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Bilingües

Sección para textos en inglés

The Development of Critical Thinking by Means of Literature

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Reading is an act of freedom

This paper is part of the result of a research exercise carried out as a requirement to get the Bachelor of Education in English Teaching (Licenciatura en Inglés) at a private university in Medellín, Colombia. English language teaching has gained stage in this country as a way to provide students with better communication tools to connect with the world. Within the learning process, special attention must be given to the development of reading and critical thinking, as established by the country's main educational policies. As an example of this, the General Law of Education 115 (1994, p. 7) sets the acquisition of reading and conversational components in a foreign language as an objective of Colombian education¹.

Even though the General Law of Education mentions the need to develop reading skills, this is barely taken care of. In Colombia, reading is one of the main skills promoted in educational fields. It is evaluated through standardized tests such as the Saber 11 exam, promoted by ICFES (the Colombian Institute for Educational Assessment and Evaluation). However, one may wonder if the meaning of reading has been considered prior to the creation of such tests. According to Shihab (2011, p. 209), "reading involves an interactive process in which the reader actively produces meaning through a set of mental processes.". Reading is not only the act of connecting the words, but it goes further. "Interpreting texts through a critical literacy lens can help students become aware of the messages that texts communicate" (Hall and Piazza, 2008). This provokes the thought of how reading is not a limited action but it can be connected to different skills.

This is why daily strategies inside the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom are carried out in order to accomplish the established goals. The use of literature has turned out to be one of these strategies, when used as a way to provide vocabulary, grammatical structures, and reading comprehension activities. Nevertheless, there is no documentation showing how literature has been or can be taken further in Colombia. Many authors such as Short (2009), Lazere (1987), Ghosn (2002), among others, have highlighted that literature is an important element to take into consideration, in order to develop critical thinking. "Literature can encourage students to focus on themselves as cultural beings in order to go beyond the typical "Who am I?" activities" (Short, 2009. pp.1-10). With this in mind, it can be said that not only these two elements are not isolated but that they might influence one another. Furthermore, it can be a way to enhance and strengthen teachers' practices and students' learning and reading processes.

1 "La adquisición de elementos de conversación y de lectura al menos en una lengua extranjera".

The Guía 22 defines EFL as the one language that is not spoken on the immediate and local environment, since the social daily conditions do not require its permanent use, to communicate² (2006, p. 5). The language policies in the country encourage students to read in this language as one more way of communication and as one of the main goals of education. Nevertheless, when learning a new language and reading in that language, different cognitive processes happen when connecting that to the students' previous knowledge, according to Shihab (2011, p. 209): "We must draw not only on our knowledge of language, but also on our knowledge of the world. Foreign language reading constitutes an interactive process between the reader and the text." For this reason, the researcher believes that the process of reading does not stop on the mere comprehension of the text, but goes beyond the literal plane. "Critical reading is related to thinking and that is why we cannot read without thinking" (Shihab, 2011, p. 209). This theory overlook showed up the different conceptions of critical thinking and its relation with literature inside the EFL classroom, and how these three concepts mediate and intertwine in order to complement each other.

According to Stenberg's definition of critical thinking, "Critical thinking comprises the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (Stenberg, 1986, p. 3). He proposes a mental picture and the importance of taking choices by having a critical stance, highly accurate and important in the current world's reality, where tons of information are popping up, from so many diverse sources. In agreement with this, Tosuncuoglu (2018) states that "Critical thinking helps us solve problems, make decisions and reach our goals" (p. 26). Looking for hidden details and making a construction from it, in order to move towards the daily situations, it equips a person with an armor hard to break. With this, a filter is created at the moment of receiving data; there is higher questioning, and a bigger skill to "decide what to believe or do" by "identifying, developing, asking, planning, defining, drawing conclusions, and judging credibility" when accessing it, as Ennis (1993) and Fisher (2001) propose. Moreover, Lipman (1987) points out critical thinking as "Skillful responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, is self-correcting, and it is sensitive to context" (p. 3). These authors portray how critical thinking is highly connected with judgment and decision making. These characteristics might be stimulated by the different didactic strategies applied in a classroom, such as with literature.

