

Literature as a Catalyst for Critical Thinking in the Foreign Language Classroom

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The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper is in part a teaching practice report on a first year university course for foreign language learners of English and in part a reflection on how the critical thinking capacity of students may be improved through the incorporation of a literature component into an oral communication curriculum. First a brief profile of the class will be presented, as well as an overview of the structure of the course. Then, after a discussion on how critical thinking is to be defined, five important aspects of critical thinking that may be stimulated in language learners through the study of literature are identified, namely the tendency to ask questions, creative thinking, objective thinking, increased awareness of sociopolitical power structures and intellectual courage. It is argued that literature can provide an excellent opportunity for educators to introduce pertinent but sensitive topics into classroom discussion activities and that such dialogue will better equip the future generation of graduates with the skills necessary to meaningfully participate in a democratic society.

Keywords: critical thinking, literature, foreign language instruction, discussion

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“Reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home,
but more important it finds homes for us everywhere.”
Jean Rhys

1. Introduction

Across the world, employment practices and the nature of work itself are rapidly changing due in part to advances in technology, the globalisation of trade and the emergence of new political climates. It is estimated, for example, that nearly half of all jobs in the United States could become fully or partially automated within the next two decades (“Study Finds Nearly Half of Jobs are Vulnerable to Automation”, 2018) and workers will need to adapt to new roles and new jobs. It is no wonder then that the question of how national education systems should prepare the future workforce to survive and thrive in times of change is often on the minds of educational researchers and policymakers. One aspect of education that it is argued will better equip future leaders, workers and citizens for dealing with change is critical thinking. The educational think tank Partnership for 21st Century Learning (“Framework for 21st Century Learning”), for example, lists critical thinking among the key learning and innovation skills that learners need to develop, noting that it is “believed to play a central role in logical thinking, decision-making, argumentation, and problem-solving” (Ventura et al., 2017, p.5).

This paper is partly a teaching practice report on an original course developed to improve speaking fluency in English as well as critical thinking skills among first year students in an English linguistics and literature programme for undergraduates at a major research university in Japan. The main focus of the paper, however, is to reflect on the ways in which the study of literature during the course contributed to the development of students’ capacity for critical thought. After providing a brief profile of the students who were enrolled in the course and an overview of its structure, the paper will briefly discuss the meaning of the term *critical thinking*. The final section will identify five aspects of critical thinking which could be developed through the study of literature with examples from the course to illustrate what forms such development may take.

2. Class profile and course overview

The course is a credit-bearing component of the four-year degree programme in English. It is one of several compulsory courses designed to improve students’ general English communication skills in their first year at university in order to serve as preparation for the English medium academic content courses focussing on linguistics and literature that they will be required to take in the years that follow. In terms of language skill-building, the course aims to develop students’ speaking and listening abilities for active participation in seminar discussions. Entry into the programme is competitive and as a result students generally start the course with a level of English proficiency that would correspond to the intermediate B1 to B2 range on the CEFR scale, although many lack the confidence to produce much spoken output in English at first. Students also tend to be particularly reticent to express their personal opinions in class and have trouble formulating coherent arguments to substantiate their points when they enter the course. Such hesitancy on the part of Japanese students to express original ideas and views in class have been previously

noted in the literature (Long, 2003). In a discussion on the characteristics of East-Asian learners, Ho (2009, p.333) suggests that a Confucian tradition in education encourages students to “respect, obey, listen, and follow their [teacher’s] instruction” and to avoid challenging their authority, which could explain why students become anxious when required to express an opinion that may not correspond to that of their teacher. One of the practical aims of the course is therefore to raise students’ confidence in expressing and defending their original ideas and, in classes numbering twenty to twenty-five students, this is achieved through unstructured and unassessed small group discussions that take place before students are asked to present their ideas to the class and to the instructor .

