

Full Length Research Paper

Critical thinking through translated literature in the EFL Omani Class

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Received 13 July, 2014; Accepted 24 December, 2014

This paper rests on the hypothesis that critical thinking could be fostered through the use of translated literature in the EFL tertiary classroom. Narrative research methodology is used in the study, with twenty Advanced Academic Writing Course, English for English Specialists Credit program of Omani students of the Language Center, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. While responding through reflective journal entries to the given prompts about the text, *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* (an English translation of TayebSalih's Arabic story), students forge connections between the text and real life. This qualitative research enquiry unfolds Omani students' critical thoughts and viewpoints while using Middle East literature in translation in the EFL classroom.

Key words: Critical thinking, language learning, literature, reflection, Doum tree, narrative methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has emerged as one of the most essential 21st century skills, a primary goal and a necessary outcome of education. Prime importance is given to developing critical thinking skills in students in all aspects of education at the international level. Critical thinking is proposed as the commonly identified aim of education as it enhances student's employability in the workplace. It is one of the most essential skills of the century that is central to effective learning, as it develops not just the cognitive skills but also involves development of attitudes and values, thus, furthering not just cognitive development but also personal and social development. Critical thinkers are effective communicators who are

open minded about issues presented to them, and have problem solving and decision-making skills. As critical thinking involves the use of different cognitive skills, it is not acquired automatically and needs to be developed consciously. Developing critical thinking skill is an important area of teaching as it makes students self-motivated and autonomous, able to apply their acquired modes of enquiry inside and outside the classroom.

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking has been defined variously. Paul and

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Elder (2001) define critical thinking as a mode of thinking about any subject, content, or problem. "Critical thinking is the most cross-curricular and generic of skill constructs. It takes place in mathematics and science, and it takes place in humanities, arts and social sciences. Critical thinking underpins literacy and numeracy" (McCurry, 2013).

There are three perspectives connected to critical thinking. The philosophical aspect is based on the 'hypothetical critical thinker' in the ideal world, while the cognitive aspect is related to how people actually think and is therefore defined by the types of actions or behaviors that critical thinkers can do. The third aspect, which is educational, is based on Bloom's taxonomy of what learners do or need to do. Critical thinking can be divided into two main aspects which are skills and disposition. Skills constitute the ability of synthesis, evaluation, application and inference while disposition comprises attitude or habits of mind in the form of open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, flexibility, the desire to be well informed and respect for the viewpoints of others.

The American Academy of Sciences in the US, called *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* (2013) aims to fuse the '3Rs and 4 Cs (Critical thinking and problem solving, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity and innovation)' as most essential skills 'to compete in a global economy that demands innovation'. To think critically is to go beyond a mere accumulation of factual information to conceptual understanding and understanding of the interrelatedness of all concepts, old and new. In the technology age, where information is so easily available, the mere recall of basic, factual information is less important than the ability to critically analyze the great amount of information that is so readily available. "Critical thinking includes the component skills of analyzing arguments, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decisions or solving problems" (Lai, 2011). But there has been a fine distinction drawn between problem solving and critical thinking. A commonly accepted distinction is that problem solving is associated with Math and Science disciplines. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is "rooted in behavioral sciences" and is a broader term describing reasoning in an open-ended manner, with an unlimited number of solutions. In real life, however, problem solving and critical thinking are used interchangeably.

According to Capper, some of the principles for good teaching and learning are that the curriculum should focus on central ideas and aim for a deep understanding of those central ideas rather than a wide coverage of different topics.

It should "aim to promote active learning by having students process and organize ideas and use knowledge in real-life situations" (1996). These aims are central to

fostering critical thinking in learners.

CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH LITERATURE

The ability of literature to engage a learner affectively, cognitively, linguistically and socially makes it the most appropriate didactic resource for language learning and critical thinking.

