The Effect of Critical Reflection on Iranian EFL Learners' Narrative Writing

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Abstract

One of the significant conditions of being human is to understand the meaning of experience along with developing all aspects of humanity. Reflection and more importantly, critical reflection, looks back on experiences in a way that people learn from them. And, narrative writing would be a suitable conduit for explaining such an appeal. The present paper attempted to illuminate how narrative writing would help five Iranian teenagers' pre-intermediate EFL learners who are all living in (Homa Town) to become true critical thinkers. Moreover, it sought to discover how different challenging classroom topics about food, sport, vacation, lye and the due critical reflections written in one or two paragraphs affect students' views towards social issues and their autonomy. Qualitative research within Ethnographic analysis of data was the methodological inclination of this work. Examining the efficiency of the work and its impact on learners' writing was also another requirement of this work. Since the learners stimulated discussions there was an exchange of ideas in a cooperative fashion. The result of this study further indicated that the learners became more autonomous. As well, their scores generally increased and they became aware of how powerfully they could manifest their thought in their narrative writing.

1. Introduction

Education helps learners realize that learning is to make meaning from experience. Among three concepts of transmission, transaction and transformation, transformation in education can play a pivotal role in helping learners become true human beings and one of the significant conditions of being human is to understand the meaning of experience along with developing all aspects of humanity like physical, moral, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. As mentioned by [19], transformation refers to a "common process of encounter and investigation of life-based issues and challenges". It also delves into a concept like critical thinking.

As long as Asian learners of English, particularly Iranian EFL learners are concerned, the concept of hesitation in expressing adversarial views, individual voice and more importantly critical thinking reaches its pinnacle. That is to say, foreign language teaching in Iran is not sufficiently conducive to learners' autonomy which is broadly defined as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning in a way that learners learn to make choice and take responsibility in the learning process" [11].

By adopting classroom critical thinking whose elements are interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, learners can take a position to talk of their ideas clearly and freely that may help them move away from rote-learning toward a creative, autonomous and critical mode of learning. Accordingly, transformative learning requires critical and analytical skills, and in order to meet this need, educators can assist learners to become conscious and enjoy critical reflection as it is central to transformative learning in Mezirow's opinion.

In terms of history, critical thinking is known as reasonable reflective thinking and it is an indispensable part of reflection which is the key in experiential learning. Despite what Pennington (1992, as cited in [7] proposed about reflection, that (1) it improves classroom processes and outcomes, and (2) develops confident, self-motivated learners, Dewey (1933, as cited in [22]) argued that experience and reflection alone does not necessarily lead to learning.

On the other hand, one of the aims of education is to let learners understand that learning is to draw meaning out of experience and critical reflection pays further attention to this tenet of learning. It truly looks back on experiences in a way that opportunities for new learning are created. It is the process of analyzing, rethinking, and questioning experiences; in a way that the main purpose of it is to think critically about everything. According to what [14] mentioned about critical reflection, it has been very important to the major objective of adult education. Besides all the above, self-doubt, feelings of isolation, and uncertainty are the result of

activities used for a group of learners who engage in critical reflection.

Above all, in the process of teaching and learning, critical reflection seeks to ask "why" questions. Meanwhile writing - a set of developing but manageable thought molecules - and especially narrative writing would answer these why questions in the form of generating, revising of ideas and evaluating. Narrative paragraphs talk about the story of one specific event. The concept of narrativity identifies the event clearly and shows the writer's value judgment, feeling, and thoughts concerning the event. The details in narrative paragraph should answer questions bearing: who, what, when, where, why, and how that can be addressed by learners who are engaged in critical reflection and narrative writing.

Narrative writing would be a suitable apparatus for learners to think critically and to reflect upon their feelings, opinions and even their attitude toward certain events. It involves documenting human experience in the form of a story.

It is worth mentioning that narrative writing would also give identity to the self and satisfy human soul. It actually fosters positive life changes and provides the opportunity for learners to follow their own development.

On the other hand, it is actually by reflection and critical reflection on the experience that personal growth also happens. While reflection speeds up personal development, it is critical reflection that ushers learners to thrilling, substantial personal growth. Therefore, critical reflection and narrative writing both function as powerful media for developing self and self-awareness in addition to considering what this process involves in personal level.

