

DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

ABSTRACT: This paper is based on the observation of reading skills that students of the first year apply in English classes and on the analysis of a reading self assessment. It discusses the assumption that students can read better if they apply critical thinking and they will become critical readers if they are taught and trained how to do it. When students start University we take it for granted that they know how to read in the mother tongue as well as in the foreign language. They are assigned a lot of textbook readings from authentic materials. But every day practice and their performance show that students read simply for comprehension. Secondary schools mainly teach students to read to get information. First year students have not been taught to read for gist or to develop their critical thinking. Many have not learned to analyze texts through questions and answers that examine students' comprehension. Nowadays students do not like reading at all, but when they read they do it for pleasure. When they read to accomplish a task and they do not 'understand it' they give up rather than work hard to solve out the difficulty of the task.

KEY WORDS: authentic materials, comprehension, critical reading, critical thinking, reading skills.

What is critical reading?

'Critical reading' asks teachers to make their students think while reading in their professional literature. It is defined as "learning to evaluate, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on evidence" (Carr, 1988). It means reading with a goal in mind in order to find deep understanding of a material, whether it is fiction or nonfiction. It is the act of analyzing and evaluating what you are reading as you progress, or as you reflect back. Critical reading is a technique to go deep into your thoughts in order to discover information and ideas within a text. Critical reading asks the readers to evaluate the text they are reading (Graney, 1990). This means to create an image in your mind what is represented in the text against our own experience and knowledge (Wallace, 1996). It also entails the attempt to

¹ delija.sh@gmail.com

understand the purpose or the motivation behind the creation of a text. This is because the writer's purpose directly affects the way the text is constructed. Graney going further to this idea, views the ability to determine whether a text is fact or opinion as one of the elements that contributes to a reader's evaluation task. He emphasizes the idea that in deciding whether a text is fact or opinion a reader considers both linguistic knowledge and background knowledge, which help the reader put the text into a perspective.

Critical reading goes beyond comprehension. It goes beyond just understanding the core elements of reading: decoding, predicting, and summarizing, identifying the topic, main idea, supporting ideas, patterns of organization, and inferences. Critical readers recognize the writer's point of view, purpose, targeted audience, and tone. They ask questions as they read to monitor their reading.

To know how to read is not enough. In addition, students should be able to use the reading skills while reading professional material. Students with good reading skills are good readers and are successful in school.

How do Readers Read

A critical reader uses: $\text{Prior Knowledge} + \text{Predictions} = \text{Comprehension}$. When we read, we don't decipher every word on the page for its individual meaning. We process text in chunks, and we also employ other "tricks" to help us make meaning out of so many individual words in a text we are reading. First, we bring prior knowledge to everything we read, whether we are aware of it or not. Titles of texts, authors' names, and the topic of the piece all trigger prior knowledge in us. With prior knowledge we make predictions, or guesses about how what we are reading relates to our prior experience. We also make predictions about what meaning the text will convey. To non-critical readers, texts provide facts. Readers gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text. To the critical reader, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only what a text says, but also how that text portrays the subject matter. They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author.

Non-critical reading is satisfied with recognizing what a text says and restating the key remarks. Critical reading goes further. Having recognized what a text says, it reflects on what the text does by making such remarks. Is it offering examples? Arguing? Appealing for sympathy? Making a contrast to clarify a point? Finally, critical readers then infer what the text, as a whole, means, based on the earlier analysis. They reach for an interpretation.

Strategies for Reading More Critically

Previewing

Previewing a text means gathering as much information about the text as you can before you actually read it. The reader can ask himself the following questions: What is my Purpose for Reading? What can the Title Tell Me About the Text? Who is the Author? How is the Text Structured?

Annotating

Successful critical readers read with a pencil in their hand, making notes in the text as they read. Instead of reading passively, they create an active relationship with what they are reading .

Summarizing

Summarizing the text is an valuable way to check the understanding of the text.

Analyzing

Analyzing a text in order to find out how its parts relate to one another can help the reader better understand a text's meaning.

Re-reading

Re-reading is a crucial part of the critical reading process. Good readers will reread a piece several times, until they are satisfied they know it inside and out.

Responding

Responding to what is read is an important step in understanding what the reader reads.

Background of the study

There is a serious frustration for instructors that students do not read the assigned material. There are at least three general problems:

- students do not allocate the time necessary to do their reading;
- Students may not understand the difference between reading and preparing, and so do not get as much out of the texts as they might, and are not then ready to engage in class discussion;
- Students do not know how to deal with difficult material and it often stops them from continuing reading .

This brings out the importance of teaching reading, and learning to read effectively to students. Wilson (1988) suggests that teachers re-think the way they teach reading and look critically at their own teaching/thinking processes. She cautions against skills lessons that are repackaged in the name of critical thinking but which are only renamed worksheets. She points out that teaching students to read, write, and think critically is a dramatic shift from what has generally taken place in most classrooms.

