

Student-centered Classroom Activities for Teaching Literary Text Interpretation and Fostering Critical Thinking Skills in the Context of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Considering the traditional teacher-centered approach practiced in Bangladeshi undergraduate literature classrooms, the intention of the authors is to offer alternative student-centered approaches explaining how the classroom activities designed for teaching text interpretation can also complement Critical Thinking (CT) skill development. The significance of this approach is twofold, relieving teachers from designing separate CT tasks while securing both outcomes of learning how to interpret a text and developing CT skills through students' active participation in a classroom. Though teaching text interpretation and developing CT skills are considered two different pedagogic avenues assuming requirements of different teaching strategies, however, the authors' attempt is unique here as they intend to propose how these two avenues are potentially complementary to each other. Hence, this paper utilizes two theoretical models, Sandra N. Harper's (1988) Three-phase sequence approach to teaching how to interpret a literary text and Numrich's (2006) sequence of tasks to develop CT skills. The paper is a non-survey study based on existing literature on classic classroom activities.

Keywords: teaching literature; CT skills; active learning; interpreting text; classroom activity

I. Introduction:

In a literature classroom interpreting a text and developing Critical Thinking (CT) skills are integral parts of the whole teaching and learning process. Meaningful interpretation of a text is completed by the CT skills that endow a student to function more humanly beyond the classroom. For this, the teaching-learning process needs to shift from a traditional teacher-centered method to a student-centered one. In this regard, engaging and collaborative classroom activities are able to promote necessary mental activity for students rather than traditional lectures on texts.

English Studies is a popular discipline in the Higher education scenario of Bangladesh yet the teaching and learning approaches generally practiced in the majority of the English Departments are quite traditional in style, especially in the case of teaching English Literature in undergraduate classrooms. Students only listen to the teacher's lectures in this case and process the literary text which keeps them as passive entities in the classroom (Amin, 2019, Dutta, 2001). The reason behind this is the hereditary legacy of lecture-based teaching in the English Departments of Bangladesh where training on effective teaching is absent. Novice literature teachers directly confront large-sized classes with very little knowledge of 'how' to teach in a meaningful way, suffer from a set of anxieties and fail to craft active learning in the classroom due to this lack of training (Alam, 2005; Showalter 2003). Effective teaching on the other hand requires creativity, monitoring, evaluation, selection, execution, adjustment, and frequent use of teaching techniques to determine the degree of active learning for students (Bay, 2012, Knutson, 2014, Mulligan 2011). Therefore, the didactic teacher-centered approach hinders active learning resulting in a fundamental lack of CT skill development in undergraduate classrooms.

Literature cultivates humanistic perspectives in its learners that can be reinforced by employing active learning and using student-centered teaching methods in the classroom. The transmission of knowledge by the teachers is not only to be transacted later when it's needed, rather it should immerse the students with their realization of using education to think, question, act and react towards the world and its systems to make it a better place (Hooks, 1994). It is a matter of concern how actively the teacher communicates the necessary outcomes of literature with their students in a classroom. Hence, activating CT among the learners can be done by employing student-centered classroom activities.

This paper discusses how to incorporate active learning while teaching how to interpret a literary text in undergraduate classrooms using engaging activities which concurrently create scope to develop CT skills. Encountering text, making meaning, analyzing the evidence, dealing with language, and reaching a conclusion comprise the meaningful interpretation

of a text which is crucial in a literature classroom context. CT involves discovering the meaning and substantiating the interpretation of a text by weighing the evidence. Also while interpreting a text CT reflects students' mental engagement, experiential learning, decision-making, problem-solving abilities, and comprehension of the text (Esplugas and Landwehr, 1996). This is such a rational approach that demands a shift from the didactic paradigm and introduces active methods in the classroom.

This paper infuses Sandra N Harper's (1988) three-phase approach to teaching how to interpret a text and Numrich's (2006) Sequence of CT tasks to address three primary objectives in an undergraduate literature classroom: interpreting a text, developing CT skills, and initiating active classroom environment. This is a non-survey-based study of a number of literature classroom activities designed for undergraduate early years where target students can be seen as non-specialists. Considering the traditional teacher-centered approach practiced in Bangladeshi undergraduate literature classrooms, the intention of the authors is to offer alternative student-centered approaches explaining how the classroom activities designed for teaching text interpretation can also complement CT skill development as well. The significance of this approach is twofold, relieving teachers from designing separate CT tasks while securing both outcomes of learning how to interpret a text and developing CT skills through students' active participation in a classroom. Though teaching text interpretation and developing CT skills are considered two different pedagogic avenues assuming requirements of different teaching strategies, however, the authors' attempt is unique here as they intend to propose how these two avenues are potentially complementary to each other.