This study has concentrated on a group of learners with certain culture or sub-culture by adopting a methodology which benefits from descriptive studies such as interviewing individuals on several occasions, and observing learners, a methodology which fathoms detailed, in-depth description of learners' behavior. Ethnography, as a holistic approach to inquiry, has been opted for in this research for being capable of attaining the learners' point of view in order to realize their vision of the world. It seeks to look beyond what people say to understand their culture. And this could not happen unless the ethnographers (the researchers) started to observe, interact and participate in learners' activities.

With these aims in mind, the researchers encouraged learners to think critically about subjects around their everyday life or even subjects which were chosen by themselves - a situation that gave them the liberty to choose whatever topic they would like to discuss and write one paragraph. The next step in this study was to see whether this judge-like reflection had changed the way they were thinking about the world, a certain theme or a problem which bothered them for a long time. The other step that the researchers took was to investigate if this process had any effect on their performance in narrative writing, and their autonomy, accordingly. The researchers, meanwhile, as the observers watched, described, and narrated events happening along with listening to whatever was said, and collected data which could help this work.

As a consequence, if educational systems are armed with critical reflection, existing curricula may require restructuring (Foley, 1995 and Millar, 1991, as cited in [10]. If this restructuring happens, the teachers' major responsibility is to support adult learners in their struggle with the dark side of critical reflection. In actuality, not all learners may be predisposed to engage themselves in it, which can be problematic. The findings may be of importance to EFL teachers and curriculum designers to determine and decide whether applying critical reflection in current educational system in Iran would be practical in enhancing student autonomy.

2. Statement of the problem

Nowadays in Iran, teachers put emphasis on memorization without making any attempt to engage learners in mutually active and responsive learning. In this context, learners have just passive role and this may lead them to lose their interest toward learning. Additionally, in Iranian educational settings, interpersonal relationships have been taken for granted which otherwise shapes ones' everyday life and plays an important part in learning a foreign language.

Instead of transmitting knowledge solely and ignoring interpersonal relationships among the learners, teachers can set learners in a position to manage their own learning by cooperatively planning, implementing, and monitoring their activities. This can happen when critical reflection as an integral ingredient of transformative learning, besides narrative writing as a suitable conduit for explaining such an appeal, come into play for effective learning to take place. Furthermore, Posner, as cited in [12] mentioned that without critical reflection the knowledge and skills that teachers gained in their teacher training program might be quickly and easily obliterated.

Regarding this issue from another perspective, recently, reflection has been a central focus for scholars and a great deal of attention has been paid to this topic [1]. Also noted that critical reflection has not been considered by current reflective theories. This study investigated in what ways critical reflection affects learners' outlook toward the world, especially, social issues and different capabilities they have.

Based on what Mezirow said about transformative learning as developer of autonomous thinking, this study has inquired into how critical reflection can affect learners' autonomy in Iran [15]. Whether critical reflection has any effect on learners' ability in narrative writing is another concern which this research has probed.

3. Significance of the study

There is a growing concern in the concept of reflection, particularly critical reflection. While moderating distortions in our beliefs is possible through reflection, it is by critical reflection that connections are made and new knowledge is created. This may occur in the case that learners accept other opposing ideas which may culminate in positive, productive changes in them.

Such changes can also happen by adopting reflective writings in the process of critical reflection by which learners can easily express themselves and critically reflect their thoughts on their sheets. These written reflections can also be called "open letters" by Brown and McCartney [4].

In this research, there was no attempt to examine the meaning of acquired facts and information, or to challenge wisdom. All learners felt comfortable because they knew they were there to ponder over social issues. In this work the researchers shared with learners every step they took through feeling the pain they bearded, feeling the confusion they experienced and most importantly, feeling changes they were involved in. Moreover, the researchers helped learners think they were important because they were autonomous people whose critical views might cause differences around them.