According to Wilson, critical literacy advocates the use of strategies and techniques like formulating questions prior to, during, and after reading; responding to the text in terms of the student's own values; anticipating texts, and acknowledging when and how reader expectations are aroused and fulfilled; and responding to texts through a variety of writing activities which ask readers to go beyond what they have read to experience the text in personal ways.

Method Participants

Participants were 26 first year students. These students have high self-efficacy, clear goals, and strong extrinsic motivation, i.e. university education and job prospects; as well as an interest in the language itself. Thus, it is very surprising to see that their expectations from and interest towards the language learning classroom in formal education is much lower than their motivation to study the language. On the other hand,

it should be considered that high school education in Albania has essentially been shaped by the backwash effect of the Matura exam in recent years. The influence of school education is seen in their reading skills. Their reported reading practices during the secondary school studies were: reading short paragraphs with comprehension questions as preparation for the university exam, translating texts and summarising short stories, all of which were chosen by the course teacher, and answering comprehension and vocabulary questions at the end of reading texts in their course books. They also reported that authentic texts were not a part of their reading courses at high school.

The students were given a Reading Self-assessment as a tool to see their approach to reading in order to identify and address their needs. This self assessment also aimed at making them more aware of their reading skills. The Reading Self-assessment covered reading speed, comprehension, volume of material, concentration on reading, retention.

In relation to comprehension ten students state that they have difficulty finding the main idea when they read. They often need to read materials several times before they understand it. Eighteen students say they have difficulty interpreting the meaning of works they read, because they have trouble reading between the lines' for implied meaning. They struggle with the new words and this slows their reading comprehension and reading. As far as retention is concerned fifteen students say that they cannot read all the required readings (not enough time) and cannot keep up with supplementary readings. The only texts they read are the assigned ones. Only eight students state they skim before reading for detail. This critical reading skill is neglected because of the myth that "Skimming isn't real reading."

Students connect their concentration on reading with their interests and environment. Only three of them accept that their eyes often see the words, but

their mind is somewhere else. And that they are easily distracted by their own thoughts while reading.

It is to be pointed out that most of them, twenty out of twenty six state that they forget much of what they read soon afterwards. One of the reasons of this is that only six of them use effective critical reading skills so they make notes while reading and highlight or underline while reading. Few of them make use of the title and the other information to make predictions. Only three of the students make ample use of the annotations. Whereas summarizing of the text as a valuable way to check the understanding of the text is equaled to retelling, or the preparation of the test.

Twenty-two students report a positive change in their approach to reading lessons in the Faculty.

The analysis of the answers given by the first- year students' sample shows that we should focus on teaching students how to read critically by applying and showing them effective reading strategies. First it is connected with reading for comprehension in a foreign language.

Reading for Comprehension

We want our students to read critically, to be able to evaluate an author's argument and to relate that argument to other texts, to course concepts, and to their own experience. But reading critically assumes having effective strategies for reading for comprehension. Before achieving the goal of having students read critically within a discipline, it is usually necessary to spend some time teaching them strategies for reading for comprehension. Effective reading comprehension is the culmination of mastering vocabulary, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension skills. A person having good comprehension skills is considered as active reader, with an ability to interact with the words by understanding its complete meaning and the concept behind it. Thus the skills of reading comprehension distinguishes an active reader from a passive reader who just read the text without getting its meaning.

Reading comprehension teaching aims at

1. To let better grasping of the context, sequence and the characters narrated in text.
2. Certain parts of the text can confuse readers. Reading comprehension skills works on this aspect to get the clear idea of the meaning of the text.
3. Helps to create the questionnaire based on the text about its theme or idea. It often helps in better understanding of the said paragraph.

4. It helps to link the event of narration with our previous experiences and predict the next probable event in the course based on the information given in the narration. University usually places new demands on student reading, demands for which students are often not prepared. Many students approach their reading in a way that was appropriate for the purposes emphasized in high school, and still promoted in many university courses: read-to-write-exams. This conception of the reading process leads students to see the objective of their reading as being to remember everything they read, so that each idea, indeed each sentence, is seen as having equal value. They therefore do not differentiate among evidence, argument, claims, purpose, illustration and explanation, let alone establish a hierarchical relationship among these various elements in the texts they read. It is useful then to teach students to read for argument rather than for content; to teach them that the key comprehension objective in most of their reading is not to memorize every piece of information, but to find the controlling thesis of the text, and to identify the main supporting evidence given for that argument.

