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An Exploration of Teaching Critical Thinking Skills through a Novel in an English First Additional Language Classroom

A Case of South African Rural Public Secondary School

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Abstract

Scholars point to the value of the literary text as an effective stimulus for learners to think critically and express their feelings and ideas in a language in integrating literature in the language classroom. The benefits of literature for developing learners' critical thinking skills and creativity have been highlighted by a number of researches (Alvarez, Calvete, & Sarasa, 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Fernandez de Caley, Bobkina & Sarto, 2012; Ghosn, 2002). Against this background, this study investigated challenges faced by grade 10 learners at a rural public secondary school in Mankweng circuit in Capricorn North District, Limpopo province, South Africa in analysing novel. This study was guided by Rosenblatt's (1982) Literary Transaction Theory which transformed the landscape of literary instruction. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and classroom observation were used to collect data. The findings of this study show that literature helps the learners to understand the meaning of the literary text by drawing from multiple interpretations and perspectives from classmates as way of developing their critical thinking skills. This study recommends the use of high order of thinking as a strategy when teaching literature and a further investigation to explore the efficiency of critical thinking approaches in teaching different subject areas.

Keywords

Novel, Rosenblatt's (1982) Literary Transaction Theory, Literary texts, Critical thinking skills, Linguistic knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been widely used in teaching and learning language nowadays (Ghosn, 2002; Motlhaka & Jore, 2022). Literature is considered a promising tool for language learning purposes where literary exploration can be used to enhance the efficiency of language learning programmes and also gives some advantages in the classroom. Literature also fosters learners' motivation to read and write which also can improve their reading and writing proficiency to serve their academic and occupational needs (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). Literature involves various genres such poetry, drama, short story and novel in teaching and learning languages which offer four benefits: authentic material, cultural enrichment, language advancement, and personal growth. In addition, literature promotes the psycholinguistic aspect of language learning as it focuses on form and discourse processing skills and improves vocabulary expansion and reading skills as it provides learners with authentic, pleasurable and cultural material (Motlhaka & Jore, 2022). Scholars point to the value of the literary text as an effective stimulus for students to think critically and express their feelings and ideas in a language in integrating literature in the language classroom. The benefits of literature for developing students' critical thinking skills and creativity have been highlighted by a number of researches (Alvarez, Calvete, & Sarasa, 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Fernandez de Caley, Bobkina & Sarto, 2012; Ghosn, 2002).

A close reading of a literary work can develop the skills students need to understand hidden meanings, reconstruct images from details, separate facts from opinions, examine phenomena from multiple points of view, and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of their daily life. In short, a close reading of a literary text involves all those skills that are part of the critical thinking process: analysis, synthesis, argumentation, interpretation, evaluation, problem-solving, and reasoning, among others. In this way, the reader-response approach, which posits the active role of the reader, encourages students to generate and communicate their own interpretation of a literary text. However, learners with lower proficiency level are limited in expressing their ideas and thoughts because learners do not get ample time to explore a novel as teachers will be racing against time due to school-administered proficiency tests and examinations which tend to emphasize too much on the accuracy of the learners' output and jump in too quickly for correction of learners' errors in speaking. This is probably one of the drawbacks of the South African schools system where teachers are supposed to have completed the syllabus at a stipulated time, English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers will not have ample time to use effective strategies for teaching a novel.

The use of literature in the language classroom has seen a revival during the last few decades. In explaining the benefits of integrating literature in the language classroom, scholars point to the value of the literary text as an effective stimulus for students to think critically and express their feelings and ideas. The benefits of literature for developing students' critical thinking skills and creativity have been highlighted by a number of researches (Alvarez, Calvete, & Sarasa, 2012; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Fernandez de Caley, Bobkina & Sarto, 2012; Ghosn). In other words, it can develop learners' critical skills to understand hidden meanings, reconstruct images from details, separate facts from opinions, examine phenomena from multiple points of view, and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of their daily life. Though rooted in various theories such as participatory theory, emancipatory theory, Critical Literature Pedagogy Theory (CLP) etc., it is most strongly associated with the critical pedagogy philosophy developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and is based on problem-posing education, that aims at making students critical thinkers. When applied through the paradigm of postmodern, poststructuralist, or feminist discourses, it encourages teachers and students to engage in dialogues over texts that were meaningful in their lives. Taken into consideration the social nature of the language discourse, critical literacy pedagogy helps students to interpret the texts they read, questioning the social theories they relate to. To deal with literary texts in language classroom effectively, Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) suggest a model that is based on the strategies endorsed by both the reader-centered critical reading approach and the critical pedagogy approach. For them, critical thinking skills required to work with literary texts in the language classroom can be broadly defined as a set of processes whose main dimensions include the interpretation of the world, self-reflection, intercultural awareness, critical awareness, reasoning and problem-solving and language use (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016).

