Promoting Critical Pedagogy in Language Education

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Abstract

This research investigates effects of critical pedagogy on the development of critical thinking through teaching English essay writing. The research also provides guideline to English Language Teachers to promote critical thinking in language learning and to teach language for reasoning. Quantitative and Qualitative data were collected from 53 English Language Teachers and 34 Civil Superior Services (CSS) students to test the hypothesis (by incorporating critical thinking through English Essay Writing promotes reasoning skills among the students). Descriptive Statistics, Paired Sample t-test and graphic representation were executed for the analysis of data. A marked difference (41.26 Mean Score) was measured in the performance of English language teachers in the result of critical thinking instructions into the composition of English Essay Writing. A significant difference was measured between Post-test I and II among the CSS students. The results signify that by incorporating critical thinking in teaching English Essay Writing promotes reasoning skills among the subjects. The research suggests replacing the old cycle of transmission pedagogy with critical thinking pedagogy in language education – a vehicle through which the students gradually discover themselves in the process of language leaning, and develop the cognizance of appropriate language to reason.

Introduction

The research assumes that critical thinking in Essay writing expands the learning experience and makes the language more meaningful for the learners – a vehicle through which they can gradually discover themselves in the process of language learning. Lipman (2003) says that it is responsibility of the teachers to develop critical thinking in the students other than pushing them from one educational level to the next. Brown (2004) proposes that the objectives of a curriculum in an ideal academic English program should go beyond linguistic factors, and to develop the art of critical thinking. Language teaching strategy requires pushing the learners further up through the progression represented by Bloom (1956). Critical thinking matters in language learning, and demonstrates that

English is regarded as an international language; there is a great need for its users and learners to be critical in their learning and using of the language (Thadphoothon 2002)

Fairclough (2001) comments that no significant advances have been made in terms of critical awareness of language, which endorses to reform ELT pedagogy to brush up the learners' metalinguistic ability. The present research aims to promote critical thinking through English Essay Writing (EEW), and it also suggests how to develop critical thinking pedagogy. The research measures critical thinking in EEW over five areas as:

1. Clarity of writing
2. Analysis of author's argument
3. Use of supporting information
4. Organization of ideas (Coherence and Cohesion)
5. Grammar and syntax accuracy

Critical thinking is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness.

Background

Today, the world needs people with qualities of critical thinking to meet up the growing challenges; whereas, the education system in most of the countries is mere examination driven (siddiqui 2007).The empirical findings reflect that the teachers subconsciously provide the pedagogy of answers to the learners (Kabilan 2000). Eventually, the teachers deny the learners the opportunities and the rights to question, and the learners are abandoned to reason and reflect higher order thoughts (Freire 1973; Bruss et al 1985). Paul et al (1993) pointed out in a survey study on "Critical Thinking Pedagogy in Twelfth Grade Composition" held in California that only 9% of the teachers of K-12 bring critical thinking in their teaching and assessment. Patry (1996) concludes in a research that critical thinking is not supported and taught in the classroom instructions. The main reasons for this shortcoming are: (a) the teachers are not educated in critical thinking (b) there are less number of standard textbooks available on critical thinking, and (c) the teachers have no time and other instructional resources to integrate critical thinking into their daily instruction (Astleitner 2002 and Petri 2002). These shortcomings

count a lot, because critical thinking is highly correlated with students' achievements. The learners may become proficient in English language if they are motivated and taught how to display critical thinking in English language usage, which signifies that the learners must be reflective in their production of ideas, and they may critically support them with logical details and examples. For this, the teachers need to revamp their pedagogical views, and to adapt a more flexible attitude in the existing system of language education in order to exploit the metalinguistic abilities of the learners. Mirman (1988) and Scanlan (2006) suggest that critical thinking skills should be embedded in the subject matter and woven into language education.

Although powerfully advocated by the scholars cited above, among many such voices, critical thinking yet does not seem to have an explicit role in language education. The debate about practical critical pedagogy in language education is still tending to take place among language planners (Wallace 2005). The present research endorses to replace the old cycle of transmission pedagogy with critical thinking pedagogy in language education.

Underlying Assumption

The research assumes that by incorporating critical thinking in the classroom instructions promotes reasoning skills among the students. The learners may become proficient in language usage if they are motivated how to display critical thinking. The teachers may facilitate the process by reflecting language learning practices through writing skill.