4. Purpose of the Study

In order to encourage learners to take an active, responsive, and autonomous part in the class, teachers are to help them think and reflect critically about whatever that happens in the class. By challenging learners to step back and examine their thinking, critical reflection is to support learners to revise old assumptions and to change ways of interpreting experience. Empowering learners to modify their perspectives toward life and related social issues which autonomous and true critical thinkers may rise from would be one of the goals that critical reflection is to attain. Specifically, the critical reflection process aims to give learners confidence to realize their own and other people's frames of reference, to know things which may cause experiences to make sense and to reflect upon feelings and thoughts on their papers.

The main purpose of this ethnographic study was to discover how critical reflection affected learners'

views toward social issues and their autonomy. In addition, this investigation was carried out to examine narrative writing which is the variable that the researchers inspected if critical reflection had any effect on it.

Moreover, this study intended to explore every apt technique for establishing interrelationships, cooperative thoughts are all valued and respected. In this community, special emphasis rests on individualization, critical reflection on thoughts and ultimately learners' autonomy in foreign language learning. Learning, and creativity among learners which give rise to developing a democratic learning community where participants, their opinions and ultimately learners' autonomy in foreign language learning.

5. Research questions

Research questions of a qualitative study are open-ended. This open-ended-ness and broadness allows the discovery of complex, specific experiences that have been the focus of study. In order to fully understand the issue, by and large, this study has attempted to find reasonable answers to the following two major questions:

1. How does critical reflection influence Iranian intermediate EFL learners' viewpoint toward social issues?
2. In what ways does critical reflection impact Iranian intermediate EFL learners' narrative paragraph writing?
3. How is teenager's autonomy affected by their critical reflection?

6. Definition of key term

Following reading many of the major works of literature the following operational statements are opted for by the researchers to provide a lucid road map for the study.

6.1. Autonomy

Crome et al. defined autonomy as "the capacity to think for oneself - as an acquired habit" [6]. Autonomous learners are expected to have great responsibility for their own learning.

6.2. Critical Reflection

"Critical reflection is the process of creating or clarifying the meaning of experience (present and past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world)" Boud and Fales (1983, as cited in [21].

6.3. Critical thinking

Critical thinking is the process of applying, analyzing, and evaluating information. Bowell and Kemp referred to critical thinking as a process which "enables us to ensure that we have good reasons to believe or do that which people attempt to persuade us to do or believe" [3].

6.4. Ethnography

A branch of anthropology concerned with the detailed descriptive study of living. As a research methodology, ethnographic research deals with prolonged direct observation, especially participant observation, attempting to see social actions and the activities of daily life from participants' point of view resulting in a long detailed description of has been observed [18].

6.5. Holistic education

Holistic theory is concerned with wholes rather than parts. [9] Noted that holistic education focuses on the most possible development of the person, encouraging individuals to become the very best that they can be and enabling them to experience all they can from life and reach their goals.

6.6. Narrative paragraph

A narrative denotes telling a story from personal experiences with a particular point of view which may explain or describe "interpersonal and intrapersonal problems" [20].

6.7. Reflective thinking

[13] In their book considered "reflective thinking as a part of the critical-thinking process that refers specifically to the processes of analyzing and making judgments about what has happened". It would not be tautologous to mention that back in the 1930's, Dewey introduced reflective thinking as an active, persistent activity.

6.8. Reflective writing

Coles in his paper characterized reflective writing as the "narrative mode of analysis of different processes which explores not only what the experience was, but considers the meaning the writer attached to it at the time and subsequently" [5].

6.9 Transformative learning

Transformative learning is the development of awareness through the change of one's view toward the world and different capabilities that they have. Complementary definition of transformative learning was stated by [17]. They held" transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that seriously alters our way of being in the world.

7. Review of the related literature

In this part researchers deal with background of this study, related literature and the similar studies which have been done in this field. To fulfill the purpose of this study and in order for the educators/readers to have a clear picture of the idea, trying to map and have a clear meaning of just what critical reflection is, what it involves, how it may be used, what its effects are and how we can make both critical reflection and narrative writing become perfectly normal and be taken for granted seems to be worthwhile. This section commences with a discussion of the origins and history, past records of the notion of critical reflection, and narrative writing. The researchers will briefly explain the implication of these two concepts in education which would be a great support in getting a far better understanding of the issue in the learning process.

