

Journal of legal and social studies

Issn: 2507-7333

Eissn: 2676-1742

**Promoting Critical Thinking among EFL Learners of Higher Education through
Merging Philosophical Theories in Literary Texts' Analysis.**

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Date of send: 10 / 03 / 2023

date of acceptance: 01 / 05 /2023

Date of Publication: 01 / 06 /2023

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Abstract:

In recent times, notorious debates have been raised about adequate teaching and learning strategies that aim to foster the quality of critical thinking among learners of English as a foreign language within the context of higher education. The interplay between critical thinking and literary criticism plays a quintessential role in enhancing the EFL Learners quality of learning, especially when combined with philosophy. Therefore, this paper discusses the importance of embedding literary texts as an input to EFL learners' syllabus in order to ignite their sense of criticality through creating relatable problematic situations. It also offers an overview about the implication of philosophical theories to excavate implicit meanings in any selected material pertaining to literature. After examining different teaching approaches and notions related to bloom's taxonomy and metacognition , this paper concludes that literary texts that express philosophical views are indeed of a notable importance in enhancing the students' holistic process of language acquisition . They contribute in elevating their criticality through problem solving activities that enrich their vocabulary, lexis and above all their critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Critical Thinking 'EFL Classroom' Literary Texts 'Philosophy'

Introduction

Recently, heated debates have been tantalized about adequate teaching and learning strategies that aim to enhance and foster the quality of critical thinking among learners of English as a foreign language. The importance of embedding literary texts to EFL learners' syllabus is to ignite the sense of criticality through creating problematic situations in relation to selected literary texts aiming at engaging their reasoning. In order to promote critical thinking among learners, cognitive, mental along with psychological skills are to be included and developed. Furthermore, what this paper has, as a distinctive contribution, is the implication of philosophical theories to extrapolate and interpret multiple points of views and reveal implicit meanings presented in literary texts.

1. Critical Thinking: meaning, value and prospects

René Descartes who is considered as the founding father of the systematic uncertainty and dubiety is widely acknowledged for his eminent saying « I think, therefore I am ». Descartes philosophical approach denies certainty and emphasizes on doubt as an effective way of reflecting uncertain realities as well as seeking answers to challenging queries. The significant achievement of the systematic doubt lies in its use as a methodological apparatus to objectively arrive at solutions to various problematic questions. Nevertheless, even though critical thinking entails nearly the same way of doubt, it supports the possibility of finding a cutting-edge answer. Notwithstanding the fact that the use of the concept of critical thinking is frequent and widespread among various academic spheres, its definition is not yet clear-cut.

Starting by the simplest version of available definitions, critical thinking according to Robert Ennis means “reasonable and reflective thinking which is focused on deciding what to believe or do”¹. We encounter situations where we find ourselves using our critical thinking across our mundane daily life's activities or disputes over products, TV shows or even food recipes. We observe, evaluate and finally choose what is suitable for us according to our preferences. Simultaneously, critical thinking requires following a systematic operandi in order to skillfully reach reasonable inferences through collecting data, comparing points of views, determining cause-effect relationships as well as distinguishing facts and opinions. if we shift to a more pedagogical definition of critical thinking , especially that this paper's focus is pivoted around its use in literature class of EFL learners , it becomes a necessity to cite Sternberg's explanation of the term from a cognitive psychological standpoint as :«The mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new

concepts”². Accordingly, Critical thinking as defined by Sternberg is the combination of mental skills based on specific strategies that attempt to synthesize judgments and evaluate assumptions.

Another definition provided by Mcpeck suggests that critical thinking is: “the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism”³. In fact, Mcpeck’s view about the term resembles to some extent the one of Richard Paul in terms of the remarkable emphasis placed on reflective thinking and skepticism. He asserts that: “critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it”⁴. For Paul, the pattern through which critical thinking is attained is drawn on a total readiness for tolerating other opinions after a substantive evaluation.

In a nutshell, critical thinking is a fluid concept with diverse purports and interpretations that range from unchangeable essential values such as rationality, independence of thought, and flexibility. It places a considerable focus on the importance of being objectively judgmental to arrive at conclusions, leaving no space for bias and confusion.

2. Incorporating Critical Thinking Strategies in EFL Teaching

Integrating critical thinking in EFL classrooms is remarkably essential to involve students in the lesson. Language learners benefit from the implication of their criticality through being able to have a command over their own thinking, instruct and assess their own methods of learning and formulate their personal point of views regarding the literary texts handed to them. Moreover, critical thinking enriches the learning experience and allows the foreign language acquisition to be useful and more relatable to them.

