

USING FICTION IN CLASS TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS ON THE EXAMPLE OF *THE FIFTH CHILD* BY DORIS LESSING

Abstract: Critical thinking is a fundamental component of academic life in today's world. In this article I discuss the possibility of practicing and strengthening university students' critical thinking skills by means of a novel, *The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing, in the course of an ELT class. Drawing from experience, I show how this particular novel, due to its problematic, yet universal, subject matter as well as the author's enigmatic presentation of the said, becomes a useful resource for this purpose. It confronts the reader with perplexing questions and dilemmas without offering definite answers. I offer a lesson plan in order to help the teacher to involve and guide students throughout this fascinating novel, one which never leaves anyone indifferent.

Keywords: critical thinking, fiction, ELT classroom, opinions, university students, lesson plan

WYKORZYSTANIE LITERATURY PIĘKNEJ DO NAUKI KRYTYCZNEGO MYŚLENIA NA PRZYKŁADZIE POWIEŚCI DORIS LESSING *PIĄTE DZIECKO*

Streszczenie: Krytyczne myślenie stanowi obecnie fundamentalną umiejętność w świecie akademickim. W artykule omawiam możliwość przeciwieństwa i rozwijania tej umiejętności, tak ważnej dla studentów, za pomocą powieści Doris Lessing pt. *Piąte dziecko*, w trakcie lektoratu języka angielskiego. Czerpiąc z własnego doświadczenia, demonstruję, jak ta właśnie powieść, dzięki temu, że porusza trudny temat, i to w dodatku w dość skomplikowany sposób, ma szansę stać się bardzo użytecznym narzędziem do rozwijania tejże umiejętności. Czytelnik zostaje skonfrontowany z trudnymi pytaniami i dylematami, na które nie ma jednoznacznych odpowiedzi. Proponuję plan lekcji, który powinien pomóc nauczycielowi poprowadzić studentów przez meandry tej fascynującej książki, która nie pozostawia nikogo obojętnym.

Słowa kluczowe: krytyczne myślenie, literatura piękna, lektorat języka angielskiego, opinie, studenci uniwersytetu, plan lekcji

Introduction

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that students attending regular language classes as part of their university curriculum can benefit in a number of ways, if guided appropriately, from reading a novel as part of their homework assignment.

The benefits of such an assignment extend far beyond the obvious practical aim of developing foreign language skills, such as developing one's vocabulary or strengthening one's reading skills. The progress occurs in a different domain, one widely accepted to be very much in demand in the rapidly changing modern world, namely the domain of critical thinking.

For this purpose I would like to introduce a novel entitled *The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing and offer a lesson plan which, hopefully, can be used to promote such skills. First, however, I would like to summarize briefly what critical thinking skills are and how this particular book represents a good resource to practice them.

1. Critical thinking skills

Although various scholars define the concept of critical thinking in different ways, generally speaking, critical thinking is thought to be the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking (Elder, 2007). Someone with critical thinking skills is widely believed to be able to do the following:

- understand logical connections between ideas;
- solve problems and disagreements using reason and evidence;
- take into account multiple perspectives and viewpoints;
- analyse consequences and reasons of beliefs or actions;
- create, evaluate and re-evaluate arguments;
- find incongruities in reasoning;
- suspend judgment especially in light of new information.

In the context of a fast-changing world, one driven by a great amount of information and ever-changing technology, a great demand is placed on flexible intellectual skills such as the ability to integrate different sources of knowledge in order to solve problems or the ability to suspend judgment to check whether a solution makes sense, especially in the light of new information. I strongly believe that such skills can and should be practiced in the university foreign language class context. If, as Nicholas (2011) argues, critical thinking involves 'breaking ideas, concepts, arguments and problems into their components, asking questions, playing the devil's advocate, weighing context, making distinctions, and classifying information,' – then *The Fifth Child* lends itself to being a perfect resource to do so. Let me introduce the author and her book before I proceed.

2. Doris Lessing and her novel

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) was a British novelist, poet, playwright and short story writer. She was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature and won a number of other notable awards worldwide.

