## The Role of Literature in Boosting EFL University Students' Critical Thinking: Case of First-year Students in Algeria

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**Abstract**
The integration of critical thinking within the learning process is considered a crucial indicator of education's quality. Nevertheless, with the reforms introduced in higher education, less importance was given to this skill; consequently, most Algerian EFL learners cannot think critically and creatively. To fill the gap, this study suggests using literature as a bridge between the teaching of the foreign language and the enhancement of learners' critical thinking abilities. The research also proposes strategies and approaches to motivate students to use their critical thinking skills in literature class. To this end, the researcher raised the following research question: How do we enhance learners' critical thinking abilities while teaching literature? And what strategies and approaches to adopt to motivate students using their critical thinking abilities within a literature class? The researcher adopted semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations as instruments to collect necessary data. The participants are EFL university teachers and first-year students of different genders from the department of English language at the University of Dr. Moulay Tahar, Saida (Algeria). Obtained results show positive feedback from the students towards the critical thinking approaches used by the teacher-researcher in literature class. It also revealed that teachers are aware of the effectiveness of critical thinking when teaching literature to improve the learners' proficiency in English as a foreign language and enhance their critical thinking abilities. This study recommended using high order of thinking as a strategy when teaching literature.

*Keywords:* Algeria University, critical thinking, EFL learners at Saida University, high-order thinking, literature teaching

## Introduction

One of the fundamental elements for the development of the 21$^{st}$ c education is the implementation of critical thinking skills, which require reflective and rational thinking to investigate and solve problems. This is probably the reason for which most of the universities worldwide set the development of the students' critical thinking abilities as their primary goal, to make their students able to meet the demands of professional and social life. This ability became essential to living effectively in this constantly changing world.

Literature is viewed by many scholars as an appropriate setting in which critical thinking can be fluently and effectively developed. Fisher (1999) stated solid pedagogical reasons for developing thinking skills using literature. Accordingly, the interest of the present paper is to demonstrate that literature can be an adequate tool to boost learners' critical thinking. Besides, it tends to prove that a shift towards learning based on the high order of thinking in the teaching of English as a foreign language in general and literature, in particular, can promote the learners' proficiency of the foreign language and urge them to use their critical thinking abilities. To this end, the researcher raised the following research question:

- How do we enhance learners' critical thinking abilities while teaching literature?
- What strategies and approaches to adopt to motivate students using their critical thinking abilities within a literature class?

To probe the potential advantages of using literary texts as a material in boosting students' thinking abilities, the researcher, has adopted semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observation as tools to investigate the raised research questions.

## Literature Review

### Understanding Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking (CT) is a complex process that develops in every individual having the capacity and the disposition to seek reasons, truth, and evidence. Many scholars have proposed different definitions to the concept, yet no single description accepted by all has been formulated because, as Black (2007) argued, "Critical thinking is difficult to define satisfactorily and hard to measure" (p. 4). The earliest significant debates and examinations of the concept were conducted by Dewey (1916) when he discussed the concept of CT in education. He considered CT as "a process that begins with a problem and ends with a solution and self-interpretation" (cited in Alsaleh 2020, p. 21). In this context, Bean (2011) explained this point, declaring that this problem must arouse learners' curiosity to encourage them to learn using their critical skills.

Various scholars agreed with Dewey's view that CT is about solving problems; for example, Butterworth and Thwaites (2013) distinguished between being critical and thinking critically. Using critical thinking, according to them, does not only refer determination of a problem or expressing disapproval towards something but means giving just and objective opinions. Contrasted to the impression provided by various textbooks, the writers emphasize that critical thinking is not only directed at arguments besides it also items of evidence, statements, assertions, explanations, dialogues, statistics, news stories, etc. Consequently, the objects of critical thinking are texts, be they visual, oral, or written (both non-literary and literary). According to Lau (2011), critical thinking requires "thinking precisely and systematically, and following the rules of logic and scientific reasoning, among other things" (p.

1).  Whereas, Mason (2008, p. 5) thought that "critical thinking is the ability to apply rational thoughts and the evaluation of one's competence to manifest reasons" (cited in Tabackova, 2015, p. 730). The concept may either refer to a skill or to the result of using this skill. Paul and Elder (2007) maintained that a critical thinker is someone able to detect problems and raise crucial questions in a clear and precise way, capable of collecting and assessing pertinent information and interpreting abstract ideas successfully, qualified in drawing up conclusions and suggesting appropriate solutions. They emphasized that critical thinking is "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-correcting thinking" (p. 4).