Genres like novels, stories and drama present learners with a microcosm of the real world in which characters, setting, and action presented appear to be a replication of the real world. When learners use a literary text to exercise skills of rational analysis, synthesis, inference, interpretation, evaluation, logical reasoning and application, thinking is stimulated. Literature reading is a complex process that requires readers to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences (schema) or memories to construct meaning of the text. Through inferences, deductions, multiple perspectives and possible interpretations, literature stimulates reflection and promotes critical thinking. Literature readers need to be able to differentiate facts from opinions, understand the literal or implied meaning and the narrator's tone, locate details related to the issues discussed, find out the connections between the events or actions, understand different points of view about issues in the reading, make moral reasoning and fair-grounded judgments, and apply what they have learned from this process to the real world. This helps in personalizing of information. Hence, as Langer (1990) observes, "They (learners) sometimes go beyond the particular situation, using their own lives, those of others they know, or a human situation in general. In doing so, they open possibilities for meaning, leaving room for alternative interpretations and changing points of view. The reading of literature, then, involves a great deal of critical thought." Thus, when students are engaged in reading, interpreting and evaluating literary texts, their thinking is stimulated. But the question that arises is which type of texts maximizes development of critical thinking skills?

Rationale for using translated literature in the EFL classroom

Readers of literature respond to texts differently depending on their "cultural distance". Learners (students) approach a text with perceptions from their own culture and cultural norms and beliefs mark their identity as insiders. When the text and the reader culture match, involvement is optimized (Fish, 1980). Using stories from students' own culture lowers learners' "affective filter"; it lowers learners' defensiveness and sense of alienation, and allows learning to happen easily (Krashen, 1986). Campbell (1987) supports this view by stating that same

culture stories enhance the learners' self-esteem and is, therefore, conducive to better learning. When cultures match and learning is optimized, critical thinking too reaches a peak. To test this hypothesis, *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* (an English translation of Tayeb Salih's Arabic story) was used in the EFL Omani classroom with the tertiary level English for English Advanced Academic Writing Course students at the Language Center of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

Context of the study

LANC 1120 is an Advanced Academic Writing Course offered by English Specialists tertiary level Omani students at the Language Center of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Some of the students belong to Education Major, who later on qualify to become English Language teachers, while others belong to Arts major and later on become English language translators.

The writing class meets six hours each week for fifteen weeks and the course has a three-hour credit. In the first half of the semester they study a novel (British Literature) or a collection of two short stories (Literature in translation) and in the second half they study a play (British Literature). Assessment is based on written analytical essays on the literary texts they study. In the process of writing text based analytical essays, students are required to exercise skills of planning, organizing, synthesizing, seeking and providing textual evidence for their assertions through textual quotes, interpreting events and making inferences about a character's actions or the plot events. In short, they are required to practice all the skills needed for stimulation of critical thinking. However, many students end up writing plot summaries or mere narration of plot events. The reason being, lack of critical thinking skills because of their prior learning experience, which may be based on rote learning. Also, students who are more attuned to a collective society where individuality in thought and action is not valued as much as in western societies may face difficulty in thinking critically (Tung and Chang). Therefore, there is a need to teach critical thinking explicitly.

The pedagogy essential for teaching critical thinking is to make teaching more student centered than content – focused, to engage students actively and to place an emphasis on higher order-thinking skills rather than facts and basic skills. Use of open-ended tasks, real-world or authentic problem contexts that require students to go beyond recalling or restating previously learned information would stimulate thinking. Some strategies which foster critical thinking are higher-order questioning, active learning, cooperative learning, modelling thinking, real-life application of knowledge, problem solving and development of a questioning stance (McCurry, 2013). As analytical academic essay writing is more structured

and does not provide the outlet for free expression of personalized thoughts, reflective journal writing was introduced.

NARRATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Students were asked to keep a journal where they write freely expressing ideas to given prompts or on topics that the text has set them to think reflectively on. Reflection is a mental process, a contemplation or exploration of an event. Genuine reflection reveals anxieties, uncertainties, weaknesses as well as strengths. When learners reflect on anything, they revisit it and explore it to find a new meaning in the experience or the event. While reflecting, learners might question their own assumptions, rework the issue on hand and thus look at matters more critically. It is useful to reflect to the future as well as to reflect back on an experience or event. Thus, reflection and critical thinking have very close links. Some of the journal entries were done in class (depending on the time available) and others were done as homework. This article illustrates how Tayeb Salih's short story, *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid*, was used as a springboard to stimulate reflection and critical thinking through application of textual concepts to real life. Some sample student responses are selected from the narrative writing to record the critical thoughts and viewpoints of Omani students using Middle East literature in translation in the EFL classroom.

