

# A Review on Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Literary Texts

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Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.2p.4

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.2p.4>

Received: 25/10/2014

Accepted: 07/01/2015

## Abstract

Many ESL instructors are generally in agreement with the belief that it is essential that students should be assisted in developing critical thinking skills while being engaged in their language learning process especially those learning the target language at higher level (Stern, 1985; Dickinson, 1991; McKay, 2001; Terry, 2007; Van, 2009; Odenwald, 2010). As it enables language learners to engage in a more purposeful and self-regulatory in judgment, helping them in their evaluation of the arguments of others and of their own, coming to well-reasoned resolutions to any complex problems and to be able to resolve conflicts encountered in their daily lives. Critical thinking requires them to be actively involved in their own learning process as they attempt to individually understand and apply the information they are exposed to during the classroom interaction (Landsberger, 1999; Tung & Chang, 2009). The many advantageous and feasibility of teaching instruction that incorporates the study of literature in the ESL classroom which suggests that literature texts, if correctly chosen and instructed, can prove to be beneficial to ESL students' overall level of literacy and critical thinking skills. Numerous empirical researches also asserted that literary texts that are authentic, enjoyable, and motivating would naturally increase both their knowledge of the target language patterns and cultural awareness.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, ESL classroom, literature, literary text

## 1. Critical Thinking Defined

The notions of critical thinking have been introduced by prominent Greek intellectuals such as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato as early as 2500 years ago. These philosophers acknowledged the need for development of the quality of human reasoning skills, thus developing the early criteria for critical thought, for what we now know as Critical Thinking. A well known process of questioning referred to as the Socratic Method, developed by Socrates was designed to facilitate people in the community to see the apparent inconsistencies and assumptions in their current beliefs and reasoning systems. However, by the 1930's John Dewey, an American educational psychologist contended that learning to think should be the fundamental purpose in our system of education. He referred to this form of thought processing as "reflective thinking" and an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds which support it" (Dewey, 1934, p. 9).

By the 1960's a more modern understanding of critical thinking is developed by Enniss (1962), who suggested the importance of assisting students with the engagement of a thinking process that is a more reflective, reasonable, and directed on what to believe or do. During the 1980's, based upon Dewey's idea of critical thinking, Edward Glaser (1980) developed one of the most highly employed test of critical thinking termed as the *Watson-Glaser Thinking Appraisal*. After some extensive readings on various studies conducted on the notions of critical thinking by past researchers, the author thus discovered that there is no one agreement on the absolute definition on critical thinking. Deciding that a common definition can be a difficult task, the table below attempts to give a few significance definitions of critical thinking found:

Table 1. Definitions of Critical thinking

No.	Author	Definition	Year
1.	Dewey	"active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds which support it"	1934
2.	Glaser	"(1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods"	1941
3.	Paul	"Critical thinking is the ability to reach sound conclusions based on observation and information"	1988
4.	Facione	"Critical thinking is to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as an explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based on"	1998
5.	Ennis	"Critical thinking is reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do"	2002
6.	Cosgrove	"Critical thinking is an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences"	2009
7.	Mulnix	"Critical thinking includes a commitment to using reason in the formulation of our beliefs"	2012

However, Facione (1990) brought together a panel of 46 authority figures in the field of critical thinking and reasoning skills to generate a consensus of the definition of critical thinking by means of the well-known Delphi method. Consequently, arriving on the definition of critical thinking as:

"We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based"

(Facione, 1990, p. 2)

Additionally, many scholars in the area generally agree with the belief that it is important that students should be assisted in developing the aforementioned critical thinking skills while being engaged in their academic learning process (Facione, 1998; Schafersman, 1991; Landsberger, 1996; Halpern, 2003). As it enables students to engage in a more purposeful and self-regulatory in judgment, helping them in their evaluation of the arguments of others and of their own, coming to well-reasoned resolutions to any complex problems and to be able to resolve conflicts encountered in their daily lives. However, there are still quite a number of educational institutions that still emphasis on 'what' to think rather than how to think" (Daud & Husin, 2004). Thus, changing such pedagogical approaches from what to think to how to think would definitely require some major shifts in their belief about instructional paradigms. Such changes would require educators to think more about how they could develop their students' critical thinking skills whilst teaching the central disciplinary content.

