we need to set the long-term goal of enriching learners' education with dispositions like critical thinking about and analyses of matters rather than merely preparing them for an immediate score-oriented formative evaluation.

Even if our sole goal as educators is to elevate interest in our students towards the course, as an impetus for motivating them to study and prepare more, the implementation of critical thought-provoking techniques would be advantageous. The findings of performed statistical procedures indicated change in the participants' attitudes towards English literature, the subject they were exposed to, after implicitly being taught to and experiencing some critical thinking practices and strategies.

As trialled through this study, within-group discussions and weightings of arguments had a number of benefits, including the indirect promotion of critical thinking ability (Guiller, et. al, 2006). Moreover, exchanges of ideas amongst classmates, equal in power and position, alerted learners that disagreements with and oppositions to one's ideas or interpretations were not aimed as disrespecting the beholder of the particular belief and that a descent debate with differing viewpoints and analyses was indeed beneficial in the formation of a multi-dimensional understanding of an issue. This practice, not only engraves in the learners the culture of discussing matters in groups, but also boosts their capacity of tolerance in confrontation with views in opposition to theirs.

However, there are a number of factors we need to attend to when deciding to securely replace our traditionally mechanistic classroom routines with learner-empowering critical pedagogies. We need to remember that as we are hoping to train individuals that are disposed to think and analyse matters in life more critically, rather than only having the restricted academically analytical power, we need to choose authentic content for our courses (Pally, 1997). This way the students' practices in higher-order thinking on them is not artificial and contrived; rather, they are gathering experience and expertise in facing real problems in life more critically.

Moreover, we need to have in mind that an effective and perpetual tendency towards critical thinking cannot be mastered in our students unless we have a long-run precisely-planned programme that demands persistence in practicing the habit. The enhancement in critical thinking abilities comes about as an aftermath of recurrence in conforming to a critical pedagogy and therefore, our evaluative system and summative testing of our students should be in accordance with the implemented critical pedagogy.

Hence, this study, yielding results in support of the applicability of critical thinking can be replicated in different classes of varying subjects and retested with different age groups and cultural backgrounds to examine its efficacy in different contexts and with different learners.

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