

English Learners' Literary Competence Development through Critical Thinking Tasks in a Colombian EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Literary competence is still a poor research subject in many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. Therefore, this qualitative case study analyzed how a group of Colombian English learners developed literary competence in the foreign language for the first time in their lives with the support of Numrich's (2001) Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks. Data related to English learners' literary competence development were collected through learners' transcripts of their oral responses to literature, artifacts (written papers/worksheets), and the teacher-researcher's field notes. Data were analyzed through grounded approach and content analysis. Although reading and discussing authentic versions of literary texts in the foreign language was challenging for these Colombian English learners, findings revealed that they were able to foster literary competence when they did critical thinking tasks, namely *Identifying assumptions* about literary content based on the titles of texts, *interpreting* implicit meanings to discover conflicts and themes, *inferring* meaning conveyed in images and symbols, and *evaluating* literary content through *inquiring further* and *analyzing* literary language. The research novelty is that EFL Colombian education, as well as other EFL settings worldwide, can foster English learners' communicative competence and literary competence gradually and more purposely through the Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks model, encouraging the construction of meaning and at a critical stand through original versions of literary texts.

Key words: Literary Competence, English Learners, Critical Thinking Tasks, Authentic Literary Texts, EFL Education.

INTRODUCTION

The boom of communicative language teaching dominated EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms back in the 80s and 90s, privileging survival and practical uses of language for communicative purposes. By then, literary language was not completely considered a means that would have helped language learners enhance communicative competence. McKay (1982), McRae (1991), Sell (2005), and Khatib (2011) report that there was the general perception among language teachers that the aesthetic language properties of literature and its deviation from the linguistic norms not only confused EFL learners, but were useless for social communication of everyday life. Therefore, literature was absent in Foreign Language programs and syllabi (Qiping & Shubo, 2002).

However, in the new millennium, EFL scholarship and research have reconsidered the importance of incorporating literature in the EFL classroom. Byrnes & Kord (2001), Ghosn (2002), Van (2009), and Neranjani (2011) highlight that integrating language and literature in EFL education cannot only enhance language learners' linguistic and communicative

expression, but also their analytical, cognitive, and even humanitarian skills, including social, ethical, and intercultural attitudes. All these skills, attitudes, and knowledge together constitute essential components of what is understood as literary competence. Although there is interest in the inclusion of English-language literature in language teaching, further research on its influence and impact in many EFL settings is still needed (Paran, 2006; Clapsadle, 2014).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In line with the current awakening of literature in EFL education, this qualitative case study research aimed at fostering a group of Colombian EFL pre-service teachers' literary competence through Numrich's (2006) Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks, recommended for English language learners (Beaumont, 2010). The study attempted to examine how these Colombian English learners could not only improve their language competence through the reading and discussion of literary texts, but also develop critical thinking and interpretative skills through the negotiation of meaning. In

fact, these pre-service teachers had never read and analyzed authentic versions of literary texts written in English before because the inclusion of these materials was missing in the syllabus. Their English learning process was mainly supported by units taken from communicative English textbooks, grammar books, and abridged reading materials concerning journalistic, entertainment, academic, and general cultural topics. Their reading practices focused on reviewing vocabulary and grammar forms in context and on answering questions to verify comprehension. However, as Byrnes & Kord (2001) indicate, this type of traditional reading limits learners to enhance "expression of cognitive and analytical potential" and leads "them to 'dumb down' the text in their linguistically inadequate analysis" (p. 43).

Another reason for helping these EFL pre-service teachers develop literary competence was due to the fact that the Modern Language Program to which they belonged had recently undertaken a curricular renewal. Its main mission is "to guarantee training and support for language and *literature* teachers to become reflective, critical, and intellectual in their teaching profession" (Master Document and Study plan¹, 2018, p. 19). While these pre-service teachers had taken three literature courses in Spanish, their native language, they had never been exposed to be reflective and critical thinkers through English-language literature. Thus, they needed more opportunities to develop literary competence at a critical stance in the target language since, in the near future, they were going to be Spanish, English, and literature teachers in their home country. Accordingly, this research study aimed at examining how a group of EFL English learners dealt with aesthetic appreciation and interpretative and analytical skills, important components that can enhance literary competence in the EFL classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question leading this study was:

How could a group of Colombian English learners foster literary competence through a sequence of critical thinking tasks in an EFL content-based classroom?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literary Competence

Culler (2000) defines literary competence as "the implicit knowledge that readers and writers bring to their encounters with texts" (p. 62). Readers familiarize with literary conventions that "allow them to take the words of the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meaning" (Lazar, 1993, p. 12). Scholarship in EFL education claim that learners should be taught to recognize and discuss elements of literature in the foreign language such as themes, plot, sub-plot, conflicts, characters, and the narrator's point of view, enhancing, in this way, literary competence (Spiro, 1991; Lazar, 1993).