## 2. Teaching Critical Thinking in the ESL Classroom

Most scholars in the field of instructional pedagogy do not view critical thinking as a separate body of knowledge to be delivered as a disconnected subject in the language classroom, but like the notion of reading and writing, as having significant applications in all areas of students' learning (Facione, 1990a). Terry (2007) suggests critical thinking requires them to be actively involved in their own learning process as they attempt to individually understand and apply the information they are exposed to during the classroom interaction. An article by Schafersman (1991) generally suggests two major methods for instruction of critical thinking: 1) instructors need to modify their classroom teaching and testing methods in some parts to augment critical thinking among their learners. This can be incorporated through their lectures, homework, assignments and exams, and 2) to make use of established critical thinking pedagogies and/or programs, and materials developed by specialists in the field.

On the other hand, in specific to language learning, Landsberger (1996) argues that learners should be encouraged to attempt examining the differences between theory, facts and opinion, and belief when they carry out any form of classroom reading. In an identical notion of belief, Starkey (2004) differentiates further between the idea of facts and opinions and suggests that critical learners ask themselves the following questions when they encounter a reading a text:

- 1) What is the topic of the reading text?
- 2) What are the issues being addressed?
- 3) What type of conclusions does the author reach regarding the issues?
- 4) What are the major reasons for the author's statements or beliefs? Did the author use facts, opinions, or faith? Did the author employ unbiased phrases or emotional phrases?

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Questions learners should ask themselves when studying a text in the language classroom.

(Starkey, 2004, p. 96)

Thus, instructors should emphasise more on training and encouraging ESL learners to go beyond the superficial meaning of the words from the reading text. They should be trained to see that meaning is not just merely the facts directly stated in the given passage. As Knott (2006) argues; critical readers reflect on the passage by making observations such as: Is it offering any relevant examples? Arguments? Engaging for sympathy? Constructing a contrast to explain a point? Critical readers should be able to infer what meaning the passage, as a whole, is trying to convey based on the earlier analysis. Being able to look beyond the surface language and see if the reasons given are clear/or not. Thus, critical readers would recognize not only what the passage says, but also how the subject matter is portrayed. Recognizing how the various ways in which every text is uniquely created by its individual author.

Additionally, Halpern (2003) also discusses the concept of explicit instruction in how to think and introduced a Four-Part Model for the explicit instruction of critical thinking as follows:

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**Part one- Dispositions for critical thinking:**

It explains that it won't be constructive to teach advanced students the skills of **critical thinking**, if they are not inclined to use them. A disposition for **critical thinking** is to be present in the learners or is to be cultivated

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**Part two-Instruction in the skills:**

Critical thinking skills are to be instructed.

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**Part three- Structure training:**

It is a mean of improving the probability that students will recognize when a particular **thinking skill** is needed, even in a literature-based context.

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**Part four: Metacognitive monitoring:**

Metacognition is usually defined as what we know about what we know. So metacognitive monitoring is determining how we can use the knowledge we already possess to direct and improve the **thinking** and learning processes. While engaging in **critical thinking**, students need to monitor their **thinking** process, check that progress is being made toward an appropriate goal, ensures accuracy, and makes decisions about the use of time and mental effort.

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Halpern's (2004) Four-Part Model for explicit classroom instruction in how to think;  
*as quoted in Khatib & Alizah (2012)*

Finally, a more recent model for teaching critical thinking in an ESL context and worth noting is a model proposed by Jun Xu (2011). The model is a five-step process that is as follows:

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**First step** : A Pre-reading introduction about the background and/or cultural knowledge of the selected text/passage

**Second step:** A comprehension activity by the explication of the main idea of each paragraph.

**Third step** : Explore the logic of the text/passage

**Fourth step:** Evaluating the logic of the text/passage

**Fifth Step** : Writing/Composition

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Jun Xu's (2011) Five-Step Model for teaching Critical Thinking in the ESL classroom.

