

CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH INTERDISCIPLINARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking, the art of reasoning, is a high level academic skill. It can be taught using several other resources, one of them is the use of interdisciplinary texts. This writing aims at exploring how interdisciplinary texts can be supportive to enhance students' critical thinking skill and also comprises some recommendations for a successful delivery of these texts to enhance the target skill. It concludes that the use of interdisciplinary texts is a means to teach critical thinking skill but not an end. The judicious use of them to develop students' critical thinking skill is relevant.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is understood as an ability to analyze, evaluate and interpret ideas and arguments. In the words of Weston (2011) critical thinking leads us to certain skill, for example, keen eye for arguments, the ability to look past vivid and to challenge the misleading statements, analogies...etc. Critical thinking is an active process in which one has to think, raise questions, find relevant information, ...etc. rather than learning in a largely passive way from someone else.

The tradition of applying critical thinking skill in reading dates back to Socrates, the ancient Greek thinker and was followed by Plato and Aristotle respectively in their Philosophical discussions. It is no exaggeration to say that critical thinking attaches huge importance to reasoning as its key element and further it comprises the evaluation of the ideas expressed. John Dewey (as cited in Fisher, 2014: 2) using the term 'reflective thinking' defines critical thinking as an "active persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends."

Critical thinking, an analysis, evaluation, interpretation of ideas, analogies exhibited in the texts, is an intellectual/academic exercise. The skill of critical thinking completes a standard cycle by developing reasoning, constructing arguments through acceptable evidences, rhetorics and its impact, formulating objective, sensible, universal response. Supporting this view Lohani and Adhikari (1998) write that critical thinking is conscious purposeful mental activity summoned to focus on an issue or a problem.

The term interdisciplinary, an intellectual essence of the field, covers a knowledge view that especially applies language from more than one academic

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discipline to examine a central theme, issue, topic...etc. "A wider body of teachable knowledge with its own background of education procedure and content areas" (Piaget, 1972 as cited in Jacobs, 1989: 22). Interdisciplinary course now has been a wing of syllabus because of collaborative nature of the texts, for example, art, history, economics and development, geography, literature and music, contemporary issues: information and communication, postmodernism, globalization, ... etc. Reading these texts of diverse themes, the students can develop their interpretive ability across discipline, these thematic texts can be motivating and develop students' adequate acquisition, make them competitive to face the challenge. Schneider (2004) as cited in Fisher (2014) rightly says that exposing students to interdisciplinary texts fosters the skill to critically analyze the contexts and make assimilation through the concept of newer values, need and the aspiration of people.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY TEXTS

Interdisciplinary texts can acquaint the students with the world of difference, make them familiar with the contemporary global issues and develop in them the skills to compare and contrast the authors ideas and develop the feeling of assimilation in diverse society. Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) as cited in Repko (2014) mention the characteristics of interdisciplinary texts:

- Mosaic (the texts are from more than one discipline)
- Linkage (interdisciplinary texts do not stress delienation but linkage)
- Wider coverage, competitive skills (texts have wider coverage, students enjoy reading them and develop the skills of analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Nepalese context, the interdisciplinary texts based on either themes or genres have been used as reading materials to develop students' skills to analyze, synthesize, and interpret the text and, further it comprises the ability to compare, contrast and assimilate their experiences to the themes of such texts. Highlighting the background and reasons of including such texts in course of grade XI English, Lohani and Adhikari (2004) write that the present textbook Mosaic Readings in the Genres deals with some of the most burning themes of present day existence and treats them with incisive perception. Realizing the changed socio-political context of Nepal after 2007 A.D., Tribhuvan University, Faculty of Education has revised the courses. In order to address the thrust, the texts of interdisciplinary nature have also been included in the syllabus. Although the notion of studying academic content in a second language is not a new; the concept was advocated by St. Augustine as early as 389 A.D. the present study attempts to answer some of the crucial questions: Do we teach contents or skills or both using such interdisciplinary texts? Is it possible to teach both contents and skills simultaneously using these texts?

How can these texts be supportive to foster students' skill to analyze, interpret when students have limited proficiency in English? Are our English teachers able to transform these skills at present context? How far the interdisciplinary texts are supportive to develop students' critical thinking skill? Where does the teaching of critical thinking skill ultimately lead the students to?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (1) to explore how interdisciplinary texts can be supportive to develop students' critical thinking skills.
- (2) to suggest for pedagogic implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gardner (2005), in his book, *New Directions: Reading, Writing and Critical thinking* has mentioned five diverse thematic chapters and each chapter is organized into five different sections. One of the sections is making connections and deals with the art of reasoning. He concludes that the texts of diverse themes make students able to compare and contrast the authors' ideas, combine facts, ideas and beliefs to form their own opinions and judgments about issues.

Lohani and Nissani (2008) in their book *Flax-Golden Tales* have mentioned fourteen thematic units and each unit includes the texts of interdisciplinary nature and the approach used for discussion is supportive to enhance the skill of critical thinking. As a concluding remark, they highlight that students develop their ability to grasp concepts, promote art of reasoning, equip them with confidence after reading these texts.

Lau (2011) states the role of interdisciplinary texts, especially those dealing with the themes of contemporary issues: postmodernism and globalization, global warming, pollution, financial crisis etc. He focuses that such texts of diverse themes make the students familiar to present day world complex problems and provide them with opportunities to think clearly/precisely and rationally, systematically to communicate ideas, analyze and interpret them using adequate reasoning.

