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Literature and critical literacy pedagogy in the EFL classroom: Towards a model of teaching critical thinking skills

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Abstract

Drawing on the numerous benefits of integrating literature in the EFL classroom, the present paper argues that the analysis of a fictional work in the process of foreign language acquisition offers a unique opportunity for students to explore, interpret, and understand the world around them. The paper presents strong evidence in favour of reader-centered critical reading as a means of encouraging observation and active evaluation not only of linguistic items, but also of a variety of meanings and viewpoints. The authors propose a model of teaching critical thinking skills focused on the reader's response to a literary work. The practical application of the method, which adopts the critical literacy approach as a tool, is illustrated through a series of activities based on the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling.

Keywords: critical thinking skills; critical literacy approach; literature; EFL classroom

1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a growing interest in the benefits of linking the learning of a foreign language to the study of its literature. However, the relationship between English language teaching and literature has not always been smooth. There have been moments of mutual understanding and empathy (Carter, 2007; Cook, 1994; Lazar, 1993), as might be the case of the early 1900s, marked by the dominance of the grammar translation method, which used literary texts as "illustrations of the grammatical rules" (Duff & Maley, 1990, p. 3). There have also been moments of a consistent rejection of the value of literature in the language classroom. In fact, in the mid-twentieth century literature almost disappeared from the language learning curriculum (Carter, 2007), and priority was given to approaches focused on linguistics. Despite those controversial viewpoints, at present, theories encouraging the inclusion of literature in language teaching prevail among teachers and scholars.

In explaining the benefits of integrating literature in the language classroom, scholars make an appeal to different values of the literary text. While Lazar (1993) claims that literature sharpens linguistic and cognitive skills and enhances students' understanding of the human condition, Horner (1983) points to literature as an important tool in the holistic development of students. Duff and Maley (1990) establish three criteria—linguistic, methodological, and motivational—to support the use of literary texts in the language classroom. A number of scholars emphasize the importance of culture and intercultural awareness as crucial factors in favour of the implementation of literature in EFL (Collie & Slater, 1987; Floris, 2004; Hernández Riwes Cruz, 2010; Tayebipour, 2009; Van, 2009).

A whole new paradigm of studies incorporating culture and literature as an essential part of language studies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Numerous works on the use of literary texts in the foreign language classroom highlight its importance as a means of enhancing critical thinking and creativity among language learners (Alvarez, Calvete, & Sarasa, 2012; Gajdusek, 1988; Ghosn, 2002; Sivasubramaniam, 2006; Van, 2009; Yaqoob, 2011). Thus, Ghosn (2002) states that by not taking things for granted, literature may bring changes in the students' attitudes towards the world. Along the same line, Langer (1997) argues that working with literary texts helps students to reflect on the world around them, opening "horizons of possibility, allowing them to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607). This characteristic of literature as a means of developing students' ability to think critically and to explore and discuss social problems is becoming especially valuable nowadays. Not surprisingly, in recent years there has been a strong move towards reintegration of literature into academic curriculum as a tool for developing critical awareness.

Literary texts have traditionally been employed as a source of studying grammar structures and vocabulary, and related exercises have aimed at general

comprehension of the text. However, recent studies have pointed to the possibility of engaging students into the process of giving meaning to the narrative strategies adopted by the author, stimulating them to cross interdisciplinary boundaries by including elements from areas such as postcolonial or gender studies. Thus, to encourage students to generate and communicate their personal interpretation of a literary work, the *reader-response approach* that assigns the reader an active role in meaning-making (Egan, 2005; Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, & Willingham, 2005; Hall, 2015; Yaqoob, 2011) becomes the most suitable method to negotiate reading for pleasure and critical thinking.

The advocates of different types of critical approaches to EFL are strongly interested in the relation between language and social changes. In this sense, critical thinking skills are often dealt with from an ideologically sensitive approach. This perspective has recently been enhanced by scholars who argue for the need of introducing *critical literacy pedagogy* into the language teaching curriculum as a means of promoting social justice (Crookes, 2010; Curtis & Romney, 2006; Nelson, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Developed by critical social theorists, the method implies teaching students to read texts in an active, reflective manner for a better understanding of power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships.

Though it is a relatively old concept, primarily related to the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970), critical pedagogy as an EFL/ESL teaching perspective is a rather new phenomenon that came to life in the 1990s. Since then, an increasing number of researchers have promoted the examination of relevant sociohistorical and political aspects of language learning and have encouraged the reorganization of the language curriculum along critical pedagogy lines (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Benesh, 2009; Degener, 2001; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Izadinia, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001).

