

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE CRITICAL READING APPLICATIONS IN ELT/EFL CLASSES

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Abstract: As the society we are living has become more complex and specialized in the last decades, reading has become one of the most important skills in ELT/ EFL teaching. The importance of connecting and commenting on the ideas are the key elements of social and academic success. In the past decade, there has been a sustained interest in promoting reading as a significant and viable means of language development for second and foreign language (L2 and FL) learners (Day and Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1995). Critical reading is a skill which we use in our social and academic lives. As critical readers we need to understand, question and evaluate the texts which are actively participate in our lives. By looking at the texts which are already there, from a different point of view will develop our critical thinking as well as critical reading. Being one of the most frequent skills that we use in every part of our lives, critical reading can be developed through learning and practice. In this study the benefits of Critical (CR) practices in traditional EFL/ELT classes is discussed and some classroom applications to improve critical reading in ELT is presented

Keywords: *critical reading, critical thinking, ELT/EFL*

Introduction

Starting with the numerous education reforms done in the last decades, new views of teaching and learning started to be discussed and used in EFL/ELT classrooms. These reforms explicitly ask teachers to change their teaching strategies by shifting the emphasis from the traditional textbook-based, rote learning, to exploration, inquiry-based learning situated in real-world phenomena (National Research Council, 1996). As the society we are living has become more complex and specialized in the last decades, the importance of connecting and commenting on the ideas became the key elements of social and academic success. In this era questioning has become the most frequently used techniques in every part of our lives. The need for the students to question and make connections between their studies and the world in which they live, is now a necessity in order to have social and academic success. Students who use critical thinking and reading strategies can demonstrate knowledge and understanding to the issues and can make connections between the concepts. At this point critical thinking becomes the key element of this connection. As teachers, we do not teach students *what* to think, but we can help them *how* to think by organizing their thinking to facilitate complex issues. Thinking skills can be improved by understanding the processes involved in thinking. Using different kinds of questions is one way to increase higher-level thinking in the classrooms. At this point some sub skills can be used to teach higher level thinking in the classroom such as: making inferences, drawing conclusions, comparing and contrasting, analyzing, predicting and evaluating. In order to read critically, the students need to learn how to think critically as the first step of the process. Although there are some quite diverse definitions of critical thinking, nearly all emphasize the ability and tendency to gather, evaluate, and use information effectively (Beyer, 1985). Chance (1986:6) defines critical thinking as the ability to analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems. Critical thinking skills aim at teaching the learner how to think rather than what to think (Taylor, 2001). In critical thinking, collecting, elaborating and using data are crucial. The components of critical thinking which are reasoning, problem solving, and decision-making along with creative thinking are thought to be the skills of vital importance for success at school and in life (Collier, et al., 2002:7).

What is Critical Reading?

Reading comprehension was given a range of definitions. Tierney and Pearson, (1994) claims reading as an active cognitive process in which the reader's background knowledge plays a key role in the creation of

meaning. Manzo and Manzo (1993, p.5) define reading as “the act of simultaneously reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines.”

According to Davies (1995) there are two types of reading activities: passive and active. In passive reading exercises, students are required to respond comprehension questions, multiple choice questions, true-false questions and gap filling questions. This kind of reading is commonly used in the classrooms where rote learning is practiced. Rote learning occurs when a person memorizes and gives back the information without thinking. This kind of reading is easier to apply in the classrooms as the teachers can easily check whether their students understand the ideas in the given text at a certain level. One other reason for the practical use in the classroom is that it is easy to correct. Active reading, on the other hand enhances the readers ability to expose their own opinions about the text they read rather than parrot the writer’s opinion. Developing critical reading skills can be time-consuming and difficult for EFL students, but if we look at the issue from a wider perspective, this kind of reading would be accomplished with continual practice and the result of these practices would worth the effort.

There is also a distinction between a critical and a non-critical reader. In order to better understand the distinction between the critical and non-critical reader, the first thing is to analyze their way of looking at the reading process. Kurland (2000) states that to non critical readers, texts provide facts. Non-critical readers get information from a text simply by memorizing it. Critical readers on the other hand do not only identify what a text *says*; they also identify what the text *does* and what the text *means*.