Carter & Long (1991) state that literary competence cannot be separated from language competence for one always depends on the other. This relationship may rely on the

fact that language competence is not only concerned with oral communication, but also "apply equally to reading and writing activities that involve readers and writers engage in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning" (Savignon, 2001, p. 27). Although there is a fair relationship between these two competences, literary competence necessarily goes further than mastering the language to negotiate meaning. It is a more complex system involving aesthetic, linguistic, affective, and cognitive abilities, as well as knowledge of historical and cultural aspects, which all put together let readers become aware of the properties of literature during the reading process.

Literary competence contains aesthetic properties as when the language learner, as a reader, is able to enjoy, empathize with, and respond emotionally to conventions of literary language, namely genre, tone, writing styles, techniques, and figurative language among many other literary components (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Spiro, 1991) which are only attained through the reading experience with written words.

Literary competence equally relates to the reader's capacity to undertake analytical and cognitive thinking, including understanding, analyzing, inferring, and interpreting both explicit and implicit meanings, events, and ideas written with literary language (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Spiro, 1991; Neranjani, 2011). This reasoning process allows readers to develop capacities of judgment and come to conclusions as being stimulated to respond to literature critically. The language learner can also be encouraged to infer meaning by interacting with the text because, as happens in normal communication, he/she "has to search both backwards and forwards, in and across and outside the text for clues which may help to make sense of it" (Brumfit & Carter, 1986, p. 14).

Furthermore, Spiro (1991) claims that literary competence is the ability to relate literature to the readers' own personal experiences and real social, cultural, and historical events. It is a competence that helps readers enhance humanitarian, social, and affective skills because literary production ultimately reflects human experience and reality; hence, it serves for personal growth and the promotion of human dignity (Carter & Long, 1991; Burke & Brumfit, 2000).

All these aesthetic, cognitive, intellectual, and affective skills cannot be separated; they take place simultaneously at different levels during the individual interaction with literary texts. Therefore, literary competence is relative and complex because different readers may have different levels of understanding, analysis, and interpretation. Rosenblatt (2002) claims that each reader is capable of finding personal interpretations of meanings that could differ from other readers' interpretations and even from the author's intention, as literary texts can be read differently, depending on personal experiences, intellectual level, and sociocultural conditions.

As a competence comprising many mental skills, literary competence in EFL education is not easy to command. It requires effort to be taught and learned over time. In this sense, the teacher must serve as a mediator and a motivator to help learners acquire critical thinking processes gradually such as reasoning, inferring meaning, finding relationships among literary elements, and giving reasonable opinions about what they read (Neranjani, 2011; Afifuddin, 2017). That is why,

as stated in the research question, this study attempted to find aspects that indicated how participants enhanced literary competence, since total mastery of this competence requires years of practice.

The Inclusion of Literature in EFL Education

Kramersch (1993) states that literary texts in language classes offer “opportunities for the dialogic negotiation of meaning” (p. 131). Since communicative competence is defined as the ability to understand, produce, and negotiate meaning in the foreign language (Savignon, 2001), it can be enhanced through the reading and discussion of literary texts because students cannot only read, speak, and write about the conflicts, themes, actions, and characters that appear in the literary texts (McKay, 2001), but also relate those contents to their personal lives and problems of real life. In other words, EFL learners can develop language and literary competences at the same time, since the production and negotiation of meaning is also possible through the interpretations of literary texts, stirring students’ capacities to acquire literary knowledge, critical training of intelligence, and interpretative skills (McKay, 2001; Amer, 2003). Similarly, literature is authentic language in use that allows learners to understand diverse cultural beliefs, values, lifestyles, and ideologies, promoting intercultural awareness and social and affective skills such as empathy, tolerance, diversity, and respect for differences (Kramersch, 1993; Zafeiriadou, 2001; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001; Amer, 2003).

Critical Thinking Tasks in EFL Education: A Means to Foster Literary Competence

Since Purves (1992) asserts that literary competence is primarily a cognitive style and a way of thinking about literary discourse to better understand and analyze literary texts, this research study attempted to help EFL learners enhance literary competence through a Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks, a framework proposed by Numrich (2006) and specially recommended by Beaumont (2010) for foreign/second language education (Table 1).

This framework guides EFL/ESL teachers to become aware of the mental processes students do when being encouraged to practice critical thinking in the language classroom. It is a scaffolding critical thinking model that supports teachers with “skills development by gradually increasing the challenge of what language and critical thinking skills [learners] employ” (Beaumont, 2010, p. 5). These critical thinking tasks go from the most basic to the most complex, aiming at analyzing written discourse, including literary texts such as novels, short stories, and poems (Beaumont, 2010; Afifuddin, 2017). Table 1 shows three phases or perspectives through which seven critical thinking tasks containing several subskills can be practiced:

Focus on the students’ world

This phase, which is comparable to pre-reading tasks, highlights the initial step through which two basic critical think-

