



Enhancement of Critical Thinking: Case Study of Kazguu (Kazakhstan)

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking skills are undoubtedly considered today as an important outcome of higher education, they are viewed as essential abilities that need to be germinated and developed in order to train a qualified specialist. This paper throws some light on the current teaching approaches applied in General Linguistics and Translation Studies Department (KAZGUU, Kazakhstan) aimed to improve language students' critical thinking capacity. One of such approaches described in the article is interactive home reading class specially designed for students learning English as a foreign language. Home reading classes are not merely designed for students predominantly perceiving world verbally while reading, but can be easily changed in such classes that can satisfy requirements and preferences of students having dominant interpersonal intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, existential intelligence, special intelligence. All this is achievable due to, firstly, interactive teaching methods when students can cooperate whether in class or out of it, mingle in the class, and secondly, thanks to new technologies making lessons more vivid and exciting. Films give students an opportunity to observe the details they missed in the narration while reading, to get film director's point of view on the issues described in the text, as films are also considered as a form of text interpretation. The given research was carried out with the help of such methods as sociological survey among students, statistical analysis, observation and descriptive method. Overall, the information is presented in the form of reflection on present situation in the department and personal teaching experience.

KEYWORDS

critical thinking capacity, reflection, high / low order thinking.

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that teachers whenever in past or present have been facing big challenges in their professional field they have to effectively cope with in order to meet not only needs of the society but needs and interests of their students as well. The emergence of all those problems is explained by true fact that world is evolving putting forward new requirements for professionals. Unfortunately, not all specialists are ready to meet challenges and it results into the necessity to study the problem, its roots, nature searching through various resources and consulting experienced people.

These days it is general to hear among teachers how they belittle their students saying that today's students' knowledge has deteriorated: they are not able to think, analyze, evaluate, and even, verbally produce their simplest thoughts. Having discussed this problem a lot in our department we concluded that the reason of the problem explained by the fact no one will refute today that the modern student reads very little in best or does not read at all. Undeveloped reading habits result into very poor critical thinking ability that is essential in preparing any successful specialist, moreover, into extremely slow pace of mastering a foreign language. To support the idea that Kazakhstani students need help to develop their high order thinking it is enough to mention results of PISA survey where our country takes almost the lowest scores [1].

To find a solution for the situation described above the course Home Reading in English was invented in our department and introduced into second year students' curriculum since the beginning of 2013-2014 academic year. The course Home Reading in English was specially designed to enhance students' knowledge of English and develop in them the interest to reading in general, as we all know what benefits a person can get from reading. Thus, as being appointed to teach this subject we had a challenge to make all our students to be active at home reading classes and read books we were working with.

2. Problem Statement

Before writing about all the difficulties faced during the course it is important to clarify the nature of this problem from the perspective of our department.

Firstly, the abovementioned problem is extremely essential for students of our department as we are training future specialists in translation and interpreting. It is obvious, a person cannot achieve proficiency level in a foreign language if he/she does not read books, magazines, journals in the language he/she studies. Moreover, reading books is vitally important for future interpreters who have to understand and easily find words for concepts, ideas presented in texts or speeches to be translated.

Secondly, these days Translation Studies or Language Department students (and not only they) have very poor knowledge of literature, most of them avoid reading classic books at all and this is explained by the way they were taught at schools. In pursuit of preparing school children to successfully pass Unified National Test in order to enter local universities most school teachers drew their students' attention to memorizing bare facts, dates, and numbers less taking into account the fact that students need to be taught to think, to reflect.

To solve the problem of lack of experience in reading the syllabus of the course Home reading in English was worked out with consideration of perspective students' needs and aimed at:

- enriching students' lexicon;
- improving speaking and writing skills;
- evoking interest to reading English books;
- developing critical thinking abilities.

The contents of the course consisted of short stories (5-15 pages) written by famous English and American authors, such as J. London, E. Poe, K. Chopin, S. Maugham and others. For

each story a set of exercises on vocabulary, checking comprehension, and writing skills that was given out to students before each lesson was worked out. Unfortunately, after first two classes there was not any satisfaction in what had been done. Mostly because not all students read the stories that had been chosen, secondly the outcomes were rather poor, in other words students could not get the message, main idea of stories. The mentioned problem was discussed with the department's teaching staff and the Internet was used for finding information that would be helpful in that situation. As the problem was evident during lesson procedure it became apparent to learn more about lesson planning. According to one of the latest education theorists Ralph Tyler 'curriculum is an extension of school's philosophy based on students need and interests' [2]. In his book four questions an educator needs to ask developing curriculum and planning lesson instruction were found out, they are:

- What educational purpose should the school seek to attain?
- What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to achieve these purposes?
- How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? [3]

Thinking over these questions it became apparent to reconsider earlier elaborated home reading class goals, contents, resources, methods and the way students were evaluated. After a while it was decided to amend the course: to find students' preferences, what they were interested in reading; to change methodology and make home reading classes a little bit digital; to learn how to develop critical thinking skills; assessment criteria.

3. Methodology and Findings

After discussing the problem with colleagues it was decided to make a survey among students and find out what they like to read. The sociological survey was made with the help of rather widely spread saving-time approach - electronic questionnaire - that was created on survey monkey site. A set of questions aimed at finding students' reading preferences was worked out: what book genres they prefer reading, whether they want to read a novel or stories, what topics they would like to read about.

The second step in finding a solution was changing methods and resources used within traditional home reading classes. With this quite constructive change it was intended to make all student get motivated to read at home and be able to present their knowledge of stories at lessons. It is widely accepted that motivation is crucial in any work. Being a teacher for more than seven years it is definitely possible to confirm that students adore communicating at lessons while doing tasks and exercises. This knowledge reminded to make home reading classes more interactive.