Taking into consideration the major development of critical perspectives on teaching literature in the EFL language classroom, our aim is to present a model of using literature with high school students as a means of teaching critical thinking skills based on *critical literacy* and *reader-response theory*. Although they do it in different ways, both methods support critical analysis of literary texts, active learning, and a learner-centered approach.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Literature and critical thinking skills

The importance of teaching *critical thinking* as one of the basic learning skills has been widely recognized. According to Fisher (2001), the expression itself has become something of a "buzz word" in educational environments. Though the

critical thinking approach is not new, it has become extremely popular in educational settings over the last two decades. The intellectual roots of *critical thinking* can be traced back to ancient times, in particular, to the teaching practice of Socrates about 2000 years ago.

In modern times, one of the most popular definitions of *critical thinking* belongs to Glaser (1941), who describes it as

> (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience; (2) knowledge of the methods of local inquiry and reasoning; and (3) some skills in applying those methods. (p. 5)

Norris and Ennis (1989) define it as reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. Haskins (2006) insists on *critical thinking* as involving rational or objective thinking. He also identifies five steps that those thinking critically follow: (a) adopt the attitude of the critical thinker, (b) avoid critical thinking hindrances, (c) identify and characterize arguments, (d) evaluate information sources, and (e) evaluate argument. We should also bear in mind the version proposed by Fisher and Scriven (1997). According to these authors, *critical thinking* is "skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation" (p. 21). This definition is especially valuable for us as it focuses on the ability to interpret and evaluate oral and written texts as an essential part of critical thinking, an ability that is intrinsic to working with literature.

Working with literary texts in the English classroom can make a considerable contribution not only to learning a foreign language but also to inspiring *critical thinking*, which is inherent to a critical reading of a fictional work. For Lazere (1987), literature is an academic discipline that "can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking" (p. 3). Engaging imaginatively with a fictional work is a complex process that requires readers "to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meanings of the text" (Tung & Chang, 2009, p. 291). A personal response to a literary work urges students to interact with the text and with other students in order to communicate their interpretation of the work. They are expected to develop skills to help them understand hidden or implied meanings, separate facts from opinions, examine characteristics of the narrative from multiple points of view, reconstruct images from details, and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of life. In other words, close reading improves all those skills that are part of the *critical thinking process*: analysis, synthesis, argumentation, interpretation, evaluation, problem-solving, and reasoning, among others (Brunt, 2005; Facione, 2007).

2.2. Critical reading and critical thinking skills

When critical reading of a fictional work is included in a teaching proposal for the EFL classroom, current creative pedagogical approaches often appear to distance themselves from literary theory, and the engagement of the didactic proposal with one interpretative perspective or another remains unclear. An interdisciplinary approach that combines working with linguistic aspects of a literary work and encouraging critical thinking requires a suitable method of analysis of the text. Critical reading is mainly an act of interpretation, and adopting different methods of analysis can lead to different conclusions. The teacher should consider a variety of possibilities and opt for the one that privileges those elements of the literary work whose analysis contributes to the acquisition of *critical thinking skills* in the EFL classroom.

Reception theory is an umbrella term used to refer to "a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader" (Holub, 1984, p. xii). It is represented by the approaches developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfang Iser. Jauss's method, oriented towards a dialogical relation between reception and production, highlights the importance of a historical study of literature. He argues that

> the quality and rank of a literary work result neither from the biographical conditions of its origin, nor from its place in the sequence of the development of a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence, reception, and posthumous fame. (Jauss, 1982, p. 5)

His idea that the reception of a work can be assessed within an "objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language" (Jauss, 1982, p. 22) applies to the approach proposed in our paper.

For Iser (1974), reading enacts an interaction between the structure of the literary work and the reader. The text is viewed as a complex web of different perspectives: narrator, characters, plot, and narrative devices employed by the author. In the process of understanding the meaning of a work, the reader often confronts his own expectations, which may result in a revision of his premise and perspective. By making the readers aware of the limits of their perception, the literary text is identified as a source of aesthetic pleasure and moral inspiration. "In this way"—Iser (1974) claims—"the reader is forced to discover the hitherto unconscious expectations that underlie all his perceptions, and also the whole process of consistency-building as a prerequisite for understanding" (p. xiv). A number of theorists (Barthes, 1969; Culler, 1982; Eagleton, 1983; Fish,

1980; Foucault, 1991) point to the limitations of Iser's theory and discuss the need to take into account the implications of the approach adopted for the analysis of a literary work for the understanding of the text.