Theoretical Assumptions

Historically, writing is thought to contribute to the development of critical thinking skills (Kurfiss 1988). Canagarajah (2002) articulates that critical thinking brings into sharper focus matters that are always there in writing. It develops an attitude and a perspective that enable us to see some of the hidden components of text construction and the subtler ramification of writing. Writing has been widely used as a tool for communicating ideas, but less is known about how writing can improve the thinking process (Rivard 1994 and Klein 2004). Champagne (1999); Kelly (1999) and Hand (2002) comment that writing is thought to be a vehicle for improving student learning. But too often it is used as a

means to rehearse content knowledge and derive prescribed outcomes (Keys 1999). Applebee (1984) suggests that writing improves thinking because it requires an individual to make his or her ideas explicit, and to evaluate and choose among tools necessary for effective discourse. Resnick (1987) believes that writing should provide an opportunity to think with arguments, which could serve as a "cultivator and an enabler of higher order thinking." Marzano (1991) suggests that writing is a means to restructure knowledge improves higher-order thinking. In this context, writing may provide opportunity for students to think through arguments and use higher-order thinking skills to respond to complex problems. Writing has also been used as a strategy to improve conceptual learning (Applebee 1987 and Ackerman 1993). Subsequent work has focused on how writing within disciplines helps students to learn content and how to think. Specifically, writing within disciplines is thought to require deeper analytical thinking (Langer et al 1987), which is closely aligned with critical thinking. The influence of writing on critical thinking is less defined in English Language Teaching (ELT). Researchers have repeatedly called for more investigations about the influence of writing in English for promoting critical thinking.

Michael (1998) proposes a cycle of engagement and reflection that forms the cognitive engine of writing. An engaged writer devotes full mental resources to transforming a chain of associated ideas into written text. The cycle of critical thinking proposes that the writer should bring the current state of the task into conscious attention, as a mental representation to be explored and transformed.

Perhaps the most relevant study to address the issue of improving critical thinking in English language classes was done by Pullen (1992). She collaborated with 15 teachers in English department at New Jersey high school aimed to improve the critical thinking through writing. She reported that through this effort, the English department was successful in fostering greater critical thinking skills, reflected by improving the students' test scores. Pullen's study reflected the efforts of a single student teacher working without the support of a department, to bring about significant, assessable change in the critical thinking of high school seniors relying on Paul's "Elements and Standards(E&S) of Reasoning" as the chief instrument of instruction. Paul's E&S of reasoning are outlined in several publications (Scanlan 2006). Paul argues that there are two essential dimensions of thinking that students

need to master in order to learn how to upgrade their thinking: (a) they need to be able to identify the parts of their thinking, and (b) they need to be able to assess their thinking. Paul refers to the parts as the elements of reasoning, which he assessesed through the standards of reasoning.

Methodology

The methods used in this research were both the quantitative and qualitative. In quantitative method, a sample of 53 English language teachers (18 male and 35 female) representing the whole Province – Punjab was selected for the administration of five point scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from Foundation of Critical Thinking. In the Pre-test, the existing level of critical thinking of English Language Teachers was rated through the questionnaire. Prior to the Post-test I and II, they were taught English Essay Writing (EEW) by incorporating Paul's E&S of critical thinking in two hours class in a day over 2 weeks. In the end of the instructions, the same questionnaire was administered to measure the degree of improvement in reasoning skills of English language teachers. Descriptive Statistics and Paired Sample t-test were applied to test the hypothesis mentioned earlier.

Qualitative method was executed to measure the CSS students progress in Post-test I and II. A sample of 34 CSS students was chosen to measure the improvement in critical thinking through EEW. The data were quantified from 0 to 4 Grade Point (GP) among Low-range achievers, Mid-range achieves and High-range achievers over five rubrics for assessment: Clarity, Analysis, Support, Organization and Grammar. The participants were divided into three categories on the basis of their Pre-test as the followings: High-range (3.70 and above GP), Mid-range (3.69 to 3.30 GP) and Low-range (3.29 and below GP). In the Pre-test, the participant were asked to write an essay (200-250 words) on one of the present issues such as Poverty Alleviation, Global Warming, Suicide Bombing, Message of Islam, Inflation, Nuclear Proliferation, Patriotism, Tolerance and National Integration. The study looked for signs of heightened composition skills reflected by an increased clarity of writing, level of analysis, use of supporting information, organization of ideas, and accuracy of grammar and syntax. The participants' writing skills were measured quantitatively using a rubric system proposed by Paul (1997).

An important concern of the present research was reliability and validity of the methods: (a) whether they had consistently lead to successful elicitation of participants' language performance and competence, and (b) whether the analysis of this performance matches other independent measures of expectations for the participants' production. It is frequently impossible to tell from a given collection of data whether the forms produced are simply an artifact of the method (Doughty and Long, 2003). This is why; the present research employed multiple measures such as questionnaire, the participants' journals and different statistical techniques in order to triangulate the findings. Many researchers such as (Pienemann, 1998; Dietrich, Klein and et al, 1995; Pica, Kanagy and et al, 1993; Swain and Lapkin, 1998) proposed triangulation in the measurement of data in order to ensure reliability and validity in the research.

