

The Impact of Instructing Self-Questioning in Reading Literary Texts

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Abstract

This study sets up to address two research questions: 1) the effect of teaching students self-questioning strategy while reading literary texts on students' ability to do so independently and 2) the effect of using this strategy on improving their comprehending of literary texts. To this end, 32 participants were taught self-questioning strategy using Dubravac and Dalle's (2002) model of question types. Findings suggest that students were able to ask questions independently at the end of the experiment. Furthermore, a paired t-test showed significant difference between the pre-test and post-test means of the participants. The finding of this research can have some implications for teaching literature to ESL students.

Keywords: Reading literature, Self-questioning techniques

1. Introduction

Despite the emergence of a ‘critical thinking’ approach, literature classes usually have been shown to be deprived of the advantages of the principles of this approach. Recent studies [such as Jaffar, 2004 and Hwang and Embi, 2007] in Malaysia have revealed that students in literature classes are usually passive and are unable to respond critically to literary texts. This stems from the fact that literature classes are often lecturer-centered and students are not given guidelines and opportunities to work with their friends and express their views and responses that contribute to their language development and the appreciation of literature (Siti Norliana, 2003).

To alleviate this problem, the instructional focus should be on the process of teaching critical thinking. In this respect, research has proved that lecture and rote memorization do not contribute to critical thinking. However, instructional strategies that employ students’ “higher-order thinking” skills have proved to be helpful in improving critical thinking skills (Snyder, 2008, p.92; Wong, 2007; Duplas & Ziedler, 2002). Nevertheless, the point is that critical thinking is not an innate ability, and its improvement involves training. In this regard, the goal of instruction is to help learners acquire both the knowledge and the process for learning how to learn since, as Janssen (2002, p.95), states, the teachers’ role has shifted “from providing literary knowledge to coaching student’s individual reading processes”.

In this connection, training students to generate questions while reading literary texts has been assumed to be a useful strategy to interpret literary texts (Eliason, 2009; Janssen, 2002). This stems from the fact that self-questioning while reading fosters “self-regulative, independent learning”. Secondly, generating questions while reading is a kind of response to literary texts. In this respect, studies of narrative and literary understanding (e.g. Trabasso and Magliano, 1996) reveal that readers ask themselves questions in order to interpret the stories. And thirdly motivating students to ask questions while reading can help them to be actively involved with the text which, in turn, can help them improve their understanding (Ehlers, 1995). Despite the advantages of generating questions while reading, literature teachers have rarely encouraged their students to use self-questioning strategy while reading literary texts (Janssen, 2002).

At this junction, what needs stressing is that instruction that is in line with critical thinking employs questioning techniques that require students to “analyse, synthesize, and evaluate information, to solve problems and make decisions (think) rather than merely to repeat information (memorize)” (Snyders, 2008, p.91). Nevertheless, this point is ignored in literature classes today. In a literature class, the lecturer normally delivers a lecture; students sit passively and just receive the information transmitted to them by the lecturer. Consequently, when the students are questioned about the “hows and whys” within any text, they are unable to answer. It seems, therefore, indispensable to train and teach students how to question both the instructors’ and the authors’ point of view. This process helps the students understand that literary criticism is not on-the-vacuum activity and involves a coherent and organized mental process (Jaffar, 2004). Considering the aforementioned facts, the present study aims to address the following questions: 1) To what extent does teaching

students to ask appropriate questions help them to be able to ask appropriate questions independently? and 2) Can teaching this strategy improve their reading ability of literary texts?

At this stage, this question may crop up that what kind of question can be considered appropriate. In this relation, it is noteworthy that appropriate questions in this research refer to what Janssen (2002) calls “authentic or genuine knowledge-seeking questions”. According to Janssen (2002, p.97)

authentic questions are questions in which the questioner is really interested in expanding his/her knowledge regarding the raised point and, while reading, for example stories, is curious about discovering the incentives of characters’ actions and reactions.

Furthermore, appropriateness of a question can also be assessed by the extent of discussion arisen from that (Commeyras and Summer, 1998).