Reader-response criticism is another widely accepted term that refers to the shift from the author of the text to the reader and the text itself. The term has applied to a variety of theorists such as Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and Jonathan Culler, among others. Tompkins (1980) argues that "reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words *reader*, *the reading process*, and *response* to mark out an area for investigation" (p. ix). For instance, Wolfgang Iser, "one of the most important initiators of reception theory, is usually regarded as a 'reader-response critic' as well" (Holub, 1984, p. xii). Although there seem to be some features that separate *reception theory* from *reader-response criticism*, our proposal draws on the essence of both concepts, that is, the focus on the interaction between the reader and the text. In the present paper, we refer to the concept *reader-response theory* as some of the most significant studies about the benefits of critical reading of literary texts in the language classroom adopt this term (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009; Boyd-Batstone, 2002; Courtland, French, Owston, & Stead, 1998; Golden, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2002).

This approach displays numerous open-ended possibilities which enable students to interact with the literary work and project their views on the meaning given to the text. Thus, in a complex process of anticipation and retrospection, they connect the fictional world with the familiar world, and gradually become aware of the meanings given to literary representations and the feelings these representations evoke. Reading and the resulting response activate previous knowledge of syntax and semantics, and new linguistic structures are learned and mastered alongside the development of critical thinking. Students' abilities to reflect critically, relating experience and theory, undergo positive transformation in the course of formulating and discussing their vision of the text.

To illustrate our proposal, we have chosen to design a series of activities based on a critical reading of Kipling's (1910) poem "If," which is why our theoretical framework also takes into account two theories that focus on the analysis of poetry. The proposed critical reading of the poem departs from the highly influential theory called *practical criticism approach* first developed by the Cambridge critic I. A. Richards (1929) in his seminal work *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*. Richards's theory emerged as a result of a number of experiments that aimed at introducing students to "close reading" of poems and exploring "the astonishing variety of human responses" they cause (Richards, 1929, p. 11). He provides a list of the main difficulties that readers encounter when they discuss poetry and analyzes them. Difficulties, according to Richards,

include making out the sense of poetry, sensuous apprehension, the place of imagery, and mnemonic irrelevances, among others.

Widdowson (1992) adopts a slightly different approach under the name of *practical stylistics*. He defines two possible roles of the readers when they examine poetry: *animator* and *author*. As an *animator* the reader's task is simply "to activate meanings deemed to be in the text", that is, he "provides an exegesis." On the other hand, the *author* "provides an interpretation" (p. x). Widdowson argues that "the experience of poetry, and its educational relevance, depend on the reader assuming an author role" (p. xi). What is important for him is not the interpretation, but "the process of exploration of meaning; not the assertion of effects but the investigation of the linguistic features which seem to give warrant to these effects" (p. xiv).

2.3. Critical literacy approach: History and theory

The idea of using literature as a tool for developing critical thinking skills is best represented by the *critical literacy approach*. The development of *critical literacy skills* enables students to interpret different types of texts using critical lens. Students are particularly encouraged to explore social phenomena and their effect on human relations in order to acquire tools that enable them to explore critically traditional norms and values.

Critical literacy takes its roots in the socio-cultural view of language, critical philosophy, pedagogy, educational sociology, feminist concerns and post-structualist theory (Gee, 1996; Janks, 2010; Van, 2009). Actually, the term *critical literacy* was introduced by social critical theorists concerned with issues of social injustice and inequality. They were particularly worried about power structures that dominate modern society, as well as the role of education for increasing or eliminating inequalities.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), beyond doubt one of the main contributors to the *critical pedagogy philosophy*, proposes a methodological approach based on problem-posing education that aims at making students critical thinkers. A set of different situations or problems are presented in class and students are encouraged to reflect on them and offer possible solutions. Freire (1970) claims that this process involves uncovering of reality, striving for the emergence of consciousness, and, finally, critical intervention in reality. The teaching methodology offered by Freire (1970) aims to counteract the "banking model" of education that considers students mere "depositories of knowledge." Opportunities to move beyond the characteristics of "banking education" include, according to Breunig (2005), employing methodological practices that support students' active learning, multiple "ways of knowing," multiple sources of knowledge, as well as multiple ways of assessment.