There are eight skills that are deemed to be eminent for critical thinking: raising inquiries, indicating problematic situations, scrutinizing evidences, investigating given data and biases, committing to objectivity in analysis, valuating the dilemma without exaggeration or oversimplification and lastly, studying all possible interpretations and abiding equivocations.⁵ Relying on the views and suggestions of Ennis and Paul, teaching critical thinking should be held through clear and direct methods. They have distinguished three important approaches: general approach, infusion approach as well as mixed approach. Firstly, the general approach aims at developing the critical thinking capacities and it requires the use of non-school subject contexts because the purpose here is stimulate and bring up thought-provoking subject matters⁶. Secondly, infusion approach, according to Ennis, it necessitates infusion of critical thinking in subject

matter instruction where students are directly driven towards using the techniques of critical thinking ⁷Third, the mixed approach that is the incorporation of the two previously mentioned approaches that relies on the inclusion of both, related and direct subject matters and separated ones that share the purpose of improving the critical quality in their thinking.

2.1 Bloom's Taxonomy in relation to critical thinking:

When trying to explain how critical thinking mechanisms function, it becomes essential to draw on the relevance and importance of Bloom's taxonomy. This latter suggests that student's engagement in the learning subject-matters is done according to the taxonomy that Bloom suggests. In fact, Bloom starts his taxonomy by emphasizing on the importance of the background knowledge of the learners. All the data that the learner knows and remembers from previously learned materials escorted by the ability to comprehend and grasp the meaning of the learned material.

After that, Bloom's focus through his taxonomy is shifted to the second level of his hierarchy which is application. This latter, looks into the student's ability to preserve his background knowledge in new contexts other than the previously learned materials. In fact this entails a higher level of understanding. A level that would allow the student to easily relate to external materials. Then , the upcoming scale of his hierarchy is analysis that demands from the student a skillful way of thinking that permits him to grasp the content and the structure of the learned material. Furthermore, according to Bloom's cognitive hierarchy, synthesizing is very important. It necessitates creativity and ability to engender new forms and paradigms out of the already existing learning material. Finally, the last area of the taxonomy is evaluation. Having this "quality" or more precisely, "capacity" yields the learner to be judgmental. Thus, Bloom's hierarchy starts from the simplest to the most sophisticated skills that cultivate the critical thinking capacity among learners. ⁸

