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Critical Thinking for Literature Teachers at University Level Academic Setting In Pakistan

Asim Karim

Abstract

A great body of literature establishes the effectiveness of literature in enhancing EFL competency and cross culturalism. But this strategy can work well in a typical learner centered class room environment and innovation in teachers' attitude to teaching literature. The study argues that teachers of literature at university level academic setting if trained adequately are in a significant position to use literary text to achieve varied objectives of developing cross cultural understanding and communicative language competency of the learners. Critical thinking skills it is contended if interfused in teachers' instructional methodology will develop their potential to use literary text for diverse purposes of achieving cross culturalism and enhancement of communicative language competence.

Cross Cultural awareness in particular has assumed greater significance in the face of strained ties and micro level conflicts between the western/American world and the Muslim world. In view of this situation, there is every possibility that greater the disparity and dissimilarity between the cultures, higher would be the possibility of cultural shock and cultural antipathy.

Key words: Critical Thinking; Cross culturalism. Personality development; Communicative language Teaching

1. Introduction

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English Literature has remained one of the major parts of TESOL/TEFL practices all over the world. Van (2009) argues that studying literature in the EFL classroom is advantageous as it provides meaningful contexts; involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose; it appeals to imagination and enhances creativity ; develop cross cultural awareness; encourages critical thinking; and is in line with Communicative Language Teaching principles. Mackay (2001) highlights the use of literary text for development of integrated language skills of reading, writing listening and speaking. Several other studies high light the significance of literary text s for various objectives in EFL context (Maley 1999; Lazar, 1993; Collie and Slatter, 1994; Carter and Long, 1996; Pison, 2000).This study argues that critical thinking techniques can be effectively utilized at higher level academic setting in Pakistan to promote cross cultural awareness and interactive/communicative language competence (Richards and Rodgers 2001, Celce-Murcia 2001).

Culture has been defined as a “complex frame of references that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community” (Ting-Toomy 1999 qtd. in Medina Lopez 2010, 1). Cross culturalism on the other hand as Oxford (1996) defines “deals with a dynamic system of understanding across cultures and sub cultures. Comprehending cross cultural similarities and differences involves carefully considering crucial aspects of cultures such as concepts of time, personal space, body language, worship, relationship, hatred, prejudice, love and respect . . .(x). Medina Lopez (2010) and Oxford (1996) also refer to “cultural iceberg” i.e. certain beliefs, perceptions, and values are below the surface of consciousness (in the submerged part of the iceberg) which often influence how people learn.

In our developing society, English literature can serve as a powerful medium of facilitating learner-centered paradigm shift for creative and critical thinking nourishment, increasing language competency and interculturality simultaneously. It however needs

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appropriate training and experience to use literature for all these objectives in our rigid and traditions based community. In literature class at higher education level academic setting aestheticism permeate literary interpretation and analysis. But in non-native contexts, western and American Literature provides a precious source of cross cultural understanding, cultural awareness and appreciation of diversity in human thoughts and reflection. This cultural aspect is inclusive of all such factors history, religion, social and personal relationships, habits, thoughts and thinking pattern, social values, moral codes, arts, and so on and so forth. It can not however, be presumed that literary texts always lead to create cross cultural awareness/cultural understanding. The unconscious aspect of culture ruled by certain beliefs, customs, perceptions influence how we look upon other culture and is not always condescending to opposing and different cultural values particularly if the disparity between the cultures is paramount. On the contrary greater the disparity/dissimilarity between the cultures, higher would be the possibility of cultural shock and cultural antipathy than cultural awareness. For egalitarian global relation, cross culturalism must be based on empathy, understanding of differences and values and accommodating other's perspective objectively, and dispassionately. In the wake of cold war and 9/11 2001, there has been steep rise in misconceptions about cultures and living styles, and cultural disparities in this situation are liable to set these diverse cultures further apart and give rise to increased hostility at the micro levels in both cultures (Obeidat and Shalabi 2011). Traditional teacher centered methods so deeply interfused in our class room practices because of teacher centric value system and one sided discourse pattern cannot fulfill ideal of proper cultural awareness. It discourages social constructivism, creates misperception and leads to stereotypical negative behavior to the target culture. For getting desirable benefits from the use of literature in our set up, the teachers of literature need to be trained to use this powerful tool effectively for developing global perspective and enlightened personality. Much attention needs to be paid to integrate literature, language and interculturality and changes needs to be articulated and applied systematically in the development of curricula and teaching material that will strengthen literature effectiveness for multi purpose in the present day changing realities.

