

Enhancing Critical Thinking through Questioning: A Case of Teaching Short Stories¹

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Abstract

Using questioning techniques in teaching short stories is a tool to enhance understanding and higher order thinking. Questioning is believed to allow students to participate in the teaching learning process and helps to develop critical thinking skills. It is a reflective model that helps students to evaluate a shared experience or an event so that they can identify ways to improve or act. But many English teachers in Nepal do not teach the students how to ask the right questions. Instead, they provide answers only. Also, the classes teaching English as Foreign Language in our context are not equipped with adequate resources for teaching and learning activities. Such low - resourced classes can be made engaging and effective through questioning. On this background, this paper explores the role of questioning in teaching short stories and attempts to implement the questioning technique in a short story included in the English textbook of Grade 12 in Nepal. To implement the questioning technique, Bloom's taxonomy is used as a tool to propose the teaching of the short story "A Devoted Son" written by Anita Desai. This study is based on the empirical evidence of using questioning techniques in the real classes for a week in Koshi St. James School, Itahari, Sunsari. The study was conducted among 60 students of two different sections using diagnostic tests, observation and discussion tools. Result of this study reveals that the students in English classes are more engaged and activated through the questioning technique implemented while teaching short stories and other texts in contrast with the students who are taught without the questioning.

Keywords: Questioning, higher order thinking, critical thinking, low-resourced classes, short story

Introduction

Questioning Technique

Teaching short stories is not a new phenomenon, but teaching short stories through questioning can be an innovative and new teaching learning process in our context. The source of the question is none other than human curiosity and the nature of thinking out of the box. Human mind is a complex

neuro-transmission process which develops thoughts as per the social and cultural inputs. When one encounters ideas different from his stance and understanding, his brain reacts as a rejection. Then, rejection triggers opposition, which is another source of the questioning. Brostrom (1994) opines that questioning is the key ability to organize our thinking around what we do not know. In regards to the students, it originates from the

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refusal of them to accept new ideas, facts and views. Trying to see a new point of view—or at least being open to seeing something differently—is an important strategy for critical thinking. Based on the Brostrom’s idea, we can claim that the environment deliberately designed for arousing more questions and refusals from the students can be a fertile setting to develop critical thinking.

Why do we use questions in the classroom? Discussing further about the need of questioning, it is relevant to highlight the importance of it in the classroom teaching. Questioning is a key to stimulate students’ participation in the teaching learning process. It, further, helps the students to get motivated at a higher level, and engage them more intensively to explore the deeper meaning of the texts. The primary purpose of questioning is to test the prior knowledge of the participants, to seek factual information, to stimulate students’ thinking, to drive to clear ideas and conclusions, and to stir the imagination as well, whereas, the higher order questions help students to engage themselves with developing skills like analyzing, evaluating and creating. For the better learning outcome, it is desirable to design the questions keeping in mind the age, learning ability and level of the students. These kinds of questions need to be carefully considered as they relate to more serious matters such as consequences and to use questions of how and reason (Farrant, 1985). Carefully designed questions set a good tempo in the classroom and orient the students to learning achievements generating proper stimulation and motivation. Deed (2009) asserts that strategic questions can be

viewed as a pedagogical tool for students to represent, organize, communicate, and more importantly conceptualize their abstract ideas committed to their learning. To discuss further about why questioning is important, and to summarize the rationale of applying questions in a language classroom, an academic website OSU EDU suggests varieties of purposes of it as in the following list:

- To involve students actively in the lesson
- To increase motivation or interest
- To evaluate students’ preparation
- To check on completion of work
- To develop critical thinking skills
- To review previous lessons
- To nurture insights
- To assess achievement or mastery of goals and objectives
- To stimulate independent learning

According to Christenbury and Kelly (1983), questioning also can:

- Provide students with an opportunity to find out what they think by hearing what they say.
- Allow students to explore topics and argue points of view.
- Allow students to function as experts.
- Give students the opportunity to interact among themselves.
- Give the teacher immediate information about student's comprehension and learning.

Research on reading comprehension shows undisputed benefits from asking questions. Questions help students comprehend content, and students who use questions learn more subject matter than students who do not use questions. As early

as 1917, educational psychologist Edward L. Thorndike suggested that the use of questions and oral exercises can improve reading comprehension. Questioning, hence, helps students discover their own ideas, it gives students an opportunity to explore and argue and to sharpen critical thinking skills. It allows students to function as experts and to interact among themselves. It also gives the teachers invaluable information about a student's ability and achievements. Questioning also helps students in the comprehension of content, and it can counteract fear of writing or general writing difficulties.

