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From descriptive to critical writing: A study on the effectiveness of advanced reading and writing instruction

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Abstract

Studies conducted in the area of critical thinking and critical writing are notably rare within the Turkish EFL context. For this reason, there is a need to investigate these considerable concepts and to integrate them into the field of foreign language learning and teaching. This study may take steps in the direction of bringing a broader perspective to the field since it integrates and combines the concepts of critical thinking and critical writing in foreign language reading and writing classes. The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the critical thinking skills and critical writing discourse of the 1st year students registered at the ELT Department in Nevşehir H. B.V. University. There are forty nine participants who are nearly at the same age and nearly half of them studied in one year English preparatory program. The qualitative data was collected during the Advanced Reading and Writing I course. Throughout the study, students' written work which are essays written every other week, have been analyzed to examine the extent of their critical writing skills. In addition, the researcher observed the classes during course sessions and took notes about the interactions taking place between both the students and the instructor, and the students with one another. Finally, the participants were given open-ended questions to write their opinions and perceptions about critical thinking, critical writing and the advanced reading and writing course. The results of the analysis of the data indicate that the students usually have a positive opinion about the relationship between critical thinking skills, critical writing and advanced reading and writing instruction. In the conclusion part of the study, the use of advanced reading and writing instruction to encourage critical thinking, have been discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there are quite a number of studies involving critical approaches such as critical ethnography, critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness which is considered as Critical Discourse Analysis's pedagogic branch, critical literacy, critical pedagogy, critical applied linguistics (Siegel & Fernandez, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999). All of these disciplines cover different areas. In order to describe the common characteristics of these domains, Allan Luke (2000) pointed out that: "what has counted as *critical* in recent years has focused on how people use texts and discourses to construct and negotiate identity, power and capital" (p.449). It is a fact that, critical approaches have a more comprehensive view of language. Again Luke (2000) mentioned that "Language is not simply a means of expression or communication rather, it is a practice that constructs, is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves their social surroundings, their histories and their possibilities for the future" (p.451).

There are various reasons for investigating critical language study. For example, Norman Fairclough (1989) who is widely known for his studies in critical discourse analysis pointed out that he had two main reasons for studying critical language: The first one is "to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power"(p.1). Second aim is "to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation" (p.1). That is to say, critical approaches in education, aim to empower people by encouraging them to broaden their perspectives and to resist oppression and manipulation attempted by language and education.

Nowadays, critical thinking issues are highly challenging and trendy for language teachers since people have been influenced by globalization and modernization to think critically on both national and international matters. On the other hand, some research findings on critical thinking skills gained by EFL students seem to be unsatisfactory. Stapleton (2002, p.251)) claimed that Asian EFL students lack of critical thinking and individual voice or opinion. Later, Alagozlu (2007) supported this statement by stating that "Turkish English students cannot express their own ideas in EFL writing". She added that "it is related to their low critical thinking skill. The solution is to teach them critical thoughts in language learning so that they can significantly foster their writing abilities" (p.120). This problem might show us that critical pedagogy is really needed in EFL writing classes.

There is a lack of scientific study and educational research to investigate critical thinking concepts and to integrate them into foreign language teaching and learning. There are only a few studies on critical thinking in Turkish EFL context (Alagozlu & Sezgi, 2010; Alagozlu, 2007; Yagcilar, 2010; Irfaner, 2002, Tufan, 2008). This study may take steps in the direction of bringing a broader perspective to the field since it integrates and combines the concepts of critical thinking and critical writing in foreign language reading and writing classes.

1.1 What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking skills are used everyday both consciously and unconsciously by most of the people as their daily life. Students, for e.g. at university need to use critical thinking skills in their reading, and demonstrate critical thinking skills in their writing. Sumner (1940) defined critical thinking as follows:

Critical thinking is the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances. (p.632)

A critical thinker is enquiring, analytical, and open-minded. Critical thinking involves reading and writing critically. Reading critically means examining different points of view with an open and enquiring mind, evaluating your own position, and drawing conclusions as to whether a particular point of view is persuasive. Writing critically means presenting your conclusions in a clear and well-reasoned way to persuade others.

When you think critically, you:

- **analyze** - break things down
- **synthesize** - bring parts together in a coherent way

- **evaluate** - make judgments, based on sound evidence

Critical thinkers pay attention to details, consider different points of view, and evaluate their own position. They not only develop an accurate understanding of an issue but also identify trends and predict outcomes. In addition, critical thinkers consider broad implications and long-term consequences.