The role of the teachers as dynamic coordinators of the learning process is formative and creative at the same time. They are responsible for providing appropriate conditions which enable students to act as active agents of their own transformation (Kincheloe, 2008). Besides, teachers help students to communicate effectively and learn from each other. According to Degener (2001), the teachers' role is essential for the successful implementation of the method as they design, plan, and put into practice educational activities.

When applied to language teaching, this approach aims at adding "critical quality to the existing textbooks and everyday instruction" (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012, p. 224). Given the relation between language and discourse, and the social nature of the latter, this method helps students interpret the texts they read in an attempt to challenge beliefs that sustain particular social structures of power. Both language learning and language teaching are viewed as politically tinted processes that are at the heart of educational curricula (Norton & Toohey, 2004). As far as the curriculum is concerned, there is a strong conviction that it should be constructed taking into account students' experiences and realties, with special emphasis on the use of authentic material and realia (Ohara, Saft, & Crookes, 2001).

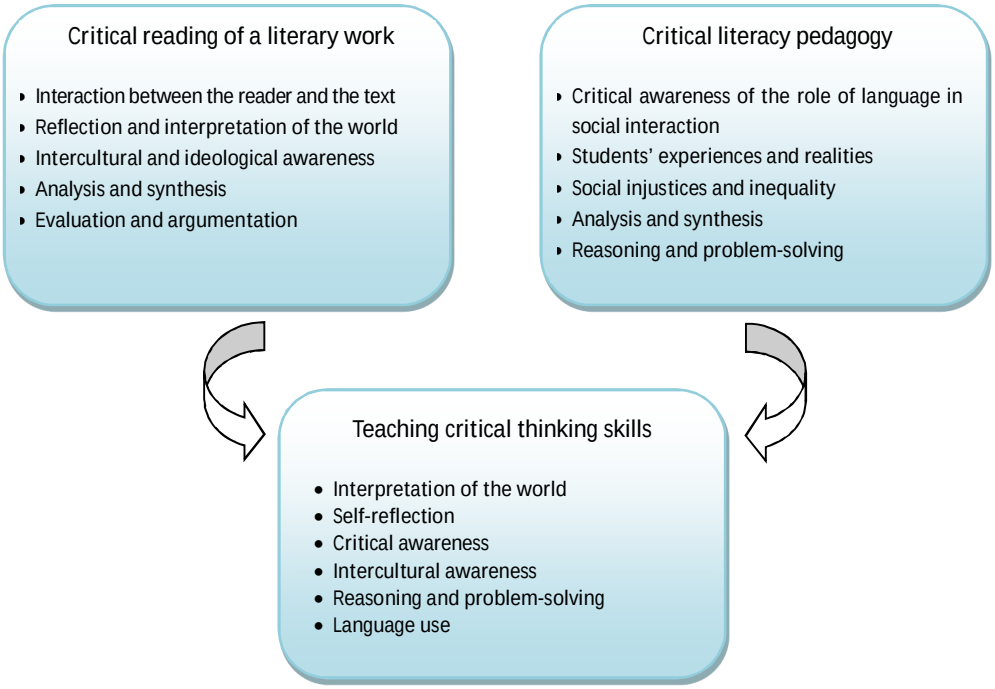

Figure 1 Model of teaching critical thinking skills: Reader-centered critical reading and critical literacy pedagogy

Considering the main characteristics of the *reader-centered critical reading approach* and *critical literacy pedagogy*, we would like to argue that the two methods intersect, overlap, and interact at various points. Figure 1, created to represent the theoretical rationale behind our model, illustrates the intersections—strategies endorsed by both theories—which provide an opportunity to teach and develop *critical thinking skills* in the EFL classroom.

As we see it, *critical thinking skills* involved in working with literary texts in the EFL classroom can be broadly defined as a set of processes whose main dimensions include the interpretation of the world, self-reflection, intercultural awareness, critical awareness, reasoning and problem-solving, and language use.

The *model of teaching critical thinking skills* we propose integrates a critical reading approach that focuses on the reader's response, taking into account the author and the context of the creation of the literary work for its interpretation. Our model builds on the idea that the intersection between *reader-centered critical reading* and *critical literacy* provides a unique opportunity for students to reflect on how the linguistic features of the text affect the creation of meaning and how this meaning is affected by and affects their personal experience and understanding of the social phenomena represented in the fictional work.

