



IMPROVING SKILLS OF EFL LEARNERS THROUGH TEACHING CRITICAL APPRECIATION

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ABSTRACT

English, being a language of knowledge construction and knowledge extraction, is a requisite for EFL learners in hi-tech digital era to learn and be skilled in, besides, to live with the expectations of the altered scholastic and corporate ethos in order to nurture, sophisticate and hone them. Language instructors also have to perform an arduous task planning various strategies and methodologies for EFL learners to make their teaching result-oriented. This paper explores the possibilities of improving skills of EFL learners through teaching critical appreciation of literature. In addition, it discusses the critical plan of judging literature and how an instructor assists EFL learners in selecting a specific literary genre to appreciate equipping them with characteristics of a good critic. Learning strategies are discussed which could be guided by the instructors to the learners to imply for successful language learning. In addition, the paper discourses how the language skills are improved during the course of reading, analyzing and judging a literary text would be useful for learners with humanistic approach.

Keywords- Knowledge, Corporate, Literature, Appreciation, EFL Learners, Strategies.

Introduction

English, being a language of knowledge construction and knowledge extraction, is a requisite for EFL learners in modern era to learn and be skilled in. Moreover, nowadays it helps students to live with the expectations of the altered scholastic and corporate ethos in order to nurture, sophisticate and hone them. Language instructors also have to perform an arduous task

planning various strategies and methodologies for EFL learners to make their teaching result-oriented. The question might arise here why the learners need to read a literary text and critically evaluate it, how it will improve students' language skills. The paper attempts to answer these queries.

Literature being one of the Fine Arts is the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing or the expression of life in words of truth and beauty. The impulse behind choosing teaching critical appreciation or judging a piece of literature for an EFL learner to refine his/her language skills is because of literature's humanistic approach. As a human, one desires for self-expression, one feels interested in people and their doings, one feels interested in the world of reality in which a person lives and in the world of imagination, which one conjures into existence, and finally one loves and concerns for learning sophisticated speech in global language English with realistic touch.

Evaluation and appreciation that in strict sense are involved in every sphere of life what a person faces at both professional and personal front. Generally, it might be taken as a tool for faultfinding in people but in literature's perspective, criticism is the act of judging the qualities and values of a literary work as an aesthetic object, which enlightens and stimulates increasing the power of perception.

Through reading and critically appreciating a literary work students would be able to enrich their speech in English and develop critical thinking power to cope up and outlive with the requirements of digitalized commercial world where one needs to have good communication skill for personal growth and development. As they read literature for analysis, they need to be cognizant about the approaches of studying literature.

Approaches to the Study of Literature

Before appreciation of a literary text, an instructor should brief the learners a little about the approaches to the study of literature as mentioned below:

❖ The historical or chronological approach or the study of periods of literature, e. g. the age of Chaucer, the Elizabethan age of Shakespeare, or the age of Milton which helps the learners to criticize and understand the social, historical and political background in which it is written.

❖ The aesthetical approach or the study of different literary genres, e. g. the epic, the sonnet, the drama, the novel, the short story or the lyric should be discussed with the learners so

that they can relish the aesthetic aspects of literature in the techno-advanced era relieving their anxieties.

❖ The approach of literary tendencies or the study of schools of literature assists the EFL learners to think of the stream of literature as dividing itself not into chronological periods or into types of writing but as the expression of certain tendencies, moods, or tempers, e. g. the classical, the romantic, the realistic or the expressionistic tendency, temper or school.

Learners can be further guided to choose a literary work from either poetry or prose for reading and evaluation task.

Selection of a Literary Work

It is an instructor's task to help the learners in choosing a right text and implement right communicative methodologies for involving learners in reading and critical appreciation process. It requires introduction to the content; purpose of the author for writing, describing the setting, plot, characters, themes and developing the interest in learners, setting a connection between the text and learners' experiences. Instructor should make the practice evaluating different genres identifying the differences between those like poetry more abstract and imaginative and dialogues in plays more realistic and interactive.

EFL learners' motivation in the process of learning language depends on how much interested the learners are in the chosen texts or material used in class for reading and judging, the levels of their diligence for the activities given related to critical appreciation, and the levels of their attentiveness and getting pleasure out of reading and evaluating a literary piece. (Crookes, Schmidt: 469-512) Although text selection plays a very important role, students should be motivated by good text selection for learning language through reading and criticizing it. The research and discussion involved in selection assists them for improvisation of their language skills as they communicate more with their instructor or other learners and they do research individually also according to their caliber and knowledge. Learners might not improvise their language skills if they have to be dependent heavily on the instructor for deciphering the literary work to them or the text is too boring and incomprehensible for them. An instructor should instruct them not to be fully dependent on him/her semantically or pragmatically for interpreting the text and application of the learned language in their lives.