Although it is very delicate to talk through the idea of critical reflection in an isolated manner, the researchers tried their best to provide a very brief history of this concept in order to familiarize the reader in critical reflection with general. The truth is many concepts such as critical thinking, critical awareness, critical consciousness, critical inquiry; critical self-awareness, emancipatory reflection, and reflexivity are interrelated to it in most cases.

Decades of research on critical reflection have shown that the origin of it goes back to the inspiration of Socrates who accentuated the centrality of "critical self-examination" for ethical, compassionate, humane engagement with the world and its moral dilemmas. The concept of critical reflection also comes from combination of postmodern thinking and critical theories which form the basis of it. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess [16]. It should be linked to action so that the individual becomes empowered to act autonomously and is enabled to challenge and change the status quo through the conversation with others to assess and justify their assumptions [8].

Critical reflection occurs in a variety of fields such as nursing, medicine, social work, law, management. There is also an extensive range of related areas such as transformative learning, action research, narrative research - personal stories, reflection on personal experiences - discourse analysis, human education, and adult education which are the most relevant to the critical reflection. Critical reflection in education, as a teaching and learning strategy, terminates in intellectual growth and improvement in one's ability to understand the need for personal change.

Nonetheless writing is currently viewed as more than just a tool for communication. Many students rate writing activities among the least enjoyable or beneficial for learning English. There is an effectual writing- narrative a kind of writing in a story based form- which stands up for deeper understanding of the experiences culminating in deep learning. Although in analytical philosophy, the concept of narrative has been subsidiary, recorded history has demonstrated that great academic studies have been engrossed in it for at least the last four decades.

Originally narrative comes from narratology, poststructuralist literary and cultural theory and constructivist approaches in the social sciences. It has penetrated into psychology, political thought and policy analysis, health research, law, theology, cognitive science and education. In Education, narrative methods and storytelling play a fundamental role in teacher training and professional development, in schools, research methodology and e-learning. Confessions, excuses, and justifications are the extraordinary uses of narrative writing.

8. Methodology

Ethnographic analysis of data - naturally occurring case records and reports - or transcripts of meetings is one of the favorable and practical methods for this study. Think aloud, observation, interview, and narratives are techniques included in this work. Numerical assessment of students' progress in applying techniques of narrative writing is actually ignored in this process.

For the purpose of the data gathering, the researchers will use different challenging topics about social issues, and will consider what phenomena the participants and themselves would experience and narrate accordingly. Data will be collected through photos, video, sound recorder for greater audibility of students' voices and visibility of their behaviors in the class. These photos or images may look "unpolished" or "rough" because ethnography is something by which one can observe real and meaningful phenomenon that is not staged. Attempt has been made to reach a more comprehensive result by examining the quantitative

aspect as well. Therefore, a dual stage of teaching, before and after the treatment, is practiced in here. In the former phase, free sample writing about a certain topic is administered and in the latter phase an alternate topic in the same sphere of social issues will be introduced.

9. Results and Discussion

Regarding one month and a half trying desperately to find the specific community suitable for ethnography, the participants were found at "Land of Progress Institute". All of them were living in (Homa Town) where my family and I have been living for about twenty years. Based on ethnographic research that researchers can look again at the culture they may already know so well, the critical view toward the surroundings was highly significant for this study.

On November 22nd, a class of five students went through the processes of information gathering. As a matter of fact, they were invited with industrious effort of my old friend.

Due to tremendous hand of autonomy in storytelling, first session was spent asking these teenagers twenty one open-ended questions based on autonomy questionnaire designed by Zhang and Li, revised by Oxford, 1990 P.17). The reason behind applying this process was to see whether critical reflection had the same positive effect on teenagers it had on adults. In addition to the above, being autonomous is a state of mind which makes you confident in choosing your own path. When you are autonomous, you are not afraid of crossing the standard lines; you fight for your opinions and stand up for it. Hence, Students' level of autonomy was carefully observed by those questions as they narrated whatever they thought and felt during that session. It was free sample writing before beginning teaching any point in writing.

In the general procedure of this research project, students were supposed to read texts about social topics, then remember any memory about them, and finally write a summary of the whole class. First five sessions were spent reading different texts with different social issues. During this time students' speaking improved. At least Rojin was not afraid of expressing her ideas anymore and started to talk in English even in few words. It happened to Horvash, too. The exceptional point in this class was that students summarized the reading part in English, but for retelling their memories, they switched to Farsi. Speaking in their mother tongue made them have the possible reflection of their thoughts.