For this reason, higher-order thinking is interrelated to Bloom's Taxonomy, which implies a hierarchy of six stages of thinking. This suggests that the higher-level skills are more cognitively challenging to most students when analysing literary texts because the capacity to master them means the ability to master all other levels below that level. Even though, 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. In other words, 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. In this case, literature involves high levels of thinking because students are expected to analyze, contrast, and infer ideas about the literary texts they are dealing with. Therefore, the taxonomies above can be beneficial strategies to adopt while teaching a novel within English First Additional context as demonstrated in table below:

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 in the novel?
Comprehension	Understanding	What was the problem the main character had to solve?
Application	Applying	How are the personal problems of the characters in the novel similar to the ones that real people face?
Analysis	Analysing	What literary devices are being used to convey to the reader the character's feelings?
Synthesis	Evaluating	Based on the novel 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 novel faced.

Adopted from Gopalan and Hashim (2021)

Using novels to promote CT is supported by two underlying reasons. First, like other literary works, a novel is allegorical. It has a literal meaning and implied meaning which is beyond the surface. To get the appropriate meaning, the reader should reflect, infer, analyze, and synthesize the presented information. By doing these, the reader has practiced critical

thinking skills. Secondly, novels are closely related to life; they are even about life. Although the subject matter is about life, a novel presents it uniquely. The characters may look like people in reality. The actions can take place as if they belong to daily life. These features make novels to be perceived as a “simulation of society” which provides learners an opportunity to explore from other perspectives so that they improve their understanding of others. The nature of novels that they are close to life promote the ability to make a decision, which is one of the major features of critical thinking skills. By studying novels containing matters directly related to daily life, learners can get schemata about particular matters, store them in their minds, and use them later as a reference in taking up action. Thus, there is still a need for more empirical evidence in the literature on this topic, hence, literature available over the last two decades consists of few empirical studies that are systematic in methodology and their reporting of the analysis and findings.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The researchers observed that learners with lower proficiency levels in English First Additional Language are limited in expressing their ideas and thoughts in English First Additional Language classroom during literature lessons of a novel despite being expected to demonstrate critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, argumentation, interpretation, evaluation, problem-solving, and reasoning, among others. Nonetheless, critical thinking is not given enough attention in the language classroom, which still focuses mostly on skill practice, vocabulary learning, and accumulation of linguistic structures (Pineda Báez, 2004). The lack of understanding of a novel adversely affects learners’ performance in English First Additional Language Paper 2 thereby lowering the grade of the other papers, resulting in poor performance of English First Additional Language. The researchers, therefore found it pertinent to investigate factors that suppress an adequate understanding of a prescribed novel for EFAL grade 10 learners. The novel in question is “The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton”. The study, therefore, aimed to investigate challenges faced by EFAL grade 10 learners at a rural public secondary school in Mankweng circuit in Capricorn North District, Limpopo province, South Africa in developing critical thinking skills through analysing a novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Rosenblatt’s (1982) Literary Transaction Theory as it significantly transformed the landscape of literary instruction. Benton (1990) describes the substantial contribution of Rosenblatt’s model as a force that brought about a pedagogical sea change, shifting instructional focus from an emphasis on building student understanding of the literary canon and its theory-driven, analytical conventions towards the encouragement of more personal, yet still textually-grounded interpretations. He argues that the advancement of a system of teaching that emphasizes the role of the reader in the formation of meaning “rather than upon conventional, narrowly-conceived ideas of comprehension and criticism, is now the priority”. In this paper, Literary Transaction Theory enhances learners’ perspective to be as important as the lens of the expert in developing their critical thinking skills. In addition to valuing the autonomy of reader response, Rosenblatt’s theory assumes meaning is produced through interaction between text and individual, granting the reader a degree of freedom and independence from restrictive interpretive traditions. In other words, instead of teaching learners what the correct or “authorized” meaning of a novel is according to accepted, scholarly interpretation, a teacher is grounding his/her practice in Transaction Theory which invites learners to directly engage with a text so as to develop a personal response to it through critical thinking. Thus, Rosenblatt’s theory, described in further detail below, served as the primary framework for this study because provided a means for the researchers to understand classroom experiences that will be reported by learners as being most valuable in constructing knowledge.

Regarding the specific reader and text interaction, Rosenblatt (1982) argues that the reading event is organic and multi-dimensional, meaning that it is an interaction between the reader and the text that is not limited to a single definition. The meaning of a story or a poem does not come into being solely by virtue of a given narrative or a combination of written rhythmical, rhyming lines. However, neither does a text rest entirely on the reader’s ability to ascribe reference to the words (Rosenblatt, 1982). Rather, reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances. The words of the text activate certain elements of memory and consciousness in the reader. In turn, informed by past experiences with language, the reader “sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl. This implies a constant series of selections from the multiple possibilities offered by the text and their synthesis into an organized meaning. Furthermore, a reader’s stance may be aligned with the desire to seek aesthetic pleasure, attainment of knowledge, or some mixture of these two viewpoints (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1994).