According to Truong Thi My Van, the study of literature should proffer learners, *“enjoyment or recognition of the value of literature”* without creating *“a negative attitude*

towards literature". (Van: 3) So rather than directly choosing some award winning literary works or Classics, an instructor should consider many things in directing for appropriate text selection according to learners' level since for EFL/ESL learners; there can be of many kinds of difficulties such as:

- ➔Vocabulary and syntax
- ➔Complex historical, social and political references
- ➔Cultural unfamiliarity

Moreover, the process of criticizing or judging literary work involves learners mentally making them well responsive of how a literary work is interrelated to issues like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, struggle for identity or equality and tussles for political or economic power etc. Sometimes learners come from different backgrounds, in such case, it is instructor's task to guide by choosing suitable text so that reading or judging that work does not make learners low-spirited or affect learners' sense of security. It should not hinder their participation in classroom activities. Besides, an instructor should also take care of that they do not carry any assumptions about politics or religion or race in their minds while evaluating a literary piece.

Role of EFL Learner as a Critic

The critic's purpose can usually be to make worth judgments on a work, to elucidate his or her interpretation of the work, or to provide other readers with relevant historical or biographical information. However, here a critic is a learner who is keen to learn the language use through approaching and appreciating literature so the instructor should tell them the role of a critic in specific as an EFL learner has to be many following things:

□**An Appreciator**- EFL learner should learn to be an appreciator for making valuable judgments on a literary work covering its aesthetic aspects and appreciating the beauty of it with humanistic approach as literature deals with the complexities of life's deepest mysteries.

□**An Interpreter**- Interpreting or inferring the meaning of words, phrases or sentences used in the prose or poetry is an important task a language learner needs to do. It requires more care and attention with inquiring attitude in them for fruitful language learning.

□**A Censor**- EFL learner will learn to use his/her editing skills to publish or censor the idea or a particular point or language used in the text, which he/she feels, is censorable.

□**An Elucidator**- A learner should be an elucidator explaining the ideas of an author or poet, or giving clues to the language used in creative literary work.

□ **A Literary Enthusiast**- A learner may play the role of a literary enthusiast who is eager to promote the best that there is in literary work either for learning language in a better way or for the sake of humanity and literature itself.

□ **An Artist**- The learner should be like the artist, always constructing life into an image with words which combines truth and beauty; delightful and convincing.

To fulfill the proper role of an appreciator and evaluator of literature, the learners need to improve them in certain aspects. So when EFL learners judge a text, an instructor should make them practice a lot to be skilled in critical appreciation with aptitude as manifested below:

- a keen insight
- a quick response to impressions
- a sensitive and delicate taste
- an ability to grasp essentials
- a broad sympathy capable of appreciating many styles
- a knowledge of the common culture of civilized man
- a sense of responsibility and impartiality

Critical Appreciation of Poetry

Although ability to criticize a poem cannot be taught through rules of criticism and must be felt to develop as a result of a thorough acquaintance with the best poetry however it will be useful to EFL/ESL students to be provided with a scheme for criticizing a poem. There is no specific scheme or plan for the critical evaluation of a poem. In the book *Literary Criticism*, Khuri says, “*all schemes, therefore are suggestions and the criticism of a poem is always, in the last resort, a personal and individual act depending on the feeling and taste of the person writing it.*” (Khuri: 79) The scheme with few set questions suggested to help learners at initial stage in criticizing a poem is the following:

1. **Subject:** What is the poem about? Is the subject valuable for poetry? Is it common?
2. **Treatment or how the theme is presented:** Is it presented in a serious or in a humorous way, in a sincere or an insincere way?
3. **The form of the poem or the literary medium adopted in writing it:** Is it an epic or a dramatic poem? If it is a lyric, is it an ode, a song, a sonnet, an elegy or a satirical poem?

4. **Style:** Under style three aspects may be considered, namely the vocabulary, the meter and rhythm, and the rhetoric. (Khuri: 80)

With help of such questionnaire scheme, the instructor can first teach and illustrate how to explore the meaning of the poem, the kind of theme with which it deals, and the poetic terms or literary devices, by which it is expressed, including figurative language, style, imagery, symbolism and versification. Moreover learners will learn to feel the beauty of poetry. The instructor should tell the steps through which the critical process passes. Then learners should be directed to choose a simple and small poem for practice.