1.2. What is critical writing?

Critical writing is not necessarily writing about the topic in a negative way; it is simply making sure that you have considered all sides of the argument. For example, in your reading you are likely to discover different authors with different views. It is the job of a critical writer to consider all of these views in their essay to show their awareness of all the issues associated with their topic. The most characteristic features of critical writing are:

- a clear and confident refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide;
- a balanced presentation of reasons why the conclusions of other writers may be accepted or may need to be treated with caution;
- a clear presentation of your own evidence and argument, leading to your conclusion; and
- a recognition of the limitations in your own evidence, argument, and conclusion.

(University of Leicester, 2009. Student Learning Development section, para.2)

Critical writing is about developing a person's own academic voice within his or her subject area. It is the result of an ongoing process of reflecting, researching, note-making, reading and writing. It means you do not accept information at face value.

1.3. The difference between critical and descriptive writing

Descriptive writing is relatively simple. In fact, with descriptive writing you are not developing argument; you are merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion. The most characteristic features of descriptive writing are that it will describe something, but will not go beyond an account of what appears to be there. A certain amount of descriptive writing is needed to establish for example:

- the setting of the research;
- a general description of a piece of literature, or art;
- the list of measurements taken;
- the timing of the research;
- an account of the biographical details of a key figure in the discipline; or a brief summary of the history leading up to an event or decision. (University of Leicester, 2009 Student Learning Development, para. 4).

Descriptive writers provide only description and they do not transform information. That means they only report ideas. On the other hand, critical writers participate in the academic debate. They need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others, and to contribute their own opinions. Critical writers need to:

- consider the quality of the evidence and argument you have read;
- identify key positive and negative aspects you can comment upon;
- assess their relevance and usefulness to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment; and
- identify how best they can be woven into the argument that you are developing.

This is more challenging and risky because a much higher level of skill is clearly needed for critical writing than for descriptive writing.

2. Problem

Most of the recent studies show that students cannot express their own ideas in EFL writing and it may be related to their low critical thinking skill. Teaching them critical thoughts in language learning so that they can significantly foster

their writing abilities is thought to be a solution for the issue. This problem might lead to the idea that critical pedagogy is really needed in EFL writing classes.

Based on the problem indicated above, the main aim of this study is to investigate the critical thinking skills and critical writing discourse of the 1st year students at the ELT Department in Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. The research questions addressed in this paper are as follows:

- Is there a relationship between the critical thinking skills and critical writing discourse of the 1st. year ELT students?
- What are the attitudes of 1st. year ELT students towards critical thinking?
- What are the attitudes of 1st. year ELT students towards critical writing?

3. Method

In order to answer these research questions presented above, qualitative research methods are adopted. As Mackey and Gass (2005) point out “qualitative research is based on descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures” p.44). Qualitative research is claimed to provide rich description of the phenomena under the investigation. Moreover, the qualitative studies take an inductive way, so these types of studies first observe the situation then explore the questions raised from the context. Therefore, in alignment with the nature of the research, qualitative methods are adopted for this study.

3.1.Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 49 first year ELT students enrolled at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Faculty of Education. They are nearly at the same age and nearly half of them studied in one year English preparatory program. These students were enrolled in the Advanced Reading and Writing Course 1 and 2 during two semesters.

3.2.Materials and observation methods

There were several sources of data for this study. The first were essays of the students which were written every other week by the students. The researcher used a critical writing rubric to analyze the essays. There were 7 essays for each student and 343 essays in total. The second source was classroom observation. The researcher herself gave the course and had the chance to attend all the sessions over the span of two academic semesters. The third source was a structured interview with the students on their opinions about critical thinking, critical writing and Advanced Reading and Writing course I & II. The researcher asked 6 questions to the students during the interview.

3.3.Advanced reading and writing course

This is a compulsory course offered to first year students at the ELT department at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University. The course outline is provided in Appendix. Below is the course description:

This course presents a wide range of authentic reading materials including newspapers, journals, reviews and academic texts in order to comprehend contrasting viewpoints and to predict and identify main ideas and to decode inter sentential clues. It also aims to equip students with intensive and extensive reading habits. Critical thinking skills such as synthesizing information or analyzing a problem as well as reacting on the basis of evaluation are fostered. Such sub-skills of reading are employed by the students' in their writings. Students also analyze and produce different types of writings; build up writing skills emphasizing the organization, coherence, and cohesion and such sub-skills as summarizing, outlining, and paraphrasing at paragraph level. The use of spelling and punctuation conventions as well as non-alphabetic symbol use will be practiced as well.

3.4. Procedures

The data used in this study were collected throughout the two semesters. The primary method of analysis was qualitative content analysis. The multiple sources of information discussed above were reviewed and themes were derived. The researcher observed the classes during course sessions and took notes about the interactions that took place between both the students and the instructor and the students and other students. Then, after all the essays were collected the researcher analyzed them by using the “Critical Writing Rubric”. Finally, the researcher interviewed with the students three weeks before the end of the second semester. Interviews took nearly one week to complete and they were recorded.