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A typical MA English class in Gomal University where the author has taught English literature for over fifteen years is comprised of lower and middle class students with deep seated attachment to traditions, beliefs, and religion in a rigid patriarchal social order. Of these 30 to- 40% belong to adjacent tribal regions which border Afghanistan and are deep in turmoil due to ongoing war on terrorism in and around the region. People of these areas are known for hard line stance on traditions, religion and patriarchal social order. It is really a hard task for the teacher of literature to approach and teach modern, liberal western/American literature without ignoring the typical mindset of the students, cultural factors of the young university graduates. Modern European and American literature address certain key areas in morality, ethics, religious belief (Karim and Butt 2011), human relationship, life and personality liberally that clearly points out the existing disparity in cultures and, to approach it as it is could give rise to negative, sentiments against European/American liberal arts, and/or cause failure to create desirable cross cultural awareness. The most disturbing phenomenon in the modern literature is related to liberal views on ethics, religion and the existence of metaphysical phenomenon. More than those texts like O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Plath's "Daddy" create a kind of cultural shock for the majority of students who are exposed to literary text with multiple interpretations for the first time in their higher education. Their previous interaction with the literary text had remained confined to simple poems and essays for Reading purposes and comprehension type post-reading activities. Plath's poems are symbolic, with intensity of feelings and meanings. They are essentially modern in nature and raise serious question on various issues that have relevance to thoughts, beliefs and emotions and are replete with deeper connotations that diverge into such disparate areas as God, religion, sexuality, psychoanalysis, psychological complexes as explained by Freud (Electra and oedipal) , rejection of religion and even God. O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey, Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude* likewise bring forth critical issues in modern life openly and boldly on the stage (Karim and Butt 2011) and reflect deep ethical crises in modern man's life. There is every possibility that greater and wider diversity in cultures as exhibited in

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thoughts and narratives could increase polarizations among the followers of different cultures and pave the way for intellectual, sociological and emotive conflicts at different levels in the society. Importantly infiltration of the conflicts into micro levels in the society. Particularly among the youth it is likely to accentuate the polarization between peoples and may have negative impact on people to people contacts. For a class with traditions-oriented approach, these texts could lead to create cultural shock and not cultural understanding and awareness.

Second university graduates in our context do not show promising aptitude to speaking and interactive discussions. They are by nature shy. That means they are least willing to participate and interact in the class. The reasons could be related to lack of speaking/ communicative language and learner centered approach in their previous class rooms practice. Then, for most of them, it is first-ever experience in co-education set up. Both boys and girls in majority cases are very shy to speak or take any responsibility of initiating discussion/interaction in the class. They feel unusually constrained to communicate freely, work in mixed groups, or undertake any other activity for increased interactive learning in the class. The teachers' role in this context assumes greater value and significance to create an atmosphere where the students are eager to participate in interactive discussion, communicate freely, and dispassionately on diverse issues related to literary aspects and intellectual ideas in a text.

The study argues that teachers of literature at university level academic setting, if trained adequately, are in a significant position to use literary text to achieve varied objectives of developing cross cultural understanding and communicative language competency of the learners. Critical thinking skills if interfused in teachers' instructional methodology, it is contended, will develop their potential to use literary text for diverse purposes of achieving cross culturalism and enhancement of communicative language competence simultaneously.

2. Critical Thinking (CT)

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Gough (1991 as quoted in Cotton 1991) emphasizes that CT skills in the era of sociological explosion is critical for educated personas to cope with changing realities, and Cotton (1991) considers it pre requisite to responsible citizenship in a democratic society. Shaila and Trudell (2010) argue that CT is essential especially for students living in a country with political and socio-economic problems, “for will help them to look at issues with different viewpoints and become independent thinkers and responsible citizens ‘(6). CT has a broad range of definitions and associated concepts that can fairly be utilized in a literature class at university level setting. Scriven and Paul (retrieved 2010) look upon CT as an intellectually disciplined process which encourages conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and /or evaluating information. Paul and Elder (retrieved 2010) regards it as a mode of thinking in which the thinker improves the quality of thinking. The last definition signifies CT as a self directed, self disciplined, self monitored and self corrective process of the mind-ful use of such standards as analyzing, assessing, evaluating and synthesizing. This self directed and self corrective mechanism in CT aligns it with another desirable practice reflective thinking (Davis 2006, Ho and Richards 1993, Stanley 1988). Self directed and self disciplined thinking approach to class room practices is a valuable asset as unlike the traditional teaching-learning approach it encourages and trains the teachers to adopt measures that pave the way for subjective reformation and development without much of external aids and assistance. Once inculcated, this habit will lead to a greater independence of teachers in and learners from traditional methods, beliefs and teaching practices. Critical thinking also contains several universal intellectual standards that an educator/teacher must follow and inculcate in the students to develop reflective, tolerant personality types. In literature class the pursuance of this intellectual standard is essential to create desirable cross cultural empathy and objective evaluation and understanding of differences in cultures and awareness of diversity in cross cultures with profound spirit of acceptance and understanding. From a wide list of CT Intellectual standards Paula and Elder (1996) have selected some for appropriation and adoption in class room practices. They are clarity, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, and logic. The standards if inculcated in the teachers