2.4. Critical literacy approach in practical terms: Application of the model of teaching critical thinking skills

Though it was not initially developed as an approach to working with literature, *critical literacy pedagogy* found its place both in mainstream English classrooms and EFL classrooms (Wallace, 1995). Foreign language teachers became especially interested in *critical literacy pedagogy* after the mid 1990s, when Freire's ideas were adopted into the EFL/ESL language classes (Benesch, 2009; Ohara, Saft & Crookes, 2001). This method provides a key opportunity for developing critical awareness of the role of language in social relations, including those sustained by power structures, that is, how texts are related to issues of identity, political power, gender, ethnicity, class, and religion.

All texts, using a set of linguistic devices, seek to make readers see the world in a particular way. Readers' response is not neutral either, as they bring "to the act of reading a set of discursive lens, each of which will interact with the discursive designs of a text in a particular way, ranging from submission to resistance" (Locke & Cleary, 2011, p. 121). The *critical literacy approach* stimulates readers to engage in discursive acts and discover the way a particular text is a part of a wider set of discursive practices, reflecting social-cultural, ideological, and economic realities. In other words, students explore the impact of social and historical phenomena on the literary work; they learn to recognize the

ways in which narratives construct different points of view on a particular topic; they become aware of the fact that texts are not neutral and that language and linguistic devices may affect our understanding of a text; finally, students learn to identify value judgments and bias, as well as to reflect on their own value judgments (Locke & Cleary, 2011).

In designing activities to accomplish these aims, it is important to consider the four curricular components proposed by the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) and later adapted by Kern (2003) for addressing the full range of literacies. The components, which are explained in the following list, are: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice.

1. Situated practice refers to immersion in language use. The focus is always on the here and now: students' lives and experiences, their thoughts, opinions and expectations. No conscious reflection or metalanguage is used on this level.
2. Overt instruction involves systematic, analytic and conscious understanding of the text. Various elements contributing to meaning are identified, talked about, and learnt. In this way, overt instruction introduces elements of conscious analysis, allowing students to talk about the meaning design process.
3. Critical framing deals with the reflective dimension of literacy instruction. It involves understanding the relationships between different elements of the linguistic system, communicative context, and sociocultural context.
4. Transformed practice involves transformation and transduction (Kern, 2003). According to Kern (2003), the former concept refers to reshaping texts within a single mode, while the latter deals with changing the form of representation form one mode to another.

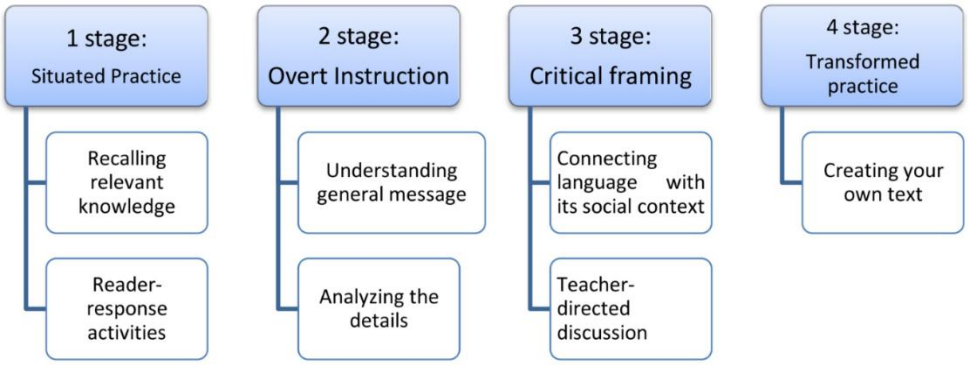

Figure 2 Application of the model of teaching critical thinking skills

To translate the theoretical perspective of our model of teaching critical thinking skills into the reality of EFL teaching, we have adapted the four elements proposed by the New London Group (Cazden et al. 1996) into a strategy that reflects the complex intersections between reader-centered critical reading and critical literacy pedagogy. Figure 2 has been designed as a graphic representation of the way the four aspects mentioned above are projected into a learning sequence, suitable for the application of the model of teaching critical thinking skills.

The first stage includes a set of prereading activities whose main purpose is to activate students' schemata on the topic. Students try to recall relevant information from the long-term memory. They will later read the text and share their feelings, ideas, and experiences on the topic under consideration. Some activities in this stage can include creative writing, letter writing, readers' theater, and so on.

