

Improving Critical Thinking Skills through Guided Novel Reading: A Case Study of A State Educational Institute

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In Advanced Technological Institute, Jaffna diploma students have the lower critical thinking power along with reading skills. The study aims to find out the effectiveness of guided reading to improve critical thinking in novel reading by using classroom based qualitative research in the second year Higher National Diploma Students. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of guided novel reading which its supports the level of improvement with the instruments of observations and thematic analysis. The various challenges to improve critical thinking with its support of guided novel reading are examined with the support of feedback from the students in the concept of psycholinguistic-cognitive orientation. The results of the study indicate that the guided reading will support them to improve the critical reading and provides the solution over coming from the challenges in reading a novel.

Keywords: *Guided reading, Novel reading, Critical Thinking*

I. Introduction

In Sri Lanka English is used as a second language. So English is taught as a second language and English Literature has been introduced and included from General Certificate in Education in Ordinary Level and General certificate in Education in Advanced Level as well. Further, after English Literature is taught in the diploma level and degree level in Universities. So, the government has introduced Appreciation of English Literature in General Certificate in Education in Ordinary Level and the purpose is mentioned as “Brining the pleasant experience to the students, language excitement and writing on their own experience” (1993). Then in 2015 the purpose in altered as “to make aware of current thinking and innovations, critical awareness” (2015)

In the English Literature Curriculum, novel is one of the section and it is authentic material to learn English and at the same time “For improving student English skills, a novel can be one of the methods. Because from the reading novels, student not only constructs their critical thinking ability but also they can learn about social culture (Rachmijati & Anggraeni, 2019) Novel reading makes the students enjoy the story with satisfactory feelings. It creates interests and motivate them to read more(Tsai,2012) But, at the same time the novels deal with different culture and there are some complex situations to understand.

Reading is a process of constructing the meaning of sentences from the structure of words which are used in sentences. According to Puspitassari et al it is also another communicating activity that is communicating with the text as well as author. So when reading a novel student should read the book carefully (Puspitassari et al, 2016).

Critical thinking is the process of giving a text, a careful consideration and that self-evaluation is a key component of critical thinking Carroll (2005). Critical thinking plays a vital role in problem-solving and decision-making, relying on inference and argumentation (Chaffee, 1994).

Reading encourages cognitive development, fosters critical thinking, and expands problem-solving skills. Literary genres provide learners with unique ideas, complex characters, and plots filled with twists that leave a lasting impression. Students are compelled to think deeply, critically, and analytically while reading, which helps them master certain higher-order thinking skills. They develop inferential skills, make connections between texts, and cultivate the ability to think about, and beyond, what is stated in a text based on evidence. (Rachuri, 2024).

In Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE) was found in 1995 under the ACT of 29 of 1995 and there are Advanced Technological Institutes under SLIATE which offer diplomas for the students who have completed G.C.E (A/L). Among the diplomas Higher National Diploma in English is one. In the curriculum of Higher National Diploma in English, English Literature is one of the subjects. So the students learn poems, short stories, Dramas, Non-fiction, film and novels. To motivate the students and enhance English Literature learning the study, The Effectiveness of Guided Reading in Novel Reading to improve Critical Thinking Skills was conducted.

The study focused on In which extend does the guided reading support to enhance the novel reading along with improving critical thinking skills?

II. Literature Review

In higher education, critical thinking is considered as one of the central goals. Although a book of literature can be seen as a reproduction of our world within a single four-walled classroom, it has the potential to influence young minds and enhance critical analysis skills, particularly through language teachers (Rachuri, 2024). Further, critical thinking is a complex activity that often demands higher-order thinking and cognitive functioning. When individuals possess critical thinking skills, they can solve problems, make judgments, evaluate evidence, and draw informed conclusions (Rachuri, 2024).

The contemporary world, regardless of whether it is referred to as a Melting Pot, a salad bowl, or a global village, calls for citizens who can make decisions, recognise and explain differences, and tolerate and even appreciate various points of view. These individuals need to have an understanding of how they think to be competitive in the job market (Tabačková, 2014).

The Guided Reading is a method of reading a text under the instructions of a teacher for a homogenous group. The teacher checks their accurate decoding and explanation along with the guidance of a teacher. By asking question the teacher could evaluate their accuracy of decoding of the text. Finally Ouafae stated “students have a discussion about the text at the end of the guided reading session” (Ouafae, 2021).

According to Facione (2007) critical thinking and reading comprehension are highly interrelated. Throughout the early phases of comprehension, readers develop literal knowledge of the text; both recalling information and summarizing the text are required skills.