The course is taught over the entire academic year, with fifteen weekly sessions per semester, each lasting ninety minutes. In the first semester, students learn presentation strategies, take part in small-group discussions based on homework readings and deliver several short individual presentations, followed by a longer research-based individual presentation towards the end of the semester. Students are required to spend a significant part of each session producing spoken English output and in addition to the language practice, they are also trained on how to take a position on a contentious issue and to construct logical arguments in support of their position while providing evidence and examples. After the first semester, which focusses on presentation practice, the second semester of the course introduces students to the fundamentals of debate. In this semester, they are also required to read the prescribed text: *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. This novella was chosen for its interesting and relevant array of themes that it was believed would stimulate debate and also for the fact that first-year students studying English as a foreign language generally find Orwell’s writing style accessible and the length of the chapters manageable. In addition to reading one chapter for homework each week, students are also asked to write a short paragraph to summarise the main events and to prepare two discussion questions on the chapter content before each class. During classes, students start by discussing the chapter events in small groups of three or four in order to ensure adequate comprehension. For this they may refer to the summary paragraphs that they have prepared as homework. Students then take turns to ask and discuss questions within their groups. Each student asks one of their two pre-prepared questions and then leads a five-minute discussion session until it is the next student’s turn. These small group discussions take place simultaneously among groups and once each student has had the chance to ask one question, the remainder of the class time is spent on group debate activities. The debate follows an original format designed for an EFL context, with elements of team policy debate and the Lincoln-Douglas style (Roberts, 2012). Over the first five or six sessions, students practise making constructive speeches, conducting cross-examinations and making rebuttal speeches. By the middle of the semester, they are able to navigate the entire debate format and weekly practice debates are carried out simultaneously in groups using resolutions formulated by the students themselves that are based on the weekly chapter readings from *Animal Farm*. The final few weeks of the semester are dedicated to a series of assessed team debates in which all students take turns to participate in front of their peers.

3. What is critical thinking?

While critical thinking is often mentioned in educational literature and is even the subject of several academic journals, no single definition of the term seems to have gained widespread acceptance (Isozaki, 2014). It is nevertheless possible to identify certain key concepts that tend to be associated in the literature with critical thinking. These are higher order thinking, inference, objectivity and intellectual autonomy.

The concept of a hierarchy in cognitive functioning was first modelled by Bloom et al. (1956) in the influential work *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* and more recently updated by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) to better suit the conditions surrounding education today. The revised taxonomy identifies *remembering* as a thinking skill of the lowest order. Above *remembering* comes *understanding* and above the latter *applying*, which is characterised as the use of learnt information in a new, but similar, situation. *Creating*, *evaluating* and *analyzing* are placed alongside one another at the top of the hierarchy, constituting the so-called *higher order thinking skills*. In order to integrate higher order thinking skills into pedagogical practice, educators should therefore plan and manage class activities that encourage learners to critically analyse and evaluate information. While the need for rote memorisation in certain situations is undeniable and the mid-tier thinking skills of understanding and application often essential, active participation and a general approach of critical engagement on the part of students are to be strongly encouraged. Creativity, the third important skill of higher order thinking in Bloom's taxonomy, may also be developed in the class context by providing learners with opportunities to use the information that they acquire in order to produce new ideas or to find original solutions to problems.

A second key concept often associated with critical thinking is *inference* (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2010), which refers to the process of reaching a conclusion on the basis of sound logical reasoning informed by evidence. This aspect of critical thinking is essential for effective participation in debate as well as for persuasive academic writing. Related to inference is the concept of *objectivity*, which is also often discussed alongside critical thinking. While objectivity may overlap with inference insofar as the use of logical reasoning and evidence guarantees objective conclusions, a different form of objectivity relevant to critical thinking may also be identified. In order to gain a clearer and less biased understanding of a complex issue, especially one that involves social, political and economic considerations, it is often necessary to discard one's own preconceptions and prejudices to as great an extent as possible. This is no easy task, however, as human beings are naturally predisposed towards egocentric and sociocentric thinking ("Defining Critical Thinking") in that one's interpretations are often influenced by one's own unquestioned beliefs and vested interests or coloured by the values and norms acquired through one's own sociocultural upbringing. Gaining an awareness of one's biases and learning to suppress these in cases where clear reasoning substantiated by evidence points to different conclusions is an important step towards critical thinking. One final concept that is sometimes mentioned or implied in conjunction with critical thinking is independence of authority (Weiler, 2004), or perhaps it is more accurate to say a willingness to question and evaluate authority before one accepts its legitimacy. This aspect of critical thinking necessarily lends the act an air of subversiveness which may complicate its teaching, especially at the pre-university level where socialisation

processes that rely heavily on the authority of the teacher and of tradition often constitute an important part of the curriculum.