2. Background

Generally speaking, self-questioning in reading has been investigated from different theoretical angles. As the literature indicates, most self-questioning studies while reading published since 1992 show positive treatment effects on students’ reading comprehension. In this connection, Frances and Eckart (1992) using narrative and expository texts, employed reciprocal teaching of reading strategies to teach reading skill to grade 7 students. At the end of the course, the researchers noticed that reciprocal teaching group scored higher on reading comprehension than did the control group.

By the same token, Lederer (2000) taught self-questioning techniques to 4-6 grade students. After this experiment, a post-test revealed that using self-questioning techniques helped the students to improve their reading comprehension skill.

Nevertheless, some self-questioning studies showed mixed results. For example, Alfassi (1998) taught self-questioning strategies in reading expository texts to high school poor comprehenders. The post-test indicated that experimental group outperformed the control group on experimenter-developed comprehension test. However, no effects were found on standardized reading tests.

In a nutshell, self-questioning instruction seems to be an effective approach to improve students’ text comprehension. However, the majority of the self-questioning studies in the literature just focus on the effect of self-questioning strategy during different reading comprehension tasks. Rarely do they deal with the how of the teaching of self-questioning techniques. Furthermore, the emphasis of the majority of the studies is teaching self-questioning techniques while reading non-literary texts. Thus, the current study attempts to focus on teaching self-questioning strategy while reading literary texts. Since as Janssen (2002; p.99) claims reading fiction or literature involves different reading goals, such as “pleasure, aesthetic experiences and understanding”; therefore, different self-questioning techniques may be involved while reading literary texts.

Another drawback of the above-mentioned studies is that they do not follow a particular model in systematic teaching of self-questioning strategy while reading. In this respect, Janssen (2002) asserts that if questioning texts plays an important role in critical understanding, it is implied that students need access to instruction in generating questions to improve their understanding of written texts. Considering these facts, this study set out to investigate the effect of teaching self-questioning technique while reading literary texts. To this end the Dubravac and Dalle's (2002) model of question types has been employed. According to Dubravac and Dalle (2002), many of the differences in question types seem to be related to the quality and quantity of online inferences. An inference is generated when a reader uses both his or her background and linguistic knowledge. In view of the fact that the answer to the questions asked by the students requires background knowledge or linguistic knowledge, Dubravac and Dalle (2002) have classified questions into five categories.

The first question type introduced by Dubravac and Dalle (2002) are "scripturally implicit" questions which require the greatest amount of available background knowledge in order to answer. In other words, these questions (e.g. *what is the theme of the story?* or *why has the author narrated the story?*) require an answer that is not in the text. In order to answer these questions, the reader should be cognizant of textual clues which show the relationships between characters, as well as textual clues which show the relationship between the text and other world situations.

The second question type embraces "textually implicit" questions and, while relying on less background knowledge than scripturally implicit questions, still maintains a certain amount of inference. In other words, these questions require the reader to link two parts of a given paragraph using their background knowledge

The third question type is "textually explicit", which demands little, if any, background knowledge and whose answer can be easily found in the text.

The fourth type of question is "the linguistic question", which typically includes questions pertaining to the syntactic or semantic traits of the text such as "what does x mean?", "*what does x have to do with anything?*" or "*Does it mean what I think it does?*" These questions often seem to show failure to comprehend the text and the subject himself/herself understands that s/he has a problem in understanding it. Using this model of question types, the researcher, intends to investigate whether or not teaching students to ask questions while reading literary texts can improve their comprehension.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The experiment was run in the context of a third-year undergraduate course in *Reading Short Stories* at Sheikhabaee University, and was conducted over a whole semester. The participants involved in this research were 32 undergraduate students (24 females and 8 males) who were all Persian native speakers and were selected from population of senior students majoring in English literature at Sheikhabaee University on the bases of their GPA. The participants had already been enrolled for a course entitled "*Reading Short Stories*".

The reason for such a selection stemmed from the fact that these participants had passed all the relevant and required courses of reading literary texts (i.e. *Introduction to Literature I*, *Reading Simple Prose Texts* and *Reading Advanced Prose Texts*). Therefore, their post-test scores could better reflect the role of the experiment in their comprehending literary texts.