“Literature is a body of writhen works. The name traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry distinguished by the intentions of authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution” (Ouafae, 2021) Literature can be categorized based on variety of systems, including language, national origin, historical period , genre and subject matter. In literature there are various genres. So it can be classified Non Fiction such as Narrative Non Fiction, essays, biography, autobiography speech and fiction such as Drama, poetry, fantasy, Humour, Fairy tale, Science fiction, Folklore, Historical Fiction, Horror , Mystery and mythology.

In Literature literary terms are widely applied such as technique, style, figurative language, theme plot, character, setting, conflict” Literary terms have a wide range of applications, from the poet’s beauty to speakers’ persuasion, to novelist’s story development”(Ouafae, 2021)

According to Tsai Novel- Teaching was focused to elevate the effectiveness on students’ subjective perceptions.” For this purpose two classes of non-English majors read and received instruction on an unbridged novel for one semester. A pair of questionnaires was used to measure students’ perceptions and attitudes prior to and after the

novel class. Analysis of the pre-test and post-test shows that after a semester- long novel- reading process, students demonstrated improvement attitudes, confidence, interest and their own perceived reading ability. The results are of pedagogical significance to EFL teaching in that they present how well a novel was received in an EFL class, the benefits it offered as well as the difficulties it entailed to the reading process” (Tsai, 2012)

According to Alshammari and Ahmed (2019), a mixed study was conducted with 10 Saudi EFL university students’ perceptions of the use of authentic materials in an intensive three-week reading a novel, *Great Expectation* by Charles Dickens. To collect quantitative data pre-test and post- test were conducted to measure reading progress and to collect qualitative data, semi- structured interviews were conducted. The results showed that the participants had positive attitudes about using interactive instruction with authentic literary texts such as novels in Saudi EFL reading classrooms. At the same time they faced some challenges for reading long texts due to lack of vocabulary

Palupi et al (2021) focuses to aware if student ability improves or not when they use English online novels to learn English to conduct qualitative research. The researcher used social media (Facebook). The results show that the students were able to improve the ability in grammar, pronunciation, social culture and vocabulary.” So, English online novel is one of the parts of learning media. But of course, not all the English online novels have a safe plot for the student especially for young learners. The student still needs parent and teacher guidance to choose the novel for their ages” (Palupi et al, 2021)

According to Maibodi & Branch (2014), an experimental study was conducted to examine the effect of critical thinking skills on reading English novels. To conduct the research sixty Iranian EFL junior undergraduates were divided into two groups. “For this purpose of this study participants in addition to their text books read and received instructions on the unabridged short novels for one semester. To test the hypothesis two independent t-tests were conducted to see the difference between the two groups. The results of the study showed that students in group A were more critically oriented than their counter parts in group B. The pedagogical implication of this study suggests that direct instruction in critical thinking has an impact on EFL learners’ reading proficiency. The findings of this study revealed that there was a significant improvement in students attitudes, confidence and interest especially in their novel-reading ability (Maibodi, 2014)

Baki (2020) focused on reading comprehension and creative thinking in *The Effect of Critical Reading Skills on the Evaluation Skills of the Creative Reading Process*. The critical reading skill “which is the main medium for accessing the right knowledge, is defined as a sub-category for creative reading in which high cognitive processes are involved.” The study aimed to examine the effect of critical reading skills on the evaluation skills of the creative reading process among 5th-grade learners. “The study group was formed by simple random sampling and composed of 265 5th grade learners. The data were collected through the Scale for the Evaluation of Creative Reading Process and the Critical Reading Scale. SPSS 23, AMOS 22.0, and structural equation modeling were utilized for data analysis”. (Baki, 2020) Critical reading skills showed the evaluation skills of creative reading process by 57%. The critical reading skill affected by 43% in the female-reader model and in the male-reader model it affected by 67%.

Hence, critical thinking should be incorporated into a lecture on literature whenever higher-order thinking and reasoning are being utilised. Reading literature can assist in the development of not only reasoning abilities and subject-matter expertise but also the dispositions and moral attitudes necessary to embrace opposing worldviews, which are important to survival in the modern world (Rachuri, 2024).

To be prepared for the modern workplace, students need to develop critical thinking (UNESCO, 1996). Hence developing critical thinking is vital in the sphere of higher education and to achieve this, using literature reading to encourage students to think critically is a highly feasible approach (Tung and Chang, 2009)

III. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted in the second year of Higher National Diploma in English at Advanced Technological Institute, Jaffna. They completed two semesters in learning English Literature. The semester consisted 15 weeks. In the third semester of their course they are supposed to do novel from Sri Lankan Literature. The novel, *Funny boy* by Shyam Selvathurai was chosen to study the effectiveness of guided reading novel which supports to develop the critical reading. The treatment lasted one month.