EFL learners can select poems like *'The Eagle'* by Alfred Lord Tennyson or *'I wandered as a Cloud'* by William Wordsworth for judging individually or in pair. While judging, students can follow this simpler critical plan that involves the following steps:

1. Learners should begin with a general statement of the theme and the tone of a poem as a whole.
2. Then they should give a detail account of the meaning of the poem specifying phrases and talk about the development of the poet's thoughts and ideas.
3. Further the learners should explain in detail
 - a. the kind of theme the poem has
 - b. the poet's purpose in writing about it
 - c. the style and figurative language used in the poem

A judgment of the poem- based on evidence set out in the earlier stages of the critical process-can be expressed finally. While judging a poem, learners will improve their imaginative power and sensitivity, as poetry is the emotional and imaginative interpretation of life through language.

Critical Appreciation of Prose

At present, prose fiction is indisputably the prevailing literary form, both in quantity and quality. Millions of people who would not think of reading any other form of literature regularly read a significant number of novels and short stories. For the last hundred years the novel and the short story have been the leading types of Western Literature. This success is not purely financial and popular. Indeed, although it is true that a tremendous amount of the prose fiction produced at

present is commercial and has no literary interest whatsoever, yet in all countries prose fiction writers are considered as literary persons and readers read for developing their communicative competence. As for the present supremacy of prose including drama, short stories, and novels, language teachers also plan their strategies for improvement of EFL learners' skills through making them learn evaluating these literary genres. A critical plan is a must to be told to the learners to follow for critical appreciation, as prose is longer in form than poetry. In the book *Literary Criticism*, Musa Khuri says:

“Long length and wide range of the drama and the novel make it neither practicable nor desirable to suggest a critical plan for them. However, they both provide a more suitable vehicle for the working out of such large philosophical and symbolic themes as the crumbling of a way of life, the problem of good and evil, the downfall and redemption of man.” (Khuri: 121)

Among the aspects of a drama and a novel the understanding of which helps in writing critically about them, Khuri further mentions the following:

1. Understanding the development of the main characters and the reasons for their actions and for the changes they undergo;
2. Having clearly in mind the developments of the central plot and the relationship to it of any sub-plots;
3. Absorbing the setting and seeing how it influences character and action;
4. Considering the author's technique and style including point of view, method of characterization, plot structure, tempo, descriptive detail and language;
5. Thinking about how character, action, setting and style work together to produce the total effect of the drama or the novel and to define its theme. (Khuri: 121-122)

Mainly a drama, a novel or a short story is concerned directly with human life-with men and women and their relationships, with the opinions and emotions, the desires and drives by which they are directed, with their pleasures and grieves, their struggles, achievements and failures, they make the learners more thoughtful, focused and realistic to deal with day-to-day problems of rush and run life of digital era. Many of the characters in the stories, they feel them

connected with, they feel the same kind of weakness or strength they have inside them, they learn the dialogue manners. Going through dialogues of characters, their style and techniques of speech usage, students enrich their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

When a learner reads a text for critical evaluation, it exposes him/her to *“meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters.”* (Van: 2) Moreover, the reading of any literary genre and judging it enriches the EFL learners with a *“profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose.”* (Van: 2) Besides improving learners’ English language skills, teaching literary appreciation also

“appeals to their imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes and characters.” (Van: 2)

Through a careful analysis or critical appreciation of the interactional, intellectual and moral impressions of a prose fiction, the EFL learners will be able to discover the underlying philosophy of life to deal with all hurdles equipping them with good language skills. Moreover the humanistic approach of prose writings and the interactive activities planned by the instructor will assist students building up their professional communicative skills enhancing their knowledge as they extract information and construct the opinions.

Strategies for Successful Language Learning

“For second/foreign language learning, learning strategies play a very important role in the process that why some language learners succeed in their efforts while others are doomed to failure in seemingly identical.” (Noor & Al Qadi: 123)

For making language learning successful, self-directed and enjoyable for the learners through criticizing and appreciating a literary piece, all learning strategies should be recommended to them that have been stated in literature and Oxford (1990) has listed within the taxonomy as the following:

Direct Strategies		Indirect Strategies	
Memory Strategies	Creating mental linkage Applying Reviewing Employing	Metacognitive Strategies	Centering the learning Arranging and planning the learning Evaluating the learning
Cognitive Strategies	Practicing Receiving and sending Analyzing and reasoning Creating structure for L2 input & output	Affective Strategies	Lowering anxiety Encouraging Taking emotional temperature
Comprehension Strategies	Guessing intelligently Overcoming limitations in all four Skills	Social Strategies	Asking questions Cooperating with others Empathizing with others