She was born in Persia (now Iran) to British parents. Her father worked as a clerk for the Imperial Bank of Persia. In 1925 the family moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to farm maize on a huge farm; a project which failed to bring either happiness or wealth. Lessing was educated at a Roman Catholic convent school but dropped out at 13. She left home at 15 to become a nursemaid and it was then that she started educating herself, reading on sociology and politics and began writing, selling her stories to magazines in South Africa. Her first marriage, to Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children, ended in divorce. Doris Lessing left her husband and their two children and was drawn to communist ideas. She joined the local Left Book Club where she met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing (with whom she had a son) but divorced again in 1949. That year she returned to London to pursue her writing career and communist beliefs with her youngest son, leaving her two elder children in South Africa.

She was an active opponent of nuclear arms, supported feminist claims and fought against apartheid – a cause which led to her being banned from South Africa and Rhodesia for many years. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary she left the British Communist Party but was under the surveillance of the British secret service for over twenty years afterwards.

Her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, was published in 1950. During her communist phase (up till 1956) she wrote radically about social issues; a subject to which she returned with *The Good Terrorist* in 1985 (the novel was short listed for The Booker Prize). The book that gained her international attention was *The Golden Notebook* with its anti-war, anti-Stalinist and pro-feminist message. Doris Lessing also wrote a number of science fiction novels which bear witness to her fascination with Sufism. By the time of her death she had published over 50 novels, some under a pseudonym.

The Fifth Child is Doris Lessing's tenth novel, first published in 1988. It became a bestseller and was translated into a number of languages. It was followed by a sequel *Ben, in the World* in 2000. On a basic level the story is about two people, David and Harriet who meet at an office party and instantly fall in love. They discover they share the same conservative viewpoints, something which apparently sets them apart from the London of the 1960s. They marry, buy a large house in a small town and announce their plans to have many children (six or eight), which does not meet with the approval of their relatives. By the time they have had four children, two boys and two girls, their plan does seem to have worked and their house becomes the centre of joy and happiness for all the relatives and friends. This suddenly comes to an end with the fifth, painful and traumatic, pregnancy which turns out to be the beginning of the misery, suffering, and eventually destruction that the fifth child, Ben, brings to the whole family.

3. Why *The Fifth Child*?

Extensive reading is widely understood to be extremely helpful in developing foreign language skills and literacy in general so it is only natural that I have thought of ways of how to encourage students to read more. After much careful deliberation, I once decided to choose *The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing as the first ‘experimental’ book for one of my C1 groups to read. I myself had read the book all those years before in my student days and have never forgotten it since.

The novel has some useful advantages for teaching purposes: it’s not too long (about 130 pages); it’s a page turner (it reads well, it can even be read in one or two evenings); a vast majority of students have never heard of it (an element of surprise); and its universal subject matter (human relationships, family life and the concept of otherness) can appeal to many of them.

The book can occasionally be irritatingly enigmatic or even sketchy but in spite of it, or perhaps, because of it, it is also gripping and thought-provoking, which makes it a useful and rewarding teaching resource for students of various fields of study.

Here are some examples why:

- it is never clearly explained what Ben suffers from exactly; his medical condition is never fully revealed (is it autism, ADHD, another disability?) – students try to grapple with this question;
- it is not known what Ben thinks or feels, how he sees the world around him, or how he behaves outside the family environment e.g., at school – students have to imagine and discuss this mystery;
- it is sometimes unclear if the voice we hear is the one belonging to the anonymous narrator, Harriet or, perhaps, another character – students need to cope with this uncertain viewpoint;
- there are a lot of ‘what if’ questions connected with the story – students are encouraged to speculate on other potential endings.

All in all, the central mystery of Ben, the fifth child, enables the teacher to confront students with many questions (the nature of motherly love, the concept of acceptance, the perception of otherness) without giving any clear cut answers, which fosters their critical thinking skills.

4. A description of material and method

The material is aimed at C1/C2 university students and addressed to those students who are not only willing to read authentic, ungraded texts in a foreign language but to read *a whole book* in a foreign language.