II. Theoretical Implication:

The justification for using Sandra Harper's three-phase approach to interpret text and Numrich's sequence of CT tasks is due to the capacity these models to direct critical reading that requires readers' personal emotional interaction with the text and help make meaning from their own perspectives. Critical reading is interpretation and theorists have taken a significant turn in the 80s and 90s prioritizing the reader and text over the author and work. With the rise of Reception theory and Reader-response theory, interpreting texts results in numerous open-ended possible meanings, anticipation and retrospection, connecting the fictional world with the familiar world, gradual awareness and meanings given to literary representations, evoking feelings, activating and learning previous and new linguistic structures, and mastering CT (Rosenblatt 1993, Iser 1978, Holub 1984 cited in Bobkina & Stefanova 2016). These trajectories to interpret a text are central to the designing of classroom activities in Sandra Harper's Three-phase approach. This

approach consists of three consecutive phases in a sequence, the first phase, *Pre-Interpretation*, is preparatory in nature where students participate in pre-interpretation activities that enable their perceptive ability through systematic practices. In the second, the *Interpretation* phase consists of activities that guide the students to personally encounter and interact with the text. The third phase is *Synthesis* where students engage in summative activities enabling them to unify their learning.

In the same vein, the addressing of the humanistic engagement of the readers in these theories clearly necessitates the adjustment of CT skills during class activities. Therefore, Numrich's (2006) sequence of CT skill tasks is discussed here to create a basis so that the authors could logically present how the text interpretation activities can be substantially complementary to the development of CT skills. Also, the authors have found Numrich's model feasible as it is closely adjustable to the pre-interpretation, interpretation, and post-interpretation/synthesis phases of Sandra Harper's model. Numrich's model is a scaffolding sequence of tasks that takes into account of learner's level and advances gradually from a lower to a higher order of CT tasks (Afifuddin 2017, Beaumont 2010, Gomez-Rodriguez 2018). Hence, the claim is justifiable that Sandra Harper's Three-phase activities are complementary to Numrich's sequence as the former formulates its activities from preparatory to more complex ones. Numrich's sequence of tasks includes seven CT tasks from three different perspectives. *Observing and Identifying assumptions* correspond to the first perspective, *Focus on the students' world*. *Interpreting and Understanding* relate to the second phase, *Focus on the text*. Other tasks, *inquiring further, analyzing and evaluating, and making decisions* are included in the third perspective, *Focus beyond the text*. Popularly used in language classrooms, Numrich's sequence of tasks model has been studied as a framework for guiding teachers to scaffold CT and English language skills, foster English learner's intercultural communicative competence, and develop a competency-based syllabus (Afifuddin 2017, Gomez-Rodriguez 2018, Benavides, Cantillo & Monogollon 2018).

Although many researchers have investigated the relationship between literature and CT, and developing CT and language skills in EFL/ESL classrooms using literary text as a tool (Imran & Firman, 2020; Karimi, 2016; Manalo, 2019; Mohsen, Hamed & Reza, 2021; Petek & Bedir, 2018; Qadir & Yousufi, 2021; Wang & Seepho, 2017; Zare & Makundan, 2015) only a few have focused on guiding teachers with possible classroom activities which could serve multiple purposes at a time such as introducing active learning and engage students, interpreting a text and developing CT skills as well, specifically with a model for each purpose to ground a basis on which

the possibilities can be outlined (Abida, 2016; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Clark, 2021, Clark, 2020).

III. English Literature studies at the undergraduate level in Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, at present, a large number of public and private universities are equipped with designated departments for English studies. They are advancing with a view to enhancing the linguistic competency of Bangladeshi students in the English language, teaching the English language, and nourishing them with literary merits and aesthetics of English literature as well.

However, the dichotomy of the learning outcomes between equipping students with linguistic skills for the job market and harnessing them with humanistic quality through teaching literature afflicts the English departments of Bangladesh (Mortuza, 2020). While the transformative aspect of Bangladesh Higher education aims more to enhance the skills of students, to function more, and to be more productive to compete with the industrially revolutionized world, the ultimate purpose of knowledge is to liberate human minds for physical, moral, and intellectual progress seems insignificant to the stakeholders (Freire, 1972). Henceforth the growing focus on the communicative aspect of language somehow marginalizes the humanistic outcome of many traditional English studies programs that were primarily focused on how the implied readers of English Literature should give artistic expression to their experience of the world (Rosovsky, 1991, Mortuza, 2020). Furthermore, though literary texts have been a potential source of authentic materials, it is rarely used in language classrooms in Bangladesh. Thus a lack of reconciliation between the language and literature stream in the English departments is evident which refers to the dichotomy and predicts future chaos in this academic discipline. As a result of this, what is more hypothetically alarming is the loss of an entire generation who will lack the ability to think critically and function creatively while studying English language and literature in the Higher Education Institutions in Bangladesh because of the existing dichotomy that hinders the activation of humanistic approaches that literary studies could provide. Relatively, it is also very crucial to ponder on the question of how to improve the teaching strategies in English literature classrooms that can successfully instill CT skills among students. This inquiry is necessary because acquiring those skills reflects the very purpose of literature as well as education, that is to experience and evaluate the world and reality with a critical view that advocates asking valid questions and making judgments between right and wrong (Ahmed. 1986; Amin 2009).