2 "Aquella que no se habla en el ambiente inmediato y local, pues las condiciones sociales y cotidianas no requieren su uso permanente para la comunicación".

With this in mind, Lazere (1987) defines literature as “the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking” (p. 3), which allows the researcher to connect these two main concepts and makes her think that one influences the other. Cortázar (1980) sees literature as an inquiry of human destiny, a way to be participant of historical processes³. He also says that literature can touch many sides of humans, such as intelligence, sensitivity, life, death, relationships, and destiny, comprising all that in just one world: history⁴. Different stories from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Rayuela*, passing by *Ana Karenina* and *Cien Años de Soledad*, might give to the reader more than what he or she thinks, they might provide them with a bigger picture to look at. In fact, literature is seen by many, as a way to know the world, cultures, languages, and perspectives, without stepping on a plane. In other words, it is an element in which students and teachers can rely, and find diverse inputs and voices that might contribute to a growing community.

After an eight-month review research exercise, which can also be described as a reading and analysis process, diverse realities were seen and contrasted from different perspectives and the resulting theory from the literature, in order to comprehend the reality, using tools such as observations, interviews, and reading logs, and working with teachers and students who belong to a teaching program at a private university. During the journey, it could be seen the way literature and critical thinking interact, affect, and influence the context, and how the meaning of such events is acquired, turning this process into a private, personal, and intimate, experience indeed. It could be seen how literature in the classroom was meaningful and powerful. I could find that a) literature enhances critical thinking by producing awareness, analysis, reflection, problem-solving skills, connections, questioning, and positions, among others; b) teachers' beliefs (or positionalities) about literature and reading influence the way in which they use literature in the classroom, affecting students' response; and c) accurate selection of didactic strategies can lead to the development of critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a quality we all as human beings own. It is present throughout different scenarios in our lives, from the most mundane to the most complex ones. It permeates the act of reading, when a person is trying to give meaning to

3 “[...] la literatura como indagación del destino humano y luego la literatura como una de las muchas formas de participar en los procesos históricos”.

4 “[...] ese territorio -que es el más fascinante de la literatura- en que se combina la inteligencia con la sensibilidad de un ser humano y determina su conducta, todos sus juegos en la vida, todas sus relaciones y sus interrelaciones, sus dramas de vida, de amor, de muerte, su destino; su historia en una palabra”.

a text, making connections, judgments, and asking questions based on it. Based on different authors such as Shihab, Bobkina and Stefanova, and Fisher, it can be stated that they are not two separate things, when you read, consequently you think. During this research exercise I could appreciate how a piece of literature, from *Why Is the Sky Blue?* to *Like a novel*, can enhance critical thinking as long as this is encouraged in a proper way, sometimes by the reader, sometimes by an external actor such as a teacher. Part of this process of reading critically is that awareness and recognition of how critical thinking affects our reader positionality, our teaching practices, and how it opens a gate to a construction with the other.

The author suggests to think about the act of reading as a deeper process, standing from a critical standpoint to look at a literary text, also, as a way to understand ourselves from the very core. Although it is known how literature is used as a linguistic input in many cases, the power of these texts is sometimes underestimated and limited, which puts up a barrier between the reader and the text. Likewise, having a bigger consciousness about the daily practices allows the teachers to open their possibilities and to exploit the different didactic strategies they use, bearing in mind their own conceptions about thinking and reading critically. Reading is an act that should allow students to feel in freedom and connection with themselves and what surrounds them, and to feel questioned. Therefore, when referring to this specific field, reading is not a matter of mere strategies, but reflection and responses to the text, enjoyment, self-confrontation, and sometimes, even shelter.

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