It may come as a surprise but such students do exist and with the right encouragement and guidance from the teacher they may even enjoy the very process of reading and then, in class, of treating the book as a springboard to develop their responses, opinions and critical thinking skills, not to mention the four language

macro skills i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are two factors crucial for the success of the project. Firstly, the choice of the book, which I have already explained. Secondly, the methodological approach of the teacher. Speaking solely from my own experience, it is advisable to remember a few basic rules:

- the focus is on enjoying and appreciating the story and the language, not on literary analysis;
- the teacher does not impose her model interpretation; all views are listened to and accepted (at some point I usually reassure students that they do not have to like the book as much as I do);
- the text is treated as a stepping stone for learners to express and share their impressions and opinions and to listen and respond to their peers.

The handout offers some tried and tested techniques to activate students. They are encouraged to respond to the book in a variety of ways. For instance, at one point they listen to the author talking about her ideas behind the book, take notes and re-evaluate their argument in light of this new information. They also write a paragraph summarizing the plot from Ben's point of view. Following another teacher's advice that 'moving from traditional homework such as writing an exercise to more creative assignments like writing a paragraph which is focused on a critical thinking strategy can produce continuity in the teaching and learning of critical thinking,' I can wholeheartedly recommend this activity (Vdovina, 2013).

The lesson usually takes 90 minutes. As a form of encouragement for students to read the book, I show them two extracts from the blurb of my own copy of the book.

The two extracts are as follows:

“A hair-raising tale...as full of twists and shocks as any page turner could desire.” – *Time*

“A horror story of maternity and the nightmare of social collapse...a moral fable of the genre that includes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*.” – *The New York Times Book Review*

Another helpful idea is to ask student, preferably a volunteer, to prepare a few-minute presentation about the author. To my knowledge, Doris Lessing, who is a fascinating personality in her own right, is not a familiar author to Polish readers. Therefore, such a presentation would probably prepare students better for what is to come.

5. Conclusion

I have continued to use *The Fifth Child* with many of my C1 groups for the last four years. It is usually read as the first item on our reading list which we invariably

compile together at the beginning of the academic year. It is also the one they usually remember best years later. Students are compelled to take a stand with this book. They feel stimulated to express their own opinions, which, more often than not, leads to lively class discussions or even heated debates. They are usually encouraged to express their views in writing, too. Over the years, long essays, far beyond the required word limit, have been produced. I should also stress that the fascination of the teacher with this book can stimulate students to formulate or verify their own opinions.

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THE FIFTH CHILD

Doris Lessing

THE PLOT

A. Put the events of the story in chronological order.

- a) Harriet and David buy the estate outside London.
- b) Ben becomes a pet for the gang of John and his buddies.
- c) Harriet meets David at a work function and they fall in love at once.
- d) Harriet goes to the asylum Ben has been taken to and brings him back home.
- e) Ben almost falls out of the window but is rescued by Harriet.
- f) Harriet unexpectedly becomes pregnant with a fifth child.
- g) Two girls and two boys are born in quick succession.
- h) The house and family change and nothing is the same again.
- i) The family disintegrates with everyone going their own way.

Which event(s) do you think was/were crucial for determining the fate of this family?

B. Look at four extracts from the novel. What do they refer to?

1

‘Summer was the same: two months of it, and again the family came and went, and came again. The schoolgirl was there all the time, poor Bridget, clinging fast to this miracle of a family. Rather, in fact, as Harriet and David did. Both more than once – seeing the girl’s face, reverential, even awed, always on the watch as if she feared to miss some revelation of goodness or grace the moment she allowed her attention to lapse – saw themselves. Even uneasily saw themselves. It was too much...excessive... Surely they should be saying to her, “Look here, Bridget, don’t expect so much. Life isn’t like that!” But life is like that, if you choose right (...)’

2

‘He watched the children, particularly Luke and Helen, all the time. He studied how they moved, sat down, stood up; copied how they ate. He had understood that these two, the older ones, were more socially accomplished than Jane; and he ignored Paul altogether.’

3

‘It was as if the strain of her life had stripped off a layer of flesh – not real flesh, but perhaps metaphysical substance, and invisible, unsuspected, until it had gone. And David, working as he did, had lost the self that was the family man. His efforts had made him successful in his firm, then gained him a much better job in another. But that now was where his centre was: events have their own logic. He was now the sort of man he had once decided never to be.’