Data Analysis

Cronbatch's alpha shows 0.60 reliability level in the questionnaire. The Mean Score (MS) in the first execution (before the instruction) was 41.12 with 15.67 Standard Deviation (SD); whereas, the MS in the second execution (after the instruction) was 82.38 with 18.53 SD respectively. It is evident that the average MS has a significant increase (41.26) as the result of the instruction. The t-test value -15.67 *** was found to be significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

Paired Samples Statistics of English Language Teachers

	Mean	N	S.D	T	df	df
Before Instruction	41.12	52	15.68	-15.677	51	.000
After Instruction	82.38	52	18.53			

Table 1

Table 2 and figure 1 illustrate the comparison among five rubrics over three executions: Pre-test, Post-test I and Post-test II.

CSS Students' English Essay Writing Performance in Three Executions

	Pre-test	Post-test I	Post-test II
Clarity	2.15	2.43	2.87
Analysis	1.75	2.08	2.65
Support	1.47	2.03	2.57
Organization	1.98	2.18	2.54
Grammar	1.99	2.04	2.37

Table 2

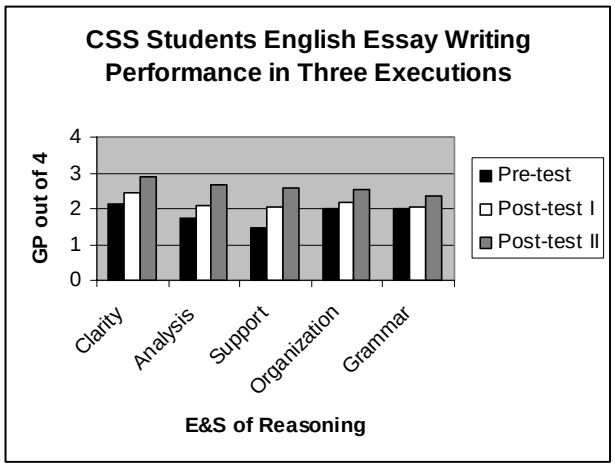

Figure 1

The score on all the given rubrics was less than 2.00 GP except on Clarity; whereas, the lowest score 1.47 GP was recorded on Support in the Pre-test. In the Post-test I, the score on all five categories of measurement was above 2.00. The minimum score 2.03 GP was recorded on Support and the maximum score 2.43 GP was on Clarity. In the Post-test II, the score on all rubrics was more than 2.50 GP except Grammar that was 2.37 GP. The maximum score 2.87 GP was found on Clarity. The subjects had a gradual improvement in their critical thinking ability in EEW over the three executions.

Discussion

Low-range achievers showed low affective filter for the assimilation of critical thinking instructions; whereas, the High-range achievers had high affective filter which prevented a significant improvement in their critical

writing skill. It was synthesized that critical thinking pedagogy benefited the Low-range achievers more than the Mid-range and the High-range achievers. Why did the Low-range achievers outperform and show low affective filter as compare to the High-range achievers? Perhaps, the High-range achievers had gifted intelligence, which fostered their ability to use appropriate language for reasoning. Whereas, the Low-range achievers were lack of this gifted intelligence but they were motivated to take the opportunity of critical thinking instructions to brush up their reasoning skills. The Low-range achievers had high motivation, high self-esteem and low affective filter, which helped them to improve their critical writing skill. It strengthens our assumption that critical thinking instructions can stir metacognitive skills to use language for reasoning. Further research is required to test the hypothesis whether left hemisphere of the Low-range achievers can be improved to foster appropriate language for reasoning. The neurologists agree on the belief that language and critical thoughts come into being in the left hemisphere of a brain, whereas right hemisphere gets experty over non-verbal expressions. The learners – particularly the Low-range achievers requires critical thinking training to improve their metalinguistic ability.

Conclusion

The present research explored whether or not by incorporating critical thinking in English essay writing promotes reasoning skills of the students. The Paired Sample t-test was applied to test the hypothesis. The hypothesis was accepted at $p \leq 0.05$ level of significance. That is, by incorporating of reasoning in teaching English Essay Writing promotes thinking skills among the subjects. A marked difference (41.26 Mean Score) was measured in the performance of English language teachers in the result of critical thinking pedagogy into the composition of English essay. A significance difference was measured between Post-test I and II among the CSS students. It signifies that by incorporating Paul's E&S of critical thinking in teaching English Essay Writing promotes reasoning skills among the subjects. The CSS students had a steady improvement in their critical thinking ability between Pre-test and Post-test II. A significant difference was found in the improvement of critical thinking among the Low-range achievers as compared to the High-rage and the Mid-range achievers. Although the High-range achievers scored the highest grade points yet their performance remained slightly even;

whereas, the Low-range achievers had remarkable shift in their critical thinking ability on five rubrics in all the tests. The Mid-range achievers showed a noteworthy improvement in their critical thinking in Post-test I but their performance remained slightly steady in Post-test II.

Implications

This research motivates English language teachers to infuse critical thinking skills in their instructions. The research also influences testing and evaluation procedure indirectly. That is; the research not only encourages the teachers to blend critical thinking in the transmission of knowledge and contents but they also are motivated to design standardized tests which could measure metalinguistics ability over all language skills.

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