In the second stage the students read the text for general comprehension. The teacher checks understanding through general comprehension questions and a discussion of some key ideas of the text. For a more detailed analysis, the students read the text again, this time paragraph by paragraph, analyzing the main idea of each paragraph, its structure, and the way the key elements fit together. Close reading should help students to understand the inner logic of the literary text. Cohesive and coherence textual devices should be taken into consideration. Other activities may include constructing knowledge maps, teaching genres, revision and editing, and so on.

The third stage deals with the students' conscious attention to relationships between linguistic forms and social-cultural contexts. They explore the writer's attitude, point of view and intentions through the analysis of the lexical and structural choices he makes. The most adequate procedure for the successful completion of the task is a teacher-directed discussion.

In the fourth stage the students are required to create their own texts. These can consist of reshaping the original texts within the same mode (for example, rewriting a dialogic extract as a narration) or changing a fragment from one mode to another (as might be the case with creating a short video based on the text). Some other activities might include genre or stylistic reformulation of the text, inventing story continuations, translation, and so on.

3. Practical illustration of the model of teaching critical thinking skills

To put our model into practice, we have chosen Kipling's poem "If." It has been selected as the British favourite one on numerous occasions, on which it is widely quoted. The poem reads as a piece of advice given by a father to his son on what it means to be a real man. The characteristics of the text make it highly attractive for students and suitable for EFL teaching:

"If"
If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son! (Kipling, 1910)

3.1. Stage I: Situated practice

3.1.1. Pre-reading activities: Recalling relevant knowledge

1. In his poem, Kipling describes some essential qualities a mature man should have. Can you think of any characteristics a person should have in order to be considered mature? Compare your answer with the poem after you have read it.

2. Read the following quotes about maturity and being a mature person. Do you agree with them?
   Discuss your answers in groups. Try to give your own definition of what maturity is.
   - "Maturity is often more absurd than youth and very frequently is most unjust to youth." Thomas A. Edison
   - "Maturity is when your world opens up and you realize that you are not the center of it." M. J. Croan
   - "Youth ends when egotism does; maturity begins when one lives for others." Herman Hesse
   - "The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That's the day we truly grow up." John C. Maxwell
3. Assuming that the poem tries to create a "set of rules" to describe the characteristics of a mature man and inspire people to follow them, which of these words would you expect to find in the text? Explain your choice.
   Dream, think, triumph, stomach, sound, city, abyss, delete, hate, light, wise, hurt

3.1.2. Post-reading activities: Reader-response activities

1. Students read the poem and comment on how they feel about the ideas expressed in the poem. Are they relevant to the contemporary world and to being a student? Why/why not?
2. Students comment on different situations when they had to give a piece of advice to a friend on how to behave in a particular occasion. What happened then? What piece of advice did they give? Did it work?

3.2. Stage II: Overt instruction

3.2.1. Understanding general message

Students read the poem again and answer the general comprehension questions:

- What is the general message in the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling?
- What is the main idea of the first stanza?
- The second stanza focuses on overcoming obstacles that can impede our progress through life. How can we do it?
- What advice does the poet, Rudyard Kipling, give when a person fails in his life, according to the text?
- What are the pieces of advice the father gives in the third and fourth stanzas?

- Can the series of advice offered in "If" by Rudyard Kipling be applied to the present-day reality?

3.2.2. Analyzing the language details

1. Identify the qualities Kipling describes and divide them into positive and negative.
2. Look at the syntactic structure of the poem. What type of grammatical structure is used by the author?
3. Identify the features of conditional sentences used in the poem. In pairs, create your own conditional sentences related to becoming a mature person following the same structure as in the poem.
   You will be a real man/woman if . . .
4. Choose five conditional sentences and change them into direct advice using *should*.
   Example: *If you can wait and not be tired by waiting.*
   You should wait and not be tired by waiting.

3.3. Stage III: Critical framing. Connecting language with its social context

1. Identify five adjectives and five verbs used by the author. Analyse the emotions they evoke in the poem.
2. The poem is written as one long conditional sentence. Why do you think the author chose this grammatical structure? Does the syntactic structure of the poem contribute to its general message? Why/Why not?
3. The father uses the second person pronoun *you* throughout the poem. In which way do you think the use of this pronoun contributes to the creation of a special link between the author and the reader?
4. There are no women mentioned anywhere in the poem. Why? Do you think the poem is meant just for boys?
5. "If" is considered one of the British most favourite poems. In fact, Lines 11 and 12 appear at the entrance to the central court at Wimbledon. Why do you think it is so popular?
6. Compare Kipling's "If" with William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus." Discuss some similarities and differences between the two poems.

