STRUCTURAL LITERARY ANALYSIS AS A WAY TO DEVELOP CRITICAL READING SKILLS OF EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The article deals with the applications of structural literary analysis at the classes of English literature for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners at Kazan Federal University, Russia. Structural literary analysis is perceived as the way of examining the constituent parts of the work of literature (plot structure, characters, setting etc.) to understand the author’s intent and message. The significance of the issue is determined by the necessity to teach critical reading skills, vital for both academic performance and everyday life. Structural literary analysis is a good way to develop critical reading skill (the definition of which is given in the article). As the current experiment shows, building up a lesson on a work of literature accordingly, help learners to develop and acquire their critical reading skills. The article also specifies literary terms, which learners need to be acquainted with to manage this type of literary analysis. A sample lesson plan is given as a model for structural literary analysis. The results of the research could be applied by the teachers of English as a foreign language, who include literature as the source of authentic language into their courses, as well as the teachers of literature.

Keywords: Structural literary analysis, critical reading, teaching literature, teaching EFL, university, education, text, learners, skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language through literature has been a debatable issue for a long time. Historically, literature has always been the source of good literary language that can be used as a model for learners. But, with the development of technology, methods of foreign language teaching and accessibility of authentic language material, the role of literary works in language instruction started to decline. The growing popularity of the English language as the international means of communication also contributed to the fact that society needed to mass-produce “functionally competent users” [1]. Thus, reading long and complicated texts in the course of a foreign language was considered to be overuse of time. Fortunately, since 1980’s literary texts have started to regain their positions among foreign language teaching materials, arousing interest of teachers, researches and learners. [1]

At the same time, reading an authentic literary text could be a daunting task for learners, leading to misunderstanding, reluctance to read, thus depriving the students of the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the best literary works. Using different forms of literary analysis could help to avoid this problem.

Van [2] singles out six different approaches to literary analysis – New Criticism, Structuralism, Stylistics, Reader-Response, Language-based and Critical Literacy. In order not to go deep into the historical background of each of the methods, we’ll point out that Structural Literary Analysis used in this research is the combination of various approaches – it includes structuring the text into its constituent parts, paying equal attention to both social and historical contexts as well as the text itself, eliciting answers from the students about their personal experience similar to the one described in a book, using methods from Stylistics, Language-based approach etc. In other words, Structural Literary analysis is a way of examining constituent parts of a work of literature in order to come to understanding of the author’s idea and message. During the process of analysis, students learn to think critically.

Critical reading is a skill, which is formed as the result of complex cognitive processes. While the issue of critical thinking is thoroughly studied in both Russian and English-speaking teaching community, critical reading has rather been the matter of recent interest of educators and researchers (see [3], [4], [5], [6] and other more recent works). Russian researchers have not given critical reading enough attention as such. Meanwhile, reading has been considered from the perspective for modeling multicultural identity [7] and some other narrow aspects. Critical thinking development through reading...
has been applied by Russian researchers to foreign language teaching just once [8]. Thus, the issue of critical reading has not been studied closely as applied to Russian EFL learners.

Literary analysis has also been mainly the area of literary critic’s interests and is rarely applied to teaching foreign language practice. At the same time, such research can be really helpful to teachers of foreign languages, reading and literature, as it gives better understanding of main characters’ roles, images, symbols and other parts of a literary text, especially when studying modern writers [9].

Critical reading ability is closely connected with the idea of active and passive perception of information, thus forming active and passive reading processes.

Passive reader, according to F. Davies, performs the tasks which include: silent reading, responding to multiple choice exercises, superficial comprehension questions, gap filling exercises, true–false statements, vocabulary and dictionary work [10]. These tasks do not demand active personal involvement of a learner; the correct answer can easily be tracked by finding key words in the text.

Active reading demands to read “between the lines”, work in pairs to negotiate answers [10], write book reviews, summaries, take notes [4].

C. Wallace sees reading as practice, product and process. Reading as process focuses on a reader and strategies to construct meaning from the text. She considers critical reading as “concerned less with the individual author’s communicative intent than with ideological effect: the claim is that readers not to accept words on the page as given, but that a range of interpretations are legitimate” [6].

As critical reading deals more with individual interpretations of the text, every reader builds his interpretations on his own prior knowledge, previous experience etc. This idea was largely influenced by Stephen Kraschen’s “Schema theory”, which has been recently proved by a growing body of research on reading comprehension [11], [5], [12]. Schema theory views the process of teaching reading as “a process, meaning that students are taught techniques for processing texts, such as making inference, activating prior knowledge, and using critical thinking” [13]. In other words, critical reading is a complex process, which evaluates information using activated prior knowledge and is based on critical thinking.

