
Fostering Critical Thinking Using Language of Literature – A Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract

Teaching of Literature is always a rewarding and learning experience as it offers scope to broaden the horizons of thinking by virtue of open-ended discussion in the classroom. Literature is taught at different levels and based on the level and contextual requirement the teacher uses the text and sometimes goes beyond the text to critique, analyse, evaluate and conceptualize. The participant in the classroom is likely to receive multiple benefits such as developing sense of appreciation, aesthetic thinking and critical acumen. Literature and its language is often a linguistic treat as language in literature is used creatively and authentically used. The situations in novels, poems and plays provide a plethora of ideas which contribute towards enhancing the sense and sensibility. Its language comes with many connotations and denotations giving an opportunity for the teacher to foster critical thinking which demands reasoning, clarity of thought, accuracy in thinking, logic and fairness in inference etc. The current paper *Fostering Critical Thinking Using Language of Literature – A Pedagogical Perspective* aims at exploring lines from literary texts where in a teacher can judiciously use them to inculcate sense of critical thinking. The paper makes an attempt to bring into context certain treasured utterances from literary texts and explore the possibility of fostering critical thinking skills.

Key words: Language, Literature, Soft skills, Critical Thinking

Critical thinking enables an individual to use his/her sense of judgment by rational assessment and scientific evaluation. Considering critical thinking as a skill, it is overambitious to think of imparting it within the four walls of classroom or through modules of teaching consisting of case studies. However to a greater extent, discussion on soft skills namely decision making, team work, leadership, positive thinking and critical thinking using sources of literature, anecdotes and real life situations may broaden the understanding of the course participant soft skills or life skills cannot be placed in a rigid curricular framework as they have to be imbibed through one's own cognitive thinking, experiential learning and one's own perceptions.

To nurture cognitive thinking and for skill enrichment literature is an inexhaustible source which can be judiciously used in the classroom as it promotes creativity, critical thinking, authentic use of language, aesthetic perception and human attitude besides providing ample scope for gaining better and succinct understanding of aforementioned soft skills. Literature which essentially deals with problems of human existence, the conflicts, the dilemmas, the resolutions and the crises situations offerings the readers a treat of feelings, a pack of

emotions, a bundle of thoughts, a bonanza of same ideas and variety of people with varied attitudes undoubtedly contributes towards fostering of critical thinking.

Gillian Lazar in his seminal work, literature and language teaching opines, “Literature is a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions. It helps students to become more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally.” (p.24)

Further, language of literature is

- Correctly used
- Creatively used
- Critically used
- Carefully used

Any poet, novelist, playwright or a critic looks for best possible expressions and supplies apt expressions to suit the context. The use of language evokes the emotions, thoughts and feelings that they wish to convey. The choice of language and its vocabulary is crucial for any work of literature as the words carry different meanings, literal, figurative, contextual. Symbolic, connotative, denotative, social and grammatical.

Against this background, the current paper endeavors to put for the certain literary sources where in opportunities to foster critical thinking among the learners can be explored. In the current scenario, especially in technological institution where in there is greater thrust on skill component, literary texts have taken back seat and they are sparingly used.

While dealing with soft skills mostly teachers depend on text books which are in plentitude and which hardly ensure the consistency of ideas. The discussion often is confined to definitions of critical thinking or decision thinking (whatever skill is dealt), its features, types and couple of illustrations. Given a situation where the teacher or trainer gets adequate time, use of literature in the classroom where soft skills are taught, a more enriching experience can be lent which implicitly develops a better perception and broad understanding.

Before presenting certain treasured utterances / quotes from literature which provides insights on critical thinking, the theoretical basis of using literature is to be considered. The postulates of cognitive theory which consider reasoning, evaluation and creative output as key dimension of learning also vindicate the stand literary sources can be suitably utilized in the classroom for soft skills training. The constructivists’ theory of learning which calls for learning on the basis of experience and past knowledge is also relevant in this context of discussion. Literature with its creative output presents varied experiences germinating from the imaginative prowess intellectual acumen and critical judgment of the literary artist. It has a humor potential to provide knowledge in the form of description of people, places events, history and institutions.