3.2 Materials

In order to model asking questions while reading literary texts, the following short stories were of the focus of the present study: *A Clean Well-lighted Place* and *Cat in the Rain* by Ernest Hemingway, *I'm a Fool* by Sherwood Anderson, *That Evening Sun* by William Faulkner and *The Demon Lover* by Elizabeth Bowen. The students were supposed to have covered the stories at home and write down their formulated questions so that they could report them to the class the following session. These stories were taught throughout 12 weeks using asking questions technique while reading.

However, in order to investigate the effect of instruction on improving the ability of participants in asking questions, a total of three Literary texts were used for the purpose. One of the literary texts was selected from short story genre [entitled "*The Cask of Amontillado*" by Edgar Allan Poe] whereas the others were chosen from the genre of literary essays entitled "*The Effects of Sympathy in the Distress of Others*" by Edmund Burke and "*The Rewards of Living a Solitary Life*" by May Sarton.

The short story "*The Cask of Amontillado*" is a classic example of the use of an unreliable narrator. Montresor, the narrator of the story, tells his tale of revenge with pleasure, as he invites the reader to appreciate his intelligence. By telling the story from Montresor's point of view, Poe forces the reader to penetrate into a murderer's mind.

The incentive behind the selection of this story stems from the circumstance that, the reader, on reading this story, is supposed to become quickly aware of the fact that Montresor is not a reliable narrator but tries to convince him/her that his intentions are honorable. In order to grasp this point, the reader should find the link between textual clues of relationship between characters and world knowledge. Accordingly, comprehending the text at issue involves great deal of "scripturally implicit" information, which drastically challenges the reading comprehension skill of the participants involved in the present study.

Another justification for such a selection is that *The Cask of Amontillado* is a carefully crafted story so that every detail contributes to a certain unique effect (Womack, 2009). The story is replete with ironies, both verbal and dramatic. It is now widely acknowledged that in dramatic irony the reader perceives something that a character in the story does not (Womack, 2009). Therefore, distinguishing this type of irony requires the reader to link two or more parts of a given paragraph using his/her background knowledge. This causes the text to be full of "textually implicit" information which makes the text under discussion a good candidate for the current research since this may stimulate the participants to ask this kind of question.

Another important factor in selecting this text is its structural complexity, which paves the way for asking "textually explicit", "linguistic" and "miscomprehension" questions, which

are the types to be investigated in the present research. In summary, all the selected texts had the above-mentioned advantages.

It is noteworthy that all the texts used in the current research were authentic ones, for authenticity is considered an important characteristic of foreign language reading (Govindasamy & David, 2004). As far as the present research is concerned, the concept of authenticity has been borrowed from Wallace (1992, p.145). Wallace defines it as "... real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes". Authentic texts are therefore written for native speakers and contain real language. They are "... materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community" (Peacock, 1997; p. 2).

The other materials used in this study constituted of two tests, one pre-test and one post test. Both the pre-test and the post test contained forty items testing the literary comprehension of the participants. Twenty test items intended to evaluate the participants' comprehension skill and the rest was to assess their ability to recognize literary elements in the texts.

3.3 Procedure

At the very beginning of the course, in order to investigate the effect of asking questions while reading at the end of the course, an experimenter-designed test of reading literary texts was assigned to the participants as a pre-test. Then in the following session, the experimenter asked the participants to read the story *Rope* by Katherine Anne Porter and ask questions that occur to them. This process of asking questions before coming to the class lasted for 12 weeks. The original estimation was that students had no idea what it meant to ask questions. The experimenter presupposition proved to be true. The questions generated by participants appeared to be, as Janssen (2002, p.97) believes, "inauthentic" in the sense that the questioners already knew the answers themselves. In other words, the questions were similar to the test or display questions asked by teachers and in text books. The following is the introductory paragraph of *Rope*.

On the third day after they moved to the country he came walking back from the village carrying a basket of groceries and a twenty-four-yard coil of rope. She came out to meet him, wiping her hands on her green smock. Her hair was tumbled, her nose was scarlet with sunburn; he told her that already she looked like a born country woman. His gray flannel shirt stuck to him, his heavy shoes were dusty. She assured him he looked like a rural character in a play.

