



Enhancing Literary Analysis in EFL Classrooms Through Critical Thinking: A Pedagogical Model on Character Analysis

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Abstract. This paper proposes a pedagogical model designed to improve critical engagement with literary texts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms with a special focus on character analysis. Drawing on the Paul-Elder model of reasoning, the paper outlines a systematic approach for character analysis that examines the purposes, assumptions, evidence, points of view and implications of interpretations of different characters. Through encouraging critical engagement with literary texts, this model helps students understand and appreciate literature on a deeper level, while also promoting essential critical thinking skills applicable to analyzing other narrative elements such as plot and theme.

Keywords: critical thinking, character analysis, Paul-Elder model.

1 Introduction

Literature courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms serve multiple purposes. [6] However, many students still view literature in a foreign language primarily as a tool for language learning.[2] Due to limited language proficiency and a lack of background knowledge related to literary texts, EFL students often struggle to fully engage with literature.[10] To enhance their understanding, pedagogical approaches that teach critical engagement are essential. Literary analysis is inherently a critical cognitive process, as it involves interpreting, analyzing, contextualizing, and evaluating complex texts. Character analysis, in particular, offers an excellent starting point for developing these skills and deepening students' comprehension. Students are often drawn to novels or short stories because they can identify with or empathize with specific characters. This paper explores a pedagogical model designed to integrate critical thinking into character analysis in Chinese EFL classrooms. Although this approach could also be applied to other narrative elements such as plot, theme, tone, and setting, these aspects are beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Literary Review

Critical thinking (CT) has been defined in various ways.[3][4][9] However, a common thread among these definitions is that critical thinking involves systematically interpreting and analyzing information, and making evaluative judgments based on appropriate standards.

A large body of research has examined the importance of critically engaging with literary texts.^{[5][6][8][12]} However, critical thinking is always practiced within a specific context which means that different cultural contexts can affect the way their members engage with it.^[11] Atkinson argues that critical thinking is shaped by cultural values and influences, which can either encourage or constrain an individual's ability to think critically.^[1] For instance, students from collectivist backgrounds might experience discomforts when engaging in critical thinking as they might perceive it as challenging authority or disrupting harmony. Moreover, research shows that while many EFL teachers recognize the importance of integrating CT in EFL education, they might hold partial or misconceived understandings of CT.^[14]

Given these challenges, it is useful to propose a pedagogical model that effectively integrates critical thinking into EFL literature classrooms. While character analysis is usually approached through various theoretical frameworks, such as New Criticism or feminism criticism, students cannot fully employ these interpretative lenses without mastering the skills of thorough analysis and evaluation. However, there is limited discussion on how to systematically incorporate critical thinking into literary analysis. In China, Yin argues literary texts should be analyzed through critically engaging with the concept of standard English and western-centric values.^[13] Other studies applied Facione's model into literature classes to cultivate critical thinking.^[7] However, these studies took a fairly general approach. There is still a lack of detailed designs on how to pedagogically integrate critical thinking into literature classrooms. This paper aims to address that gap by utilizing the Paul-Elder model to demonstrate how critical thinking can enhance literary analysis, with a particular focus on character analysis.

3 Research Design

Literary analysis involves using reasoning to make evaluative judgement about a text. When analyzing characters, we often need to assess and explain what kind of person a character is, what they represent or symbolize, and why the author creates such a character. In essence, this involves critically examining both the character and the author's intentions. To conduct structured and rigorous analysis, the proposed pedagogical model leverages Paul and Elder's elements of reasoning which include purpose, question at issue, information, interpretation and inference, concepts, assumptions, implications and consequences and point of view. [9] These elements can serve as a checklist for examining the relevance and coherence of an argument in character analysis.

4 The Paul-Elder Model for Character Analysis

The first element of reasoning is that all reasoning has a purpose. [9] In the context of character analysis, the purpose can be multifaceted. Depending on the goal, different depths and approaches to analysis are required. Common purposes for character analysis include:

- Gaining a deeper understanding of the text
- Writing a literary criticism
- Preparing for a presentation
- Contributing to a group discussion

Regardless of what the purpose is, character analysis is inherently a critical process. The differences usually lie in how the analysis is presented to the target audience.

The second element focuses on clarifying the question at issue. [9] What is one trying to uncover or explain? When analyzing a character, numerous questions can be raised and examined. These could range from identifying the type of character to exploring the themes or symbols they represent. Moreover, the overarching question of character analysis can be further divided into sub-questions that explore various angles of the character. This is a very common scaffolding strategy in EFL literature classrooms where the teacher usually breaks down the main task into sub-tasks. By such scaffolding, the teacher can ask easier questions first such as what kind of person a character is and then gradually move on to more challenging questions such as what a character symbolizes or whether certain characterization of a character is successful or not.

The third step is to examine the assumptions behind the reasoning. [9] This can be particularly challenging for students because many of their assumptions are deeply ingrained, making them difficult to identify and question. Without explicitly prompting students to check their assumptions, they are less likely to challenge them. After identifying their assumptions, students need to justify why these assumptions are reasonable.