The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid

Tayeb Salih's *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* is a short story which is set in a remote, rural village in Northern Sudan in the first years of home rule. The narrator is an old man who dips into the collective memory of the village through the voice of the twelve different narrators and gives the impression of recall of the oral history of the village. The narrative is heard by a young visitor to the village. The old man recalls the struggle of the villagers in their battle between tradition and spirituality versus modernization and progress. The villagers of Wad Hamid refuse the government's attempts to modernize their village by introducing an agricultural scheme, a water pump and a stopping place for the steamer. They refuse all this because the doum tree is in the danger of being cut and the tomb of Wad Hamid would be removed from under the tree. The doum tree is a symbol of tradition, beauty, hope, protection, fertility and such an integral part of their daily life that they dream of it at night and cannot think of a life without it. They are willing to put up with any difficulty just to preserve the tree and the tomb of Wad Hamid which is under it. The clash between tradition and modernity is the central theme in Salih's *Doum tree*.

FINDINGS

Question prompts with critical thinking functions and selected reflections

1) *Question prompt. Identify the metaphors, similes, irony and other literary devices in the story.*
Function: While evaluating the language and literary aspects of the text, learners are deeply engaged and adopt a judgmental attitude towards it which stimulates critical thinking.

Selected responses

a) *Example of use of simile in the text:* The Doum tree “look at its full, sturdy trunk, like the form of a comely woman, at the branches on high resembling the mane of a frolicsome steed!” like some mythical eagle spreading its wings over the village and everyone in it”.

Journal Reflection: The physical form of the tree and its fertility aspect compared to that of a woman seems appropriate. The movement of the branches compared to the mane of a steed brings to my mind stables and race horses in my village.

b) *Example of use of simile in the text:* “he climbed a hill and on reaching the top he saw a dense forest of doum trees with a single tall tree in the center which in comparison with the others looked like a camel amid a herd of goats”.

Journal Reflection: I can actually visualize the scene of a towering camel surrounded by goats. This is such a familiar image to me from my everyday life!

c) *Example of the use of irony as a literary device:* The narrator talks of the horse flies and says “ they have a special love for man and no sooner smell him out than they attach themselves to him.”

Journal Reflection: This again, is such a familiar scene in my village, the menace of the flies which literally attach themselves to people!

d) *Example of the use of irony as a literary device:* The preacher who preaches on “ the delights of the primitive life”, runs away from the village unable to withstand the bites of the flies and other hardships that the villagers uncomplainingly put up with.

Journal Reflection: I have come across many such “preach but do not practice” type of preachers.

2) *Question prompt: According to himself, what was the Speaker like as a young man? Do you believe in him? Do you find that, as a narrator, he exaggerates at any point in the story?*

Function: Critical thinking suggests not readily accepting any given viewpoints. It means asking questions about narration, portrayal of characters, and not accepting anything at face value.

Journal Reflection: The old man is no doubt exaggerating when he says “In my young days I would breakfast off half a sheep, drink the milk of five cows for supper, and be able to lift a sack of dates with one hand.” I don’t

believe that anyone could eat so much and not have digestive problems or cholesterol issues! Description of horse-flies as enormous flies “the size of young sheep” also sounds rather exaggerated! Sand flies are called “devils”, which I think is an appropriate description of the menace of these flies.

3) *Question prompt: Why does the man in charge of the government scheme speak like this: “Doum tree stay-scheme no stay!” What does the writer want us to understand from this?*

Function: When students interpret some action in the story, they focus not just on the explicit meaning but delve deep into the implied meaning.

Journal Reflection: The event occurs during the time of foreign rule and the district governor speaks in broken Arabic because of his unfamiliarity with the language. There is a hint that the villagers find his broken language funny.

4) *Question prompt: How does the text connect you to real life?*

Function: Appreciating the text as a reflection of events in real life and becoming aware of the ways in which literature connects us to real life experience, fosters application of knowledge gained to learners’ own lives.

Journal Reflections

1) The village reminds me of Oman in the past, with no electricity, no asphalt roads, no schools and no hospitals. Life indeed must have been hard for my grandparents. No wonder the narrator’s son, in the story, runs away to the neighboring city to enroll in school. Probably I too would have done the same.