Some of the questions asked by participants were as follow: *When did he come walking back from the village? What was he carrying? How was her hair? What did he tell her?*

Therefore, it was arranged to teach participants asking questions techniques while reading. To this end, following Rosenshine et al. (1996) teaching asking questions while reading consumed an estimated 75% of the instructional time. The experimenter modelled the strategies through thinking aloud and the students were asked to apply the learned strategies in small peer groups.

In this connection, considering the time constraint factor, the experimenter prepared the questions before attending the class and formulated the questions on the basis of a question framework. The framework applied in this experiment was that proposed by Dubravac and Dalle (2002) and has been appended in appendix A.

In order to investigate the effect of instruction on students' ability to generate questions, three texts were given to the participants to read and write the questions that come to their mind. Then, the questions were categorized on the basis of Dubravac and Dalle's (2002) model of question types which has been taken up below. Next, the frequency of each question type was computed. Finally, in order to observe the effect of teaching asking questions while reading, another experimenter-designed reading comprehension test was assigned to the participants as a post-test.

4. Results and Data Analysis

In order to address the first research question (i.e. the impact of teaching asking questions while reading literary texts on improving participants' asking questions ability), the frequency of each question type (i.e. scripturally implicit, textually implicit, textually explicit, linguistic and miscomprehension) questions was calculated for each of the literary texts assigned to the participants. Table 1 displays the frequency of question types asked by the participants while reading literary texts.

Table 1. Observed Frequency and Percentage of Question Types in Literary Texts

Literary texts	Scripturally implicit	Textually implicit	Textually explicit	Linguistic
The Cask of Amontillado	291	73	242	189
The Effects of Sympathy ...	89	22	159	117
The Rewards Of Living ...	166	68	136	60
Total	546	163	537	366
%	30.6%	9.1%	30.1%	20.5%

As the percentage of the questions indicate, almost two third of the questions asked while reading literary texts have been scripturally implicit and textually explicit questions. However, only one third of the questions has been textually explicit, linguistic and miscomprehension ones.

On the other hand, to address the second research question (i.e. the effect of teaching asking questions while reading on reading comprehension skill), a Paired t-test was applied in order to examine whether the difference between the means of the participants' pre-test and post-test scores are statistically significant. To this end, SPSS (The Statistical Package of Social Sciences) was employed. Table 2 shows the mean and Standard deviation of the pre-test and the post-test scores. However, Table 3 displays the results of Paired t-test at $p \leq 0.01$.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of pretest and post test scores

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	12.4688	32	1.54470
Post-test	14.0781	32	2.28286

Table 3. The results of Paired Samples Test

Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
-160938	2.26735	-4.015	31	.000

As the table indicates the difference between pre-test and post-test means has proved to be statistically significant at $p \leq 0.01$. Although the results presented above tell us that the difference we obtained in the two sets of scores was unlikely to occur by chance, it does not tell us much about the magnitude of the intervention's effect. One way to do this is to calculate an effect size statistic. Therefore, Cohen's effect size formula was used to calculate the effect size and it was shown to be 0.84 which indicates the large effect of the instruction of asking questions while reading in improving the participants' comprehending literary texts.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

One of the goals of the current study was to investigate whether teachers' modelling a questioning approach technique can be helpful to foster in students ways of asking appropriate questions in order to be able to unravel the meaning of texts independently or not. In this connection, this experiment indicated that the use of well-designed comprehension questions can be useful in helping students to generate their own questions by paying attention towards various aspects of texts (scripturally implicit, textually implicit, textually explicit, linguistic). In this regard, the participants who were familiar with asking only display questions at the beginning of the course, produced 30.6% scripturally implicit, 9.1% textually implicit, 30.1% textually explicit and 20.5% linguistic questions at the end of the course for the text *The Cask of Amontillado*. This finding is consistent with that of Eliason's (2009, p.29) who believes that "students need modelling and scaffolding as they learn how to ask knowledge-seeking and hypothesis-generating questions, as well as questions that stimulate divergent thinking and encourage independent learning".