- *What a text says* – **restatement**
- *What a text does* – **description**
- *What a text means* – **interpretation**

(http://www.criticalreading.com/critical_reading.htm)

Reading is not only about getting the meaning from the text as it is given. As Grabe (1988) defines critical reading is “a dialogue between the reader and the text”. That is, it is an interactive process that goes on between the reader and the text, resulting in comprehension. During the process of reading, the reader interacts with the text and tries to get the meaning from the text where different kinds of information and knowledge are presented. L2 reading comprehension is known as highly complex, dynamic, multicomponential and multi-dimensional because it involves multiple interactions among reader factors (e.g., first language literacy (L1) literacy, L1 background, language proficiency, background knowledge, knowledge of genre and pragmatics, metalinguistic knowledge, motivation, metacognition, and strategy use) and contextual factors (e.g., text topic and content, text type and genre, text readability, verbal and non-verbal communication (Phakiti, 2006). Reading effectively requires approaching texts with a critical eye: evaluating what you read for not just what it says, but how and why it says. (<http://writing.umn.edu/docs/sws/quicktips/criticalread.pdf>)

The aim of critical reading is;

• to recognize an author’s purpose
• to understand tone and persuasive elements
• to recognize bias
That is:
• recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language
• recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices
• recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language

(http://www.criticalreading.com/critical_reading.htm)

“Critical reading” is basically a reading process which involves critical thinking. In the last decades, in addition with the comprehension in reading, analytic reading was started to be discussed. Critical reading requires reading and critical thinking. In order to make a good critical reading, one should know how to do critical thinking. According to Marshall and Rowland (1998), critical thinking occurs when students question their own beliefs or what they are told. Correspondingly, Kurland (2000) states that Critical *thinking* is a technique for evaluating information and ideas, for deciding what to accept and believe. Critical thinking involves a variety of skills such as the individual identifying the source of information, analysing its credibility, reflecting on whether that information is consistent with their prior knowledge, and drawing conclusions based on their critical thinking (Linn, 2000).

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Adapted from Knott's (2005) five steps to read looking for ways of thinking is stated below:

Central claims:

The first one of the five steps is to distinguish the central claims or purpose of the text. At this point it would be beneficial for a critical reader to identify if the text states a fact or an opinion. If the text is an opinion, the critical reader aims to discover the purpose of the writer.

Context:

Context is another key element to identify the text. "In which context the text is written and who is the potential reader according to the writer" are some questions to be answered.

Kinds of reasoning:

Differentiating the kinds of reasoning in the text would also give the critical reader to understand the organization of the text which would also give an idea to understand the text more clearly.

Evidence:

Another point to be covered is to find out the supporting details that the text covers that is the evidence that the text holds

Evaluation:

Evaluation is the outcome of a critical reading. Instead of accepting the ideas given in the text, a critical reader makes judgements and tries to bring up counter argument.

Knott (2005) also gives some tips to be used in classroom settings in order to promote critical reading.

1. Critical reading occurs after some preliminary processes of reading. Begin by skimming research materials, especially introductions and conclusions, in order to strategically choose where to focus your critical efforts.

2. When highlighting a text or taking notes from it, teach yourself to highlight argument: those places in a text where an author explains her analytical moves, the concepts she uses, how she uses them, how she arrives at conclusions. Don't let yourself foreground and isolate facts and examples, no matter how interesting they may be. First, look for the large patterns that give purpose, order, and meaning to those examples. The opening sentences of paragraphs can be important to this task.

3. When you begin to think about how you might use a portion of a text in the argument you are forging in your own paper, try to remain aware of how this portion fits into the whole argument from which it is taken. Paying attention to context is a fundamental critical move.

4. When you quote directly from a source, use the quotation critically. This means that you should not substitute the quotation for your own articulation of a point. Rather, introduce the quotation by laying out the judgments you are making about it, and the reasons why you are using it. Often a quotation is followed by some further analysis.

In order to promote critical reading in ELT classes the reader use questions such as;

What have I gained from the information given in the text?
How are the facts, examples used and interpreted?
What is the aim of the writer in writing the text?
Who did the writer specify as the target reader?
What is the organization method of the text?
How does the text reach its conclusions?
What is the specified time of the text?
What are the bias of the writer?
What is the setting of the text?
How does this text work?
How is the text argued?

Therefore in reading, the teachers, should expect the learners to perceive and recognize

1. claims
2. the claims with reasons (arguments)
3. evidence
4. opposing arguments

5. refutations (to correspond them)
6. fallacies (flawed reasoning)
(Stapleton, 2001)

In order to foster critical thinking and reading in the classroom, the students can be asked open ended questions such as,

- I wonder if...?
- What could we do...?
- Can you find a way to ...?
- What would happen if...?
- Why do you think (that) happened...?
- What did you notice about...?
- Tell me about...?

Critical Reading Strategies

Improve Your Reading Strategies and Identify the Purpose of Your Reading

Improve your reading by studying the reading strategies. In order to read the text effectively, you need to identify your reading and improve it according to your needs. Identifying the purpose of why you read the text will help you get the best out of your reading. Knowing the purpose will help you organize your ideas about the reading text. In order to organize your ideas properly, it would be beneficial to answer some questions such as:

- “Why do I read this book?”
- “What kind of information I am looking for?”
- “Are there enough supports for my argument?”