Despite all the efforts in teaching grammar and different points in writing, and their progress in speaking and vocabulary, their writing seemed to be progressing almost with difficulty. Exposing learners to distinctive pictures of different interesting items

was the work done for this setback. For example, by showing three pictures and asking to make a story of these pictures, they experienced creative process of writing a story in the class under control, and it definitely worked. From the very beginning they were asked to write at home and bring it to the class, and due to their school assignments they did not spend any time for writing. And, from then on, they could narrate in the class.

Session by session, there has been enormous advances in their writings. Every session there was a picture to reflect upon, and write about. Listening to classical music to narrate any memories they remembered, a moment they listened to, and to get their thoughts down on paper was a piece of work done in the class. Asking students to provide a map from each other's ideas was the other effective way which helped their narration.

Progress in Rojins' writing was very clear, and little by little Aidin, who refused to write due to his hatred toward English, became interested in this class. I as the researcher in this project did my best to inspire him to learn English especially writing, the production skill in which most of Iranian students has difficulties of different kinds. From the very first time, Sourena's writing was acceptable, but as time went by his writing became almost perfect. Sourena was not good at spelling, and his significant improvement in spelling came to be as vivid. Soheil's progress was continuing till his grandmother died. After this loss, he couldn't write as well as he wrote before. Asking him in different ways to compensate this negative impact in his life was in vain. His writing was getting worse and worse till session thirteen when he wrote a piece of writing in his final exam which had nothing to do with their writing class. Seeing his writing, I decided to talk to him, and he promised to pull himself together. It did happen in a way that his writing became more understandable next session. In the meantime that all the students except for one went through the same process of training, Horvash was put through a little bit different type of training due to her level of knowledge. In a way that she could not be compared with the rest of students or tested in the same training processes.

Drawing inspiration from critical reflection, central to transformative learning, in the face of serious challenge, learners including me felt comfortable to express our concerns, and everyone really empathized with what we were going through. In this investigation the major outcome of critical reflection was transformation in Aidins' behavior, an aggressive person who just yelled, and could not tolerate any situation which went against his will. After discussing the matter further in the class, he became better and better in a way that he did not yell any more.

For our final session I worked on autonomy questionnaire to see whether the processes would have any effect on students'autonomy and writing in comparison with their first session. Similar to first session, students wrote about whatever happened, in the class with a slight difference that for first session they wrote at home, but for last session they narrated in the class.

Taking all the procedures into consideration, there were not any scores students had earned for their writings all along the procedures. Bachman cited that due to not being able to measure individual's total performance in a given language, interpretations and uses made of scores may be invalid [2]. Frozen entity of giving numerical values to the responses causes insalubrious competition among learners which generates a long distance away from cooperative learning. As holistic education has put all its emphasis on collaboration, all the efforts in this research have been made to ignore scoring concept to compare students' progress with their own performance in order to put emphasis on collaboration, and not to underscore noxious effect of competition on learners.

Eventually, after four months struggling, real and meaningful results were reached. It should be stated that to accomplish all I set out to do, things have been studied in their natural settings, in forms of naturally occurring case records and reports; in addition to transcripts of meetings. In order to give an accurate and fair description, I as the researcher lived with these students for four months, and because I crossed conventional lines every teacher has with their students, they considered me as themselves.

10. Conclusion

In consideration of the findings and the results that were found in this study, we arrived at some conclusions that were the result of making learners work together cooperatively. Learners were allowed to contribute their unique personal responses, feelings, and concerns. They acknowledged the stress-free environment which helped them to discuss and write in a better way which could render them more responsible about their own narrative writing.

Since the learners stimulated discussions there was an exchange of ideas in a cooperative fashion. The result of this study further indicated that the learners became more autonomous. As well, their scores generally increased and they became aware of how powerfully they could manifest their thought in their narrative writing.

The result can be of importance to EFL teachers and curriculum designers to determine and decide whether applying critical reflection in current educational system would be practical.

11. Acknowledgement

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