Table 1. Numrich’s sequence of critical thinking tasks

Perspective	Critical thinking tasks	Skills practiced
<i>Focus on the students’ world</i>	1. Observing	Looking Listening
	2. Identifying assumptions	Sharing background Expressing opinions Clarifying values
<i>Focus on the text</i>	3. Understanding and organizing	Summarizing Distinguishing relevant details Ordering Classifying Comparing and contrasting Explaining cause and effect
	4. Interpreting	Making inferences Interpreting meaning Hypothesizing Theorizing
<i>Focus beyond the text</i>	5. Inquiring further	Surveying the public Interviewing a specialist Researching
	6. Analyzing and evaluating	Synthesizing information Critiquing Reflecting on related ideas Making logical conclusions Reevaluating assumptions
	7. Making decisions	Proposing solutions Problem solving Taking action Participating

ing skills tasks, *observing* and *identifying assumptions*, are practiced before reading the texts. Learners can predict the class topic based on the title of the reading material or use previous knowledge about the topic that is about to be discussed. The first critical thinking skill task, *observing*, consists of two skills: looking and listening; while the second critical thinking skill task, *identifying assumptions*, consists of three skills: Sharing background, expressing opinions, and clarifying values.

Focus on the text

This phase leads English learners to do more complex critical thinking tasks when doing while-reading tasks (Table 1, second column). Thus, the third critical thinking task is *understanding and organizing* information in the text which encompasses several concrete subskills such as summarizing, distinguishing relevant details, and explaining cause and effect. The fourth critical thinking task is *interpreting* through which learners are encouraged to deal with more complicated subskills. At this level, "students begin to look below the literal surface of the text . . . make inferences, interpret meaning, and hypothesize about what they have read" (Beaumont, 2010, p. 13) based on the literary language contained in the text.

Focus beyond the text

In this phase, learners practice other type of complex critical thinking tasks once they have read and studied the main text. One task is *inquiring further* which involves seeking information on a given topic supported by literary authority, academic articles, databases, and the Internet. Another critical thinking task is *analyzing and evaluating* (whose subskills entail critiquing, reflecting on related ideas, and making logical conclusions). The last task is *making decisions* which includes skills such as problem solving and taking action). These seven scaffolding critical thinking tasks with their corresponding subskills can significantly guide EFL teachers to help English learners develop literary competence at a more critical level (Afifuddin, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Type

This descriptive case study inquired in depth how a group of EFL English learners could foster literary competence in a content-based English class with an emphasis on literary topics. It aimed at answering a research question (stated in the introduction) by collecting and analyzing qualitative data in the particular context where the study was conducted. Data compiled participants' personal opinions and critical responses (Bassey, 2000; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2013) to a series of literary texts in the foreign language, including poetry and short stories (See sample in Table 2). These data were useful to examine the way participants dealt with the properties and convention of literary language and how they were able to analyze, infer, and interpret both implicit and explicit literary meanings in English, these being evidence of their literary competence development.

Context for the Study and Participants

This research study was conducted in an advanced English classroom of a Modern Language Education Program at a University in Bogotá, Colombia. This program trains EFL pre-service teachers to become certified Spanish, English, and literature teachers. The participants were seventh semester students, seventeen females and seven males, whose ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. They had taken two basic, two intermediate, and two advanced English courses through task-based approach with an emphasis on language for communicative purposes. The instructional materials were units photocopied from diverse communicative textbooks and grammar books because the Language Department had the policy of not requesting students a guiding text. Participants had also learned English with adapted versions of reading materials, Internet resources, and movies. This was the first time in their lives that they were going to read authentic versions of literary texts in English.

Data Collection Instruments

Three data collections instruments were implemented during a pedagogical intervention (Table 2) that lasted one academic term during which the teacher-researcher and students met twice a week. The teacher-researcher took field notes by summarizing how students constructed meaning and responded critically to literature, and by identifying which interpretative, cognitive, and critical thinking tasks they employed during the pedagogical intervention. The second instrument was the transcription of learners' oral interventions and personal interpretations of the literary texts which were audio recorded in order to collect significant qualitative data in class time. Also, EFL learners' written literary responses of the literary texts, essays and worksheets (artifacts), were collected, as participants had the opportunity to write about their own critical views, interpretations, and final conclusions based on class discussion.

Pedagogical Intervention

Criteria for literary texts selection

EFL learners read and discussed several original versions of literary texts (Table 2), meeting the following characteristics: (1) Appropriate length to avoid language learners' tiredness or frustration of reading extensive literary language (Brumfit & Carter, 1986); (2) accessible readability (McRae, 1991) that allowed learner to understand the texts, but also deal with new vocabulary and work on literary discourse; and (3) cultural and universal human topics (Maley and Duff, 1989; Kramsch, 1993) from which learners could acquire new knowledge about the target culture and the world. The literary texts belonged to American Literature, out of which a sample of four texts were chosen to meet the scope of this article (Table 2).