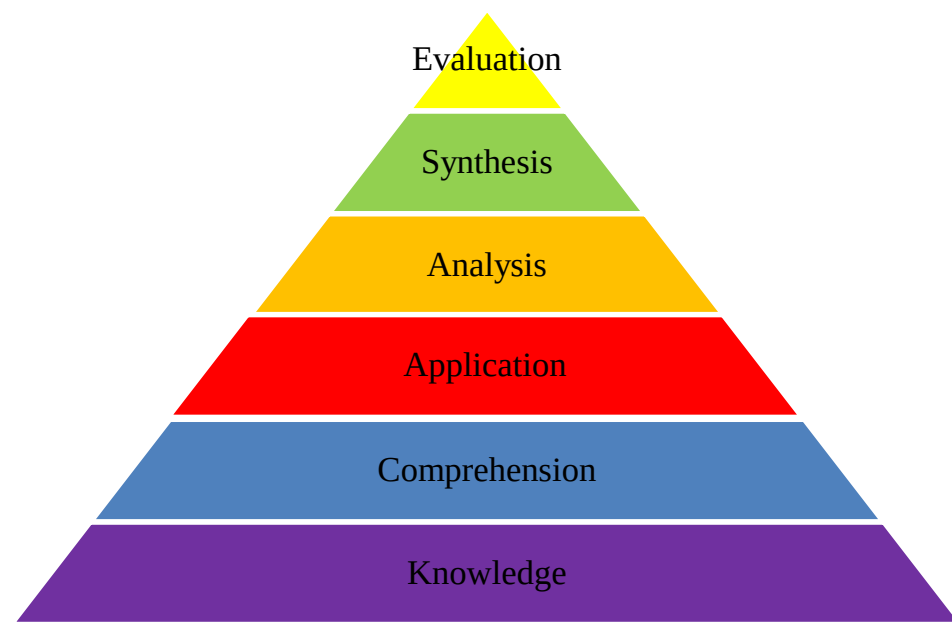


Figure1. Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy

2.2. Realizing Critical Thinking through Metacognition:

Another important notion that is related to critical thinking is metacognition. There is not yet a consensus among scholars and philosophers of the field about a single and universal definition of the term. Flavell defines metacognition as “knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena”⁹ while Livingston refers to it as “higher-order thinking that involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning”¹⁰ Meanwhile, Dean & Kuhn describe it as “awareness and management of one's own thought,” which makes use of “inquiry, analysis, inference, and argument”¹¹. By looking into the three definitions provided, it becomes evident that the shared point among them is that they all emphasize on defining metacognition thinking about thinking as Livingston suggests. As far as higher education is concerned, metacognitive approach is highly recommended since it provokes the critical side of the EFL learner's thoughts. It also enables learners to assess and test their own assumptions and conclusions about raised problematic questions. When the learner arrives at the point of evaluating his own thoughts, they become active and empowered.

Flavell sorts metacognition into three categories. The first one is labeled by him as the learner's knowledge or the set of thoughts that influence his cognitive activities. Metacognitive knowledge inspires the individual to either adopt or abandon any given learning material depending on his interests, capacities and aims. The second one is metacognitive experience; it refers to the subjective feedback that relates the individual to his personal thoughts, goals and

cognitive activities. Thirdly, metacognitive goals and tasks, Flavell denotes that his third category is the combination of results, aims and the objectives that are expected to be attained after undertaking a cognitive experience. These goals and tasks contain a number of skills such as comprehension, memorization and creation of or a new product whether written or spoken or simply enriching one's knowledge about any given idea.¹²

Indeed, metacognition is useful for teachers because it drives them towards a self-evaluation process through which they establish a solid base of knowledge labeled by Timpson as metateaching¹³. Nevertheless, the task to imply metacognitive strategies into their lesson plans is intricate due to the firm instructions of institutionalized curriculums that place a huge attention on the subject matter rather than the thought. Developing critical thinking is quintessential within EFL classrooms for it is associated with quality thinking that transcends the simple and the survival-related definition of language as a means of communication. Learners when exposed to a foreign language even the task of using it as a simple means of communication requires an extra cognitive effort that involves thinking about its suitability and efficacy in transmitting the message intended. In the same respect, David Chrystal in his book *Stories of English* suggests that languages are culturally determined. Accordingly, as cultures differ, languages also differ. The influence of culture on language is immense since this latter reflects the mindset, traditions and the lifestyle of the accompanying culture. Its vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure change also correspondingly. Thus, when EFL learners use English, they evoke their critical thinking to compare ideas or clichés and how they are put in their mother tongue and in the target language. They start spotting similarities, extracting differences, turning the EFL classes into a joyful and enriching experience of cultural exchange. The same thing is noticed when including literary texts along with philosophical theories to further provoke the learners' critical thinking.

3. Integrating Critical Thinking in Literature classroom through Philosophy:

The existence of a solid relationship between literature and philosophy is undeniable. Both scopes influence and utilize each other as means to express the core of their ideologies. In many ways, it may seem complex and uneasy to decide which of the fields relies on the other; we come across plenty of literary works written by philosophers on one hand and a considerable number of writers with philosophical inclinations on the other.

Philosophers such as Voltaire, Camus, Sartre, Nietzsche Murdoch and others have chosen to express their philosophical insights through novels.

Meanwhile, plenty of writers used their novels as tribunes to their philosophical tendencies. Among them we mention Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Eco's *Name of the Rose* and Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Thus, studying a literary text on the light of philosophy is possible and worth trying. Recently, many teachers of EFL classes started to embed theoretical analysis of literary texts inspired from philosophy for the sake of encouraging learners to use critical thinking skills in order to better acquire the langue and enrich their vocabulary.

3.1. Literature and philosophical Critical Thinking

When integrating critical thinking skills and strategies into an English literature classroom, the teaching/learning process becomes exciting, enjoyable and fruitful. In the same respect, Vygotsky¹⁴ suggests that as far as abstract critical thinking is concerned, elevated stages can be mostly attained through the use of mediated instruments such as language. For the sake of ensuring a successful knowledge discovery in literature Classrooms, dialogic types of questions and answers are intrinsically important. To put it differently, it is the exploratory debate that generates and stimulates motivation among learners in order to enlarge their knowledge through experiencing various thoughts and receiving feedbacks from the teacher rather than the , pre-arranged presentational speech, especially when the dialogue held orbits around basic philosophical matters.