For last decades it has become popular among teachers to say that he/she is an educator using interactive teaching methods. Methods of active pedagogy are considered now as the most effective and productive ones. According to different researches it has become evident that learners gain great benefits from learning process if they are taught to find answers to their questions in interaction and cooperation. Thus, assignments done in pairs and groups became dominant at lessons.

Moreover, taking into consideration the knowledge of different learning styles based on the theory of multiple intelligence developed by Howard Gardner [4] it was thought what interactive methods and new resources to employ in class. It is accepted that most people belong to the category of visual learners - it is important for them to see an object/phenomenon before to remember and understand it. This idea inspired to insert videos into home reading classes. In the global net we managed to find short movies based on the stories we

were reading with students. All these changes made lessons more interesting and increased students' motivation to read at home in order to be able to participate in all class activities. This consequently had a positive impact on teaching and learning processes that was seen in students' outcomes.

Next step in improvement home reading classes was concerned with the achievement of the goal defined as to develop students' critical thinking skills. Within our workforce experience in teaching English we have worked with students having different levels of academic preparation (A1 - C1). These years gave us a possibility to deal with a big range of class material adapting it to the needs of the exact group and students' interests.

Since 2012 case method has been widely introduced in our department and is mostly compulsory at English classes. Thus, as a result of this academic year eight case studies were worked out ('THINGS YOU LEARN FROM MOVIES', 'PUBLIC ART PROJECTS', 'BEING BEAUTIFUL: HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO?', etc.) in accordance with curricula of first-/second-year students and critical thinking principles. This work can be considered as one of the credentials on the path to master critical thinking methodology.

At home reading class students were taught to interpret stories according to stylistic analysis. But the problem was they did not know anything about text linguistics, text interpretation, stylistic devices and expressive means that help readers interpret texts and decode key message of them. So, the problem was not in students, but in understanding how to develop critical thinking capacity at home reading classes without knowledge of stylistics.

Generally, critical thinking is defined as a way of deciding whether a claim is true, partially true, or false. On the basis of this understanding of critical thinking it was clearly seen that within the given subject it is not necessary to teach students to analyze language peculiarities of the text, but make students comprehend the essence of it and imply this knowledge in analysis of practical issues we all face in everyday life.

Remembering Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy presenting classification of learning objectives [2] it was understood that it is important to work out assignments checking not only students' comprehension, but such tasks that will make them use new information and knowledge in practice reflecting on real life. First changes were introduced into class discussions asking questions developing not only low order thinking but mainly high order thinking, like what for, why, how, etc. We have studied the nature of questions put usually in reading section of IELTS. Secondly, as a result of our observation all our final assignments were arranged in the form of role-plays, project works, essays and book reviews. Writing essays and book reviews is very useful not only for improving grammar, writing skills, but critical thinking capacity as well. Working on essays and reviews students get some experience in stating their arguments, premises, assumptions in a logical, coherent way following language rules, such as rules of grammar, tips to construct syntactically and stylistically appropriate sentences, passages, and texts.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

To summarize the experience in elaborating curriculums it is vital to highlight key points as results of the work done during 2013-2014 academic year.

Developing any curriculum teachers need to remember that modern approach to educational procedures underlines individual characteristics of students. Therefore, curriculum is not understood anymore as a static document, but an instruction that can change over time meeting students' need and interests. Planning in its nature happens whether before lessons, during lessons and even after lessons, when teachers reflect on their outcomes, achievements or mistakes. That is why it is important to insert any changes into curriculum whenever

than never; Home reading classes are not merely designed for students predominantly perceiving world verbally while reading, but can be easily changed in such classes that can satisfy requirements and preferences of students having dominant interpersonal intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, existential intelligence, special intelligence. All this is achievable due to, firstly, interactive teaching methods when students can cooperate whether in class or out of it, mingle in the class, and secondly, thanks to new technologies making lessons more vivid and exciting. Films give students an opportunity to observe the details they missed in the narration while reading, to get film director's point of view on the issues described in the text, as films are also considered as a form of text interpretation.

Home reading classes are great to improve critical thinking skills of students. It is known in Britain they have special critical thinking development tutorials aimed to prepare students for future situations of inevitable reality, and this is what we still do not have in Kazakhstani universities. Without critical thinking skills a person can not evaluate a situation, suggest any solutions, and apply theoretical knowledge into practice.

Home reading classes definitely develop reading habits as most students at first are scared to read big stories or novels in English explaining that this is a time consuming task, but later as they get interested, as they are hooked by a book they proceed reading without teachers instructions what to read and when to read. Most of the students who took part in the experiment finished reading books much earlier than it was planned. They come to class and share their opinions with teachers and other students, expressing their thoughts about this or that character and what is more valuable apply accepted knowledge into analyzing real life situations.

5. Gained Experience

From the abovementioned research and observations it is certainly possible to assume that the experiment with home reading class positively influenced teachers' views on teaching in modern world, taking into consideration today's trend in education that is students are learning to learn. Using different interactive methods, traditional and digital resources we teach new generation how and where to find information, evaluate whether it is helpful or not, and cooperate to find solutions in this or that real life situation.

To conclude the given case in teaching practice of our department it is worth mentioning that all findings, outcomes of changes in teaching are presented now in the manual called Development of Speaking and Writing Skills through Home Reading Classes (the English language) published for students of General Linguistics and Translation Studies Department. The manual consists of three parts: student's book with texts followed by vocabulary, reading, and writing exercises, CD with video files and recordings, Resource Pack for teachers.

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