The current research will consider applying structural literary analysis to develop critical reading skills.

2 METHODOLOGY

A group of 20 EFL learners were taught a course of English and American literature of the XX century in Kazan Federal University, Russia. All students had English as their second major subject. According to the curriculum, the classes were divided into 8 lectures and 10 seminars. As the course was limited in time, only the most significant authors and literary works of the given period were covered, e.g. O. Wilde, B. Shaw, T. S. Eliot, J. Joyce, G. Orwell, E. Hemingway, J. Salinger and some others. The students came prepared, having read the text (full or an extract) by one of the authors prior to the class. The learners’ level of English varied from intermediate to advanced, all students were familiar with reading techniques.

The lecture part of the course covered the main historical and cultural trends of the XX century (such as “aesthetism”, “modernism”, “the lost generation” and others) so the students were familiar with the epoch and background of the work of literature they were going to read.

The specific structure of the course made it difficult to follow pre-, while- and post-reading stages. To be more exact, the pre-reading stage was done during the lecture course, when the students’ previous knowledge (schemata) was activated and the new information was given. The while-reading stage was done by students independently (the learners were previously instructed on how to read a certain text). And the post-reading stage was completely devoted to group discussions and developing critical reading skills.

Classes were organized according to the structural literary analysis scheme, which includes the following stages:

- Plot (main events of the story),
- Setting (time and place of the action),
- Characters (major and minor),
- Stylistic devices (artistic elements to convey the author’s idea).

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3 RESULTS

The work on each of piece of writing was carried out according to the above mentioned scheme. **Plot.** The students’ summarizing skills are practiced at this stage. They were asked to go over the main points of the piece of writing in 2-3 sentences. As the pieces under consideration were mainly novels, plays and sometimes stories, this task was not easy to perform. The students had to learn to distinguish facts from lengthy descriptions, emotional imagery, monologues and dialogues. They had to give brief outlines of multiple events of each story.

**Setting.** The students were asked to describe time and place of the story. As the learners had been lectured about the main literary tendencies and about the history of the XX century before, they were asked to activate their previous knowledge and correlate it with the piece of writing. The most common questions asked at this phase were “How is the epoch reflected in the story?” and “Are there any major historical events that influence the characters’ lives and deeds?”

**Characters.** This was the lengthiest stage among the others. The students were asked to distinguish between major and minor characters, analyze their role in the conflict, describe their appearance and say if it could speak of some traits of character. The learners were also asked if the person in the novel was characterized by actions, words or some other characters, whether it was first- or third-person characteristic. At this stage students also used their communicative skills, as they had to participate in discussions, take turns to express their opinions and use appropriate language.

**Stylistic devices.** As the students were not closely familiar with the course of stylistics yet, only most common points were stressed. “Does the author use direct or indirect speech?”, “Are the sentences mainly short or long?”, “Does the author use any metaphors, epithets or syntactic means?”, “Why did the author use this form of narration?” and “What impression did the choice of artistic devices leave on you?” were the most common questions.

At this stage it would be logical to pay attention to artistic details and remind students that no detail is unnecessary in a work of literature. The common question could be “Why do you think the author attracts out attention to this detail?”, “Does this fact mean something?” etc.

**Message.** At this stage, the students had to summarize and analyze all that had been previously said about the work of literature. They were asked about the message that the author tried to express, the hidden meaning that they discovered after analyzing the text. The students were also requested to compare their first impression on reading the story/novel and their conclusions after the text analysis, to see if it was different. As the result, the students have to think critically and develop the connection between a literary text and its constituent parts, the author’s intent and their own impressions, to see if the writer’s thought reached the target. Usually, their final ideas about a book are quite different from the first impressions, due to preliminary discussion.

3.1 Sample lesson plan on B. Shaw’s “Pygmalion”

The given lesson plan was devised according to the needs of a particular group of students, thus some parts of it can be adapted accordingly.

Before the lesson: write the name of the author and the title of the book on the board. Use the portrait of the dramatist if available. Lists the stages of the structural literary analysis on the board as follows: Plot, Setting, Characters, Stylistic devices, Message.

