

Interpreting literary texts: Recognizing and overcoming challenges

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the difficulty faced by students in interpreting literary text. Also, this study opted to identify how learners cope with their difficulty. This study employed phenomenological approach. Focus group and in-depth interview were employed to solicit responses from the participants. The result revealed that the challenges faced by students were lack of prior knowledge, poor vocabulary and lack of awareness of literary devices. Moreover, in order to cope with the situation, students tend ask help from teacher, collaborate with their peers and make use of available learning materials to further enrich themselves.

Keywords: teaching literature, challenges, literary text, Phenomenology, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Critical thinking is not just one of the key skills, yet additionally an essential objective in British higher education. A research has recommended that international learners are consistently criticized as being non-critical thinkers because of the absence of critical thinking in their methodologies to studies (Tanaka, 2002; Turner, 2006). Past research additionally reported those faculty members with experience of teaching global learners have revealed disappointment because of the absence of critical thinking stated in the texts created by global students (Huang, 2008; Kim, 2003; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Robertson et al., 2000). Studies have likewise indicated that in Asian nations, the intellectual skills of comparing, evaluating, arguing, and introducing one's perspective are not completely developed, and students depend intensely on rote retention and passive learning which brings about great adversities for many international students, who are obliged to adjust to the new learning approach. Particularly, in the Department of English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, teachers encounter the same kind of difficulties as Farida and Sinha (2012) state: learners who enrolled in the English Departments in Bangladesh encountered great adversity in tackling literature.

In the Philippines, basic education is spent studying English and other subjects (see Department of Education website). The irony is that many of these subjects (as well as those courses taught in higher education) include the teaching of critical thinking in their perspective curricula, and yet, many "educated" Filipinos remain to be uncritical. They pointed that "Critical thinking concerns itself with criteria of epistemic adequacy: to be "critical" basically means to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concept, and so forth" (Burbules & Berk, 1999). With this situation cited above, it is in this research that aimed to determine what are the challenges faced by student and on how they cope with situation in analyzing literary texts.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine what are the challenges faced by students in interpreting literary text and how they cope with the situation. The steps in the study that might help in acquiring critical analysis on literary texts are intended to guide students' confusion about a text; help them decipher the message conveyed by a certain literary piece, and lessen the complexity of the meanings.

1.2 Research Questions:

- What are the challenges by students in interpreting literary text?
- How do students cope with the challenges they faced?

2. Theoretical Lens

According to the Schema theory, the process of interpretation is guided by the principle that input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of that schema must be compatible with the input information. This principle results in two basic models of information processing. Which are called bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing is evoked by the incoming data and is also called data driven, because the data enters the system through the best-fitting, bottom level schemata. Top-down processing takes place as the system makes general predictions based on higher level, general schema, which means background knowledge in reading comprehension. In the Schema theory, skill in reading depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world. Readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign its membership to an appropriate group of

concepts already stored in the memories. During the reading process, the reader brings information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture to the printed word to make decisions about what something "means".

2.1 Research Participants

The participants of this study were the 14 students enrolled in literature class. They comprised the in-depth and focus group discussion.

3. Literature Review

Literature is powerful in its capacity to hold a mirror to the world and uncover facts about it and permitting students to bear witness to realities (Eber, 2017). In creating various aspects and aptitudes of the English language, the role of literature is multi-aspect since it advances information on vocabulary, phrases, and indicated expression (Atmaca et al., 2016). There have been developing enthusiasm in literature and its utilization in language classroom, but few researchers are against literature and literary text and one reason is not utilizing literary content is that in works of famous writers and particularly poets we experience sentences that are syntactically erroneous so submitting such text to the learners has no utilization in teacher grammar (Shokrolahi, 2014). Literature was neglected, and more consideration was given to arguments and discussions which were increasingly practical and apparent in real-world circumstances (Khatib et al., 2011) cited by (Hassan, 2018). Researchers in the field of ELT have accentuated the advantages of utilizing literature for language instructing and learning purposes.

Reading and teaching literature subjects in language classes will exactly experience adversities. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, there are many advantages and justification for integrating literature into EFL classes and under these conditions where it is possible to exploit literary texts in language classes, thereby enabling young learners to encourage and benefit from critical thinking, analytical skills, and intercultural knowledge in the development of communication (Hassan, 2018). "In contrast with adult literature, children's literature, children's literature has a simpler language, fewer abstract ideas, less complicated themes and offers a wide range of stories as well" (Ghosn, 1977) cited by (Barman & Basu, 2013; Hassan, 2018).