In fact, questioning is a way of controlling. Through questioning, a teacher can hold the classroom with proper order and command. Students are helped to engage in an interaction, and their attentions towards what is being taught can be easily drawn. Since questioning is integrated and linked with the development of critical thinking, the student friendly environment is fundamental to this technique. Research shows that classrooms involving questioning are more effective than the classrooms without questioning. Questioning is one of the nine research-based strategies presented in *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001). Therefore, teachers should be aware of any changing phenomena that take place in the classroom, and those changes should be oriented with the objectives they want to achieve in the teaching and learning process. That is why, teachers need to plan carefully before and while teaching and consider some of the following things:

- Check whether everyone in the class is paying attention to what is being taught or asked.
- A question is a key to draw the attention of the students. Make sure the question asked in the class is audible to everyone or not.
- Long (1980) says that the question must be addressed to the whole classroom before a student is asked to answer. He suggests that the teacher should not take the name of the student before asking a question. If the question is asked first to the whole class and then a particular student is called and asked to answer, the whole class will be benefitted.
- After asking the question, the teacher should take a short pause so that the students try to recollect the answer with attention.
- The teacher should plan different varieties of questions before and while the class is going on. The questions prepared and asked during the class are called 'axis questions'. Long (1980) suggested that 'axis questions' help teachers and students to orient towards the goals of teaching and learning. These questions are supposed to be short and comprehensive.
- Teachers should ask the questions relevant to the age and ability of the students.

In summary, teachers use questions in the English classroom because questions help students learn and develop critical thinking skills. The kinds of questions we ask should not be rigidly determined by any one hierarchy but should be varied and appropriate to the subject matter and to the

student's interests. When we ask questions, we should give students time to think about the answers, not bombard them with countless inquiries. Moments of silence and meditation should punctuate the discussion. If we could suggest a model for the kind of questioning atmosphere we have in mind, it would be akin to a conversation with friends. In such conversation, we talk as equals, encouraging others' comments, allowing others to wander off onto points that interest them and pausing between ideas.

Review of Literature

What is questioning? It may be a relevant question when one discusses the role of questioning in the teaching learning process. Questioning generally starts with 'what', expands with 'so what' and settles with 'now what'. Here, 'what' refers to the understanding of the idea or event through guessing and thinking, 'so what' targets to explore the facts and implications in existence, and 'now what' tries to meet the creative range of the learners exploring the horizon of new knowledge and solutions. This is the level of consolidation in terms of the new text. Questioning, being the core of critical thinking, is given main priority to enhance activities and understandings in a language classroom. It also helps to promote the participation of the students in interactive learning activities. The variety of the questions in terms of their type is also significant in better development of students' thinking level. There are various types of questions the students can be facilitated with while teaching a short story. Open ended questions, closed questions, rhetorical questions, reflective questions and probing questions are few in the list. On the part of the

teacher, readiness for accepting various and different perspectives and viewpoints is the key to setting the environment for questioning through students' participation.

Questioning is a key factor for creating effective learning environments sparking the students' thoughts inside and outside the classroom, around and beyond the text. It helps students to engage deeply in the thinking process. To create an effective classroom environment for students to higher order thinking, questioning can be one of the most crucial processes. A teacher is the key to carry out this technique in the classroom effectively. Wilen (1991) claims that through questioning, the teacher can stimulate the students' responses and through which the learning goals can be achieved more effectively. Students' learning, thinking, participation, and their level of engagement depend on the kind of questions teachers formulate and use in the classroom.

However, to explore the role of question in developing a student's critical thinking, it is desirable to understand 'a question'. Cotton (2001) suggests that "A question is any sentence, which has an interrogative form or function". He further claims that "in classroom settings, teacher's questions are defined as instructional cues or stimuli that convey to students the content elements to be learned and directions for what they are to do and how they are to do it" (p.1). These scholars have asserted that students' achievements are explicitly related to teachers' application of questioning techniques. On the part of the students, when they ask questions, this leads to more talk, higher level thinking and can result in social and academic benefits. Through questioning

how thinking can be enhanced from lower level to higher is comprehensively presented in Bloom's taxonomy. According to Bloom's taxonomy, there are six thinking levels which can be the supportive tools for the teachers to implement higher order thinking from the base. From the lowest to the highest, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and creation are these levels. It encourages and involves teachers employing the questions from lower level to higher level in their lessons. With higher level questions being used when the development of students 'critical thinking' is the main teaching focus, effective teachers may alternate between these two types of questions in a single lesson according to need, i.e. the questions of remembering and understanding, and the questions of higher level like analysis, evaluation and creation.