It should at this point be noted that significant overlap exists not only between inference and objectivity, but among all four of the concepts discussed above. Inference, objectivity and intellectual autonomy all require some degree of analysis and evaluation, two of the higher order thinking skills in Bloom's taxonomy, for example. Yet as pointed out earlier, a separate focus on each of these concepts highlights important aspects of critical thinking that, in the absence of a consensus on a definition for the term, helps us to arrive at an understanding of the concept as a whole as well as at a recognition of its value to the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

4. Development of critical thinking skills through the study of literature

Whether read for pleasure or as a requirement for an academic course, literature holds the potential to stimulate critical thinking in a variety of ways. This section identifies and discusses five aspects in which the critical thinking skills of students in the first year discussion and debate course described above were developed through their engagement with the prescribed literary text and associated class activities.

4.1 Critical thinking as a tendency to question

The first and perhaps most important way in which literature stimulates critical thinking lies in its ability to encourage readers to question. This questioning might take the form of simple curiosity, such as when one reads a detective story and wonders in anticipation what twist is about to be revealed. On the other hand, literature may at times challenge a reader to question their most deeply held convictions, which in turn may profoundly affect their perspective on their social and political surroundings, to which the tradition throughout history of governments prohibiting or destroying books that threaten their espoused values or ideologies can attest. Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, for example, was banned for a period in Britain and France for offending sexual mores in the 1950s (Boyd, 1991, p.301), several of Marx's works were banned by the South African government during the period of apartheid for the subversive political ideas they contained ("Beacon for Freedom of Expression") and more recently Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was effectively banned in India on the grounds of causing offence to the religion of Islam (Mittal, 2012). Not only do the questions raised by literature encourage readers to develop the higher order thinking skills of analysis and evaluation in order to arrive at satisfactory answers, probably through the process of inference, but such questions may also encourage autonomous thinking beyond the scope of what custom and authority would usually permit.

Students in the discussion and debate course clearly asked many questions over the course of the semester, partly due to the fact that they were required to formulate questions on the text for homework each week. During group discussion activities in which students reviewed the plot events of the chapter that they had read for homework, they would often speculate on what would happen in the following chapter, illustrating how literature can arouse genuine curiosity in readers, even in a classroom environment. Each student prepared two questions before class each week for use in the small group discussions and the resolutions for debate practice were

also adapted from these questions. As might be expected, the questions that students prepared were varied, from the more superficial questions regarding plot events to profound philosophical questions. One example of a plot-related question is “Did Mr Jones really deserve to be chased off his farm?” Even though this question is concerned with surface-level plot events, it may easily in the context of Orwell’s story lead to a fruitful discussion of the merits and shortcomings of capitalism, of which Mr Jones is the allegorical embodiment. The novella also inspired students to ask more abstract and philosophical questions such as “Should leaders enjoy greater wealth and privilege than ordinary people?” and “Is it better to believe a pleasant lie than to know an unpleasant truth?” Some students also linked important themes from the story to issues closer to home in Japan. After discussing a scene where Napoleon orders the execution of several animals on the farm, for instance, a student asked whether or not the Japanese government should abolish the death penalty. The level of engagement with the text that students displayed in formulating such questions and in sustaining meaningful dialogue during the group discussions that followed clearly indicate that they were developing their critical thinking skills and a noticeable improvement in the quality of questions and answers could be observed as the semester progressed. In addition to the small group discussion activities, students also asked questions in the more competitive and confrontational context of the cross-examination once this aspect of formal debate was introduced. While students generally found it more challenging to formulate clear and relevant questions and to answer such questions in this context, the regular debate practice sessions clearly contributed to their capacity to think critically, as they were required to persuasively construct and defend arguments. This required them to employ logical reasoning and to support their claims with evidence, in other words to practice critical thinking in the form of inference.

