



Research Article

The Survey of the Relationship between Reader-Response Literature Criticism and Content Interpretation

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Abstract: Different approaches have been applied to the criticism of literary works each manifesting special areas of literary genres, each highlighting the works' merits and demerits in its own way. This paper has surveyed the application of reader-response theory to the interpretation of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* novel and the possible impact it may have on the interpretation of the work and development of the interpretive power of to-be-teachers' students at undergraduate setting. Deploying the qualitative research design, the paper tried to answer the research questions of the amount of impact it had on the students' historical and literary knowledge of the country whose language teaching would be their future profession. The analysis of the collected reader responses revealed that this approach would be of ease of administration on the part of the instructors and would enhance the learners' power of interpretation, as well as their knowledge of historical events of the English language and literature.

Keywords: Reader-Response Criticism; Critical Thinking; Novel; Mocking Bird.

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INTRODUCTION

The English Literature learning and teaching in academic settings were once widespread, but now are limited to specialized centers and academic centers. In Iran, the beginning years of 20th century, the administration of this major was almost common in all academic centers. When it comes to the question of the administration of literature and literary genres, a greater lapse and gap can be seen and detected with this regard. There is a great zest and interest in language learning but the knowledge of literature and the hidden historical, political, and religious ideas behind it are highly missing as it has not been incorporated in the syllabus and highlighted by the instructors and lecturers in different settings. Recently, there has been a great attention paid to the incorporation of literature and literary genres for the purposes of different kinds from the sheer entertainment to the academic interpretation in academic settings. Unlike the rapid attention to the incorporation of the significance of using literature in TEFL, too, across the globe, in many countries like Iran the movement has just recently attracted the viewpoint of the curriculum developers and syllabus designers. These all add to the novelty of this major and the great call for research in this area in Iran. One major rationale behind the poor research in this area may be due to the poor familiarity of the instructors and lecturers with this area of the English language. Teaching the English language with some tinge of familiarity with the different characteristics of the country in which the English is spoken proves to be crucial for meaningful and authentic learning and teaching. In the BA curriculum on English language course for to-be-English teachers in Iran, four academic credit courses have been incorporated but the ways in which they are offered has proved to be of low academic output. This poor performance has put forwarded many hunches and hypotheses on the way of

researchers in this field. This qualitative endeavor serves the same purpose.

The Review of Related Literature

Recently, there has been a growing concern for the incorporation of literature and literature based materials in the curriculum as well as the possible impact it may have on critical thinking and interpretation powers. Nowadays, an international consensus is being formed that "education is more than just learning knowledge and thinking; it also involves learner's feelings, beliefs and the cultural environment of the classroom. However, the importance of teaching thinking and creativity is an integral element of education in the 21st century, since emotive aspects—feelings, emotional responses, intuitions, sensing—are central to critical thinking in adult life" (Vanicheva:2015, 657). Ideas of this type have encouraged the thoughtful and interested teachers to think of the incorporation of literature materials as a "necessary component of their English language teacher education curriculum" (Arikan, 2005; Küçükolu & Arikan, 2011). These intellectuals have come up with this idea that "literature helps students develop interpretative abilities" (Gangola, 2015: 19).

Alongside the many teaching methods' viewpoints, the students' view points, teachers may have been assigned different roles or viewed diversely, they are the students as the learners who better come up with the idea of effective teachers and influential materials. They are "encouraged to engage in spaces that welcomed counter-discourses of who they were supposed to be, thus allowing them to reposition themselves and reshape their identities" (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016: 86) as exposed to new materials and learning orientations. Personally, as a teacher

researcher, I based my procedure in the class on the line of paving the way for reader-response theory on this idea.

As Vanicheva (2015, 658) has summed it up, the term critical thinking has been entitled and defined differently including the development of logical reasoning abilities (Hallet,1984; Ruggiero,1975), the application of reflective judgment (Kitchener, 1986), the assumption hunting (Scriven, 1996), and the creation, use, and testing of meaning (Hullfish and Smith,1961). Regarding the population research, the empirical studies on critical thinking have targeted young adults, (King, Kitchener, and Wood, 1995) or college students (Perry, 1970, 1981).

