

THE APPLICATION OF CRITICAL THINKING IN LITERATURE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Purpose: The workshop 'conscious critical thinking' provides insight into the concept of critical thinking and the importance of this basic skill for literature education at secondary schools.

Background: The student who reads a text formulates a judgment: immediately and instinctively. By using the academic skill of critical thinking in the lesson, the teacher can make the student think more deeply about his own judgment and the meaning of a literary work. The workshop focuses on the primary response when reading a literary text: participants experience the influence of this primary reaction on the reasoned final judgment on a literary text.

Key Points: Critical thinking is an extremely useful tool that allows the teacher to strengthen the students in three areas: knowledge about literary conventions, the application of critical thinking as an academic skill and the understanding of the individual thought process.

Procedure: After a general introduction, the participants are asked to read a short text and to give a first reaction in specific places in the text using keywords. These responses are then compared with the results of an intervention in students from the upper classes of secondary education. The ensuing discussion focuses on the general tendency in these responses and the influence that the primary reading experiences can have on the further thought process.

Description participants: The workshop is aimed at researchers as well as language teachers with a maximum number of 25 participants.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, literature, secondary education.*

1. Introduction

In the novel *Poubelle*, author Pieter Waterdrinker describes a scene on Independence Square in Kiev: *'On the stage in Independence Square, a handsome singer was singing the Ukrainian national anthem, in a sea of blue-yellow flags that slowly swayed. The crowd formed a giant magnet; never before had he felt a tension that seemed to repel and attract him violently at the same time. Nervously, it was said that they were trapped on three sides by military units'* (Waterdrinker, 2018, p. 270).

The literary description of the situation on Independence Square automatically evokes a reaction from the reader. This could include an expression of disapproval, indignation or compassion, or perhaps even a sense of recognition, but that the scene elicits a response is inevitable. The question is, however, on what basis do these various reactions come about: are they the result of a profound, substantiated reasoning or a first impression; an unconscious feeling?

In his research into thinking skills and decision-making Psychologist Kahneman (2011) makes a distinction between intuitive and reflective thinking systems. Kahneman's ideas provide a preliminary answer to this question: intuitive thinking is automatic based on unconscious, uncritical associations and does not assume any choices. Such an association leaves no room for doubt, is based on previous experiences or obvious solutions. The doubt and falsification of this intuitive thinking comes into effect through the active use of the second thought system: conscious, reflective thinking. What could these two systems of thinking mean for the reader's reaction to the fragment from *Poubelle*?

Conscious critical thinking could be seen as a form of thinking that allows readers to reflect on their own bias, which has been evoked by the automatic intuitive thinking system. Making the thinking steps explicit is then crucial for critical thinking and forms the direct motivation for adding the word 'conscious' to 'critical thinking'. It would therefore be worthwhile to develop a teaching model that gives critical thinking a more central place in literature education (Meijerink, 2009; Guth, 2016; Hernot, 2019).

On the basis of an extensive literature study, a conceptual model has been constructed, which will be refined in the various phases of the research. The workshop of the END Conference provides insight into the first thinking step of the subject-teaching model: the creation of the primary response. The description of design, objectives, methods, discussion and conclusion are therefore mainly aimed at clarifying this first step in the process of critical thinking.

2. Design

Educational Design Research (EDR) is at the heart of the methodological approach. EDR is in line with the thinking steps in critical thinking, because it is based on analysis, design and evaluation. The research phases have an iterative character, with which hypotheses and conjectures are always validated and refined (McKenney, Reeves & Nieveen, 2014). The research is carried out at the Sint Odulphuslyceum in Tilburg with pupils aged 16 to 18 years, from the highest classes of preparatory scientific education (vwo). The research phases will be described in four chapters: theory and background, a model for critical thinking in literature education, critical thinking in the classroom and finally critical thinking and the student.

3. Objectives

The aim of the *total research* is the construction of a subject-taught model of conscious critical thinking (CCT model), with which the teacher can achieve three goals:

- a the students gain insight into the process of conscious critical thinking at a cognitive and metacognitive level through which they first acquire knowledge about the thought process as an instrument, then learn the skills to be able to use this knowledge and finally develop the attitude to actually use critical thinking;
- b the students gain insight into the literary techniques and the formal and referential meaning of literature at a cognitive and metacognitive level;
- c the critical thinking used in the study of literary texts is transferable to situations where citizenship skills are called upon. The students can take a reasoned position in the social debate, taking into account different views and arguments.

The purpose of the *first intervention* is to provide insight into the nature of the reaction from pupils: what do the pupils pay attention to when they read a text for the first time? The categorization of these responses is the starting point for the second phase in the CCT model: the literature-substantive, normative-substantive and reflective thinking steps. If it turns out that the students focus on only a few, specific aspects in the primary response, then critical thinking should be the means to broaden the thinking about the text and make the student aware of the fact that initially only a few focus points supported the certain idea.

4. Methods

The intervention was divided into two parts: a pilot phase and a main phase. In the pilot phase only a limited number of respondents (N=4) took part in the intended intervention in order to check the reliability and validity. In the main phase, the intervention was deployed in the three highest classes of secondary education (N=45).

For the main phase of the intervention, three classes from the highest years of secondary education had been chosen. The students read the first twenty pages of a recent Dutch novel. This interaction between reader and text was not preceded by a textual introduction or an explanation of the intention of the intervention in order to exclude any form of influence. The pupils were only informed of the procedure at the start of the intervention. While reading, the students comment on the text with one or more keywords. This comment took place after every four pages and at the end of the text fragment. The students had the opportunity to write down keywords apart from these fixed points.

In order to match as much as possible with the way the students communicate in informal situations, the participants noted their comments in WhatsApp. Not only the avoidance of a school situation was a consideration, but also the more informal nature should help to ensure that the keywords were noted as intuitively as possible, without the research situation giving rise to reasoned thinking steps.

On the basis of the noted keywords the domain determination place of the primary reactions was conducted by a bottom-up encoding. A total of 45 pupils participated in the intervention and 365 responses were recorded: 120 from 6 vwo (16 pupils), 166 from 5 vwo (15 pupils) and 79 from 4 vwo (14 pupils).

5. Discussion

The intervention shows that students mainly express themselves in inner textual reactions. No fewer than 318 keywords relate to aspects that are within the boundaries of the text, while only 47 responses focus on thoughts and ideas that are extratextual in nature. Furthermore, it is striking that the inner textual reactions mainly relate to the content of the text: 42 percent of these reactions comment on the course of the story and 30 percent on the characters. The reactions focused on the form of the text, language use and structure, lag far behind the substantive aspects. Although the extratextual reactions were few in number, it is remarkable that they are mainly concerned with the individual reading consciousness: knowing how the text influences the reader and what effect this has on the reading experience.

The result of the intervention leads to a different categorization than the distinction that comparable research by Cornelissen (2016) makes in the categories 'experience, interpretation, judgment and narrative understanding'. The intervention shows a difference in inner and outer textual domains, followed by a split within the text into form (language, structure) and content (story progression, characters) and outside the text a division into individual and contextual domains. Perhaps this difference is a result of the fact that Cornelissen focuses on primary education, while the intervention took place in the highest classes of secondary education.

6. Conclusions

Now that it has been established that students are primarily concerned with the story course and the characters, it is important to focus the second phase in the CCT model, the thought process, on the translation of this strongly substantive text experience into a richer, contextual and metacognitive deepening. The planned literature-content, normative-substantive and reflective thinking steps should offer sufficient opportunities to concretize this deepening. Awareness, the reasoned formulation of one's own judgment and the further development of citizenship are key concepts.

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