As for the second research question (i.e. the effect of generating questions while reading literary texts on improving comprehending literary texts), it was shown that teaching this strategy can help improving participants' comprehending literary texts. This may be due to the fact that firstly, as Eliason (2009) claims, students have gotten tired of the overused method of answering teacher-generated questions and this method has sounded new and interesting to them, hence successful. Secondly, as McTighe and Wiggins (1993) claim, students' initial questions often can tend to additional questions and deeper understanding.

The findings of the present research also indicate that when teachers employ creative ways for their students to respond to the reading texts, it will motivate students to read and think critically about the text.

In conclusion, this study points to certain directions of further research. In this regard, the current research showed the improvement of students' reading comprehension using experimenter-designed tests. Another study can investigate the effect of the same technique using standardized tests or using different other tasks such as interpretation, analysing literary texts, finding literary elements, etc. Furthermore, a prospective study can investigate the effect of teaching asking questions on comprehending other literary genres like poetry and drama. Another study can also investigate the classroom interactions and the types of questions asked in reading classrooms.

The results of the research, however, indicate a number of recommendations for practice. For instance, the findings can be used for assessing reading comprehension. As Wiggins (1993) expresses it is through the students' questions and not just their answers that teachers are able to meaningfully assess understanding of subject matter. In this connection, Eliason (2009) acknowledges that when students are not motivated to ask and inquire, teachers do not acquire a clear picture of students' understanding. Moreover, the results of the study ask for a drastic shift in classroom interaction from teacher-generated to student-generated questions. In this relation, Newmann (1990) found that when students assume the role of questioners, they are more likely to develop the understanding required to criticize, analyse and interpret information.

To sum up, three common suggestions proposed by Janssen (2002:p.106) underlie the findings of this research: "transfer of responsibility", "authenticity of questions" and "engagement in reading". "Transfer of responsibility" demonstrates that by asking their own questions, students become independent readers and can direct their own process of reading. "Authenticity of questions" is related to the questioners interest to know and discovery in reading. Alternatively, authentic questions reflect real-world interactions. Ultimately, generating authentic questioning may promote students' personal engagement in reading. When students pose questions that concerns what they need to understand, they become motivated. This seems to be enhanced through group discussion with students. In other words, the teacher's role may be better to shift from providing knowledge to coaching students' individual reading processes (Janssen, 2002).

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Appendix

The summary of the story Rope

'Rope' is the story of a quarrel between a couple which has been narrated through the third-party narrative technique. Therefore, the reader can gain information about characters from the conversation exchanged between them.

In this story, the wife has been dramatized as a woman who is generally dissatisfied with her life and accommodates a deep-seated dissatisfaction in her heart. Accordingly, when the husband brings home a rope instead of coffee, she reacts negatively and interprets this action as an evidence of his indifference toward her. In the conversations that follow, the character often reveals her anger towards her husband by using sarcastic language. She bears a grudge against her husband and uses it as ammunition when hostilities evolve. Not only does she complain about her husband of not helping around the house, but when her husband attempts to remind her of the few occasions he has helped her, she only mocks him and degrades the value of any of his assistance.

The husband, on the other hand, has been depicted as a man who has no comprehension of her wife's desires and expectations and, as a result, fails to empathize with her. He considers his

role as a traditional breadwinner. He doesn't view the housework as his responsibility; therefore, he is unable to sympathize with his wife when she feels exhausted. When the author penetrates into the man's mind, the man considers his wife's actions as "silly" and believes that she is manipulated by her emotions and not by ration.

Understanding this story involves asking questions which can be helpful in assisting students in the process of learning to be independent in interpreting literary texts. The attempt was made to set questions in such way that enable students to infer the meaning of title, the resolution and the theme of the story in general.