This calls for the teachers to act as transformative intellectuals and reflective practitioners (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). They are expected to play the role of change agents and raise educational, social, cultural, and political consciousness in their learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). The achievement of such objectives would be impossible unless they exercise drastic alterations on the syllabus and curriculum. It is taken for granted that traditional curriculum designs have neglected the teaching of how to learn, but instead focused on imparting knowledge and skills (Hedge, 2000; Nagy & Hiebert, 2010). Hence, the present day needs and trends indicated that we would be in need of "more creativity and innovation with regards to the teaching procedures. Only then, language learning can become a fruitful and meaningful exercise. The method, approach, or technique used in the classroom should invoke the active participation by the learners in the teaching-learning process". (Vanisree & Charyulu, 2015: 40) Among the many factors involved, the one which is prioritized is critical thinking as the "internal factor which is believed to have a major influence on the process of learning and the way EFL learners deal with input and produce output" (Chamot, 1995). That is why "the significance of CT and teaching CT skills in EFL contexts has been confirmed by empirical evidence (Chapple & Curtis, 2000); however, the nature of CT and the way it interacts with other mental factors is yet to be investigated in different contexts" (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2015: 87). More research suggest that "more than 9 in ten (92.30%) of the participants perceive that reading literary texts, stories, and novels raises and shapes their critical awareness" (Öz & Efecioglu, 2015: 81) stabilizing the status of literature and literary materials as the impressive materials on the line of critical thinking enhancement as well as the enhancement of the interpretation strategies and abilities. The significance of the critical thinking has been advocated by many researchers. They have asserted that "CR, CT, and VLS have not only been among the popular topics in the TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) profession, but they have also been widely acknowledged as three metacognitive factors which substantially impact, influence, and shape the process of learning English as a second/foreign language (Connolly, 2000; Kabilan, 2000; Nation, 2001, 2004; Nation & Meara, 2002; Sarsani, 2006; Schmitt, 2000 as cited in their work). Accordingly, inspecting the relationship among EFL learners' AU, CT, CR, and VLS seems to be justified and even promising towards the elevation and furtherance of TEFL practice and teacher education" (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2015: 87).

The activation and formation of appropriate critical analysis, for sure, calls for great teachers, dynamic methods, and appropriately and richly selected materials. On the crucial role of teachers as the implementers of materials and administrators of curriculum, Nosratinia & Zaker (2017, 124) referring to the following researchers have stated that there is a "unanimous consensus that teachers' characteristics can affect learners' performance, especially their cognitive abilities and mental processes employed during learning. These mental peculiarities play a central role in the process of learning (Fahim & Zaker, 2014; Griffiths, 2007; Nosratinia, Abbasi, & Zaker, 2015; Nosratinia, Saveiy, & Zaker, 2014; Nosratinia, Shakoori, & Zaker, 2013; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2013, 2014, 2015; Nosratinia, Zaker, & Saveiy, 2015)".

The combination of the teacher roles as well as the role of materials is supposed to end in a kind of critical thinking which is the attribute of a person who "thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enables one to live and act successfully in it. Critical thinking enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society, and not be only a consumer of society's distractions". (Fahim & Nilforooshan, 2014: 136) The idea of the relationship between the reader-response theory and the critical theory is on the line of training future teachers who would be able to teacher language on the hinges of literature and would train students' with high level of critical thinking. Hence, in this research the operational definition of the critical thinking is defined as the nonnative to-be-English teachers' power of the interpretation of the texts, realizing and understanding its literary and historical information underlying the sentences and contents of the text.

Reader Response Criticism

In reader response theory viewpoint, from Rosenblatt (1978) view point, the text is considered 'as an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page as verbal symbols' (23). The interactive decoding of the meaning by the reader as well as the reader's activities on the text which negotiate the gist of the passage and cajole the meaning out of the written materials which upon this challenge that the meaning is recovered, reworded, and elaborated culminating in proper text understanding. Hence, one can turn to Jane P. Tomkins (taken from Lobo, 2013:14) who defines reader-response criticism as "not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area of investigation." To recapitulate reader response refers to the way a reader coded the meaning from his own viewpoint without taking into account any idea of where, based on what theories, or what logic the meaning is built. The application of such a school of criticism in the process of class management would be highly appealing and fascinating.

RESEARCH DESIGN & QUESTIONS

This study aimed to examine the use of literary texts (*to Kill a Mocking Bird* novel) in the BA courses at academic settings to come up with the effectiveness of this literary genre on the literary and historical background knowledge of the English language as the learners' critical thinking namely content interpretation variable. For this purpose, the following research questions were adopted:

- What influence does the use of authentic novel in academic courses have on literary analysis of the learners?
- In what ways, does the use of authentic novel in academic courses influence historical and literary background knowledge and awareness?

For the purpose of collecting data, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Since in the novel in the class where the research was carried out was integrated into the normal academic syllabus, the class followed its standard teaching sessions as well.

