

AN OVERVIEW OF CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES TO EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article describes about Critical Reading Strategy in teaching English, especially in reading comprehension. Critical Reading is a strategy that provides students with instructional support before, during, and after reading process. The students with critical reading skills have the ability to evaluate the credibility of a piece of writing. All writers have a purpose when they write, and usually a writer will choose or emphasize facts and details which support his or her purpose, and ignore facts which don't. As readers make sense of what they read, they use various relationships of ideas to aid recognition and fluency. Critical reading includes the ability to evaluate ideas and synthesize what one reads. They are the ability to see relationships of ideas and use them as an aid in reading.

Key Words: *Critical Reading Strategies, Reading Comprehension*

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A. Introduction

Reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. “Comprehension involves what the reader knows as well as the nature of the text itself. It involves the type of text to be read—narrative, expository, poetry, etc. It involves the purpose for reading” (Allan, 1998). It is in line with Bernhardt, (2003) that states comprehension involves intentional thinking, during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader.

It means that comprehension is a process in which the reader constructs meaning using the building materials, the information on the text and the knowledge stored in the reader’s head. The students who have a good comprehension not only make sense of the text, but they are also able to use the information that contains on the text. They are able to think thoughtfully or deeply and to make personal connections as they analyze and question what they are reading, hearing, and seeing.

Similarly, comprehension entails three elements; the reader who is doing the comprehending, the text that is to be comprehended, the activity in which comprehension is a part, (Snow, 2003). In considering the reader, it includes all the capacities, abilities, knowledge, and experiences that a person brings to the act of reading. To comprehend, a reader must have cognitive capacities (e.g., attention, memory,

critical analytic ability, visualization ability), motivation (e.g., a purpose for reading, an interest in the content being read, self-efficacy as a reader), and various types of knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, domain and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge, knowledge of specific comprehension strategies).

Second element of comprehension is the features of text. Comprehension does not occur by simply extracting meaning from text. During reading, the reader constructs different representations of the text that are important for comprehension. These representations include, for example, the surface code (the exact wording of the text), the text base (idea units representing the meaning), and a representation of the mental models embedded in the text. As a reader begins to read and completes whatever activity is at hand, some of the knowledge and capabilities of the reader change. For example, a reader might increase domain knowledge during reading. Similarly, vocabulary, linguistic, or discourse knowledge might increase. Motivational factors, such as self concept or interest in the topic, might change in either a positive or a negative direction during a successful or an unsuccessful reading experience. In addition, texts can be difficult or easy, depending on factors inherent in the text, on the relationship between the text and the knowledge and abilities of the reader, and on the activities in which the reader is engaged. For example, the content presented in the text has a critical bearing on reading comprehension. A reader’s

domain knowledge interacts with the content of the text in comprehension. In addition to content, the vocabulary load of the text and its linguistic structure, discourse style, and genre also interact with the reader's knowledge. When too many of these factors are not matched to a reader's knowledge and experience, the text may be too difficult for optimal comprehension to occur.

The last element of comprehension is activity which refers to the purpose of reading a text. A reading activity involves one or more purposes that is influenced by a cluster of motivational variables, including interest and prior knowledge. A reader has a purpose, which can be either externally imposed (e.g., completing a class assignment) or internally generated (e.g., wanting to know the information of the text). When the purpose is externally mandated, as in instruction, the reader might accept the purpose and complete the activity; for example, if the assignment is "read a paragraph in order to write a summary," the compliant student will accept that purpose and engage in reading operations designed to address it. In contrast, if students fail to see the relevance of an assignment, they may not read purposively, thus compromising their comprehension of the text.

B. Discussion

Factors that Affect Reading Comprehension

There are some common factors that influence a reader ability to comprehend text; students' motivation, vocabulary/background knowledge, automaticity of decoding, fluent

reading, and the nature or the genre of the text itself. Motivation has been a central aspect that impact reading comprehension tasks, and in particular, student performance on reading comprehension assessments. It plays an important role in comprehending the text. The students will be motivated to read when they felt that they need something from the text (Brown, 1994). Motivation factor includes students' interest and their curiosity in processing a text. Interest has been defined as a "relatively stable evaluative orientation toward a certain domain and described as a personal investment in an activity" (Schiefele, 1999). Interest has also been found to correlate more highly with deep-level learning than with surface-level learning from texts. It is shown that student interest has a correlation with cognitive processes such as in analyzing the feature of the text that includes text length, text genre, background knowledge and text difficulty were statistically controlled.