Halpren (1997) explained that CT refers to "the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal direct" (p. 4). This implies that when people think critically, they assess the results of their thoughts, ascertain how good a decision is, or recognize how successfully an issue has been addressed.

All the above definitions share the idea that CT is based on two distinct elements these are: the skill of critical reasoning, i.e., the ability to infer judgments, evaluate, assess, etc.) in addition to a moral disposition, i.e., willingness to accept new ideas, concepts and viewpoints (Tobackova, 2015), however, it is worth mentioning in this context that, unlike skills, dispositions cannot be taught but are cultivated through modeling activities (Reece, 2002, cited in khatib & shakouri, 2013). The crucial question in this context is how to incorporate both aspects of CT in the EFL classroom?

### *Critical Thinking: Why Literature?*
Literature represents a perfect setting for the practice of CT skills; in their attempt to understand, analyze, and interpret the literary text, be it prose, drama, or poetry, the learners are continually and endlessly using CT strategies. Literature is the mirror of society; this will effectively help the learners to find or create a relation between the literary text and real-life experiences.

In this context, Brookhart (2010) argued that CT has developed through Bloom's taxonomy and focuses the most on knowledge transfer, which refers to the students' capacity to utilize the knowledge they acquired in class in real-life. Through this capacity of transferring the knowledge and thinking critically, the learners of English as a foreign language can appreciate the target culture and compare it with their own; they became also be able to determine from whose perspective the story is narrated and how to react in real-life situations which are similar to the once the characters face in the literary text.

Many scholars and researchers recommended the use of literature in EFL context to enhance the learners' CT abilities; for example, Collie and Slater (1990) stated that "literary texts are valuable as authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and, personal involvement" (p. 3), this means that through reading the English literary text the learner is using simultaneously what CT experts call explanation, analysis, and application. Additionally, Yong (1996) enumerated two essential advantages of literary texts when dealing with CT, saying:
>      Literary texts have two crucial advantages over traditional content as they entertain
>      students' pervasive apprehension making it easy for them to learn from the beginning that

critical thinking is natural, familiar, and sometimes even fun. Second, literary texts put issues of critical thinking in an easily remembered context. (p. 90)

This means that literature represents an adequate context for practicing CT skills easily and naturally because, in its essence, literature is a source of entertainment and pleasure; this will probably make the learners feel comfortable and pleasant when dealing with a text that they enjoy; consequently, they will react positively in class.

### *Developing CT in EFL classroom: Approaches and Strategies*

Integrating the teaching of CT as one of the basic learning skills is very important. The concept itself has become, as Fisher (2001) expressed, "a buzz word" in the educational environment. Even though CT is not new, it has become prevalent in educational settings over the last decades. Educators in different areas of foreign language learning have described CT skills as a must for academic as well as professional work; Pally (2000, p.53) argued that "students should be able to attain English language competence in cause and effect, description, categorization, and differentiation specifically for comparison and contrast" (cited in Abdollah, 2019, p. 92). Therefore, the promotion of CT into the EFL classroom is significant; Shikhani and Fahim (2011) listed three reasons to do that, these are:

1. CT allows students to take charge of their thinking. Through this ability, they can monitor and evaluate their learning methods more successfully.
2. CT increases students' learning experience and makes the language more meaningful.
3. CT significantly and positively correlates with students' achievements (Fong et al., 2017)

Additionally, many studies examine the efficiency of using particular teaching strategies such as classroom discussion, collaborative learning, discussion approaches, and problem-based teaching (Kuhn, 1999). Therefore, it is the role of teachers to choose the strategy that encourages students to understand and apply such skills and encourage them to discuss their understanding with their classmates, because in the course discussion, "students aim at producing their answers and interpretations and to understand and evaluate the answers and the interpretations of their friends" (Hasen & Selmi, 2012, p.98, as cited in Alsaleh, 2020, p. 28), so the dynamics and continued nature of a practical discussion allow for the flow of ideas and the development of the thinking of all learners.