The instructional aspects and models alone are not enough in ensuring a conducive classroom practice for critical thinking skills especially in an ESL context. One of the most important ingredients in which instructors should put into consideration is the selection of text type being employed in their teaching. According to Tung and Chang (2009) one such text is the literary-based text type, they further asserted that, the reading and analyzing of literary texts are highly congenial to the crucial merits of critical thinking as the reading of literature-based texts is usually a complex process that requires learners to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior knowledge or experiences in order to create meaning from the given text.

### 3. Teaching Critical Thinking through Literary Text

The many advantageous and feasibility of teaching instruction that incorporate the study of literature in the ESL classroom have methodically been studied for a number of decades by a number of scholars including Susan Louise Stern (1985), Myra A. Dickinson (1991) and Hyung-Hwa Chu (2008). Their studies include the teaching and application of poems, short stories, and other types of conventional literary texts to students starting from the beginning to advanced level of abilities. They came to a similar conclusion which suggests that literary texts, if correctly chosen and instructed, can prove to be beneficial to ESL students' overall level of literacy and critical thinking skills. These researchers also asserted that texts that are authentic, enjoyable, and motivating would naturally increase both their knowledge of the target language patterns and cultural awareness. Critical thinking can also be fostered when students are exposed to various or even conflicting views and ways of life being portrayed in the literary passage.

While studying its meaning, students are required to demonstrate their capacities in differentiating facts from opinions, understanding both literal and implied meaning of tone, construction of moral reasoning and well-grounded judgements, as well as to be able to relate and apply what has been learnt to the real world (Alwine, 2014). Thus, the learners are, in a sense, exercising and applying what experts in Critical Thinking termed as "explanation," "analysis," "synthesis," "argumentation," "interpretation," "evaluation," "problem-solving," "inference" "logical reasoning," and "application" (Facione, 2007; Halpern, 1998; Lazere, 1987). All the aforementioned skills are the major components of critical thinking skills and the reason why Lazere suggested that "literature...is the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking" (1987, p. 3).

One of the earlier and considerably significant study in the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom is by Stern (1985) that suggested literature texts can provide a basis for expanding learners' vocabulary and enhancing their knowledge of grammar as the texts can offer the best exemplars of writing in the target language and employs vocabulary and sentence structure learners might not encounter in common every day speech. Stern further asserted that a literature text of merit would usually contain a carefully selected vocabulary and sentence structure, and exhibits the full use of connotative power of words. As well as, providing various writing styles that can present readers with unique aesthetics and stimulating intellectual experience. This literary experience can foster both learners' cognitive and aesthetic maturation and develops their abilities in making critical and mature grounded judgements.

Van (2009) enumerates a number of benefits of the application of literature in the language classroom, this includes; i) providing a meaningful contexts, ii) providing a rich resource for vocabulary range, prose and dialogues, iii) appealing to learners' imagination and develops creativity, iv) enhancing learners' cultural awareness, and most importantly v) encouraging learners' critical thinking. This is also echoed by a study by Dickson (1991) which examined learners' attitudes toward the study of literature which gave an emphasis on critical thinking. The findings of the study suggested that instructional emphasis on critical thinking; (1) encourages learners to be more interactive with the passage they are studying, (2) encourages learners to expand their focus relative to the study of the given passage, (3) the completion of critical thinking activities can foster learners to realize and adjust their approach to the reading and studying of literature, and (4) language instructors need to recognize the instruction of critical thinking skills as a precedence in order to streamline their teaching of literature to emphasize more on learners' critical thinking. The learning experience is specific to critical thinking strategies and being able to practice them through the study of English literature not only would enhance learners' confidence whilst engaging in literature, but should also provide learners with crucial strategies to be used in other real-life contexts as well.

However, studies by Hopkins (1993) and Bridges (1993) asserted that teaching literature alone is not enough in ensuring the advancement of learners' critical thinking; their studies emphasised on the importance of student engagement level in the classroom practice. The data suggested that learners who were the most participative and engaged in the learning process showed the most progress in their critical thinking skills. Bridges added that most form of selected instructional strategies would not prove to be of great significance to the learners if they are unmotivated and disengaged in the classroom. These findings indicate a strong correlation to Dickinson's (1991) study where she found that learners' prefer a learner-centred type of activities such as group discussions and experience-based classroom activities.