Similarly, one central dimension of motivation is beliefs about one's ability, or self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' judgments and perceptions about whether they are capable of doing well and accomplishing a task (Presley, 2002). Reading self-efficacy refers to individuals' judgments or self-evaluations about their ability to do well on reading activities such as reading a book, or reading a passage (Calkins, 1998). Thus, the students who has self-efficacy seems to have an even more significant impact on reading comprehension when complexity and difficulty of the passage increases.

In addition, vocabulary/ background knowledge strongly influence or affect students' achievement in reading. "A great deal of research suggests that vocabulary and comprehension are inextricably linked. Thus, strategies related to ascertaining the meaning of unknown words, as well as general vocabulary building, are also essential to a strong program in comprehension instruction" (Orasanu, 1986). It is true that people who have large vocabularies affect their reading comprehension. As Fielding and Pearson (2002) imply that the more one already knows, the more one comprehends, and the more one comprehends, the more one learns new knowledge to enable comprehension of an even broader array of topics and texts. In other words, the more students exposure to have a new word, the more their vocabulary knowledge increases. That is, to know more about the meaning of a new word, students must repeatedly encounter and use the word.

Likewise, another important aspect of reading comprehension is world knowledge, particularly background knowledge that is relevant to the topic of the text. "One of the most effective ways to improve comprehension is to activate mental files before reading" (Keene and Zimmermann 1997). Researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois found that reading comprehension can be enhanced by a developing reader's prior knowledge. One way to do this is to provide readers with high-quality, information-rich texts, and then to help them relate what they already know to the

texts. Consequently, whether or not students had background knowledge or mastered vocabulary skills affects their reading comprehension. Students must be able to comprehend a familiar word and its relationship with other words within a text. Mastering vocabulary includes recognizing a word's part of speech, definition, useful context clues, and how it functions in a sentence. These vocabulary strategies can help improve students' comprehension.

Automaticity of decoding of the text is the next aspect that is required by the reader. It has been well established that skilled reading comprehension requires the reader to be able to process the written symbols of text at an appropriate level. This is reinforced by the fact that poor decoders, both in and out of school, read considerably less than average readers (Drucker and Mary, 2003). "A first recommendation to educators who want to improve students' comprehension skills is to teach them to decode well. Word-recognition skills must be developed to the point of fluency if comprehension benefits are to be maximized" (Pressley 2002). To be able to understand what they read, students first need to be able to decode the words on the page. The goal is to have students develop the capacity to have automatic word recognition (automaticity) in order to help them become good comprehenders. It is known that well-developed word recognition become primary skill that affects students' comprehension. However, even though skilled decoding is necessary, it is by no means sufficient for

skilled comprehension. Some children can read smoothly and with expression and not understand. Others may struggle mightily with decoding but still somehow get the gist, (Pressley 2001).

Subsequently, one more factor that affects students' reading comprehension is fluent reading. "Fluency refers to the ability to identify words rapidly so that attention is directed at the meaning of the text" (Adam, 1990). Reading with fluency allows students to obtain information with accuracy, expression and increased speed. The ability to read fluently develops through reading practice. As students become fluent readers, they will spend less time trying to decipher the meaning of words and more time considering the overall meaning of the sentences. Over time, fluent readers will develop the ability to insightfully respond to a text. In contrast, "If a student is not fluent in word recognition, he/she is thinking about the sounds of the individual letters and letter combinations rather than using that energy to make sense of the text being read (Pressley 2002). That is, to be fluent means to be able both to read smoothly, without hesitation, and to comprehend.