EFL teachers must determine their learners' abilities and difficulties besides adopting appropriate methods to facilitate the learning process for their non-native students. McNeil (2011) recommended a move from low-level thinking to higher-level thinking, which is referred to as scaffolding, in teaching English as a foreign and literature as a subject area (cited in Gopalan & Hashim, 2021, p.321).

Higher-order thinking is assigned to Bloom's Taxonomy, which implies a hierarchy of six stages of thinking; this suggests that the higher-level skills are more cognitively challenging. The capacity to master them means the ability to master all other levels below that level. The revised taxonomy suggests that the levels of information, comprehension, and implementation (remembering, understanding, and applying) are also considered as low-level teaching questions

and objectives; higher levels consist of analysis, synthesis, and, evaluation. Tobackova (2015) argued that: "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 a conclusion" (p. 728).

Such questions need to use complex cognitive strategies related to critical thinking; in this regard, literature involves high levels of thinking because students must analyze, contrast, and infer ideas about the literary text they are dealing with; therefore, the discussed taxonomies above can be beneficial strategies to adopt while teaching literature within the EFL context as demonstrated in table one:

Table 1. *Bloom's and Anderson's Taxonomies and representative literature questions*

| Bloom (1956) | Anderson et al. (2001) | Example questions related to literature |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledge | Remembering | Who are the main characters of the story? |
| Comprehension | Understanding | What was the problem the main character had to solve? |
| Application | Applying | How are the personal problems of the characters in the story similar to the ones that real people face? |
| Analysis | Analyzing | What literary devices are being used to convey to the reader the character's feelings? |
| Synthesis | Evaluating | Based on the story you have read, how effective were the strategies the characters took to overcome the problems that they faced |
| Evaluating | Creating | Develop a set of three criteria for assessing problem-solving strategies to be used in situations similar to what the characters in the story faced. |

*Note 1.* Adopted from Gopalan and Harwati (2021, p. 322)

**Methods**

The researcher adopted a Mixed-method approach of research relying on experimental methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative were used to explore students' responses to high-order thinking used by the teacher-researcher to teach literature and examine EFL teachers' opinions towards the use of different critical thinking approaches in teaching English as a foreign language. The use of this approach helped tackle the research from different perspectives.

*Research Instruments*

Two different research instruments were used: a semi-structured interview with 20 EFL teachers and classroom observation of six groups of first-year EFL students. Each group includes

30 students, approximately 180. The combination of both approaches qualitative, and quantitative, helps to expand the validity of results.

## *Participants*

The participants are EFL university teachers and first-year students of different genders from the department of English language at the University of Dr. Moulay Tahar, Saida (Algeria). The researcher conducted observations in two academic years (2019-2020, 2020-2021) with different students to assume research reliability.

## Findings

### *Interview Results*

The data obtained from the interview are as follows:

**Question 1:** Do you think that literature enhances learners' CT?
All participants strongly agree that literature is valuable and essential to developing learners' CT skills. Though not all of the respondents are specialized in literature, most of them believe that reading a literary piece will help students to make intelligent judgments and draw up decisions based on reflective thoughts.

**Question 2:** Do you think that classroom discussions help students to understand the meaning of the literary text?
All the interviewed teachers approve that classroom discussions help the students a lot to understand the text. Some participants even confess that sometimes students learn better from their peers than from the teachers.

**Question 3:** Do classroom activities (pair work, group works) encourage students to explore depth thinking?
The obtained result for this question is: 07 teachers agreed that both activities are essential in boosting students' critical thinking abilities and 13 teachers believe that group works are more valuable than pair work.

**Question 4:** Can literature develop students' creativity?
The respondents strongly agree that literature helps in developing learners' creativity and consider it as a source of inspiration. According to them, being exposed to another culture may increase the learners' imagination too.

### *Classroom Observations Results*

The researcher used Bloom and Anderson's taxonomies in her literature classes. She focused on higher-order of thinking when asking questions to the students during the study of the story *The Old Man and the Sea*. She also encouraged the learners to participate in classroom discussions, urging them to give their points of view and share their understandings of the events with their classmates. The teacher-researcher avoided interrupting her students' speech and correcting their mistakes immediately. Her classroom observations revealed the following:

Students' low proficiency in the English language was the primary reason behind their lack of self-confidence. Consequently, they avoided taking part in the discussion during the lectures. When the students realized that literature as a subject area could improve their skills as EFL learners, they became more attentive. The students show their interest by reading the story, asking questions, and above all, expressing their thoughts.