3.2 Course Material

To conduct the study the novel, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvathurai which is taught in a semester with other literary work on Sri Lankan Literature in English, was used.

3.3 Course Design

In Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE) was found in 1995 under the ACT of 29 of 1995 to do reforms in the society. “The main purpose of ATIS were to reform and restructure the entire technical and vocational education system in Sri Lanka with regard development strategies and to promote privatization” (Curriculum, 2020). So SLIATE provides Diplomas those who have completed G.C.E A/L examination in one sitting along with simple pass (S) at G.C.E (A/L) or credit pass at G.C.E O/L or simple pass (s) for the subject, Appreciation of English Literary Texts at G.C.E O/L by the Examination Department, Sri Lanka. The Higher National Diploma in English programme particularly offers an intensive and focused education to meet the labour market which requires English Language or English Literature.

Based on Diplomates’ Attributes “The programme is intellectually demanding and the skills which a diplomat will develop are transferable to many fields. SLIATE expects its Higher National Diploma in English Diplomates to possess the following attributes to be exceptional analytical and communication skills which make English Diplomates sought after in the workplace, especially in the fields of teaching, translation, media and the business world” (Curriculum, 2020). The students are expected to develop knowledge and understanding in English, Effective Communication and Presentation Skills I English, Reflective Skills, Leadership skills, interpersonal skills and lifelong skills. Among these skills the reflective skills are developed through engagement with literary and critical texts and group discussion.

3.4 Instrument

To conduct the study observation, questionnaire and test were given. The students’ responses to the questions of novels were collected. Then the students were guided to read the novel, *Funny Boy* from heterogeneous group. While reading the novel the questions were asked to test their understanding and finally an essay question was given to test their critical ability.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from the answer scripts of students who were guided to read the novel.

The answer scripts were coded by process coding to evaluate the process of understanding the text and then their ability to use the literacy competency in answering the question about to discuss *Funny Boy*’s theme with present Sri Lanka. The students’ previous answers were compared with the answers which were collected after guided reading. The thematic analysis was used to extract the understanding of the novel and their ability to utilize the literacy competency.

IV. Discussion and Analysis

Before introducing the guided reading the answers were mechanically reproduced. The most of the answers of students are similar. So it shows they could not develop the literacy competency in learning English Literature and critical and creative skills as well. It shows the students haven't developed the ability of understanding the implicit and explicit of the words in a text, recognizing the theme, plot values, attitudes and demonstrating the knowledge from quotations and summary through learning English literature.

Reading comprehension is a constructive process which is personalized by individual readers' ideas and thoughts. The ideas and thoughts of readers could not be taught. They can be developed through personal connection with the text. The guidance to read novels supports to read lengthy complex situations." Analysis of the pretest and post-test shows that after a semester long novel-reading process, students demonstrated improvement in attitudes, confidence, interest, and their own perceived reading ability" (Tsai, 2012)

Based on their answers the two thematic elements were checked. That is their comprehension of the text and their critical thinking ability which has been applied in the answers. Both themes were developed in their answers and each answer was unique, not similar. From the study they are able to understand beyond their comprehension and have novel-reading strategies and confidence. So it clearly shows the students are benefited by the introduction of guided reading.

V. Pedagogical Implication

In Sri Lanka teaching English Literature has reached to fulfill the objectives of curriculum. The students' skills and deeper insights have not been developed. Literature is still taught in the traditional manner. The students could not improve their creative and critical thinking ability. But by providing appropriate methods, it is possible to foster critical and creative thinking abilities of students. The pedagogical method should consider combining language and literacy competency which will support the students to improve critical and creative skills. "Therefore it can be said that using appropriate teaching methods can develop higher skills of students such as imagination and creativity" (Slochana, 2011). Hence, teachers should adopt innovative teaching and learning processes a line with curriculum objectives.

VI. Conclusion

This study proved that the selection of appropriate method successfully catered the ability of understanding the novel beyond the level from linguistic complexity, that is guided reading supported to comprehend the novel beyond the level, *Funny boy* by Shyam Selvathurai and the students were able to utilize the critical thinking ability in answering the questions. That is, the study showed that reading comprehension is a constructive process which is personalized by individual readers' ideas and thoughts. They can be developed through personal connection with the texts. "Therefore it can be said that of appropriate teaching methods and used towards develop higher skills of students such as imagination and creativity." (Slochana, 2011). So the teachers should adopt innovative teaching and learning processes in line with curriculum objectives.

The students could use reading strategies to learn other types of literary texts to develop literary competency on their own. The teachers also improve the process of teaching to meet with global contexts. Further studies could be conducted to evaluate the students' interest and motivation based on reading novels along with guided reading strategy. Qualitative methods are also suggested to look into the effectiveness of the guided reading to read English novels.

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