2) The old man speaks of how people in his village sleep at sunset and wake up with the rising of the sun just like the beasts and the birds. During my grandfather’s time this is how life was in Oman because there were only oil lamps. But now, people stay up late at nights and wake up when nearly half of the day is over, during weekends and holidays! Life style has changed so much from the past to the present.

3) The old man in the story addresses the young man as ‘my son’ this is so truly an Omani practice. When I read the words “Sheik” in an English text, for a moment I did not understand the word then I realized what it was and felt a kind of happiness and closeness to the text and the story.

4) The behavior of the villagers at the tomb of Wad Hamid is indeed shocking! How could they venerate a dead holy man and ask favors from him and promise offerings in return for the favors? This is like idol worship.

I thought such practices were put an end to with the advent of Islam but realize, while reading on internet, that some Muslims in Morocco still do all that is described in the story. On further discussion, I came to know that even in some Asian countries some dead holy men are worshipped as Patron Saints and people seek relief and protection from them. I even happened to watch a movie song sequence where this was done. Very strange practices indeed!

1) *Question prompt: The villagers in Salih's doum tree struggle to preserve their traditional identity. Do you think tradition and modernity are at war with each other in real life? If you were to choose between the two, what would you choose? Why?*

Function: Making decisions or problem solving require deep thought, logic and reasoning. Hypothetically, when students try to apply the conflict portrayed in the text to their real life, they move beyond factual information given in the text to application of concepts to real life. They begin to express their own ideas about life, relationships, values, beliefs and apply what they have learnt in the classroom to what they see and believe outside the classroom.

Journal Reflections

1) Tradition versus modernity is a confusing topic for me, but if I have to choose between them, I will choose some of modernity and some of tradition. It is a fact that modernity has improved our life and made it easier to live by technology, automobiles etc. but some morality is also lost because of modernity. I will keep my tradition to follow morality but will have some of modernity which does not affect my traditional behavior.

2) Tradition is when a man wears a *dishdasha* (traditional male clothing in Oman) and goes to his job. It is when a student uses only books to study. Modernity is a world with technology "a small village". I will choose tradition though modernity offers big help and comfort. Who knows, modernity may bring about the destruction of the world. Tradition is doing the same that forefathers did, like singing same old traditional songs in weddings. Modernity is everything that is new, like technology, architecture, life style. I prefer modernity for the comfort and ease it brings.

3) I'd rather be with tradition than with this scary era of speed which brings so much pressure with all its modernistic devices using which one misses the "real" life while living in virtual world! It is the cause of so many broken relationships, compared to the past.

4) In the past, Omani people lived in simple houses made of mud and palm leaves. They lived by fishing and collecting wood. The family consisted of over 14 children or more. Drinking water from the *falaj*, (water channel in Oman) they lived a healthy and happy life, close to

nature. Simple, humble people, lived with friendship and helpful nature. Now, family size has shrunk, water comes in taps at home, there is air conditioning, cars, electricity and so on but where is the peace, the happiness?

5) Tradition is the root of modernity and just as we cannot imagine a tree to exist without a root, modernity cannot exist without tradition. Tradition and modernity are complementary, so I do not believe in one of them to the exclusion of the other.

6) Modernity is my choice because through modernity I can keep tradition. Following tradition means there is no place for modernity but if we follow modernity, we can use modern techniques to spread the valuable collective ideas of our forefathers.

7) The conflict between tradition and modernity need not impact negatively on life. We can balance by keeping traditions which express our identity correctly but at the same time we have to leave harmful traditions because it will hinder us from living in a better way. Moreover, we have to take positive things from modernity and leave the negative things. Actually, this balance requires the old people and young people to understand the ideas and thoughts of themselves and to cooperate in order to preserve the heritage and to benefit from progress at the same time.

8) A good management of modernity is the one that preserves our heritage and culture, and adds new good things to our life from other cultures.