To foster this, the teaching of Literature requires rethinking the traditional methods and innovating how students should get motivated and learn to employ creativity and CT through studying literature. The most popular teaching method, currently practiced in undergraduate literature classrooms in Bangladesh is lecturing. Though lecturing is a time-tested and frequently used teaching style in Higher Education institutions throughout the world, it does not engage students in active participation in the classroom and often leaves them disconnected from the lecture after a certain period of time (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011; Lambert, 2012; Millis, 2012). Active learning is quite opposite of this traditional lecture method. In contrast, it involves peer working, group activities, students responding frequently and resolving misunderstandings, monitoring students' comprehension, and engaging them in short exercises and assessments. In this regard Bonwell and Eison (1991) confirm that in the process of active learning the students do things by themselves in classrooms, it also helps them to think about what they are doing leading them to practice CT and creativity as well. So, CT and creativity postulate to be key elements of active learning which in effect significantly enhances the performance of the students than those who are taught with traditional methods (Prince, 2004; Berry, 2008). So, in the growing emphasis on improving quality in the education setting of Bangladesh, it is needless to say that the undergraduate literature teaching-learning process and pedagogy require improvement through employing active learning methods (Parks, 2012).

IV. Role of English literature to foster CT:

The relevance between literature and CT is immense. While CT and creativity are among the major purposes of education, literature is one of the pillars to enhance those skills (Khatib & Shakouri, 2013). Creativity and CT can develop the power of questioning and meaning-seeking through experience inside a student's mindset. These are the skills that help them to evaluate arguments laid by others and form personal and logical judgments (Rainbolt & Dwyer, 2012). Literary texts can enhance language learning through CT because these texts are inherently authentic and engage students with cultural awareness, intensive-extensive reading, sociolinguistics, and pragmatic knowledge and language skills (Ghoson, 2002; Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan, 2011). When reading literature students are exposed to fictional yet factual and historical events as well as essential emotions such as love, alienation, ideology, resistance, identity, etc. that formulate their response to reality as they encounter it (Van, 2009). Therefore, the teaching and learning literature fosters creativity and CT skills which are defined as the ability to interpret facts, recognize errors and apply affective reactions. Teaching literature also offers students a nuanced understanding of life, and moral standards and promotes a positive affective approach between humans and

nature through the language and culture that the text portrays (D'angelo 1970).

To nurture thinking and creative application of the earned insights from literature students need to make use of the teacher as bridges to move from lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking. While only recalling and comprehending the facts in a literary text is not enough to develop these skills, it needs to go for further synthesis of the knowledge. Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives in 1956 and its revision by Anderson in 2001 prescribes a necessary guide to attain this movement from lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking skills (Rahman & Manaf, 2017). Though there are many views on the argument that why students should receive teaching on how to think, considering thinking is a quite natural process for any human being, it is argued by many that formal teaching of CT is still in need to guide the students towards maturity and excellence in thinking. A similar argument goes for the literary readers, why students should be taught how to read literary texts while it seems important that only skill of reading is not enough for reading literary texts. When students acquire the power of reading with thinking they appreciate the text and become implied readers and move forward to apply their knowledge creatively in their own experience of life and the world.

Therefore, teachers should adopt such teaching methods in literature classrooms that prompt critical and creative thinking by students. They must support their students by exposing them to different viewpoints that may mature their view of the experience of reality and the world. They must teach them to probe into whatever they read or see before believing those as absolute truth (Case, 2013; Breslin, 2015).