Methods

The Study

As the given study suggests, short stories can be a good source of motivation, higher level of interest in reading and improved reading skills. The critical thinking skills can be enhanced in pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages of a short story teaching through questioning. This study aims to find out the thoughts and attitudes of the students toward a short story of Anita Desai covered in the compulsory English textbook of Grade 12. The participants were 60 students of Grade 12 in management stream from Koshi St. James Sec. School, Itahari. The lessons took place in regular everyday classes. The lessons were processed by classroom discussions and a writing task based on the critical questions

asked by the students themselves among their groups and the teacher. First of all, the classes were divided into two groups with 30 students in each class. The first groups (class) was named 'experimental groups' and the other class was named 'controlled groups'. Thereafter, the main tool of the study, 'questioning' was implemented in the teaching and learning activities in the experimental groups, whereas the controlled group class was not facilitated with questions. Questioning would cover the range of remembering and understanding levels to higher thinking levels like applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating whereas the controlled group class was facilitated with traditional teaching methods, i.e. lecturing and reading.

Processes

The process of the study to observe the effects of questioning in the teaching and learning outcome were implemented in three divisions of reading activities, viz. pre-reading, while-reading and post reading activities. The experimental group class was well facilitated with numerous questions based on the text. Most of the questions of different levels were designed by the teacher and disseminated to the students whereas few questions were generated by the students while reading the text. Following questions from the story "A Devoted Son" were designed incorporating different levels and used widely in discussion during the pre-reading and while-reading stages.

Pre-reading Activities

First the students were divided into groups so that they could have the discussion in close proximity, and the group leader

would present their understanding to the class. The teacher set an optimum student friendly environment in the classroom for engaging them in discussion and questioning.

Then, they were asked a few pre reading questions:

- Is the name ‘Anita Desai’ more familiar to you than the name ‘Lu Xun’?
- Which country do you think this story takes place in?
- What does the title “A Devoted Son” mean?
- What are the qualities of a devoted son or daughter?
- What do your parents expect from you? Do they have any dreams or expectations that you could fulfill for them?
- Is there any elderly person like grandpa or grandma at your home? If yes, what do they look like? How are they different from the other members of your family?

Thereafter, the students were asked to read the story “A Devoted Son” between the lines as the classwork.

While-reading Activities

Remembering

This is about students’ ability to memorize and recall key information of the text, for example, the meaning of a word or the literal meanings of the text. The questions asked in this level were:

- When did this story take place?
- Where did the story take place?
- Who is the main character of the story?
- What brings ambience in the house of Varmaji?

- Name the schools and colleges Rakesh studied in the different stages of his life.
- How does Varmaji physically look like?
- How is Rakesh? Describe him in a short paragraph.
- List the names of the schools and colleges Rakesh studied.
- Find the synonyms of the following words in the text: dedicated, muttered, shining, greatness.
- Name the scholarships Rakesh won.
- Why does Rakesh’s father retaliate against his son?

Understanding

This is the second level of Bloom’s taxonomy in which students will be able to understand the main idea of the text, explain the facts and describe the relationship between the characters or events. At this level the students will be able to understand the situations and concepts of the text. The possible questions are:

- Discuss the role of a traditional son in an extended family in an Indian society.
- What do the parents in an Indian family expect from their children?
- How did the morning papers bring an ambience of celebration in the Verma family?
- How did the community celebrate Rakesh’s success?

Applying

At this level, students are supposed to be able to demonstrate that they can use the knowledge and facts acquired from the book

and apply it to other situations, especially in real life situations and contexts. The possible questions in this level are:

- Do you think the Nepalese sons are supposed to fulfill their duty to their parents as Rakesh does in this story?
- Have you ever seen any father like Rakesh's in your surroundings? What do you think a father should expect from his son in the elderly age?
- What will be your role towards your elderly parents? Imagine you in the place of Rakesh and answer.
- What does the story say about the relationship between grandfather and grandchildren?
- Dr. Rakesh is divided between a doctor and a son. As a son, he loves his father and worries about his weakening health but as a doctor he is strict on his father's diet and medicine. In your view, what else could Rakesh have done to make his father's final years more comfortable?
- What other duties Rakesh could have fulfilled to his father in your point of view?