Give Yourself Enough Time to Read

Reading critically is not a fast process; the reader reads the text in order to get the whole idea presented in the text. It is for that reason that the reader should take his time to read the text carefully. Most of the time, rereading the text would let the reader better distinguish the ideas presented in the text. In the first reading, the reader reads the text to get the main idea. In the rereading part, it would be a better idea for the reader to work on the separate parts of the text. In more complex texts, in order not to get confused with the different ideas presented in the text, the reader should organize the parts and the ideas in the text.

Take Notes While Reading the Text

While reading the text, the reader should take notes on the text in order to make the unknown words and terms checked out later. Also it would be a good idea to write down any questions that come to the reader's mind in order to have a clear understanding of the text. The unknown words and the questions can be discussed with the instructor to make sure that there is nothing left unclear about the text. By doing such studies, in one way the text is “personalized”. In addition to these, a summary can be written in order to record the main points to be fully covered.

Try to Understand the Background of the Writer and How this Background Influence the Writing

Reading a text critically requires asking questions about the writer's authority and the purpose of his/her writing the text. It should be kept in mind that every text that the reader reads, is there to try to change the reader's view in some way. In order to do this every text filters the realities for its purpose of existence. As a critical reader, you need to understand the reason why the text was written. It would be beneficial for your understanding to answer some questions such as;

- “What kind of information does the text give?”
- “What is the purpose of the text?”
- “What does the text say?”
- “How does the writer support his/her ideas? “

Adapted from from the University of Minnesota's *Student Writing Guide*, 2004. 9–11

Sample Critical Reading Applications to Be Used In ELT/EFL Classes

Wide range of materials such as newspaper articles, all sorts of literary texts such as short stories, poems, novels, song lyrics which are appropriate for the student's age and interests can be used in classroom settings. in order to promote critical reading in ELT classrooms.

SUGGESTION 1

The teacher brings a newspaper article to the classroom which is suitable for the level and the interest of the students. The use of newspaper articles in English classrooms as a critical reading resource is beneficial as *"Authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people."* (Nuttall 1996:172). It would be more suitable to find articles which have controversial ideas in it so that the students can find counter arguments to make the discussion more fruitful..

Pre- reading;

The teacher asks the students;

- about the kind of food they consume.
- nutrition policies held by the countries.
- the reasons for the increasing number of obesity all around the World.

While reading;

The students are asked to read the text about "healty food".

"Dietitians are fond of reciting the mantra 'all foods can fit into a healthy diet' and telling people that there are no 'good' or 'bad' foods. But considering that 64 percent of adults (plus an alarming 15 percent of children) are categorized by the government as overweight, some experts say this message is baloney (which happens to be a really bad food!).

"The idea that there are no bad foods is a marketing trick thought up by the food industry to defend their products," says Bonnie Liebman, M.S., director of nutrition at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "The whole notion is full of holes and makes no sense."

Evil is the only appropriate word to describe foods that promise pleasure but deliver misery in the form of heart disease and obesity. Although a Whoopie Pie isn't going to sprout fangs and go for your jugular, it's wise to watch your back when traveling the dark alley of empty calories. A sweet, creamy taste and jazzy packaging can be hiding a food that will only do you wrong. That's the thing about evil: Sometimes it looks so good.

What makes a food really, really scary? In the edibles department, a food gets the seal of disapproval if it does more harm than good -- that is, if it supplies calories but little else, and also contains heart-disease-promoting substances like saturated and trans fats. Trans fats are the nasty man-made fats used to give foods a longer shelf life. Manufacturers hydrogenate oil to make it solid and literally twist the molecule into a form that wreaks havoc in the body."

(http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0846/is_12_22/ai_104943689/?tag=col1;subcol)

Post reading;

After reading the article, the students will be asked to answer the following questions about the article in order to identify;

- Whether the article is written to inform, influence or merely entertain readers?
- How central claims in the article are developed or argued?
- What the main idea of the paragraph is?
- Whether the writer adequately supports his/ her opinion? If not, what type of fallacious thinking is employed in it?
- What are some of the counter arguments that can be used to refute the writer's argument?

- Which part of the article does the reader agree with the writer? Why?

SUGGESTION 2

Pre-reading activity;

As a first step of this activity the students will be asked to answer some questions in order to bring up a discussion in the classroom.

- (a) What are your most favorite fairy tales? Why?
- (b) How do you feel about the theme of “injustice” especially in the most favorite fairy tales?
- (c) How do you generally feel about the endings of the fairy tales?
- (d) In real life we don’t always have happy endings, why do you think the fairy tales always have a happy ending?