Criteria for class development

Participants read the literary texts in class so that they were not influenced by previous research or literary criticism

Table 2. Literary texts implemented during the experience

Literary text and author	Literary genre	Poem/summary
“Happiness” (1916) (Carl Sandburg)	poetry	<p><i>“I asked the professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what is happiness. And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands of men. They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was trying to fool with them. And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the desplaines river And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion.”</i></p>
“The negro speaks of rivers” (1926) (Langston Hughes)	Poetry	<p><i>“I’ve known rivers: I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I’ve known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”</i></p>
“Cat in the rain” (1925) (Ernest Hemingway)	Short story	<p>Summary: On a rainy day, a woman and her husband, George, are in a hotel room in Italy. While George reads a book, she looks through the window a crouched cat under a table in the middle of the rain. She goes out to rescue it. By the time she gets there, the cat had already gone. She returns to the room. Disillusioned, she looks at herself in the mirror and starts to say that she wants to have long hair, wear new clothes, and have a cat. George asks her to shut up, disregarding her requests and keeping with his reading. Later, the hotel maid knocks on the door holding a cat and says, “The padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora.”</p>
“A tree a rock a cloud” (1951) (Carson McCullers)	Short story	<p>Summary: On a rainy morning, a twelve-year-old paperboy is having a coffee at Leo’s Café. There, a lonely sad old man invites him to have a beer, but the boy is astonished when the stranger says, “Son... I love you.” Immediately, the old man shows the boy two blurry photographs of his wife named Dodo who had left him for another man eleven years ago. Shattered by loneliness and unfaithfulness, the man says that he travelled to locate her, but he never found her. Thus, he created a science of love: Now he loves all the elements and people in the world. Finally, the old man says to the boy again “Remember I love you,” and leaves the café. The boy cannot understand the man’s science of love and concludes that he is crazy or tired of much travelling.</p>

Source: Created by the author

available in the Internet or books in the library, since the experience aimed at determining their level of literary competence by inferring meaning through their direct interaction with the texts. However, as Brumfit & Carter (1986), Neranjani (2011), and Afifuddin (2017) suggest, the teacher needs provisions and activities to help learners develop literary competence. Thus, the teacher provided students with short biographies of the authors and explained to them some general background about the authors’ literary movements, such as Hemingway being a member of the lost generation and Langston Hughes being a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Also, participants were given study guides with comprehension and interpretation questions to support their literary analysis. The study guides and class development were structured into the three perspectives or phases indicated in Table 1:

Pre-reading tasks that aimed at *focusing on the students’ world* so that they could practice the first critical thinking tasks, *observing* and *identifying assumptions*, as proposed by Numrich (2006) and Beaumont (2010). Hence, learners made predictions about plot, characters, and content based on the titles of the texts.

While reading tasks that helped learners interact with and focus on the texts. Students answered the questions individually or in small groups by practicing the critical thinking tasks *understanding* and *organizing and interpreting* and their corresponding subskills (Table 1). The teacher reviewed learners’ answers in the study guides and resolved their questions and doubts regarding language and meaning.

Post-reading tasks for learners to focus beyond the text by inquiring further, *analyzing*, and *evaluating* the texts based on investigative work in databases and the Inter-

net. This process was significant because learners compared and complemented their personal interpretations with literary authority or criticism.

Data Analysis

Based on the research question, the grounded approach method was used to read and analyze the field notes several times (Patton, 2002; Charmaz, 2012). Initial and recurrent patterns related to how participants evidenced literary competence development emerged. The data analysis consisted of finding similar signs and indications that revealed how learners enhanced critical thinking tasks to understand, analyze, infer, and interpret both implicit and explicit meanings written in the literary material, and which literary responses came from that process. For example, learners interpreted and analyzed the meaning of symbols based on context. This process constituted an initial pattern of literary competence.

Then, transcripts of learners' oral critical opinions and artifacts (essays and worksheets) were analyzed through content analysis (Dawson, 2002), appropriate to analyze written, textual information and identify which critical thinking tasks or skills were reflected in those responses that gave an account of participants' literary competence level, including for instance, how participants extracted and inferred the meaning of words and sentences beyond their literal meaning, identified topics and conflicts, examined fragments from the texts, and gave arguments based on evidence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Taking into account that "it is extremely difficult to itemize all the skills that go towards making up 'literary competence'" (Lazar, 1993, p. 13) because it is a complex skill that develops over time and involves many aspects, as previously explained, the findings are stated as key-themes that emerged from the data analysis and show the most important literary critical thinking tasks that participants developed during this experience, which all together entailed their level of literary competence development:

EFL Learners Made Predictions About Literary Content Based on the Title of the Texts

EFL learners were able to make predictions on content and give meaning to words before reading and focusing directly on the literary texts as they initially looked at and observed the words put together in the titles. These initial predictions and preliminary tasks of meaning making allowed learners to *observe* and *identify assumptions*, two basic, but important critical thinking tasks to face literary material. For instance, when the teacher asked them to make some predictions about the Poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" based on the title, they answered that the speaker of the poem could be a black man. Additionally, one learner said that the "word Negro was a despective² word in many parts of the U.S., offensive language that discriminated black people" (Field notes, April 24). Also, they said that "rivers" could mean life, maybe the life of black people in the U.S., and that the

poem could be about racism and slavery of black people in America. Therefore, EFL learners showed initial traces of literary competence as they related previous knowledge about slavery in order to make sense of the literary meaning of the titles of the poems.