4

‘And where was Ben? One day, Harriet was shopping in the town, and she heard the roar of a motorbike behind her, and turned to see a creature like a space-age jockey, presumably John, crouched low over the bars, and behind him, clutching tight, a dwarf child: she saw her son Ben, his mouth open in what seemed to be a chant or yell of exultation. Ecstatic. She had never seen him like this. Happy? Was that the word?’

DISCUSSION

- A.** What kind of a plan for life do Harriet and David have at the beginning of the novel? How is it seen by others?
- B.** How is Ben described in the novel? How do we see him? What is he called in the novel?
- C.** What is not described in the novel (and you would like it to be described)? Make a list of things you would like to find out.

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- D.** Do the characters in the novel accept the ‘otherness’ of Ben?
- E.** What do the parents, especially Harriet, find most difficult in raising Ben?
- F.** Ben has been interpreted as a symbol or metaphor of the following:
- i. the fear of the dark side of society
 - ii. decay in the world
 - iii. all displaced people who do not fit in
 - iv. the price of happiness and wanting too much
 - v. an evil force disrupting all normality
 - vi. how far the human genes reach back
 - vii. the issue of handicapped children
 - viii.

Which of these interpretations do you agree and disagree with? Discuss with a partner. Can you add your own?

- G.** Would you like to ask any questions to Harriet, David or Ben?
 - a).....
 - b).....
 - c).....
 - d).....

- H.** What advice would you give to this family? What could have they done differently? Did they make any mistakes while dealing with the problem of raising a child like Ben? Does the story have to finish the way it does?
- I.** There is a sequel to *The Fifth Child*. What do you think happens next in the story?

LISTENING AND WRITING

- A.** Look and listen to Doris Lessing talking briefly on two different topics connected with writing *The Fifth Child*. What are they? Take notes. Source: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/doris.lessing/9> as of 10.12.2016

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- B.** What question(s) would you like to ask the author?

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- C.** Doris Lessing mentioned a number of times that a lot of readers, especially teenage ones, actually identified with Ben. Imagine you are Ben. Rewrite the story from his perspective. Write a paragraph of about 150 words.

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C. Give synonyms to the following words.

wary –

awe –

to disrupt –

to nurture –

decay –

gripping –

hair-raising –

to cling –

TEACHER'S NOTES

The handout is divided into four parts.

THE PLOT

It reminds students about the plot and major characters. This is usually fairly easy for everyone to do. There's a general question for students to discuss or think about followed by a second exercise which consists of recognizing different extracts in the sequence of the whole story.

The chronological order is: c, a, g, f, h, e, d, b, i

Answer key:

1. It refers to the time before Ben is born, one of the happy, glorious summers in the family home, to which a lot of family members loved to come.
2. It describes Ben and his relationship with the siblings. It's about how he learns from the elder ones.
3. It describes what happens to the marriage of Harriet and David at the end of the book and what toll Ben's birth has taken on both of them.
4. This extract refers to the arrangement between Harriet and John with his gang who become something like a surrogate family for Ben.

DISCUSSION

Depending on the class this can take even longer than 30 minutes. The questions can be discussed in pairs, groups or as a whole class.

LISTENING AND WRITING

Note taking is practiced here as well as some critical thinking (questions to the author) coupled with creative writing (imagining to be Ben and rewriting the story from his perspective).

VOCABULARY AND SPEAKING

Answer key:

- A. It's probably best to explain some of the more difficult words like **harrowing** ('very distressing', 'traumatic'), **ambiguous** ('open to more than one interpretation'), **sketchy** ('incomplete, vague or superficial')

B. Students' own answers.

C. synonyms: (all words appear in the handout)

wary – careful, cautious

decay – disintegration, corrosion, rotting, decomposition

awe – respect, reverence, wonder, astonishment

gripping – fascinating, thrilling, riveting

to disrupt – to interrupt, to stop, to upset

hair-raising – terrifying, horrifying, scary, creepy

to nurture – to bring up, to raise, to develop

to cling – to hold on to, to adhere, to stick to