The students experience a diverse picture of both European and American thus the western socio-cultural context in a broader perspective. Assuming that undergraduate fresher lack much knowledge about the western socio-cultural aspects, they face a deeper challenge while encountering the texts. During the reading, the readers attempt to create their own meaning in the light of contexts. So new readers who are not familiar with the diverse set of the wide-ranging socio-cultural context of English society and culture may incorrectly construct the meanings of the texts. Furthermore, joined experiences and expectations can be affected by the social context in which texts are interpreted. It is therefore important to think about how culture influences the assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations that each reader brings to the reading of a text (Mangialetti & Palmquist, 2022). Thus the communication between the reader and the text needs much focus in the realm of teaching and learning English literature. In the same manner, when readers are aware of a writer's purpose, needs, interests, values, or beliefs, they are better able to appreciate, accept, and value that writer.

Now understanding the socio-cultural context for the students in Bangladesh is quite difficult. It is because learning the context of a text is not as simple as it seems. It's no more about learning aspects of society and culture from a neutral non-stimulating state. Readers' experiences of a text are as much affected by what they bring to the experience as what the text offers (Trousedale & Harris, 1993). The concern of Bangladeshi undergraduate students in understanding the western socio-cultural context is challenging because there are particular meanings attached to different ways people in different cultures live. When Bangladeshi undergraduate students experience the western socio-cultural context while reading any English literary text, their own different socio-cultural notions lead them to comparison. Moreover, literary works help students to understand how they think and behave psychologically when they read things that contradict their beliefs (Mustofa, 2016). Hence it is notable that being in a non-native environment English literature teaching should focus more on CT and creativity as the students could end up misinterpreting the texts if not trained well.

V. Discussion: Classroom Activities and outcomes

The possible classroom activities described here are categorized under Sandra harper's Three phase sequence of interpretation. The sorted activities mentioned under each phase: Pre interpretation, Interpretation, and Post-interpretation, also have the potential to help student practice CT skills implicitly. One of the major objectives to discuss these classroom activities is to identify and elucidate the potential CT skills these activities can foster among students while practicing and learning how to interpret a literary text.

Pre-interpretation phase activities and CT skills (Observation and identifying assumptions):

Objectives for Sandra Harper's pre-interpretation phase activities are establishing common background, comprehension, and linguistic abilities among students in order to facilitate the interpretation and post-interpretation phase. Alongside, the first two tasks of Numrich's sequence of CT task list are observation and identifying assumptions which focus upon students' initial perspectives on the text and their experience of the world. The activities below summarize the preparatory stage both in case of text interpretation and initial tasks for CT skill exercises like observation and identifying assumptions.

For establishing background knowledge most effective activities are to provide short lectures, audiovisual presentations, and summarizing cultural, biographical, or historical knowledge followed by a *brainstorming activity*. Students may ponder on selected terms, titles, and facts. In this process, they will brainstorm and try to assume the meaning of the selected terms, titles, facts, or initial themes from their personal life experiences (Carell, 1984;

Kramsch, 1985). *Linguistic activities* can be conducted by asking students to discuss any object or experience from their daily life that can be explained by the figurative language of the literature received from the essential background knowledge provided by the teacher (Spinelli & Williams, 1981). To establish comprehension at this stage *predicting questions* can be another effective activity after brainstorming and linguistic activities. These questions designed by the students can help teachers identify assumptions (Kramsch, 1985).

Conducting these activities in groups has the benefit of engaging students in a proactive learning environment. Besides, these pre-interpretation activities pave the way to design activities for the next phases as well as facilitate running discussions in the target language without overwhelming the students with heavy grammatical and other linguistic expectations. From a CT perspective, when students are receiving common background knowledge and participating in the brainstorming activities mentioned above, they are simultaneously using their daily life observations. They are also assuming and making meanings of selected figurative languages, themes, facts, and titles and predicting questions based on those assumptions. These activities substantially expose them to the task of observation and identifying assumptions. In pursuit of further reasoning, the observation and implicit initial assumptions contribute to the further logical argument as they learn how to take into account relevant considerations (Fisher, 2011).

Interpretation Phase and CT skills (Understanding and Interpreting):

The ultimate objective of the interpretation phase in Sandra Harper's three-phase sequence is to take into account the reader or student's direct interaction and personal experience of the text. In this phase, the students should have full access to express, negotiate and refine personal interpretations. This personal encounter and experience with text are largely facilitated by alternative interpretations provided by peers and teachers as well. Interpretation requires close reading and comprehension of a text. The reader's own background knowledge of the context encounters the text and interacts with the meaning (Harper, 1988). The reader also acquires new knowledge and goes through adjustment and refinement of their comprehension and understanding of the text. In the same vein, Numrich's next two tasks, understanding and interpreting in the sequence to practice CT skills are also applicable to Sandra Harper's Interpretation phase. These two tasks are placed under the second perspective of the model, Focus on the text. Similar to Harper's interpretation phase, these two tasks specifically train readers in skills such as understanding and interpreting texts. The classroom activities below will ensure student engagement and comprehension of text with interaction, transaction, and adjustment of ideas and meaning in the classroom while the same activities will provide ground for practicing

summarizing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, hypothesizing, making inferences, and interpreting meaning skills in order to address CT tasks of understanding and interpreting.