Similarly, before reading the short story "Cat in the Rain," participants made these assumptions based on the title:

"I think that the story is about a lonely person because the cat is alone in the rain." (Field notes, March 15).

"Maybe it's a sad story because when you look a cat in the rain you think about sadness." (Field notes, March 15).

These initial responses to Hemingway's short story based on the title indicate that learners related the images of the "cat" being alone in the "rain" to the universal human state of loneliness and the feeling of sadness. Although the critical thinking tasks *observing* and *making assumptions* constituted a starting point to understand the texts, it was observed that these English learners were already engaged in basic levels of literary analysis by being able to give literary meaning to words based on their previous knowledge and personal opinions of common elements of the world (Field notes, April 19).

Encouraging learners to develop these initial critical thinking tasks, *observing* and *making assumptions*, so that they could relate literature to their own world, express free opinions, and make predictions, proved to be a good strategy to promote English learners' initial literary competence development in the foreign language. They were not only introduced to the texts, but also predicted meaning beyond the literal meaning of words by responding imaginatively to the titles of the texts. Moreover, they became motivated to start reading the texts.

EFL Learners Identified and Interpreted Implicit Themes and Conflicts in the Texts.

By focusing directly on the reading of the literary texts and with the support of the study guides, EFL learners started to understand relevant details as they underlined passages and circled words that called their attention. This process allowed them to *interpret* literary language, a more demanding critical thinking task, by paying attention to the context and the events described with words in the readings. For instance, learners provided the following initial interpretations about the theme in the short story "Cat in the Rain" when they wondered why the American wife wanted to go out and rescue a cat in the middle of the rain:

Leandro³: Lack of love, I think it is about lack of love because maybe she wants attention from her husband, and she wants that cat because she want⁴ someone to give her love.

Teacher: Which elements in the story let us deduce that the American wife's husband doesn't give her attention?
Maria: indifference...when it says, [*Maria reads from the story*] "The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed" and he says, "Don't get wet," I imagine he means like, OK, do whatever you want, he is comfortable and doesn't want to move. So, he is careless of helping his wife.

Martha: I think the evidence is in the text that says, "George was not listening." It shows that the husband is more interested in his book than in paying attention to his wife's needs (Transcripts, March 15).

These initial interpretations involved several mental and critical thinking processes that indicated how EFL learners started to extract and infer literary meaning. First, they tried to identify the main theme of the story by using expressions such as "I think," "maybe," and "I imagine" to *hypothesize* about possible problems that were happening between the two characters, the American wife and her husband. At this level they were not completely sure, but were eager to provide possible theories that indicated that the story dealt with a central theme: the wife's need of love because of her husband's indifference. This was an early successful interpretative step in class because nowhere in the story it was explicitly stated by Hemingway, the author, that the theme was related to the wife's lack of love and that she, as one learner said, "wants attention from her husband" (Transcripts, March 15). Therefore, learners were able to deduce a possible theme of the story to be considered for class discussion.

Moreover, the interpretation of the text through *hypothesizing* was accompanied by another critical thinking sub-skill called *distinguishing relevant details*, as suggested by Numrich (2006). Considering that learners themselves had already proposed a leading theme to discuss, the teacher encouraged them to distinguish and mention important details and elements in the story that helped them infer how the wife was unsatisfied with her husband's lack of attention. As the previous transcripts indicate, Leandro distinguished that the cat in the rain was a detail that let him interpret that the wife was lonely and was seeking some kind of company to replace the love that her husband denied her. Similarly, María read a relevant part of the story to support with evidence the idea that the husband did not really mean to help his wife get the cat in the rain because, as he was relaxed and happy reading a book on the bed, he only told her not to get wet. By distinguishing these details, María interpreted that the husband was indifferent to the wife because reading his book was more important than being attentive to and lovely with his wife's request of wanting a cat. Also, Martha asserted, "the evidence is in the text" to point out another important detail that identified the theme. The piece of evidence she provided from the story was, "George was not listening," through which she interpreted that the husband was careless about his wife's emotional needs. The class interpreted that the husband's indifference and selfishness was probably a constant behavior that affected the woman. All these details helped learners to understand and interpret the conflict in the story: The lack of love and desire of this married couple.

In a similar fashion, learners engaged in understanding and interpreting the short story "A Tree A Rock A Cloud" by focusing on the old man's science of love because they thought this was one difficult topic to understand (Field notes, April 10). One group of students that was leading the discussion invited their classmates to say what they understood about the old man's science of love. Some of their answers were:

Paula: We think that the science of love consists in a process because love for him is curious thing, some-

thing that the man needs to study, to explore, to know and learn about.