Adding to that, philosophy, as far as education is concerned, is presented by Lipman Sharp and Oscanyan¹⁵ as a medium through which learners tend to investigate , evaluate and orient their thinking in order to create an overall view that does not presuppose every information handed to them as nonnegotiable truth. Since literature, specifically novels and short stories, that are selected to be taught in EFL classrooms are real-life-inspired ones, they engage the learners' "reflexive inquiry"¹⁶. In fact dialogic philosophical thinking is not a new method to be introduced to education; it dates back to the time of Socrates as Shaw indicates¹⁷.

This dialogic questioning is ensured in EFL literature classrooms through adopting a learner-centered approach coupled with discussion-based one. These two approaches of teaching focus on the learners' abilities to adapt the knowledge acquired to his real life, helping them to develop their problem-solving skills and analytical spirit through encouraging group discussions. Consequently, Learners construct their own social understanding of basic philosophical viewpoints and

notions in the selected literary texts which results in reinforcing their reasoning and self-esteem¹⁸.

3.2. Effective teaching approaches to bolster philosophical critical Thinking in EFL Literature Classrooms:

One of the widely acknowledged teaching approaches as far as critical thinking is concerned is the learner-based approach. Learners shape the central part of the whole educational institution. For that reason, how and what is done in classrooms should be planned according to their cognitive as well as affective learning experiences. The role of the teacher in this approach is to assure the organization of the contents, interpretation and application of learned notions and concepts as well as the evaluation of the students understanding. This approach directs a considerable attention to the psychological and behavioral traits that allow learners to have command over their learning process.¹⁹

Doyle defines learning as: “learning has taken place only if students can transfer the information from one context to another and apply it in a useful way to solve problems and construct new understandings. Learning is not just absorbing information; it is the ability to use it.”²⁰ Clearly, Doyle’s own apprehension of learning places an important emphasis on the students’ critical thinking skills. When it comes to teaching literature, focusing on the learner’s understanding and feedback to the ideas expressed in any literary text is intrinsic. This helps learners to go beyond the level of memorizing information and allows them to judge and measure the reliability of the different thoughts handed to them until arriving at a conclusion that is free from subjectivity.

4. The importance of philosophical literary criticism to foster critical thinking among EFL Students of Higher Education:

Apart from the educational approaches mentioned earlier concerning promoting critical thinking through the inclusion of philosophy in literary texts’ analysis, a teacher needs to construct a solid theoretical basis on which classroom discussions should be held. Teaching literature through the embedment of critical thinking skills and philosophy urges the use of philosophical criticism. Criticism is defined by Leavis as “the common pursuit of true judgment”²¹. Nevertheless, philosophical criticism does not fall into the same academic tendency as does the other types. Ever since the beginning of speculative thinking, literature has been heavily influenced by philosophy since it pivots around seeking wisdom wherever it exists.

The term philosophy literarily means love of wisdom. Analogously, literature is the textual space in which multiplicity of points of views are expressed (away from aestheticism). It is where wisdom lies either explicitly through uttered words, or, implicitly, that can only be extracted after a deep discursive analysis. Literary criticism and philosophy are closely tied. This is actually manifested through the possibility of reading texts using major philosophical theories for example: psychoanalytical theory that looks into the psyche of the human being, the Marxist one that investigates the humanistic existence in a capitalist world as well as Foucauldian one that explains the human's condition under several forms of power and their struggle to free themselves from its constraints.

The importance of literary criticism in developing critical thinking among EFL learners lies in the fact that it allows students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate the literary text from different perspectives to create a platform upon which a solid link between fiction and reality is maintained.

Conclusion:

As a conclusion, critical thinking is an essential requisite that needs to be nurtured among EFL classes of higher education. The concept is subject to miscellaneous interpretations that stem from unchangeable values including rationality, independence of thought, and flexibility. This paper had the purpose of elucidating its necessity to achieve a successful process of learning English mainly through embedding literary texts that communicate philosophical views as an input for EFL classes' syllabus. Shedding light on Bloom's taxonomy and its influence on critical thinking allowed us to reveal its considerable emphasis on the importance of being objectively judgmental to arrive at conclusions, leaving no space for bias and perplexity. In addition, being aware of the tight relationship between criticality and metacognition, the present research concluded that this latter makes an indispensable tool for critical thinking as it requires creativity and ability to engender new forms and paradigms out of the already existing learning material. Finally, including philosophical theories that are merged within literary texts permits EFL learners to be judgmental and enables them to assess and test their own assumptions and conclusions about raised problematic questions as far as higher education is concerned. Therefore, metacognitive approach is highly recommended since it provokes the critical side of the EFL learner's thoughts. When learners reach the level of evaluating their own thoughts, they become active and empowered because of their ability to use a wide range of vocabulary and lexis to better express their thoughts.

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