4. Results

4.1. Results of the students' essays

Each of the 343 essays of the students have been analyzed and graded by the researcher by using the “Critical Writing Assessment Rubric” prepared by Waypoint Outcomes in 2010.

- From the point of “Intellectual Ambition and Project Content” students' grades are not so high and they did not introduce an original argument. Although they tried to give some examples, they did not discuss any of these examples most of which are not so interesting and effective.
- As for the “Evidence and Research” item, they use evidence well in some ways, but still they need to use evidence more effectively to support their project. Fortunately, they showed progress on that issue when their first and last essay compared.
- The students have done their best to develop their writing appropriate for their audience. They are relatively successful in paying “Attention to their Audience” while writing their essays.
- When “Writing: Grammar, Style, and Organization” of the students' essays considered it has been observed that most of them showed great progress at the end of the semester because there have been big differences in their first and last essays. Generally speaking, at their 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th essays their writing is clear and has got less mistakes.

4.2. Interviews

The researcher interviewed with the students three weeks before the end of the second semester. Interviews took nearly one week to complete and they were recorded. Student impressions were gathered through structured interviews. During these interviews, students reported that,

- Critical thinking is necessary, essential and helpful for effective learning. They think it is very important to state their own ideas. They pointed out that critical thinking enables them to improve their ability to look from different perspectives.
- They think that; reading, wondering, researching, and discussing are required for good critical thinking.
- Overall, they stated that they do not have enough information about critical writing. Some of them mentioned that critical writing means writing both positive and negative sides of a topic.
- Nearly all of the students think that there is relation between critical thinking and critical writing but they do not give any reasons.
- All of the students stated that “Advanced Reading and Writing Course” has improved their critical thinking skills. They mostly mentioned that they have learned a lot of new words and this helped them to improve their critical thinking skills.

4.3. Classroom observations

Most of the students are found to be reluctant to participate in the discussions and do not want to raise their hands to voice their opinions. Some of the students used their mother tongue although the medium of instruction is English. Teacher talking time is obviously more than student talking time. The instructor guides and facilitates the discussions

most of the time. The students and the instructor focus on the content of the texts rather than the form of them. The interpretive and evaluative discourses emerge from the whole class discussions mostly.

To summarize, the classroom observations yielded many examples of aspects of the course that worked. The researcher noted the importance of “Critical Reading and discussion” parts of the course books used in the course sessions during two semesters.

5. Discussion

It is observed that there is a strong relationship between the critical thinking skills and critical writing discourse of the 1st year ELT students at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Faculty of Education. In general, critical thinking skills are found to be limited in students’ written work and discussions. However, they also usually tend to improve their critical thinking skills and they think there is a relationship between critical thinking and critical writing skills.

Students are mostly found to be successful in understanding their audience, content and organization in writing their essays; however not all of the students could show appropriate evidences and examples of their opinions. They have improved themselves throughout two semesters from the point of vocabulary use, grammar, style and organization. It has been understood from the interview results that they also are aware of that and they think this is a result of the “Advanced Reading and Writing Course”.

6. Limitations and recommendations

The main aim is to observe and describe the critical thinking and critical writing discourse emerged among students throughout the courses. Therefore, more class time could be spared for the instruction on critical writing. To better explore the students’ critical writing discourse, students may be provided with some specific cases to elicit their responses. In addition, the sample size of the study can be increased to better understand the extent and nature of critical writing. Pre-service teachers of English in their second, third or last years at the department could be observed to explore their critical writing discourse. The students’ gender was not specified in the research, the differences between female and male students may also be investigated with regards to critical thinking and writing. Last but not least, critical thinking and writing skills of students in other departments at different levels of proficiency in English could be investigated to understand the critical thinking and writing skills of the language learners across different levels.

7. Conclusion

There are main implications arising from the present study. First of all, the students who participated in the study will become teachers of English in four years. They may be in the position of choosing the materials, texts, course books to teach the language. Therefore, they need to have critical perspective while selecting and preparing all of these for their lessons. This study indicates that critical thinking and critical writing is such a broad concept that it cannot be compacted into the two semesters with the Advanced Reading and Writing course which has already an overloaded syllabus. In this study, although the instructor tried to encourage students to have a more critical point of view, students were able to attain it to an extent. They were found to be successful in improving their critical thinking skills and they think Advanced Reading and Writing Course is helpful for them, but they did not analyze the texts taking the power perspectives into consideration and they are not self confident enough. Hence, taking the importance of critical thinking and writing for our teachers into account, there is necessity for a course on “Critical Reading and Writing” in the curriculum of ELT departments. At least, there may be an elective course offered to the students willing to take the course. Then, the course may be evaluated to decide its usefulness for the students at the ELT departments.

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