3.4. Stage IV: Transformed practice. Creating your own texts

1. Students rewrite the poem changing it to a short story. They can add as many extra details as they need to make up a new story.

2. Students rewrite the poem changing it into a letter written by a father to his son. They have to keep the conventions of an informal letter.
3. Students are asked to write an essay reflecting on what being a man means for them nowadays.

4. Pilot sample of the model of teaching critical thinking skills

The model of teaching critical thinking skills described in the preceding sections was put into practice in a workshop as part of a Master's course at the Complutense University of Madrid during the academic year 2015-2016. The Master's course was aimed at EFL/ESL secondary teachers training. The workshop involved 19 participants and its objective was to familiarise students with the implementation of literature-based activities that enhance the development of critical thinking skills in the EFL/ESL classroom. The participants were asked to assess the sample designed to illustrate the model we propose.

For this purpose, our model of teaching critical skills was introduced to students during the first week of classes. Two subsequent sessions were devoted to sample implementation and its discussion in small groups. At the end of the workshop we conducted an interview with each of the groups in order to evaluate the quality of the sample proposed. Students were asked to decide whether all the aspects of the model intended to encourage the development of critical thinking skills were dealt with in the sample and to what extent (from 1 *not present* to 5 *fully developed*). The aspects the participants evaluated included (a) the interpretation of the world, (b) self-reflection, (c) critical awareness, (d) intercultural awareness, (e) reasoning and problem solving, and (f) language use.

The results obtained from the assessment process led us to examine the qualities and limitations of our proposal. The aspects related to language use and critical awareness of the role of language obtained the highest scores (with means of 4.7 and 4.5, respectively). Students believed that the sample activities made them reflect on the use of language in a particular social context. In the same vein, the interpretation of the world and self-reflection were viewed as widely explored throughout the proposed activities (with a mean of 4.1 in both cases). As most of the participants stated, a great number of tasks were related to the readers' world and involved students into direct interaction with the text. On the other hand, most of the participants reported to have found limitations in two aspects of the proposal: problem-solving and intercultural awareness (with means of 3.5 and 3.1, respectively). The results show that these particular areas require further analysis and reinforcement.

5. Conclusions

The benefits of integrating critical reading of a literary work to achieve students' holistic language acquisition are evident. On articulating this view, the present paper has explored a wide range of perspectives underpinning the advantages of developing a *model of teaching critical thinking skills* in the EFL classroom. An interdisciplinary approach to developing students' ability to think critically has brought to light the implications of the intersection between *learner-conscious critical reading* and *critical literacy pedagogy*. The main purpose of our model is to develop skills for thought and to provide students with critical tools for self-knowledge and personal growth. To illustrate our model, we have designed a series of activities focused on the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling. Although the model was piloted in a workshop with students taking a Complutense University of Madrid Master's course aimed at the formation of EFL/ESL secondary teachers, it goes without saying that a further, more ample sampling and quantitative research is needed in order to reach definite conclusions.

Our proposal views *critical thinking* as a type of *literacy*, which is why it takes as a starting point the four curricular components developed by the New London Group (Cazden et al. 1996) that contemplate the teaching of the full range of literacies. These components— situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformation practice—have been creatively transformed into *four stages* and adapted to the characteristics of the *reader-response approach* to literature. Thus, in the process of interpreting the meanings encoded in the literary text, students connect to the writer's beliefs and relate them to conceptions and general values that determine social relations and shape our identities. The simultaneous analysis of figurative language and linguistic items encourages sophistication and spontaneity, hence confidence and fluidity in the use of EFL as a means of expressing complex ideas that reflect students' intellectual and emotional response to the fictional work.

Critical thinking skills have enormous value for students as they not only enable them to interpret and understand different viewpoints in the context of EFL classroom but also offer them an opportunity to create their own reflective learning styles. Our model seeks to enhance the ability to construct and justify one's response and to reassess critically one's expectations as to the meaning of the text. A pedagogical model that includes observation, description, interpretation, and production paves the way for future research on the possibility of integrating creative writing in the EFL classroom.

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