Figure 1: Diagram of the strategy system: Direct and Indirect strategy groups and sets (Oxford 1990:17)

For successful language learning, a teacher should make the learners aware of different learning strategies so that they can choose the ones, which suit them best. Besides learners should be provided with required independence inside and outside the classroom as *“it is the learner’s involvement, the learner’s strategies and the learner’s ability to go their own ways that count, regardless of what the teacher is trying to do.”* (Noor & Al Qadi: 126)

Learner-centered Interactive Activities

Practice of teaching literary appreciation to EFL learners attempts to compromise a judicious blend of many of the ideas and teaching strategies with providing practical exposure and setting for learning and improvisation. It generally gives the learners the opportunity to know about how a literary piece should be read and judged, while at the same time *“providing*

opportunities for language use in communicative activities and task-based procedures.” (Harmer: 51) An instructor needs to take into consideration that teaching critical appreciation of literature doesn't “*become a disorganized ragbag of different activities with no obvious coherence or philosophy to underpin.*” (Harmer: 51) It should provide the learners the security of appropriate practices and activities depending on variables such as the learners' age, personal learning styles and backgrounds.

Believing that students need exposure, motivation and opportunities for language use, acknowledging that different learners may respond more or less to different stimuli, communicative activities and lessons should be given in such a way that learners feel emotionally engaged, curious, passionate and involved with what ever is going on in classroom. They should further think about language construction while writing their criticism on a literature work. Some study activities and discovery activities should be given to them so that they read the text together, find meaning of words and phrases, exert to interpret important quotes. Then the instructor should trigger them for language activation means writing on a paper, making an oral presentation or a power point presentation. To make the EFL learners engage, study and activate their language knowledge and for successful learning, different teaching sequences can be followed by the instructor such as straight arrows, boomerang or patchwork etc.

A variety of interactive classroom activities can be planned for supplementation of the given lessons for the learner making it more learner-centered. Learners can be advised to take up a literary piece such as a short poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos William or a short story *The Nightingale and The Rose* by Oscar Wilde or any one act play like *The Never-Never Nest* by Cedric Mount. Further activities should led the learners on one side to identify formal elements like motif, theme, key facts, catharsis or comic elements etc.in prose and literary terms such as similes, satire, irony, symbolism, imagery and metaphors etc. in poetry. Besides, they discover and relish the aesthetic value of literature and improve their language skills with their shared opinions and discussions. For this the instructor should divide the whole critical appreciation process in small fragmented activities such as:

- Reading and writing the critical summary
- Reading and writing the motif or the theme
- Discussing and explaining technique and style
- Identifying the poetic terms or literary devices used

- Finding out the purpose of the author for writing
- Analyzing the plot structure o the play or novel
- Writing about pattern and techniques

After the activities are over, the instructor should give feedback and work with the learners on the syntactic and semantic problems caused during the activities performed and assignments done, with a remedial lecture. Students can be further motivated for self-monitoring and self-evaluation correcting their speech and writing for accuracy in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. While working with one or more peers for language learning through activities, a learner will learn:

- Resourcing, grouping and labeling L2 material and knowledge
- Note taking of important points and ideas
- Recombining and constructing new sentences and phrases
- Elaborating and relating new information to concepts reserved in memory
- Retention of sounds for words, phrases or larger sentences
- Memorizing L2 keywords for further situational usage
- Contextualizing or placing the words and the phrases in a meaningful sequence
- Working with other peers, obtaining pool information and building team spirit
- Self-monitoring and self-evaluation

Although, for EFL learners, the task of critical appreciation can be a bit difficult lexically, semantically and grammatically but with well designed teaching methodologies and activities and supplemented with proper remedial sessions, it can be made interesting and desired result-oriented learning.

Conclusion

Critical appreciation of literature including reading a text and writing analysis, the learners improve the basic elements of language such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation for further situational usage in their professional and personal lives. Moreover, the interactive literary activities help them in building a positive attitude towards life and the spirit of team working while sharing their personal knowledge with each other. It improves language skills of EFL/ESL learners as they are going to find future job prospects based on their communicative

competence or flourish their trades nationally or internationally. This paper will be beneficial for the instructors who want to implement different methodologies for improving language skills via promoting studies of literature.

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