While reading activity;

In order to let everybody in the class remember the story, the students are asked to read the story. After reading the story, the students are asked to comment on the pitiful actions of the step mother. The teacher than asks the students to write down questions to be asked to the step mother, asking about all the cruel things she had done to Snow White. Such as:

“Why were you so cruel to Snow White?”

“What would you do if she was your own (biological) daughter?”

“Why didn’t you try to find other ways to solve your problem with Snow White instead of trying to kill her?”

“Why do you give so much importance beauty?”

“What do you think about the moral values that people have in the society?”

“.....?”

After writing the questions,, the students try to answer the above questions by giving answers as if they were the “cruel” step mother. The students try to find excuses for the step mother in order to change the negative feelings towards her.

Post reading activity;

As the last part of the activity, the students are asked to write down the story with a different point of view. This time, the story is told from the step mother’s mouth by using her point of view. In order to do this the students try to find reasonable supports for the step mother’s actions. The students are asked to be creative in their writing in order to come up with different ideas.

SUGGESTION 3

Pre-reading activity;

The students are shown a picture and asked to comment on the picture by answering the open ended questions asked by the teacher. At this point the students are expected to make predictions about the text they are going to read.



- What do you see on the picture?
- Does the picture give you an idea about the text you are going to read, how?
- Who do you think the man in the picture is?
- What do you think the man on the picture has in his hand?
- Do you think the horse is an ordinary one?
- What kind of story do you think you are going to read, what are your reasons for your prediction?

By the help of this activity, the students are expected to come up with different ideas about a text. After every idea is presented, the teacher asks the students to create their own stories about the picture by using the predictions discussed in the classroom.

While reading activity;

At this point, the teacher hands out the original story for the student to read. The students try to find the points in the original story which overlap with their own story.

"Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him.

"The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; now he was browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man, and he pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him coldly. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch."

The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat down among the roses and went to sleep.

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest.

"My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jaybird."

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So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after.

*“Moral: Don’t count your boobies until they are hatched.” by James Thurber
(<http://english.glendale.cc.ca.us/unicorn1.html>)*

Post activity;

After reading the story by James Thurber, a classroom discussion is held. The teacher asks some questions to encourage the students.

- Can you think of a saying or “moral” that fits this story?
- Is the “moral of the story” suitable for the ending?
- Do you think the man planned this situation?
- If you were the wife, what would you do to get rid of this situation?

The teacher asks the students to write a different ending to the story starting from;

“When the police and the psychiatrist arrived, they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest.

The teacher asks the students to be as creative as possible in their writing.

SUGGESTION 4

Pre-reading activity;

As the first step of the activity, the students are asked about their opinions on “animal testing. Every student is reinforced to construct a discussion about this topic. The students form groups; first group is for the idea of animal testing and the second group is against this idea. Both of the groups, write their arguments to support their ideas.

While reading activity;

The students will be given two different articles from two different newspapers with different views on the same topic. At this point, the teacher hands out the original articles which are appropriate for the level of the students and ask the students to read the articles slowly and silently and take notes to better understand the arguments in the articles. In addition to this, the students will be asked to write down the arguments of each writer. Then the students will be asked to underline the supporting sentences presented by both of the writers.

Post activity;

Having noticed the different point of views of the two writes, the students are asked to write their original ideas on the same topic. This new version will reflect their own ideas, with their own supporting ideas/sentences.

Article 1

*“On face value, it is easy to see why advocates of animal testing support it, there are clearly some benefits that come from it: vaccines, drugs, and a host of discoveries that have helped, and continue to help, millions of people worldwide. According to various reports, more than 160 human drugs and vaccines have directly resulted from animal testing, together with 111 veterinary ones. That’s right; these discoveries have helped other animals as well. When you consider the advancement in treatments such as heart disease, arthritis, cancer, and so on, it is hard to fathom, why anyone would take a stance against animal testing...”
(<http://www.helium.com/items/343721-the-case-against-animal-testing>)*

Article 2

“Animals are not good models for human cancer for 2 fundamental reasons: Animals and humans do not get the same diseases. As a result, animal research focuses on artificially inducing symptoms of human cancer and attempting to treat those symptoms. Experimental drugs and treatments that have been found effective on animal models will not necessarily work in people. Despite screening over half a million compounds as anti-cancer

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agents on laboratory animals between 1970-1985, only 80 compounds moved into clinical trials on humans. Of these, a mere 24 had any anti-cancer activity and only 12 appeared to have a 'substantial clinical role. With billions of dollars, countless animals, and well over 30 years spent on the war on cancer, concrete results should have been seen if animal research was actually working. On the contrary, the incidence of cancer continues to rise...'

(<http://caatinfo.org/AgainstAnimalTesting.htm>)

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