Given that the main goal of this study was to identify teaching strategies that engage learners and develop their critical thinking skills through analysis of a novel, Vygotsky’s theory about cognitive potential and learning also played an important role. Recognizing the part that Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) plays in how to effectively help learners learn is valuable to the teacher of a novel given that the abstract concepts and often intricate language inherent to verse frequently challenge learners (Vygotsky, 1978). The Zone of Proximal Development can effectively aid the classroom teacher in order to provide supportive and useful guidance to learners. In his text, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Vygotsky (1978) is primarily concerned with the ways in which a person connects with and understands his world as a way to learn. In essence, the ZPD is that cognitive area between what can be done independently and what may be accomplished with expert guidance. Vygotsky argues that in a school, assessment typically demands children demonstrate concepts that they have mastered. This first level of mastery

can be called the actual developmental level, that is, the level of development of a child's mental functions that has been established as a result of certain already completed development cycles. Using the concept of the ZPD for reference helped the researchers to identify moments that reflect the type of teaching events that help learners grow intellectually by meeting them in their ZPD to harness their critical thinking skills.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate challenges faced by grade 10 learners at a rural public secondary school in Mankweng circuit in Capricorn North District, Limpopo province, South Africa in developing critical thinking skills through analysing a novel.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative case study methodology at a rural public secondary school. Qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena to gain concrete, contextual and in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject (Yin, 2018). Qualitative case study ensures that the issue under investigation is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses, which allows in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life. A qualitative case study is relevant to this study because it allowed the researchers to use multiple methods of data such as semi-structured interviews and observation method to generate more descriptive data to understand challenges experienced by grade 10 learners in developing their critical thinking skills through analysing a novel in an English First Additional Language Classroom.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Population refers to the whole group selected to participate during the collection of data from which the sample is drawn and for which conclusion is made (Ary et al., 2002). The school in the study attracts learners from the surrounding villages such as Paledi, Ga-Magoa, Ga-Ramogale, Ga-Makanye, Mantjana, Moremadi, Phomolong, Makwareng, Mamaholo and RDP. The home languages of the learners at the school are Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga, whereas, the language of learning and teaching is English. Participants in the study were grade 10 learners and English First Additional Language teachers. There are 78 grade 10 learners and 3 teachers who teach English First Additional Language paper 2. Purposive sampling was used because it enabled the researchers to recruit participants who could provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. The researchers used number cards in a box to select 10 learners in order to give equal opportunity for all learners to participate in the study.

DATA COLLECTION

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to explore participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the challenges experienced by grade 10 learners in developing their critical thinking skills through analysing a novel in an English First Additional Language Classroom. Observation method was used to observe how learners behaved in the classroom during lessons in order to see how they participate during class discussions, how they respond to questions, and apply what they were taught by putting their ideas on paper in order to determine the impact of novel analysis in developing their critical thinking skills.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers used inductive thematic analysis to analyse data in this study because it is concerned with trying to understand the lived experiences of respondents on how they make sense of their experiences of addressing their challenges of analysing a novel and developing their critical thinking skills. The researchers familiarized themselves with data, assigned preliminary codes to data in order to describe the content, identify common patterns or themes that come up repeatedly from semi-structured interview and data observation, reviewed themes and started with the write up. Thus, the researchers began with an area of study and allowed the theory to emerge from the data wherein themes were derived from transcribed semi-structured interview and data observation. The researchers read transcribed recordings as well as the analysis of the observation data several times until they reached a saturation point. The analysis of data was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the challenges experienced by grade 10 learners in developing their critical thinking skills through analysing a novel in English First Additional Language classroom?
- What are the challenges experienced by teachers who teach grade 10 literature in developing learners' critical thinking skills in English First Additional Language classroom?
- Which strategies can be adopted in the teaching of a novel to enhance learners' critical thinking skills?

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study aimed to investigate challenges faced by grade 10 EFAL at a rural public secondary school in Mankweng circuit in Capricorn North District, Limpopo province, South Africa in developing critical thinking skills through analysing a novel. The following themes emerged during the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation:

Literature enhances learners' critical thinking skills

This theme sought to determine how literature enhances learners' critical thinking skills. The following extracts showed how literature enhances learners' critical thinking skills:

Excerpt one

The analysis of the novel helped me to express my opinions when explaining symbols in the novels to enhance my understanding of the events unfolding in the novel. For example, it was easy for me to explain that cars represent the Socs' power and the greasers' vulnerability because Socs' parents can afford to buy them their "tuff" cars, while the greasers are physically vulnerable in comparison to the Socs.