4.2 Critical thinking as creativity

A second aspect of critical thinking that can be stimulated through literature is creative thinking. The act of reading often leads the reader to suspend their disbelief and to immerse themselves in a different time, place or even an alternative reality, and in doing so stimulates the imagination. *Animal Farm* is set in England and, assuming that the timeline mirrors that of the events for which the story is an allegory, namely the 1917 Russian Revolution and the rise to power of Stalin in its aftermath, it takes place in the first half of the twentieth century. The cultural context of the setting and the time period is therefore far removed from the lived experiences of the typical first year university student in Japan. Furthermore, not only does the novel feature animals living and working on a farm, but the animals are highly anthropomorphous in their actions as well as in their aims, as Napoleon’s desire for world domination illustrates. Immersion in the story and identification with the characters require a great deal of imagination on the part of the reader. In Bloom’s taxonomy, creativity is identified as a higher order thinking skill and the act of creating something new is only possible through the use of the imagination. By encouraging students to imagine, literature can therefore be said to further develop students ability to think critically.

4.3 Critical thinking as objective thinking

Critical thinking often requires a high degree of objectivity, as a clear and accurate understanding of a situation is may only become possible once egocentric and sociocentric biases have been minimised through conscious effort. While fictional

literary narratives typically represent events from a subjective vantage point, the fact that the subjectivity portrayed is very likely to differ significantly from the reader's own subjective perspective means that they are likely to gain new insights through the act of reading and may even be persuaded through this activity to acknowledge alternative perspectives as equally legitimate to their own. A novel may, for example, put the reader in the shoes of a person from a different cultural background, gender, social class or, as in the case with *Animal Farm*, a different species altogether. As the reader engages with the work and identifies with its characters, they may gain insight into the unfamiliar situations and challenges faced by others, which could lead to the development of a stronger sense of empathy and tolerance of social differences. Reading about the subjective experiences of others can thus provide the reader with a more objective understanding of complex issues as they acquire fresh perspectives. Furthermore, due to the complexity of the subject matter with which literature often deals, it is able to provoke thought, discussion and debate and for these reasons may serve as a powerful pedagogical tool.

In the case of the discussion and debate course, many students clearly developed a strong empathy for the animal characters in the story and the issue of animal rights was raised on several occasions. As may be expected, much of the discussion and debate also focussed on the political and philosophical issues raised in the novella. While a lecture on the historical events that inspired Orwell's writing was deliberately left for late in the course so that students could feel at greater ease to independently look for meaning in the text without preconceptions, many of them nevertheless formulated discussion questions that required discussion participants to consider the merits and problems related to different aspects of Marxist thought. While such complex subjects were generally discussed using simple language, the fact that students actively and in many cases passionately talked about such issues in class testifies to the ability of literature to provoke, to inspire and to facilitate understanding within a language learning context.

4.4 Critical thinking as awareness

Literature can expose a reader to new ideas and perspectives that provide a clearer understanding of interpersonal hierarchies, thus increasing their awareness of sociopolitical power structures. This process contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, as higher order thinking is necessary to analyse and assess the information acquired as well as a greater or lesser degree of intellectual autonomy, depending on how far the reader's conclusions stray from the dominant cultural narratives surrounding the topic. Judging by the questions formulated by the Japanese students in the course and on the development of the group discussions in which they participated, students gained a greater understanding through their engagement with the text of how those in positions of strength may consolidate their power and manipulate ordinary people through the use of deceptive and manipulative tactics. Some students successfully linked these themes from the novella with current events in Japan and on the international stage, resulting in very interesting and pertinent discussion sessions that testify to the power of literature to encourage critical awareness.