Critical thinking involves creativity problem solving ability and the caliber to analyse the situation. My attempt in this paper is to bring into context a few lines from different texts of literature where in the possibility to generate ideas about critical thinking exist.

Source: Julius Caesar

Genre: Drama

Artist: William Shakespeare

Quote: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. (Act III, Scene II). These are the words uttered by Brutus to defend himself before the furious mob after the assassination of Caesar. The rhetoric used by Shakespeare reflects his creative genius and linguistic brilliance, logic, reasoning and deeper thinking. If the teacher/ trainer provide the background of this utterance and assign a task of analyzing the critical thinking abilities of the course participants surface the demonstration of Brutus' wisdom, his ambition, the haunting guilty of killing his soul's friend and the need to exonerate himself from the crime. The crisis in the mind of Brutus can be an apt example and a useful source to foster critical thinking.

Critical thinking lies in the equipoise that lies in the quote. Both are dearer to Brutus but his greater inkling towards Rome is presented in these lines.

Source: Hamlet

Genre: Drama

Artist: William Shakespeare

Quote: I will speak daggers to her, but use none. (Act II Scene II)

Hamlet is one such play which not only perplexed the readers but critics for its complexities that lie in character of Prince Hamlet. There are quick a good number of lines from the play where in ideas on critical thinking can be explored for example Hamlet's address to Horatio when he says, *There is either good or bad in this world, Horatio, thinking makes it so* is worth mentioning quote which reveal the philosophical disposition of Hamlet and his intense thinking in the hour of crisis as he is grappled with conflicting thoughts.

The above lines offer scope to unearth the logic of Hamlet. On one hand his he is so enraged about disloyal and unfaithful nature of his mother and on the other he is restricted to take any drastic step considering the respect for womanhood as prescribed in scriptures. Not merely critical thinking, the quote can be used to teach communication and inter personal skills. Hamlet wants to question the infidelity of mother by using piercing words but without any intention to wound her.

Source: My Last Duchess

Artist: Robert Browning.

Genre: Poetry

Collection: Dramatic Lyrics

Quote: I gave commands then all her smiles stopped together

The above lines from the famous dramatic monologue **My Last Duchess**, give the quintessence of the Dukes character who was jealous, ruthless sadistic, possessive and cruel. The teacher/ trainer dealing with critical thinking can interestingly present the context of the poem where in the analytical ability which is one of the crucial dimensions of critical thinking.

It also provides an opportunity to juxtapose the characters of the duke and Duchess and perceive their traits. What is essential for the activity is the presence of sufficient background of the poem given by the teacher. The levels of learners may vary but each learner may come forward with his her own analysis about the situation.

Source: Paradise Lost Book I

Poet: John Milton

Quote: Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.

The above lines from Milton's classic *Paradise Lost* speaks about the leadership quality of Satan, the arch rival and his commitment to remain a master not a slave. *Paradise lost* is a perhaps source of discourse between evil and good glorifying the mission of John Milton to justify the ways of god to man.

Given adequate background to the learners the task to evaluate the character of Satan and his democratic thinking of not to remain subservient. On the other hand contradictory ideas denouncing Satan may also surface. The debate between reigning and screwing may bring about the critical outlook.

At this juncture before concluding it is not out of place to mention the limitations in using sources of literature for fostering critical thinking. Heterogeneity of classroom, cross cultural aspects, linguistic ability aptitude of the learner towards literature and teachers limited knowledge about literary sources and also the academic constrains are some of the limitations to explore literary sources.

Self-access sheets may be prepared by the teacher and group activities also can be planned. The texts of literature with all its splendid expressions of language and their intensity to foster critical thinking offer a rewarding experience making both teaching and learning experiences more and more stimulating.

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