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and learners will encourage reasoning and comprehension and help the students establish opinion about cultural values and disparities dispassionately on the basis of clarity of thoughts and on reason/logic. Closely associated with these intellectual standards are essential intellectual traits (http://www.criticalthinking.org/page.cfm?page_ID=528&category_ID=68) that the teachers needs to be familiarized for enhancing CT practices in and outside the class room. The intellectual traits include fair mindedness, faith in reason, intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and intellectual empathy. The traits like intellectual standards are essential to dispassionate, objective logical, rational understanding cross cultural diversity that lies at the base English Literature.

3. Critical Thinking Activities

Keeping in view the above outlined constraints, personal attitudes and cultural modalities among the university level students, teachers of literature need to adopt CT strategy and activates to initiate positive change in the class room environment that facilitates cross cultural awareness and enhance communicative language competency of the students. Their first responsibility is to develop perceptive understanding of the learner centered paradigm shift in pedagogy all over the world. Learner centered approach requires them to move away from teacher centered attitude and look upon each student individually as potentially capable of making equal contribution to collaborative CT activities in the class (Spencer 1990, Boyce 1996). They must also understand that they have at their disposal imaginatively rich and powerful literary works of widely different cultures that inspire deep imaginative and emotive responses as well as provide effective tools /authentic material for initiate communicative language practices and cultural awareness. The most desirable option is to create non threatening environment. Teachers in our context are generally used to adopt rigid teacher centered class room approach that obstructs spontaneous participation from students in any activity in the class. An aura of teacher authority is constantly maintained, promoted and cultivated at the cost of students' personality, language and critical thinking faculty development. Resultantly their thinking pattern remains undeveloped and uncultured. In a literature

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class the teacher in particular need to provide an atmosphere where the students can freely participate and coordinate in discussion on several key parts of text like themes, characters, human behavior, relationship and other social issues. In a students centered class room, the teacher will invite the students to bring forward their own perception and understanding of a particular topic/area for discussion or any other activity like writing journal or presentation. Initially he/she will have to “push” the unwilling, shy, and unresponsive students to come forward and participate in collaborative activities and produce coherent, concise, clear, rational, objective out put. He/she will also need to provide effective and timely feedback to any such activity to each one of the participant to further promote encouraging and disciplined class room collaborative atmosphere. The teacher must ensure that all activities are effectively promoting cross cultural awareness as well as communicative language competency.

Student centered class room also demand great deal from the students themselves. Being equal contributors in learning, they have their own responsibilities to fulfill in this culture. In the first case they must be able to combine ideas creatively (Smith, Ward and Fink 1995). They must also be able to elaborate complex ideas and accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim (More and Parker 1986) that means rational and dispassionate analysis and evaluation. Furthermore they need to be able to cite good reasons for their opinion and responses; correct themselves and others and adapt to uniformities, constraints, limitations and generalizations (Lipman 1988). It will also include participation and cooperation with peers and teachers in class room activities to create with language and provide feedback to the teachers. However, the teachers in our context will initially need to develop students responsiveness to class room discussion and activities and Critical thinking skills can effectively generate these tendencies in interfused in learner centered class room practices.

Secondly literature teachers need to be familiar with higher order thinking skills and intellectual virtues and interfuse the same into the students learning styles and attitudes in the literature class. Higher order thinking skills will allow the students to use logic and reason to evaluate differences and analyze their nature, while intellectual

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virtues will lead to dispassionate and rational analysis of the difference in culture and values. Intellectual humility for instance implies having understanding of the limits of one's knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self –deceptively, sensitivity to bias, prejudice and limitations of one view point” (Elder and Paul 1996). Likewise Intellectual humility suggests that one should be conscious of the need to:

. . .imaginatively put one self in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them, which requires the consciousness of our egocentric tendency to identify truth with our immediate perceptions of long standing thought or belief. This trait correlates with the ability to reconstruct accurately the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own (Elder and Paul 1996).

The trait of Intellectual perseverance emphasize the need to develop consciousness of the need to use intellectual insight in spite of obstacles and difficulties and firm adherence to rational principles and a sense to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions (Elder and Paul 1996). Fair-mindedness likewise asserts the need to have consciousness to treat all view points alike without reference to one own feelings or vested interests or the vested interests of the community and nation (Elder and Paul 1996).