Application of the framework to the story Rope

The list of questions was prepared before attending the class. After being exposed to each section of the story the students were asked these questions:

Questions	Question type	Explanation
Why has the author avoided mentioning the proper names of characters and instead has used pronouns referring to them?	Scripturally implicit	Answering this question involves the use of background knowledge, and there is no explicit information in this respect in the text.
What can be inferred about the man's and the woman's relationship from the following sentence: " <i>... he told her that already she looked like a born country woman</i> ".	Textually implicit	To answer this question, students should relate different paragraphs to each other.
What is the advantage of third-party narrative point of view used in this story?	Scripturally implicit	There is no explicit answer to this question in the text.
Why has the author chosen the title 'Rope' for this story? What is the significance of 'Rope' for the title?	Scripturally implicit	General information is necessary in order to explain the significance of rope in this story.
What does this sentence mean? " <i>What was the use of her having eyes, if that was the best they could do for her?</i> "	Textually explicit and textually implicit	The answer can easily be found in the text; moreover, to understand this part students should also take the situational context of the utterance into consideration.
What does this sentence mean? " <i>No ice, meet</i>	Textually explicit and textually implicit	The answer to this question can also be found easily in

<i>wouldn't keep</i> ".		the text; however, in order to answer this question students should take the whole dialogue in their mind and try to infer the meaning considering the situation.
What does the following sentence mean? " <i>second best and scraps and makeshifts, even to the meat?</i> "	Textually explicit and textually implicit	As above
What does the word " <i>Claw</i> " mean?	Linguistic	Answering this question requires lexical knowledge.
Explain about the following utterance: " <i>He swallowed the words red hot, his face burned</i> ".	Textually explicit and textually implicit	Answering this question requires both using explicit as well as implicit(situational) information in the text.
What does the following sentence reflect about the man's character? " <i>...the whole trouble with her was she needed something weaker than she was to heckle and tyrannize over</i> ".	Textually implicit	To answer this question, the students should resort to their textual information gained from previous paragraphs about the man's character.
' <i>She looked so forlorn, so lost and despairing he couldn't believe it was <u>only a piece of rope</u> that was causing all the racket.</i> ' What does the above sentence show about the couple's past relationship? Does the man know what the problem of woman is?	Textually implicit	Again, answering this question involves considering the information provided to the respondents throughout the whole text.
What does ' <i>racket</i> ' mean?	Linguistic	It involves lexical knowledge.
' <i>So, she was going to bring all that up again, was she? ... He was tired of explaining.</i> Does this sentence show that she is harbouring a	Textually implicit	To answer this question, respondents should put the bits of information gained from various parts of the story, i.e., textual information together.

<p>deep-seated resentment? What can that resentment be?</p>		
<p>What does the following utterance reveal about the woman's resentment? <i>'She hadn't meant she was happy because she was away from him, she meant she was happy getting the devilish house nice and ready for him'</i></p>	Textually implicit	One more time, solving this puzzle involves putting various jigsaw information together to gain a whole picture of the story.
<p>Why has the word 'rope' been repeated? What does it reveal about the man's and woman's relationship?</p>	Scripturally implicit	Respondents should employ world knowledge as well as textual knowledge to find the answer.
<p>What does the following utterance signal about the woman's resentment? <i>'... and reminded him that housekeeping was no more her work than it was his'.</i></p>	Textually implicit	Once more the answer to this question is possible just by considering the relationship between this part with the previous ones.
<p>What does the following utterance reveal about the man's attitude towards the woman? <i>'... She knew as well as he did that his work brought in the regular money, hers was only occasional'.</i></p>	Textually implicit	As mentioned above.
<p>What is the role of "whippoorwill"? What does its appearance at the end of the story predict about the resolution of the couple's marriage?</p>	Scripturally implicit and textually implicit	At this stage, the respondents are supposed to consider the whole events of the story and compare it to the situation of "Whippoorwill" in the story.
<p>Do you agree with this final utterance of the man? <i>'He knew how she was, didn't he?'</i> What literary element can be spotted here? Justify</p>	Scripturally implicit and textually implicit	From the words exchanged between the man and woman in previous paragraphs respondents should have inferred that the man in essence didn't know

your answer.		how she was, and this can lead them to the dramatic irony element employed by the author.
What literary element can be detected in the final words of this story “ <i>Sure, he knew how she was</i> ”.	Scripturally implicit	Consequently, this question can lead the respondents to realize the verbal irony at the end of the story which can, in turn, lead them to the theme of the story.