Reading Critically

Reading critically essentially entails directly extending the strategies for reading rhetorically, but doing so explicitly within the disciplinary context of the course. Teaching critical reading necessitates teaching student the modes of inquiry, kinds of evidence, hypotheses and assumption used in the discipline, and showing them how to apply these directly to their reading. Fundamentally, then, reading critically means developing a range of questions appropriate to the discipline which the reader asks of the text she is reading

Critical Reading Strategies - Activities and Assignments

There are a number of activities and assignments that can be used with the classes to promote effective reading. Modeling the process the teacher uses when reading can be effective. Simply taking the students through a chapter in a text they are reading and demonstrating the strategies used in reading it can be quite effective. It is useful to do this a number of times through the term with a variety of texts. Another activity is to make it an ongoing expectation that students will identify in writing the central thesis of each text they read, along with an explanation as to why, possibly supported with appropriate evidence from the text. Students could write regular journal entries in which they might be expected to critically evaluate an issue raised in that week's readings. Writing abstracts of articles or book chapters can also be an effective means of promoting effective reading for comprehension. As well, students could work in small groups which would analyze a text, creating

a series of appropriate questions to ask in order to apply an effective disciplinary approach to the text.

Teachers can make critical thinking and critical analysis a regular part of all classroom work by starting with information sources (articles, advertisements, speeches, dialogues, pictures, videos) that are obviously biased or ideologically loaded, such as an advertising campaign against smoking. The use of authentic texts (newspaper articles, advertisements, letters, news broadcasts) and less traditional literacy texts (graffiti, cartoons, commercials, television sitcoms) appeals to the students' interests and helps for a communicative approach to critical reading. The authentic texts from different genres serve to provoke optimal arousal and create a sense of competency; and the practice of involving the students in the process of text selection provides an increased sense of student control in the EFL classroom (Wallace, 1999; Wallace, 2003; Leal 1998). The first step is to raise awareness by pointing out critical reading skills when they are exhibited by the teacher or by learners. If we want to develop critical reading skills we must choose readings or listening, speaking, or writing activities that are relevant and interesting for learners and must prompt learners to examine how their own experiences and values relate to and influence their approaches to topics. Sometimes multiple interpretations of information and different points of view may or may not be represented in classroom texts, materials, and discussions, so it is advisable to choose activities in which learners must consider a variety of perspectives. The activities planned can not be carried out successfully if we do not make our students feel comfortable with them, so build in time for learners to become comfortable with texts or activities before asking them to look at them critically. This entails a balance in instruction in basic reading skills (decoding, vocabulary building, predicting, summarizing) with practice in critical analysis skills. The teacher must shift from an emphasis on finding a right answer to eliciting ranges of interpretations that are supported by sound reasoning and thoughtful examination.

For active, critical reading to occur, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry. Students must be encouraged to question, to make predictions, and to organize ideas which support value judgments. Two techniques for developing these kinds of critical reading skills include problem solving and learning to reason through reading. It suggested that lessons that include problem solving can promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of ideas. When students are asked to analyze we expect them to clarify information by examining the component parts. Synthesis involves combining relevant parts into a coherent whole, and evaluation includes setting up standards and then judging against them to verify the reasonableness of ideas.

Conclusion

Critical reading is a way of interacting with information that goes beyond the decoding of letters and words. It encourages learners to engage with information sources and to question the social contexts, purposes, and possible effects that they have on their lives. It also asks them to look at their own opinions, biases, and perceptions of reality, and to consider those of others. For adult ESL learners, critical reading can be a means of comprehensively exploring the new language and culture in which they find themselves. Students reported that they try to read, comprehend and work with the texts, but they lack and need critical reading skills.

Based on these findings, it is possible to suggest that modeling of effective critical reading skills is useful. A variety of activities and assignments, relating to students' own realities through the use of real-life, authentic texts from a variety of genres in contexts :

together with encouraging the students to express their opinion as readers of the text both prior and after reading the text will raise their awareness and train them.

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RAZVOJ KRITIČKOG MIŠLJENJA KOD STUDENTA

REZIME: Ovaj rad se zasniva na opservaciji sposobnosti čitanja koje studenti prve godine primenjuju na časovima engleskog jezika, kao i na analizi samoprocene te sposobnosti. U radu se razmatra pretpostavka da studenti mogu bolje da čitaju kada primene sposobnost kritičkog mišljenja, a postaće kritički čitaoci samo ako ih podučimo i obučimo kako da to čine. Kada počnu da studiraju, mi uzimamo zdravo za gotovo da studenti znaju da čitaju i na maternjem i na stranom jeziku. Imaju zadatak da čitaju mnogo autentičnog materijala. Međutim, svakodnevna praksa i njihovi rezultati pokazuju da oni čitaju samo radi razumevanja teksta. U srednjim školama učenici uče da čitaju kako bi došli do određenih informacija. Studenti prve godine ne uče da čitaju da bi shvatili suštinu, niti razvijaju sposobnost kritičkog mišljenja. Mnogi još nisu naučili ni da analiziraju tekst putem pitanja i odgovora kojima se proverava razumevanje. Današnji studenti uopšte ne vole da čitaju, ali kada čitaju, čine to iz zadovoljstva. Kada čitaju da bi uradili neki zadatak i kada pri tome ne razumeju tekst, oni odustaju pre nego da se potrude da prevaziđu poteškoće u zadatku.

KLJUČNE REČI: autentični materijali, razumevanje, kritičko čitanje, veštine čitanja.