Participants

In this study, a total number of 24 to-be-teacher female students were attended to the demo lessons as an EFL classroom. They were all in the same intermediate classroom. They all voluntarily expressed their understanding and feelings in writing after the course was over. Besides, 3 EFL teachers were also interviewed. All the interviews were audio-recorded. Duration of the students' interviews was between 5-10 minutes while teachers had interviews between 20-25 minutes. All the students and the teachers were interviewed individually.

Characteristics of the Participants

The participants in the academic classroom were twenty four Iranian to-be-teacher students with Lorish, Kurdish, and Arabic nationalities originally who were studying at Imam Jafar Farhangian University campus. They were all female sophomores, aged 18-25. They were at the first year of academic instruction to receive B A and become English teachers in the future. They did not have that much familiarity with the English literature, critical thinking process, historically and literarily hidden meanings of the text and the roles' of academic materials as well as their significance on the teaching procedure.

Prior to the Fieldwork

A week before starting to use a literary text in EFL classroom, all the students in the classroom were provided with the novel and the way it was supposed to be covered during the term as well as the development of the types of intellectual activities that were supposed to be done in the class. They all asserted right at the beginning of the term that they were not ready and equipped with this sort of work handling which proved the homogeneity of the groups for the study. The aim of informing the students as participants of the study was to increase the validity of this research.

All of the 24 students agreed to participate in the short interviews done for this purpose. During the interviewing process, semi-structured questions were asked by the researcher. The interviewer also recorded these interview sessions and later on transcribed the participants' answers to the questions. The participants were also informed to feel free to talk about their feelings, ideas, or perspectives in order to get objective answers from them.

During The Fieldwork

The literary lessons were carried out every Monday for 90 minutes during 8 weeks. In this process, the teacher as a researcher presented one chapter from the novel to the students. Having the students' full participation through activities like reading, discussing, clarifying the themes, memorizing the characters' names, pinpointing different elements of the story, and discovering the mode of the novel were part of the preparatory actions taken on by the researcher to enable the learners' improvement of their critical thinking on achieving literary knowledge as well as understanding historical background of different types regarding the novel. Alongside this activity, the regular reading course was in progress. The class time was mainly allocated to discussing over the major brainstorming ideas and similar activities. The major portion of the text was covered by the students as an outside of the class activity. The main text was the novel *to kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee.

Analysis and Discussion

The novel *to kill a Mocking Bird* is used in some countries as a teaching material due to its hidden and crying out concepts and principles conveyed through this novel. Many mega themes have been captured through this novel whose conveyance would be roughly out of questions for the students to learn and understand. Texts like this act as a linking bridge between the past and the present and, for sure, the future. For example, to teach the learners how they can act properly in the society, how can they understand social immoralities and the way they can resist or defend it, how paternalism can be viewed as a strong social driving force, and many more can be easily interpreted and projected upon the minds of the learners through the analysis of the novel. It can even be deployed for more delicate constructs like personality and psychological traits; they can be interpreted delicately through the elements of novel in Harper Lee's work. To teach the learners to have a determined attitude and personality, the instructor can maneuver over Atticus Finch the protagonist of the novel. He is considered as "having integrated identities. First, self-integration is a product of social privilege. Only people at the

top of a social hierarchy like Maycomb's enjoy the luxury of being the same person wherever they go.

Second, we sometimes integrate our identities by centering our lives solidly on a particular value or set of values" (Ayers, 2010: 3). Another to the point reference can be the case of highlighting feminism and the way the instructor can draw attention to the nature of the construct and the way it can be put across the learner and involve them in the real process of decoding the activity

Activity One

Examining Scout's relationship with Aunt Alexandra

Divide the students into small groups, and have each read (or reread) one or more of these chapters: 9, 13, 14, 23, and 29. Have them identify and discuss comments made by Scout, Atticus, Jem, Calpurnia, and Aunt Alexandra that illustrate the role that Aunt Alexandra plays in Scout's development as a Southern young lady. Have each group present its list and explanations to the class.