Some of the many significant classroom activities to teach text interpretation are brainstorming responses to open-ended why and what, etc questions, rewriting a text with a change in time, place, and people, and scripting a text for a different media production such as stage drama. In the case of open-ended questions, students can write answers to relevant what and why questions posed by the teacher. While discussing and answering with peers, students are able to point out the key information for what questions while for why questions they provide a variety of possible points of view on the text (Mead,1980). Rewriting the full or partial text with a change in time, place, and people may ensure rigorous thoughts, heighten creativity and justify their point of view. Another engaging activity can be writing scripts for different media by students such as stage drama. This will help them employ multiple perspectives and meanings, and contextualize the text from personal experiences of life (Kramsch, 1985).

These activities also reflect the outcome of text-focused CT tasks in Numrich's sequence of tasks such as understanding and interpreting. These two tasks address the cultivation of subskill sets, for instance, summarizing, compare-contrast, and cause-effect skills under the Understanding task and making inferences, interpreting the meaning, and hypothesizing under the Interpreting task (Beaumont, 2010). Now to adjust Numrich's sequence of tasks for CT practice, participating in the open-ended question also helps students to practice summarizing skills, the rewriting activity will initiate them to make comparisons and contrast with the original text, finding logics of cause and effects in the narrative. Moreover, drama script writing can help them interpret the text from their own inference, meaning making, and hypothesis of major ideas, and themes, and other elements of the texts.

Post-Interpretation phase and CT skills (Inquiring further, analyzing and evaluating, making decision):

According to Sandra Harper the post-interpretation or Synthesis phase targets to reuniting the dissected text and unifying what students have learned. Another major target is to input new knowledge or greater wisdom in students collected from the text interpretation activities. To many extents, this greater wisdom or collected knowledge can transcend the classroom and equip students with social, moral, and cultural values to have an impact on their society. The objectives of this phase assimilate with the last phase of Numrich's sequence of tasks listed as inquiring further, analyzing and evaluating, and making decisions under the Focus beyond text perspective.

The most effective activities described under Harper's Synthesis/post-interpretative phase are: *developing a thesis* chosen by the teacher that requires appropriate inclusion of all stylistic and other literary elements. This activity can help students identify further research angles toward this particular text. Another activity can be asking students to *deliver their comments on any author or critic*. His activity can enhance analytical ability and evaluation and reevaluation of assumptions. Other activities such as *developing essay questions* and finding the possible answer by the students can help them think beyond the context of the text, and the meaning suggested by the author, and foster critical views (Hankins, 1972, Harper, 1988).

In terms of associating CT tasks, developing a thesis will encourage them to inquire further into the text and related resources such as literary criticisms. Students will be able to foster research and survey skills through this. Critiquing authors' or critics' statements will direct them to reflect and synthesize more information in a logical way. They will be able to reevaluate old assumptions and justify new ones. Forming essay questions and searching for the possible answer may give them insight into proposing outlined solutions. Furthermore, in a broader sense, the greater wisdom acquired after this phase can motivate them to participate, take action and solve problems in their socio-cultural contexts (Gomez-Rodriguez, 2018).

VI. Conclusion

By encouraging processes of thoughts in literature classrooms a teacher can make it a productive one rather than making it reproductive in a sense when students listen to lectures only and are not involved in experiential learning. Thus, they end up repeating the teacher's critical thought and interpretation only (Peck, 1985). The activity-based classroom and developed approaches to support this kind of classroom practice systematically prepare the students for interacting with the literary texts with the necessary skills. It also provides opportunities for students to convey and express their own thoughts through negotiating and revising their own personal interpretations in a mutual and supportive environment. A structured classroom activity with a proper methodology in operation can encourage expressions of complex ideas, and nurture creativity and CT while fusing and synthesizing all these with textual analysis and interpretation. An active student participating in an active classroom interacts with the text actively and encounters personal feelings and personal life experiences which merge the student's reading with his or her understanding of the world. Therefore, the proposed classroom activities can be used as an attempt to help develop CT skills in Bangladeshi English Literature students at the undergraduate level. Their encounter with a different socio-cultural picture found in the English literary

texts and another contextual unfamiliarity can be eased with the active thinking process in an activity-based classroom. Here they can have all the scopes to express, challenge, question, negotiate and clarify issues by developing their own critical interpretation skill.

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