Some of the teacher directed CT activities that could lead to simultaneous cross cultural awareness and communicative language are: giving student opportunities to speak and promptings students to improve quality of their response.” (Heather 2010). Each of these two activities comprises several sub activities that have been listed and explained below:

1. Giving students opportunities to speak: The teachers need to use literary text to prompt students after his/her input in the form of textual readings, lectures on any specific area of the text. The promptings could be in the form of repetition, ask answer question (teacher-student, student-teacher, and student-student), paraphrasing the contents, summarizing the content, giving examples and giving opinion on the contents. Repetition impresses upon the students need to focus on the content and language items. Repetition in particular is “help full for the students who are shy/timid/hesitant to take a step

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introducing oral language” (Heather 2010, 2). Some of the peculiar language competency that repetition helps pertains to improving pronunciation, accuracy (articulation, stress, rhythm, and intonation). Paraphrasing and summarizing could be utilized as very promising activities in literature class from different perspectives. Both help the students in recapitulating what the author intends to express/narrate/dramatize through language and what are the diverse interpretations of the expressed idea. Debating the possible interpretation could lead to extensive discussion on the topic. Along with repetition, they increase the comprehension level of the students and lead to independent analysis.

Paraphrasing and summarizing also involve retelling what some one has written in one’ own language/words. Thus they increase oral use of language. Summarizing requires students to “step into their linguistic reserves” and paraphrasing “forces the students to stretch linguistically” (Heather 2010, 2). They require students to concentrate on the main points of what they heard or read and therefore develop analytical skills. The students must use all of their linguistic resources to communicate what they “have read or heard in anew way” (Heather 2010, 2). This habit once inculcated among the students will lead the students to reflect more on content as well be able to paraphrase or summarize another person’s opinion/idea. Thus it will increase the refractive out put level and pave the way for building reflective personality types. Giving examples and opinion on the content are two other components of giving students opportunity to speak. Providing examples furthers their comprehension level of the concept and use language meaningfully. Giving opinion allows the students to use English creatively to express their own ideas, connect the contents in their own way and personalize the content through the use of language which could develop into extended discourse.

2. Second major activity is related to use of literary text to prompt students to improve quality of their responses. The teachers need to prompt the students to clarify their out put in response to reading, modify, extend and elaborate their opinion through other information and examples. The teachers need to help the struggling students through cues in the form of Q & A.

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Pair work and structured group work are two important CT developing strategies. In pair work, the students can be asked to select their own partner tabling the pair as partner A and Partner B, who alternate their positions in asking and answering a particular point of discussion or language activity. In structure group work both teachers and the group leader have responsibilities. Teacher has to ensure that in every class a different student is designated as a group leader and give him clear textual content or language model to initiate and lead discussions. His/her second responsibility is to call on each group leader to bring forth a response from the members of the group and assist the leader to use the language accurately. Think-pair-share (TPS) activity is fundamentally used to involve students in interactive discussion with peers in the class. The teacher initiates the discussion through thought provoking question and allows each students to write this/her response in a minute ore two and then share it with the partner sitting next to him/her The teacher must make clear the goal of the responses as the students will confine them to the purpose The students in response to defined and explained goal must engage himself/herself in discussion with the next students. He/she may do any of the three activities: he/she may convince the class mate that one's own answer is the best, or create a third answer that incorporates elements of both the answers or determine the strength and limitations of each one of them. The teacher may extend the discussion and ask several students to report their ideas to the entire class or modify the answer in the light of discussions (Cooper and Robinson 2000).

4. Conclusion

Available research (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001; Richards and Farrell 2005) has established that teachers exposed to training and professional development workshops are likely to innovate in their teaching and personality styles. However professional development needs to be an ongoing process that will help the teachers to reexamine their teaching practices and adopt innovative teaching styles in their regular class room activities. Literature is a powerful tool for achieving desirable objectives like language competency, students' personality development and cross culturalism. But the

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teachers of literature need to be trained to use this powerful tool for successful realization of the objectives. The study argued that initiating Critical thinking approach into literature class will benefit the teachers and therefore students in many ways. First of all it will add a new dimension to current practice of focus on aesthetic aspect of literature and allow teachers to use literary text for other valuable targets as developing cross cultural awareness s and students communicative language competence. Importantly it will assist the teachers to approach foreign literature on the basis of certain intellectual traits and virtues that critical thinking emphasizes and the students will be able to read and discuss literature objectively, dispassionately in the light of these traits to achieve positive cross cultural awareness. Use of Critical thinking activities will also help the teachers of literature to use text for interactive class room discussions and thus assist the shy and hesitant students to gradually gain confidence in speaking and learning more meaningfully in the class room discussions.

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