Miguel: We have like the same idea, but more too simple [*all the students laughed*] it is like he try to make love a conscious process, and to love simple things and not to be attached to anything or anyone, I mean not to complicate with loving only one person.

Pedro: Yes, it is like to love with the brain, not with the heart, we think, we think he wants to love with his mind so he won't suffer deception.

Teacher: Why does the old man think that love should be a conscious process involving the mind and not the heart?

Johana: Well, the old man creates his science of love in order to find a solution of the problem that he learn through love: The old man learns that love is a painful experience when he is abandoned by his wife.

(Transcripts, April 10).

While focusing on the text, learners used two important critical thinking tasks, *understanding* and *interpreting*, to discuss the old man's science of love. Based on the previous data, it can be seen that Paula's group interpreted that the old man thought that love should not be a spontaneous feeling, but rather a rational process that he needed to study, understand, and explore carefully. Miguel's group complemented this idea by saying that the old man proposed to love all the elements of the world through a conscious and rational understanding, instead of clinging emotionally to one woman; implying that loving only one person (the woman that left the old man in the story) could be a disappointing experience. Hence, learners stated that they now understood the character's conflict in the story: The old man had been a victim of love deception. Data indicate that learners enhanced literary competence as they aimed at trying to figure out and solve in groups how to understand the character's science of love by interpreting, hypothesizing, and theorizing possibilities based on logical arguments and evidence in the texts.

Since literary competence is mainly a cognitive style and a way of thinking critically about literary discourse, as explained in the theoretical framework, the teacher-researcher asked learners to consider why the man had assumed love as a concept involving reasoning of the mind instead of a feelings of the heart. The teacher's purpose of asking this question was to encourage learners to use other critical thinking processes, because, as suggested by Beaumont (2010), the teacher should be aware of what he is asking students to help them reach critical levels of interpretation. The result was that learners were able to use the skill *Explaining cause and effect* when, for instance, Johana explained that because the man learns in the story that love is a painful experience, as he was abandoned by his wife (the cause), he finds a solution to his loneliness and disillusion: to love cautiously all the elements of the world (effect). Thus, learners established cause-effect relationships through which they understood how one event (the cause: love deception) made another event happen (the effect: the man feels pain and loneliness and learns to love more cautiously).

This finding shows that EFL learners enhanced several important aspects of the literary competence, including the

skills of inferring and hypothesizing about theme, interpreting the meaning of relevant sentences below their literal surface, distinguishing key details that allowed them to make reasonable interpretations, and explaining cause and effect relationships as they established connections between the characters' early experiences and their later conflicts or results.

English Learners Identified and Inferred Meaning Conveyed in Imagery and Symbols

One of the main findings in this experience was that students were able to identify important symbols and images in the texts and to *interpret* their meanings based on the context given in the stories and on class discussion. That was the case with the meaning of the "cat" in "Cat in the Rain." One learner said that the cat in the rain represented the wife's loneliness because, in her marriage, she felt lonely like the cat abandoned and ignored in the street, and the rain represented her sadness and tears for being a frustrated married wife (Field notes, March 15). Sebastian assigned another meaning to the cat as a symbol representing the wife's desire of having a child as these data indicate:

Sebastian: Probably, I mean, I'm thinking, probably the man or the woman, one of them is infertile, that's why she wants to have a cat because they, they can't have children (Transcripts, March 13).

This opinion encouraged learners to discuss the idea that the wife was not only frustrated by her husband's indifference, but by their impossibility to have children. This symbol led students to interpret that sterility problems were probably the main conflict that caused this couple to be distant. Such separations increased the woman's frustration for not having children, and, therefore, her desire to have a cat was a way to replace a little baby that she would like to hold on her lap (Field notes, March 15).

When discussing "A Tree A Rock A Cloud," One student, Yamile, invited the class to focus on the part when the old man shows the boy one picture of his wife. Then, she read this fragment from the story, "The man placed another picture in his palm. The woman was standing on a beach in a bathing suit. The suit made her stomach very big, and that was the main thing you noticed" (McCullers, 1951, p.144). The images in this quote, the woman with a big belly wearing a bathing suit, let Yamile infer that maybe the woman was pregnant shortly before she abandoned the old man eleven years ago. Yamile was able to create the visual representation of the woman's old picture in her mind and associate it with the reference of time in the story to infer that maybe the man was not only looking for his wife to recover her, but was also looking for his son, since he was a frustrated father who had never had the chance to meet his child (Field notes, April 3). These data show that learners developed literary competence because they were able to provide logical arguments about the meaning of the symbols and images. They explained those symbols through the constant use of the word "because," suitable to provide reasons based on evidence found in the texts.

Inferring meaning conveyed in images and symbols was more demanding for these learners when reading poetry.