Post-reading Activities

Analyzing

At this level of thinking, teachers are expected to encourage the learners to examine the facts of the book, distinguish differences and gather evidence to support what they think. This is the state when the facts and information relate to the personal experiences and understanding of the students and they try their best to rationalize their stance. In this level the questions should begin with the words 'analyze, interpret,

demonstrate, calculate, solve and suggest' to mention a few. The possible questions in this level are:

- Write an essay on "The Parents' Ambition for their Children in Nepali Society". Include at least five examples.
- Medicines replace our diets in old age. What can be done to make old age less dependent on medicine?

These types of questions can guide the students towards the logical conclusion. Their thinking ability becomes higher; hence, this level is the stage to promote higher order thinking.

Evaluating

This is the level which is supposed to enable the students to assess the pros and cons of a particular notion, question their prior concepts, and to use their judgment for drawing conclusions. This is the state of drawing justifications, defense or solution for their understanding. The possible questions for the students in this level are:

- Justify the statement 'Elderly age is the age of confusion and deviation'.
- Is old age a problem for the other members of the family?

Creating

This is the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy in applying the critical thinking skills. It aims at the ultimate goal of a student's learning process. In this level students are supposed to create something new and creative concept or idea.

- Compose a story of a father and son relationship that ends with comic relief.
- Organize a debate on the role of sons in your local social context.

- Write an essay on “Care of Elderly Citizens” in about 300 words.
- What is the relevance of ‘Elderly Homes’ in the modern context? Do they make any sense?
- How do you look at the western practice of government aided welfare schemes for elderly people especially above the age of 60? Do you think such welfare schemes are essential in your country too?

Results and Discussion

The questions designed above were intensively used in the different levels only in the experimental group class. The results of the designed activities were pretty good in the experimental group class. The students became more active and engaging in this class. Most of the questions were asked by the students among themselves. Questions created thinking environment in the class. Their interest level and curiosity aroused higher than in any previous classes. The

thinking level of the students was visibly enhanced. Some of the passive students were also activated through the questioning process. At the end of the teaching learning procedure, students became more and more interactive, and their attitude towards the text grew positively stronger. The application of Bloom's taxonomy helped the students to enhance their thinking level in expected level. It also assisted the teacher to understand the teaching learning process in better way.

On the contrary, the controlled group class was provided traditional environment for reading the story. They were excluded from questioning. As a result, they did not become much interactive and participatory. The students remained shy and hesitant. At the end of the process, a post-test was conducted among the students which was compared and contrasted with the result of the diagnostic test conducted in the beginning of the study. The score tables are presented below:

Table 1

Pre-test

S.N	Group	Score	Process	Difference
1.	Control	49%	Guided writing	0
2.	Experimental	49%	Guided writing	0

Table 2

Post-test

S.N.	Group	Score	Process	Difference
1.	Control	49%	Guided writing	0
2.	Experimental	67%	Guided writing	18%

Also, from the observation, it was found that the students were engaged and exhibited responsible manner for

participating in the discussion. They worked in a group and selected their own group leader themselves, and the most important

thing is each of the members took turn in having their say about the answers.

Some of the students felt hesitation in communicating with their colleagues in English. However, with the help from the rest of their friends, they were able to engage in meaningful communicative language. As a conclusion, with the use of questioning technique, students were motivated to be actively involved in the classroom activity regardless of their different levels of proficiency.

This study was based on direct and indirect observation of the students' behavior and their responses in the class. The teacher observed the subjects in terms of their motivation and activities in the outline of the proposed study. This study arose from the existing classroom problem of students' reluctance in reading in between the lines and their lack of motivation for thinking critically. The notion is that questioning can arouse higher order thinking capacity and provide an open and interactive environment for the students, hence, this study helped to contribute to creating a thinking classroom to a considerable extent. This type of study is not an entirely new study in this field. There have been many studies conducted home and abroad. But this study delimits its scope in Nepal and particularly in a private college in Itahari. As discussed above some studies

have focused on improving critical thinking through literature reading whereas some other studies have focused on creating a thinking environment using questioning. Unlike other studies, this study mainly focuses on the empirical and observational inputs and outputs in the English language teaching classroom to establish a positive relationship between questioning and critical thinking in short story teaching.

Conclusion

The ability to develop students for higher order thinking through short stories can be an effective way to understand and explore the deeper meaning of the text than the surface meaning. Taking this idea into consideration, language teachers can encourage students to go beyond surface meaning and to discover the deeper meaning instead of merely using basic literacy skills (van Duzer & Florez, 1999). This study on critical thinking into the story of Anita Desai, "A Devoted Son" sums up a few crucial points for the enhancement of thinking and assessment among the students. First, questioning technique can be an effective tool to spark students' active participation and discussion. Second, stories can help students develop higher order thinking through the need-based implementation of Bloom's taxonomy in teaching activities

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