1. Begin with the plot. Ask students to summarize the plot of the play in 2-3 sentences. This task teaches students to focus on the most essential events, not being distracted by minor details. If you have enough time, you may ask students to work in groups of 4-5 people, discuss their ideas and choose the best short summary. Elicit answers from each group.

2. Make sure the students are familiar with the idea of setting. Ask additional questions and fill up the gaps in their knowledge if students are not well familiar with the lifestyle of the XIX century England. A task to develop critical reading skill is to ask students to compare life then and now and draw conclusion about lifestyle, morals and the role of men/women in the society.

3. Characters. Ask students to name the main characters of the play (Eliza Doolittle, Prof. Higgins, Pickering). Explain the difference between major and minor characters and ask who of the
characters could be the minor ones. A task to develop critical reading if to ask if they are characterized directly or indirectly, with the examples from the text of the play. Ask if the characterization is positive or negative (start with the students’ impressions).

4 Stylistic devices. Not all students know all the stylistic terms. Use the most common ones – a metaphor, a simile, tone, atmosphere, exaggeration etc. Briefly explain their meaning. Provide the examples of some devices and ask if the students can find their own. Asking students why the author used this or that device and how that characterizes the person could be a task to develop critical reading (See Section 3. Results above for more questions).

5 Discussing a message is the most important part of the lesson. Ask students more questions to help them understand the meaning of the play. Ask, for example, “What else changed in Eliza Doolittle except her appearance and the manner of speech?” or “How do you think Eliza felt when she was leaving Prof. Higgins?” to develop critical reading. Elicit personal understanding of the play from each student. Summarize the main ideas.

6 List of Literary terms

**Atmosphere** – emotions and feelings an author conveys to his readers through descriptions of objects and settings.

**Comparison** – a literary device in which a writer compares or contrasts two people, places, things, or ideas.

**Epithet** - a literary device that describes a place, a thing or a person in such a way that it helps in making the characteristics of a person, thing or place more prominent than they actually are.

**Exaggeration** – an overstatement, showing that something is beyond the limits of truth.

**Hyperbole** - a figure of speech, which involves an exaggeration of ideas for the sake of emphasis. an unreal exaggeration to emphasize the real situation.

**Irony** - a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words.

**Metaphor** - word or phrase that is used to make a hidden comparison between two things. Does not use words like “as”, “like” etc.

**Parallelism** - the use of components in a sentence that are grammatically the same; or similar in their construction, sound, meaning or meter.

**Simile** - a literary device that makes a comparison between two things using the words “like” or “as.” The objects of different categories are compared.

**Tone** - an attitude of a writer toward a subject or an audience. Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words or the viewpoint of a writer on a particular subject. [14],[15].

4 CONCLUSIONS

As the result of this structured analysis the students got thoroughly acquainted with the representatives of British and American literature, practice their communicative, familiarize with literary vocabulary and develop the critical reading skills.

At the same time, this course had its share of difficulties and challenges. First of all, the students lacked knowledge of social and cultural background that prevented them from developing critical attitude. The lectures delivered during the first part of the course were quite helpful, but not enough to fill all the gaps in the students’ knowledge, especially concerning world, British and American history. These gaps had to be filled during practical classes.

Secondly, the students faced with linguistic difficulty of the texts, which could be overcome, but was very time-consuming. The length of the texts (especially novels) made it difficult to see them as the whole structure. The students were more absorbed with twists and turns of the plot and conflict, than with distinguishing such structural parts of a literary work. At the same time, the task was quite useful, as it helped the students to practice reading for the gist, not to focus on and get distracted by unknown words, but try to percep the text as a whole.
Thirdly, not all the texts were fancied by the students, which can be explained by personal preferences, gender and age.

While analyzing the work of literature according to the given structure, the students have learned to distinguish between plot and message, facts and their impressions, objective and subjective information. The students learned how to characterize protagonists judging by the appearance descriptions and actions, self- and third-person characterization. This ability to interpret the facts, plot structure and stylistic devices brought the learners directly to the message, especially with concealed meaning which is not directly apparent. Moreover, the students got acquainted with the terminology, necessary for the literary analysis.

A literary work is a well-organized piece of writing (especially when we deal with classical literature), all elements of which are carefully selected. Every component, whether it be a character, a twist of the plot, setting or a metaphor, is well-turned. When students read and analyze a literary work, they seem to do a puzzle, the key to which is the author's intent, idea and message. Having mastered the ability to think critically and learning to find all the elements of this "puzzle", students really begin to enjoy reading.

REFERENCES