4.5 Critical thinking as intellectual courage

The final way in which literature may encourage critical thinking, in the sense of intellectual autonomy, derives from its ability to inspire resistance against oppression and injustice. A literary narrative conveys to a reader the thoughts and experiences of others in unfamiliar situations, some of which can be unsettling or traumatic, and it is therefore not unusual for readers to become emotionally invested in events and to identify with the characters portrayed. When a reader becomes aware of a situation that conflicts with the values they hold, they may feel inspired to improve that situation. This may take the form of political activism, but the inspiration could also simply lead to a greater willingness to consider sensitive or taboo topics more openly and to voice one's concerns in discussion with others. A student may, for example, challenge a statement made by a teacher or share with their peers a genuine but unpopular opinion. Such acts of challenging authority figures or openly challenging questionable ideas or norms that are dominant within one's society could require a great deal of courage. As one arrives at new insights through reading, one may also find oneself questioning one's own ideas and beliefs, the reevaluation of which may well be a more challenging prospect than any confrontation with others.

Through the course of the semester, students asked and discussed several questions on topics that could be considered sensitive, for example the issue of social class in Japan. It has long been encouraged by the post-war education system in the country that the Japanese public view itself as a classless society (van Wolferen, 1989) and university students often become visibly uncomfortable when the subject of social stratification is broached. Orwell's fable-like narrative, however, made the topic much more accessible to students, most of who were willing to actively take part in open and productive discussions of such and other difficult issues after a few weeks into the semester. This illustrates how literature can empower readers to consider sensitive and complex topics critically and to then take an informed stance with greater confidence.

5. Conclusion

This paper considered five aspects of critical thinking that may be developed through engagement with literature. First and foremost, literature stimulates curiosity and encourages readers to ask questions. This fact may be exploited by educators through discussion and debate activities that will stimulate the development of critical thinking skills in students. By emotionally involving readers in a fictional world that may be very different from their own experience in terms of time, place or reality and requiring them to identify with characters whose circumstances might be completely unfamiliar, literature also stimulates the reader's imagination and encourages creativity, which is associated with higher order thinking. A third aspect of critical thinking that literature may help to develop is the ability to reason more objectively. As the reader is exposed to new perspectives on familiar issues, a more balanced understanding is achieved which may help to overcome egocentric and sociocentric biases. Additionally, literature may have the effect of increasing a reader's critical awareness of sociopolitical power hierarchies. This, in turn, may encourage and intellectually empower readers to take a stand against oppression and injustice.

The capacity for critical thinking is not only an essential requirement for participation in meaningful academic dialogue, but it is also becoming an increasingly important practical necessity for a successful career after graduation. Job roles are rapidly changing as technological progress results in many work processes becoming automated and as workplaces put greater emphasis on social diversity and inclusivity. Candidates who can demonstrate a high degree of adaptability, creativity in problem solving and empathy in socially diverse environments will be in high demand. Each of these attributes may be linked to an aspect of critical thinking which could be developed through engagement with literature. Despite the clear advantages of critical thinking skills to academic performance and employment prospects, however, educators are often reluctant to introduce sensitive issues such as social class or religion into classroom discussion activities for fear that some students may be offended by the opinions raised. This is perhaps natural, given the rising prominence of identity politics over recent years and the desire on the part of educational institutions in many parts of the world to appear more equitable and inclusive of diversity (“Free Speech at American Universities Is Under Threat”, 2017). However, to avoid or suppress free dialogue on important topical issues in the classroom is to do a disservice to all students, as this will rob them of the opportunity to learn how to discuss complex controversial issues with openness and civility in a comparatively safe environment. It will also mean that students will be less well equipped to participate in meaningful and informed dialogue once they graduate. While the challenges faced by educators and institutions are real and complex, literature presents an excellent opportunity to raise issues, or to encourage students to raise issues, that may otherwise not be discussed in class due to their sensitive nature, thus enabling students to engage in critical thinking and meaningful dialogue of the kind that benefits a well-functioning democracy and staves off totalitarian tendencies of the kind portrayed in Orwell’s cautionary tale.

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