Excerpt two

I was able to give reasonable and reflective thought about Bob's Rings which represent the physical power that accompanies wealth because Bob takes advantage of his economic superiority over Ponyboy and the other greasers by using his wealth to injure his opponents.

Excerpt three

It helped me to gain confidence in the interpretation of literary works when interpreting the point of view of the novel which I think is told in the first-person point of view where the reader becomes reliant on Ponyboy for information about the story, setting, and characters and focuses the reader's attention on the important people in Ponyboy's world.

The above excerpts show that literature is valuable and essential to developing learners' critical thinking skills because they were able to give reasonable and reflective thought about literary devices in the novel. This suggests that literature enhances learners' critical thinking skills to make intelligent judgments and draw up decisions based on their reflective thoughts.

Classroom discussions help learners to understand the meaning of the literary text

This theme sought to determine how classroom discussions helped learners to understand the meaning of the literary text as a way of developing their critical thinking skills. The following extracts showed how classroom discussions help learners to understand the meaning of the literary text as a way of developing their critical thinking skills:

Excerpt one

I think classroom discussion enriched my understanding of literary text by drawing from multiple interpretations and perspectives from classmates when looking at how literary references as motifs helped me to understand how the characters in the novel view themselves and those around them. We see this when Ponyboy first alludes to a work of literature in Chapter 1, when he compares himself to Pip from Charles Dickens's Great Expectations.

Excerpt two

Honestly, classroom discussion equips me with the abilities to analyse, evaluate, and integrate diverse ideas of interpreting literary text when I was looking at Ponyboy as protagonist as he struggles to reconcile his social class standing and gang membership with his individuality guides the entire novel.

Excerpt three

Eish, I think it encourages an equal level of participation as it provides a comfortable environment for reticent learners to express their ideas and viewpoints.

The findings of the study show that classroom discussions helped the learners to understand the meaning of a literary text by drawing from multiple interpretations and perspectives from classmates. The study also found that classroom discussion encouraged an equal level of participation as it provided a comfortable environment for reticent learners to express their ideas and viewpoints. The findings here are in line with Yimwilai (2015) who is of the view that literature-based lessons lead to the activation of more and higher critical thinking skills than conventional instruction, which empirically validates both theoretical insights and the beliefs of the teachers in this study.

Literature develops learners' creativity

This theme sought to determine how teaching literature which blends thinking skills with literary contents develop learners' cognitive abilities and improve their critical and creative thinking skills. The respondents strongly agree that literature helps in developing their creativity and consider it as a source of inspiration as indicated below:

Excerpt one

It actually develops our ability to express an opinion and argue our ideas with examples.

Excerpt two

It helps us to be self-confident and value our own opinions by presenting them in a more logical and creative manner, and become motivated to read more.

Excerpt three

I think it equips us with basic skills and knowledge of the English Language which would enable us to have effective oral and written communication in and out of the school.

The excerpts above indicate that literature develops learners' ability and self-confidence to express their ideas in logical and creative manner. The study also found that literature equips learners with basic skills and knowledge of the English Language which would enable them to have effective oral and written communication skills in and out of school.

Classroom observation results

The teachers used Bloom and Anderson's taxonomies in their literature class focusing on higher-order of thinking when asking questions during the study of the novel "The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton". They 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 teachers avoided interrupting their learners' speech and correcting their mistakes immediately. Classroom observation revealed that some learners' low proficiency in the English language was the primary reason behind their lack of self-confidence which resulted in them not taking part in the discussion during the analysis of the novel.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated challenges faced by grade 10 learners at a rural public secondary school in Mankweng circuit in Capricorn North District, Limpopo province, South Africa in developing critical thinking skills through analysing a novel. The findings of the study revealed that literature enhances learners' critical thinking skills to make intelligent judgments and draw up decisions based on their reflective thoughts. The findings of the study show that classroom discussions helped the learners to understand the meaning of the literary text by drawing from multiple interpretations and perspectives from classmates as way of developing their critical thinking skills. This suggests that literature is an essential medium to ensure the integration of CT skills in the curriculum and literary texts are valuable and authentic materials which have different linguistic and grammatical forms to enhance learners' English proficiency levels as a suitable pedagogical support to develop learners' CT abilities. However, the study revealed that some learners' low proficiency in the English language was the primary reason behind their lack of self-confidence which resulted in them not taking part in the discussion during the analysis of the novel. It could be concluded that literature can provide a reliable tool to motivate learners to think critically, hence it is the role of the teachers to choose the appropriate strategies to combine the teaching of literature with critical thinking enhancement to motivate learners to reach their conclusions based on their understanding of the literary text. This study recommends the use of high order of thinking as a strategy when teaching literature and a further investigation to explore the efficiency of critical thinking approaches in teaching different subjects.

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