This takes us to the importance of the role of the instructor in facilitating learners' critical thinking; findings suggest learners' show a preference to having the instructor as a facilitator rather than someone who assumes too much responsibility in explaining the literature content. Learners prefer to be involved in the learning of literature when they are required to participate in more student-centred activities such as group discussions and role play. Unfortunately, students are not always given the opportunity to engage in such classroom practices, as the data from a study done by Puthikanon (2009) in Thailand's ESL classrooms indicates that many instructors still practice the utilitarian approach to their teaching pedagogy. The use of critical thinking was found to be minimal in the lessons and was focused on more pressing agendas such as passing the national university entrance examination. Thus, making the lessons more focused

on other items such as vocabulary and grammatical rules, inevitably putting the teaching of critical thinking skills in the back seat. Hence, language instructors should be more proactive in asserting their roles in the classroom to ensure the instructional approach to critical thinking do take place by encouraging their students to be more participative in student-centred literature activities by creating a comfortable and conducive learning environment for them.

As McGuire (2010) asserted in his study that learners' ability to understand a literature text does not solely depend on their proficiency but on their willingness to think critically about the literary text and their capacity to draw logical conclusions and reasoning. The importance of instructor's questioning technique was also highlighted in an earlier study by Tsui (2002) which suggests the importance of how and what types of questioning practice is applied by the instructors, good questioners would provide a conducive platform in motivating their students, encourage creativity and stimulate their critical thinking skills. A study by Dhanapal (2008) also stresses the importance of instructors in playing the role of facilitators in encouraging their students to understand the importance of learning about how to think and composing their thoughts are more important than learning 'what' to think about the particular text being studied. She further suggested that instructors should take consideration of the Cogaff taxonomy (adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy) which combines the cognitive and affective thinking skills when constructing any form of teaching framework to be used in formulating constructive literary questioning and extended classroom activities to facilitate growth in their students' creative and critical thinking skills.

Tung and Chang (2009) echo this notion in their study by investigating the efficacy of developing critical thinking skills through the reading of literature which suggested three important factors to consider for a conducive classroom practice : i) the application of Socratic questioning to promote elaboration of thoughts; ii) a text selection which provides believable contexts to develop students' critical and problem solving skills; and iii) an experienced instructor that could foster a safe and comfortable environment for critical inquiries. Studies by Steffen (2011), Choorapanthiyil (2007) and Odenwald (2010) all concur on the importance of creating a learning environment which ignites classroom discussions, promoting learners' enthusiasm for learning and relating to the text being studied to their real-life context. Odenwald (2010) further stresses the importance of giving each student the opportunity to comfortably voice out their opinions and discussion of meaning as it promotes "deeper intellectual enrichment" (p.187).

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings from empirical studies reviewed in this paper demonstrate that in order to foster critical thinking amongst ESL students through the teaching of literature, instructors must first realize and put a degree of priority in developing their learners' critical thinking in designing their instructional approaches. As proposed by Starkey (2004), learners' should be encouraged to ask themselves questions about texts that ignite their critical thinking, prompting them to think more critically about the prescribed literary passage than just learning 'what' to think about it. They should also be encouraged to understand and explore that there is no one single perspective in any given issue and also how perspectives can also keep changing. Other notable approaches in teaching literature designed to create a strong emphasis in critical thinking are Halpern's (2004) Four-Part Model for explicit instruction and Jun Xu's (2011) Five-Step Model. However, as pointed out in studies by Hopkins (1993) and Bridges (1993), emphasising on the right instructional approach alone is not enough in ensuring the development of learners' critical thinking skills; as these studies suggest, learner's motivation and classroom engagement are also crucial aspects of the learning process. Hence, suggesting language instructors to not only focus on employing favourable classroom pedagogy and approaches, but also the need to be able to create a conducive classroom environment promoting active classroom discussions, encourage learners' enthusiasm for learning and the ability to relate the text to their real-life context (Tung & Chang, 2009). However, the author also observed through this empirical research that there is evidence of the lack of research in this area that attempts to describe the exact features, guidelines or rubric language instructors could refer to in order to choose the type of literary text that would prove to be suitable and beneficial to ESL learner to accordingly suit their level of competency.

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