DISCUSSION

Prompt 1: When students search for similes and metaphors used by a writer, they are actively and deeply engaged with the text in an evaluator mode and adopt a judgmental attitude towards the literary work. When they look for other literary devices, like irony or foreshadow, they indulge in skills of analysis and interpretation which are activities that sharpen their critical sensibilities. In the recorded responses, students are making an objective assessment of the language and literary aspects of the text and responding to plot events in a critical manner when they point out that the preacher who preaches on "the delights of primitive life" is unable to practice what he preaches and that the resilience of the villagers is stronger than the preacher's empty preaching. Also, when focusing on the choice of words of the writer describing the horse flies as "having a special love for man" how they "attach themselves to him" "no sooner than they smell him", their critical thinking is tempered with amusement. Thus, the activity promotes a critical outlook and stimulates critical thinking. Also, the text evokes familiar scenes from their daily lives as the setting of the story and their own life seem so close.

Prompt 2: The students' response that they find exaggeration in the words of the narrator when he speaks

of his extraordinary appetite and strength, shows their questioning stance and ability to filter any given information through a critical lens. They evaluate the eating habits of the narrator with their own knowledge of balanced nutrition and remark that he is likely to suffer from health issues.

Prompt 3: The interpretive response to the language used by the district commissioner's man ("Doom tree stay-scheme no stay") shows that they are able to look not just at the explicit meaning but delve deep into the text to find the implicit meaning. While doing so, they connect the event with the political issues of the time and also the behavioral patterns of the villagers.

Prompt 4: This shows their ability to extend the plot events to issues beyond the immediate action in the story. The reflective prompts enable students to embark on the mental process of contemplation which is an explorative revisiting of their assumptions, their responses to the text, and their own life experience. It enables them to forge links between the text and their own life experience, past as well as present, and helps in looking forward to life ahead. Students compare the life situation of the villagers to life in Oman before 1970, when there was no electricity, schools or hospitals in their own country. They reflect on the life of their forefathers and comment on the challenges faced by them and feel that they would be unable to withstand such a life and would probably run away, just like the narrator's son, to seek education. In this response, reflection fosters critical thinking coupled with empathy. The response dealing with the life style of the villagers in their sleeping habits, provokes an active reflection of the life style during the time of their forefathers in comparison to the present.

The response dealing with the "strange practices" of the villagers in deification of a patron saint, shows that they move beyond the practices of the villagers who pray to Wad Hamid, to investigate, through internet search, if such practices are being followed by people in other countries, and report that some Muslims in Morocco do it. They further connect this practice to what they see in an Asian film song sequence. Films and film watching is not in vogue in Oman and seeing a foreign culture movie is further remote. The student has really thought deeply about the matter to investigate it to such an extent. So, the application of some new concept that they gained from the story is widened in its application through the use of internet technology and film media.

Prompt 5: In the application of the textual conflict to their own lives and their decision making and problem –solving stances, some respondents voice difficulty in making the right choice and feel that modernity will bring along with it immorality. A few respondents seem to give more importance to the outward, superficial aspects of tradition, like clothing and customs like traditional rituals

of songs. Some respondents openly support tradition, while others seem to embrace modernity whole heartedly. More balanced respondents view the positive and negative aspects of both and would like a fine synthesis of both in their lives. No response is totally right or fully wrong for literature, which reflects life, is full of multiple perspectives and each perspective is but a different angle of seeing. What matters is whether one has a perspective or not and what convincing justification one can provide for holding that stance. Critical thinking too suggests divergent thinking in the form of multiple perspectives and truths.

Conclusion

Literature and its themes, no doubt, are universal but culture does play a major role in assimilation of concepts in a more effective way. In the use of same culture stories, cultural similarity and peculiarity makes the theme more powerful and meaningful while applying it to one's life. While interacting to the story, *The Doom Tree of Wad Hamid*, learners exhibited deep engagement, active involvement, reflective exploration of the reading and application of textual concepts not only to their own lives but also to their grand fathers' time, in a wider and more authentic manner than they would have done had the story been from a different culture. They were able to dip into the past and draw comparisons to the present. Critical thinking suggests not mere understanding of information given in the text but to move beyond that to interlinking concepts and finding meaning through personalization. Therefore, use of same culture story in the EFL classroom confers additional benefits to the use of literature in the classroom. Thus, a beginning was made to promote critical thinking in a more lasting manner through use of Tayeb Salih's short story in translation, *The Doom Tree of Wad Hamid*. It needs to be kept in mind that acquiring the skill of critical thinking gets better with practice, takes time to internalize and is a life-long endeavor.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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