For example, in my literature class, some students argue that Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a righteous person because she saves Antonio's life. The assumption here is that saving someone's life is inherently just and morally right. However, this oversimplifies the situation, overlooking important nuances. If Portia saves Antonio's life by misinterpreting the legal bond between Antonio and Shylock, can her actions still be considered justified? While the conclusion that Portia is righteous may not be entirely wrong, what is important is that students must further justify the assumption. They should explain why, within the play, her legalistic interpretation of the bond is considered legitimate in the context of saving Antonio's life. In justifying their assumptions, students not only reflect upon the justifications for their premises, but also reflect upon the underlying moral beliefs. If a student believes that saving someone's life is inherently just, that might reflect her conviction that life is sacred and nothing should take precedence over the protection of life. However, for some other students who don't think Portia is righteous but biased and calculating, their assumption might

be misinterpreting a contract by taking advantage of its loopholes is morally unacceptable because they believe that legal agreements should be respected in good faith. By having these two conflicting assumptions presented in class, students can engage with each other by further weighing different assumptions and thus draw a fairly objective conclusion.

If achieving complete objectivity proves difficult, students should aim to explore multiple perspectives or points of view in Paul and Elder's model.^[9] In *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, they could consider Shylock's perspective, imagining how it would feel to be forced to wear distinguishing clothes and endure daily abuses, and what it means to him when his business is often thwarted by Antonio and his religion denounced by other Christians. This approach helps students empathize with Shylock and understand his desire for revenge. Rather than seeing Shylock as an absolute villain, they might conclude that the hostile and discriminatory environment contributes to his actions and hostility towards Christians. Also, students need to consider whether Shylock's sufferings justify his determination to kill Antonio from the perspective of a neutral reader. Moreover, they can put themselves in the shoes of Antonio and try to think about how they would have interacted with Shylock in the context of the play. They would understand that discrimination is also socially constructed. By balancing various points of view, students can reach a more comprehensive understanding of the character.

After evaluating their points of view, students are encouraged to scrutinize the evidence supporting their reasoning.^[9] It's important that they avoid selectively seeking evidence that aligns with their claims; instead, they should also look for information that challenges their assumptions. Students are encouraged to examine a character from multiple aspects, such as the type of statements they frequently make, their recurring actions, and their common thought patterns. Additionally, students are asked to consider what other characters often say to or about this character, and how they interact with them.

Further aspects that could be added include the character's socioeconomic status, educational background, ethnicity, religion, and significant life events. For example, if students view Hamlet as introspective and hesitant, the teacher might challenge them to explain Hamlet's decisive killing of Polonius or his final confrontation with Laertes. Is Hamlet also a man of action? Could he embody both characteristics? Through this process, students develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the character.

When analyzing characters, we often rely on various concepts and ideas.^[9] It is essential for students to clearly distinguish between round and flat characters, as well as dynamic and static ones. Different analytical metrics are used depending on the type of character. We frequently explore the complexity of round characters while investigating the symbolic significance of flat ones. For instance, Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice* represents many unfortunate women in Austen's era, who were compelled to marry for financial security. Lydia's actions illustrate the high stakes faced by women who transgress societal norms, and it is easy to imagine the precarious path she might have followed without Darcy's intervention. Additionally, students need to grasp important

concepts like the role of the narrator and free indirect speech, which helps them differentiate between the narrator's voice and a character's speech. Mastering these concepts lays the groundwork for deeper understanding.

The seventh element in Paul-Elder's model is inferences and interpretations, based on which conclusions are drawn.^[9] In literary analysis, evidence such as a character's actions or speech is often interpreted using different theoretical frameworks such as feminist criticism or New Criticism. Students should draw inferences based only on what the evidence suggests, clearly justify why they adopt one framework over another, and critically examine the assumptions underlying any chosen interpretative approach. For example, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* could be viewed as a feminist figure because she defies societal expectations of women by rejecting Mr. Collins's proposal and boldly confronting Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Darcy. However, she might also be seen as a conformist, as her eventual marriage to Darcy allows her to achieve both love and wealth, rendering her earlier subversive wit and sharp observations ineffective in challenging the social structures she initially resisted.

The final step is to consider the implications and consequences of the analysis.^[9] The goal of character analysis extends beyond simply profiling a character. Key questions to explore include: What does the character symbolize? How does the character contribute to the overall meaning of the text? Why did the author create the character? What lessons can the reader draw from it? For example, if Hamlet is portrayed as a hesitant and contemplative man, why did Shakespeare create him this way? Does Hamlet symbolize the Humanist figure? How does his character help us understand the tension between the Renaissance spirit and the religious beliefs of that era?

Literature often represents culture, history and moral beliefs of a society. Students cannot appreciate its culture or comprehend complex moral messages without critically engaging with literary works. The eight elements of reasoning are useful for literary analysis as they offer a structured framework for deeper interrogation. This model can also be applied to other areas of literary analysis such as theme, plot, etc.

5 Conclusion

The Paul-Elder model provides a systematic approach that encourages students to examine assumptions, evidence and implications of character analysis. By fostering a deeper understanding of characters and their thematic significance, this pedagogical model not only empowers students to critically analyze and appreciate literature but also hones their critical skills which can be transferred in other contexts. As EFL students often have difficulty interacting with literary texts thoroughly, the integration of critical thinking into character analysis serves as a useful framework for cultivating critical readers. The study has some limitations. The effectiveness of the pedagogy needs to be proven by qualitative or/and quantitative research. Future research can be done to fill in the gap and shed more light on how critical thinking can be used in character analysis to facilitate students' understanding of literary works.

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