Points To Consider For Each Comment:

- What is the relationship between Aunt Alexandra and Scout when they are first introduced?
- What does each comment mean with respect to the proper attitudes and actions of a Southern young lady?
- What is the significance of each comment to Scout? To Aunt Alexandra?
- What support do Aunt Alexandra and Scout receive from other characters in the book?
- How does Scout respond to the comment?
- What does Aunt Alexandra see as her role in Scout's life?
- What does Scout think of Aunt Alexandra?
- Has their relationship changed since they were first introduced? (Beyers, 2007: 17)

The above sample well reveals the power of the task and the questions in brainstorming the learners and the way they can build the analytical powers of the learners on the work and its themes. The tasks and questions penetrate into the minds of the learners and pave the way for fathoming higher level generalizations regarding the society and its norms, humanity and its status, and the world and the global trends. In this way, Lee establishes a historical context with which her audience can see the necessity for moral lessons. Not only does Lee set the mood with the Great Depression she also uses an attitude to enhance her message. African Americans in the South frequently faced false allegations, and juries, because of biases, wrongfully convicted (Stilther, 2002, 7)

RESULTS

Critical thinking and higher mental information processing as well as the synthesis and evaluation levels of learning levels determined by Bloom are not that much incorporated in academic settings; therefore, falls the learners in the habit of parrot fashion learning which is highly condemned academically. The application of literary criticism approaches to literary works as class activity and on the line of teaching reading skill and other cultural, literary, and social background knowledge and codes of different types would be fulfilled in this way. This research revealed the creative use of literature and the critical thinking techniques cajoled through the deployment of reader response criticism approach worked highly successful with the students' command of reading comprehension and above all the development of learning techniques for the attainment of hidden meaning of the passage, interpretive powers, and technical knowledge and schemata formation on the learned and studied materials. This indirectly paved the way for the to be teacher English language learner to implicitly form a sort of what can be known as cultural conceptualization following the four procedures mentioned by Sharifian as cultural cognition, cultural schemata, cultural categorization, and cultural metaphor establishment. Through the analysis of the interviews and the

cajoled analytical answers, the researcher noticed the formation of the above technical and academic endeavor occurring the mind the high impact of the deployment of the reader response criticism approach in their language learning process. The awareness of the real social phenomenon of other cultures and nations not only serves the pupae of language learning but also serves the absorption of meta linguistic information as well an example of which can be a reference to Social Reconstructionist who assert that the only way to save their society – which is under threat due to certain problems stemming from the injustices related to race, gender, class, etc. – is to reconstruct it by means of education because the means for social reconstruction could be found in the school curricula which is expected to inspire the attitudes, beliefs and principles of students (Schiro, 2009 taken from Bakir, 2015: 3)

Teachers' assertions revealed the fact that they did find the procedure highly motivating, creative, and fascinating for the students. The educational behavior, they noticed revealed the efficiency of treatment which was the implementation of the literary criticism under discussion. The kind of mental processing they came up with was roughly the implementation of what was claimed in the other research findings. The procedure proved to be working well with the learners' command of grasping the text and developing interpretive abilities during the class as they observed the students' behavior and their tact in dealing with the exercises and the text. They found the handling the text and introducing the concepts highly easy and operational proving to be easier than designing any task or even implementing any task. To them, introducing such a procedure changed the process of teaching easier on their part, and highly initiative and creative on the part of the learners. Something which they unanimously agreed upon was their realization of the fact that the approach was interesting, fun, challenging and welcoming from the viewpoints of the learners.

CONCLUSION

Interdisciplinary research has recently attained a great fortune in academic centers. In the past, literature was studied for the main two purposes of interpretation or entertainment; recently, it is being deployed for many other purposes like enhancing critical thinking procedures, improving major English language skills, language learning and teaching at different proficiency levels. This research focused on the impact of literature on the English major skill, that is, reading comprehension as well as discourse understanding. Literature, itself has been viewed and conveyed differently through different techniques and procedures the prominent and updated one is reader response theory which primarily dealt with the interpretation of literary works on the line of the work's interpretation and analysis. A more practical application of this school of criticism has been its deployment for the purpose of enhancement of the English language learners' tact in interpreting the text and the ultimate aim of reading comprehension strategies. This interdisciplinary application of literary criticism approaches, her the reader response theory, paves the way for the better task and content based approaches, more authentic ways of language learning, and finally more interesting and joyful way of teaching and learning the English language. In case, we attain the ability to teach and learn languages through their literatures, we would facilitate and make the best academic bed for native or near native like language teaching and learning. This research has been carried out to pave the way for the administration of the new and humane themes like what Stiltner (2002: 6) has come up with that "reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* provides its audience with a basic moral code by which to live and encounter individuals who appear different or make choices unlike those

made by the mainstream populace. Therefore, this novel becomes part of our moral culture; regardless of age, people learn from the moral codes taught by defense attorney Atticus Finch, his children, and his community". Learning language through literature thoughtfully can serve different training purposes whose research, for sure, would reveal great findings.

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