Rainbolt and Dwyer (2015) highlight how interdisciplinary texts develop high level academic skill and the art of reasoning in students. Interdisciplinary texts promote students critical thinking skill through categorical argument, analogical argument, statistical argument, moral and casual argument. They conclude that critical thinking is a skill to find the strengths and flaws in the arguments made by others and to compose good arguments of your own and it promotes students intellectual courage.

None of the aforementioned reviewed works precisely depict how interdisciplinary texts foster critical thinking skill of students. This article has opened space for further discourse and to some extent attempts to satisfy the thrust.

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the issues raised in this article, the descriptive and analytical research design has been used. Only the secondary sources have been used for collection of data.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

For discussion, the views from scholarly articles have been used. They are discussed and interpretations have been coined accordingly.

Critical thinking, the art of argument, is not a mechanical process like finding the answer to a long division problem but is forwarded with the help of some guidelines and indicator words. A careful reader, who attempts to develop the skill of critical thinking, always tends to find out whether the author wants to convince us that something is true. In the next step the reader (students for our purpose) looks at the conclusion and at the end s/he revisits the conclusion how far is it relevant. In this context, critical thinking has the posture of both process and product. Interdisciplinary texts having the contents across discipline deal with the subject matter: history, geography, mythology, religion and ancient tales, information and communication, globalization, ecology and environment. Let's see how far these texts are useful to develop the skill of critical thinking in students.

The first query is whether the interdisciplinary texts are useful to teach language skills or contents or both. Language teaching experts are of the view that such texts can enhance learners' academic growth while also develop language proficiency. Stoller (2004) is of the opinion that interdisciplinary texts intend to integrate language and content, viewing 'language as a medium for learning content and content as a resource for learning and improving language.' It shows that students can develop content knowledge at the same time as they develop language skills by reading interdisciplinary texts. The second query is how can these texts be supportive to foster students' skill to analyze, synthesize and interpret when students have limited proficiency in English? In this context, Gautam (2000) consulting some interdisciplinary texts from the syllabus of Major English raises the question on the use of teaching the lofty works of Shakespeare, Milton and W.B Yeats to develop critical thinking skills of students when our students have very limited proficiency in English. Kansakar (1997) is of the opinion that our learners should necessarily be equipped with adequate knowledge of vocabulary and patterns of grammar before they encounter with critical thinking skill through reading interdisciplinary texts. It means the students having limited proficiency in English cannot develop high level of academic language proficiency. i.e. critical thinking skill unless they are equipped with adequate knowledge of vocabulary and patterns of grammar in target language.

There are many teachers charged with developing students' academic proficiencies in the lack of adequate content knowledge and the skill to handle the texts to develop high level of academic language proficiency in students. Met (1991) focuses on the role of teachers and writes that teachers must perform a variety of tasks and roles to ensure that students acquire the skill of critical thinking and content knowledge through reading the texts across discipline. To do this, teachers must be skilled in negotiating meaning, monitoring students performance, making instructional decision and must serve as a role model.

Reading interdisciplinary texts can promote students' intellectual ability to think, perceive, analyze, judge, compare and contrast, state their agreement and disagreement etc. Strengberg (1996) views that interdisciplinary texts can be supportive to develop students critical thinking skill in the following three different ways:

- Developing creative intelligence: the ability to formulate ideas and making connection (reasoning and logics)
- Developing analytical intelligence: the ability to evaluate the quality of ideas (judging and evaluating)
- Developing practical intelligence: the ability to apply ideas effectively.

The enhancement of critical thinking skill in students if it is not tied up with creative writing may not have its meaning. As students complete a cycle of critical thinking, they naturally will head to creative writing. It means the ultimate goal of critical thinking is to foster students' creative writing.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking, the art of reasoning, is an academic exercise. For the purpose of teaching and learning, it is a high level academic skill and includes the sub-skills: to analyze, judge, compare and contrast the ideas and analogies. Interdisciplinary texts of collaborative nature include diverse themes and avail the students with opportunity to develop skills and content growth at a time. Further students enjoy reading them since the contents displayed in these texts is wider and can deconstruct the language and contents manifested in disciplinary texts. They are burning examples of what John Keats recites in his **Ode to Grecian Urn**, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipe play on."

It can be concluded that the students having limited proficiency in English cannot develop their skill of critical thinking through reading these texts unless the students are equipped with adequate knowledge of vocabulary and patterns of grammar in English. For the successful use of interdisciplinary texts to develop students' critical thinking skill, the role of teacher is equally important and the teacher should be competent, skilled enough to handle these texts and transfer the skills accordingly.

Interdisciplinary texts are enough to teach both contents and skills, they are useful resources and their judicious use in language teaching is relevant. Further, these texts are supportive to develop students' critical thinking skill enhancing students' creative intelligence, analytical intelligence and practical intelligence. The ultimate goal of using interdisciplinary texts is to develop the skill of creative writing in students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Critical thinking skill through interdisciplinary texts should be taught at higher level when our students have adequate knowledge of vocabulary and patterns of grammar in English. In order to handle such texts to develop critical thinking skill in students, the teachers handling these courses should be equipped with the skill to negotiate meaning, monitor students performance, make instructional decision and should serve as a role model. The journey of developing critical thinking skill through reading interdisciplinary texts should be launched to creative writing.

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