Experimental studies have shed light on the role of the Theory of Mind and empathy in reading literary fiction. Five online experiments among adults of around 34 years old, found that reading literary fiction enhanced readers' affective and cognitive Theory of Mind, which they defined, from a neuropsychological rather than a literary perspective, as the 'ability to detect and understand others' emotions' and '[the] inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions' (Kidd & Castano, 2013). There is support for the notion that reading literary fiction may 'change the reader for the better (Hakemulder, Fialho & Bal, 2016): it may enhance their self-examination or self-reflection as well as their social understandings.

Literary analysis is an imperative stage in the improvement of the student's critical abilities. This idea is based on Blooms' Taxonomy which delineates that analysis should come at the fourth level just after comprehension and application (Alrubail, 2014). Meaning, students should know the depiction and substance of the content before they can analyze its components. "A critique of the use of literature in the EFL classroom deals with the overuse of what is known as the standard canon-the popular, classic, award-winning literary texts, that often contain language that is difficult for the learner to understand" (Van, 2009) cited by (Hassan, 2018).

Comprehension in reading and analyzing literary texts is quite difficult for English major students even for those in their 3rd year of schooling. Comprehension is the ability to go beyond the words, to understand the ideas in a text and the relationship that exist between those ideas (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). In addition, interpretation is comprehending and conveying the meaning of various experiences and situations, etc. (Facione, 2015).

Reading fiction not only develops literary text skills but also enables students to acquire knowledge and

express themselves in different subjects and situations (Alsup, 2013). Recent trends in national literacy policies – fostering understanding of creativity, cognition of feelings, and measurable skills of building 0 have however reactivated the need to investigate how literature is read and taught in school (Alsup, 2015; Ongstad, 2015).

Critical Analysis is a careful examination and evaluation of a text, image, or other work or performance (Nordquist, 2020). Research said that literary analysis is something we should do, not something the content accomplishes for us, which is the reason students should effectively learn methodologies for it (Tramantano, 2017). A quote from Bob Fecho and Jennifer Clinton saying, education is about change of minds perspectives, values, understandings, meanings, selves- really all tools through which we construct cultures and identity is the basis of the study in which it suggests that meaningful classroom discourse is also the best way to foster textual analysis (Tramantano, 2017).

In literary analysis, textual analysis is the most important method (Caulfield, 2019). Literary analysis can allow students to engage in exercises that shape their sense of self in the world, as well as exploring content and conversations in the classroom (Tramantano, 2017). Analyzing the literary text is indeed a procedure where there is no right or wrong answer (Alrubail, 2014).

4. Results

4.1 Challenges faced by students in interpreting literary texts

The following accounts were disclosed by students as to the challenges they faced.

The key participants of the study unveiled common core ideas they have experienced in analyzing literary text. Result shows that the common reasons of all participants were having adversity in analyzing text critically such as **lack of prior knowledge**. Readers should have prior knowledge in reading literature and in literary approaches. Prior knowledge has been shown to have a significant impact on students learning and performance, (e.g. Ausubel, 1996; Kalyuga, 2007; Ruppert, Golan Duncan, & Chinn 2007). The participants also found out that limited vocabulary was one of the reasons why readers have difficulty in understanding the text. In addition, limited vocabulary is a barrier in terms of in-depth analyzing vocabulary, used in the text that leads into misinterpretation, misconceptions and confusion. Richards and Renandya (2002: 255) stated that, the four macro skills are built on the foundation of vocabulary as a basic component of language ability

As the participants come up that, less familiarity of figurative language and other literary devices is also a huge challenged that the readers have faced. Thus, in reading literary text, it also requires mastery of literary devices particularly that most of the creative readings of famous authors have applied figurative language. Therefore, in order to acquire knowledge in analyzing literary text, students should have an interest in reading different literature and engaging literary criticism.

4.2 Coping Mechanisms of students in interpreting literary texts

Through the conduct of in-depth and focus group discussion, participants revealed that in order for them to cope with the challenges, they tend to ask help from teachers, collaborate with peers and utilize available learning materials to aid them in understanding the literary texts.

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