They found poetry to be more complicated to understand than prose because they first had to solve the literal and common meaning of vocabulary. Then, they had to analyze the metaphorical or figurative meanings of those words because the poems did not provide much context (Field notes, May 3). However, learners were aware of the fact that poets had used common words to create metaphors and similes, deviating the rules of language and forcing readers to infer meaning of many figures of speech, and such awareness constituted their emotional response to literary competence.

Such was the case with learners' capacity to analyze the imagery in the poem "Happiness" when the teacher asked them the question "Does the speaker discover the meaning of happiness at last?" After reading, reviewing, making conclusions, and reflecting on the language used in this poem, they provided these critical opinions:

"The poet proposes that happiness is found in the unity of the family, as the poet sees that the Hungarians are happy with their wives and children" (Artifact, May 8). "Happiness is presented in the poem through the Hungarians under the trees, maybe is a forest, with their families, listening to music because there is an accordion. This show that happiness is to enjoy the simple moments of life with your relatives" (Artifact, May 8).

These data show that, by paying attention to the descriptive imagery at the end of the poem, including visual images such as the trees, the women, the children, and the detail of a sound image, the accordion, learners inferred the implicit meaning conveyed in this imagery which helped them understand the poet's view of happiness: Happiness is found in the modest and simple experiences of life with the loved ones.

A similar experience happened with the meaning of the lines "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" in the poem "The Negro Speak of Rivers." Learners' careful reading and the questions provided by the teacher helped them infer the meaning of the simile and images in that verse:

The speaker says, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." It means he as a black person has learned a lot of experiences and his culture has thrived strongly nowadays. We think that he is deeply proud about his culture, his personality is strong as a black person. He feels as a fighter (Artifact, May 3).

It is observed that although poetical language was complicated, pre-service teachers were able to interpret the meaning of the image "deep rivers," implying that the speaker recognized African-Americans' progress, strength, and pride of their culture and race despite having been victims of slavery and racism in the past. Similarly, when studying the line "I've seen its [the Mississippi River] muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset," they inferred the meaning as these data suggest:

The speaker mentions "muddy bosoms" to refer to the difficult and dark period when the African-Americans were slaves, and "golden" refers to the transition of blacks to freedom" (Artifact, May 3).

The words "muddy" and "golden" seem to be antonyms. They show the contrast of the "before" and "after" the slavery period. Maybe the speaker enjoys that finally they

[black people] go out from mud, slavery, to enjoy freedom (Artifact, May 3).

Learners used the critical thinking skill *Comparing and contrasting* as they interpreted that the meaning of “muddy bosoms” could represent the difficult situations of many black people who were slaved in the southern states, while, on the contrary, “golden” bosoms could mean that black people finally achieved freedom in the U.S. Many of the interpretations were also possible because they already knew some general historical and cultural information about slavery in the United States. This indicates that their previous knowledge on history was an important factor that helped them enhance literary competence as they *interpreted* figurative language and *inferred* logical meanings from symbols and imagery in the foreign language without the influence of literary authority or external criticism.

In short, data show that EFL learners implemented several mental processes or critical thinking tasks through which literary competence was achieved: They distinguished and identified images and symbols in the texts, compared and contrasted them, and inferred and interpreted their meaning; important cognitive and analytical mental processes that were possible through the Sequence Model of Critical Thinking Tasks when they focused on literary texts in the language classroom.

English Learners Evaluated Literary Content Based on Inquiry and Analysis

As the teacher is expected to encourage EFL learners to use additional critical thinking tasks productively (Beaumont, 2010), the teacher researcher invited learners to do further analysis of the literary materials in the phase called *Focus beyond the text* as suggested by Numrich (2001). Learners were asked to do investigative work so that they could either complement the analysis they had done in class or inquire further about the texts, this time with the help of literary criticism. This step was led by Beaumont’s (2010) assertion that one source, in this case the literary text, should not be enough to produce definite judgments or decisions. Students should also seek other viewpoints of the topic provided by experts in order to evaluate the texts and make final conclusions.

One particular example of how ELF learners did *inquiring further* tasks was when one group of students read literary articles and did Internet research to answer one question on the story “A Tree A Rock A Cloud.” They were asked to investigate about McCullers’s theory of love and decide if the old man in the story functioned as a *lover* or as a *beloved* based on that theory. This was the result of their further inquiry:

Amanda: In the theory of love, McCullers says that the quality and value of any love is determined only by the lover. So, it is the lover who decides if it is a good or bad experience [...] the lover desire any relation with the beloved even if this experience can cause pain in him [...]

Diego: According to the reading, we note that he lived a painful experience because Dodo left him to be with another man. But although the old man, the lover, sees the beloved’s bad behavior, it doesn’t affect his feelings for her. We can see that he wants to continue the relation, so he looks for her (Transcripts, March 15).

These data show that through *inquiring further*, learners were able to practice several subskills such as *researching* the characteristics of the lover according to McCullers’s theory of love, and *analyzing* and *evaluating* the old man’s behavior as one who wished to keep his marriage relationship even though his wife cheated on him and made him suffer because of love deception.