The teacher focused on higher-order of thinking by cantering the levels of analyzing, evaluating, and creating suggested in Anderson's taxonomy when asking a question such as:
- What does the sea represent for Santiago (the protagonist)?
- Do you approve his decision?
- What does Santiago's struggle mean for you?

Some students did not appreciate the story; they found it boring and meaningless. This category of learners was unmotivated, and their answers were superficial. While the responses of the students who appreciated the literary piece were entirely satisfactory, reflecting their depth of thinking.

Riham (one of the students), for example, thinks that the character of Santiago "was foolish when he went deep in the sea, risking his life for something uncertain. I think life is precious, we should not take such risks". On the other hand, Meise opposed her classmate's point of view when arguing that:

Santiago is a courageous person because he did not give up. People should struggle for their dreams and wishes. The character was of great inspiration to me. I have heart trouble yet am firmly convinced that I have to be like Santiago in life. I mean, I have to fight my own battle and not give up because of my illness.

Another student responds, "the story makes me aware that perseverance means success. Despite all the troubles and circumstances if we don't give up, we will certainly achieve our objectives". Khouloud did not appreciate the end of the story and suggested a new one saying:

I preferred that Santiago died in the sea while fighting the sharks giving him another existence through Mandoline (the disciple of Santiago in the novella). He was his apprentice either in learning the craft of fishing or the philosophy of life. So after growing up, Mandoline would be a better version of Santiago with a yang body and strong spirit.

**Discussion**

The semi-structured interview with teachers revealed that literature develops learners' CT abilities. They will learn to synthesize and evaluate concepts and interpret events; this will help to extend their imagination and boost their creativity. To achieve this level, the teachers encouraged group work activities. Working together, teachers explained, put the students in a learner-centered environment in which they are the monitors of the activity. Through this kind of work, students share their information, learn better and, develop their CT abilities as well as linguistic skills.

Classroom observations indicate that the students who appreciated the story were very active in class. They attempted to understand the novella by analyzing and evaluating its events. The learners were interested in the protagonist's struggle; they were involved in the text and engaged in class discussions. Students were confident in expressing their points of view and succeeded in making the connexion between the fictional text and real life. Some of them were very creative in their answers.

The results revealed that literature is an essential medium to ensure the integration of CT skills in the curriculum. Collie and Slater (1990) asserted that "literary texts are valuable and authentic materials" (p. 3), because they entertain the students on the one hand, and contain different linguistic and grammatical forms on the other. Additionally, these texts are suitable pedagogical support to develop the students' CT abilities.

**Research Implications**

Literature can provide a reliable tool to motivate students to think critically. It is the role of the teacher to choose the appropriate strategies to combine the teaching of literature with critical thinking enhancement. Based on the researcher's experience, the following suggestions are made:
- Make literature enjoyable for the students by selecting texts that make the learners interested in reading because critical thinking requires the students' disposition to decide, discern, and judge.
- Give more importance to classroom discussions and motivate the learners to reach their conclusions based on their understanding of the literary text. This will urge the students to practice their CT skills (Arbain & Nour 2017, cited in Yoges & Harwati, 2021).
- Ask appropriate questions to orient learners to think critically by focusing on higher-order thinking. In asking questions, teachers should be thoroughly ordered from the ones focusing on the content issues to those aiming at interpretative issues. The lesson will, therefore, shift from remembering to understanding the information by analyzing and evaluating its content and enhancing creativity.
- Provide adequate group activities that allow the students to reason together, discuss their reasoning and evaluate their results.

**Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to scrutinize the use of literature to enhance EFL learners' critical thinking abilities. It also aimed to provide appropriate methods to motivate the students to think critically. Findings revealed that all the teachers of literature interviewed approve of the effectiveness of critical thinking approaches to reach a deep understanding of the literary text. It also unveiled that a shift towards high-order thinking is advantageous and long-lasting learning because it leads the students to make rational and intelligent judgments, draw up decisions and, develop new ideas based on reflective thoughts. This study recommended using high order of thinking as a strategy when teaching literature; it cannot be generalized in other EFL classes, while further investigation is needed to explore the efficiency of critical thinking approaches in teaching different subject areas.

**About the Author**

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