Similarly, when EFL learners were asked to inquire further about Abraham Lincoln and explain why Hughes mentions him in the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in the line, “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,” a historical reference that they did not understand well, they came up with this investigation from Internet sources:

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States and he is consider an emancipator of the slaves. During his presidency he developed the emancipation proclamation that was a decree about the liberation of the slaves in the confederate states, and it allows all the citizens without distinction of race to have the same rights. According to this information, we can infer Hughes mention him in the poem because Abraham Lincoln represents an important figure that changes Black people’s history (Artifact, May 3).

EFL learners’ interpretations were not only supported by their personal analysis of the texts, but by literary criticism and history research, allowing them to evaluate the characters in the short stories and the speakers in the poems more argumentatively. They related and compared different sources, established connections between the literary texts, their personal interpretations, and real historical facts or literary theories, and completed the silences or missing information that were in the texts and that needed to be inferred and clarified through further inquiry. These complex critical thinking processes evidenced learners’ literary competence development in the foreign language.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study of the literary texts was difficult at the beginning of the pedagogical intervention because participants had not read any literary texts in the English language before, did not know the authors, and had only heard about Ernest Hemingway. Therefore, they were overwhelmed with authentic literary language, and reading and speaking about the materials was time-consuming. At the beginning, participants were reluctant to express their opinions because they were shy of speaking about literary issues and afraid of being wrong with their interpretations. However, as learners started to get used to reading literary language more often and the teacher gave them time to think and prepare their responses through critical thinking tasks, they showed more interest, and gradually became more participative and more critical as the pedagogical intervention advanced.

CONCLUSIONS

This research study concludes that incorporating authentic versions of literary texts suitable for EFL education can help

EFL learners to not only enhance their foreign language competence, but literary competence. While being engaged in the negotiation of meaning through those texts, the group of Colombian English learners who participated in this study used the foreign language orally and in written form to the best of their possibilities to produce literary interpretations and arguments in the target language, despite fluency and accuracy limitations.

Implementing the Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks model in a Colombian EFL classroom was a productive learning experience because learners were able to infer and interpret implicit literary content and meanings during their encounters with the original versions of literary texts. They put great effort to understand language and recognize literary elements and conventions conveyed with words written on paper. This interpretative process constituted outstanding evidence of their literary competence development.

It is concluded that implementing Numrich's Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks in the Colombian EFL classrooms can turn out to be useful instructional means to not only enhance English learners' literary competence in the target language through a more critical perspective, but also to guide EFL teachers on which critical thinking skills they should ask students to implement progressively during class development. These tasks can ensure learners' critical responses to literary language in a more organized, purposeful, and meaningful way.

Findings show that Colombian English learners were able to foster literary competence at a critical level through several main critical thinking tasks. They *identified*, *predicted*, and *made assumptions* about content based on the titles of the texts, this being a motivating preliminary step to embark on further literary analysis. Then, they were able to *interpret implicit literary meanings* related to universal human conflicts and themes such as love deception, marriage problems, human frustrations, loneliness, and the search of happiness. They also *extracted* and *deduced* complex ideas and controversial issues on racism, slavery, and social injustice in the world. Moreover, learners *identified* and *inferred meaning* conveyed in imagery and symbols such as the cat and the rain in "The Cat in Rain," and the rivers and the bosoms in the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Finally, learners *evaluated literary content* based on *further inquiry* through investigative work supported by literary authority and criticism. All these Colombian English learners' mental, cognitive, and interpretative processes constitute the novelty of this research because they indicate that these learners fostered literary competence critically and productively in the foreign language for the first time in their lives.

It is concluded that the inclusion of literary texts and literary competence development in EFL education requires careful preparation on part of the teacher, including wise criteria in the selection of literary materials suitable for language learners, the design of study guides and worksheets that could motivate learners to engage in literary analysis, and the implementation of appropriate teaching methods/principles (such as the use of a Sequence of Critical Thinking Tasks). Learners can feel safer and surer with the teachers' instructional support and these pedagogical aids, since

it cannot be overlooked that these learners are dealing with literary interpretations and analysis in a foreign language.

Finally, this study suggests that the inclusion of literature and the enhancement of literary competence should be considered relevant components of syllabi and teaching practices in other EFL educational contexts worldwide. Literature is a potential means to promote meaning negotiation and critical thinking in the target language, a content area that EFL teachers should use more often in second/foreign language learning and research.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Free translation. This master document contains the pedagogical model, methodologies, and study plan that support the operation of the Language Education Program at a Colombian University.
- 2 The student meant "derogatory." This was a Spanish interference as *derogatory* in Spanish is "despectivo."
- 3 These are fictitious names. Participants' real identity has been protected for ethical reasons.
- 4 These are verbatim samples of students' production during the research experience. They contain grammar/language mistakes, since they still were learning English.

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