The last component that affects students' reading achievement is the feature of the text itself. Texts are structured in different ways depending on their purpose and audience and the way texts are structured plays an important role in student comprehension. By teaching students to understand and draw on what they know about the organizational

structure of texts, they learn how to comprehend text, how to learn important information and remember what they have read and how to monitor their own reading. The more students know about the structure of a text, the more confidently they will be able to read it.

The students who know the structural features of a narrative, for example, it can help them to focus their attention on the more important details of the text while they are reading, e.g. knowing who the main character is; knowing what the plot entails. As students know the genre of the texts, they learn to search for and notice this information and draw on their knowledge of structure to comprehend what is text discussing about. Consequently, by knowing about the structure of the text helps students to make predictions, draw inferences, identify main ideas and reach conclusions during reading. Students recognize the important ideas more easily when they understand the patterns that authors use to organize text.

Critical Reading

Critical reading is a technique for discovering information and ideas within a text. It is identifying the various ways in which each text is unique product of a unique author. It is also recognizing not only what a text says, but also how the text portrays the subject matter. 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.

It can be inferred that critical reading generally refers to reading in a scholarly context, with an eye toward identifying a text or author's viewpoints, arguments, and evidence. It means evaluating what you have read using your knowledge as a scholar. Critical reading means being able to reflect on what a text says, what it describes and what it means by scrutinizing the style and structure of the writing, the language used as well as the content.

Consequently, a critical reader might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding. There are three steps or modes of analysis which are reflected in the types of critical reading; what a text says (restatement) what a text does (description/purpose) what a text means (interpretation). What a text says (restatement) talks about the same topic as the original text, What a text does (description) discusses aspects of the discussion itself and what a text means (interpretation) analyzes the text and asserts a meaning for the text as a whole.

A self-improving reader with critical reading skills discusses what he or she has read with others and listens to their points of view. They then might find that their interpretations reveal new dimensions to the subject, which broaden their way of thinking about it. This type of reader reflects these ideas when applying the information in new situations. Critical reading skill can also give

students the confidence to investigate new sources of information, such as reading books and material from the other sources that nobody has recommended, and learn about subjects that are not actually taught anywhere. These skills empower readers to forget their own way and to pursue studies determined by their own goals and objectives. They allow readers to use the knowledge they acquire through reading to help themselves.

Consequently, critical reading skills is essential to effective communication, problem solving, and analysis in the humanities, and, indeed, to any profession and field of study. To attain these abilities requires ongoing practice and critical review by peers, mentors, and perhaps most importantly, yourself. In any event, the same fundamental principles will assist how to create tighter, better reasoned, and more compelling analyses and arguments.

The important of critical reading

Beginning readers often rely on skilled readers to guide them through a text. However, as readers develop, they will be able to monitor their own reading comprehension. Students can actively guide their own reading by targeting comprehension problems as they occur. Students can troubleshoot comprehension problems by recalling what they read, asking themselves questions or evaluating the text. Students can also actively respond to a text more efficiently when they possess critical thinking skills. As students read, they can determine the main idea and supporting details, the sequence of events and the overall structure of the text. Students will

also be able to identify literary devices and their effect on the text. Having critical reading skills help to deepen a student's comprehension of a text, resulting in a positive reading experience.

Similarly, the students with critical reading skills have the ability to evaluate the credibility of a piece of writing. All writers have a purpose when they write, and usually a writer will choose or emphasize facts and details which support his or her purpose, and ignore facts which don't. As readers make sense of what they read, they use various relationships of ideas to aid recognition and fluency. Critical reading includes the ability to evaluate ideas and synthesize what one reads. They are the ability to see relationships of ideas and use them as an aid in reading. A reader who is constantly looking for new information and inspiration encounters a text with an open mind, but at the same time questions the purpose and content of the text by testing it against his or her previous knowledge and experience. In addition, a critical reader is also trying to discover the hidden message in the text and to find out how the information in the text accords with his or her opinions, values and objectives.

Therefore, by having critical reading skills, a person can read fluently, smoothly and expressively at speeds approaching regular speech. The active vocabulary of an average person is about 1,000 words (National Reading Panel). Most people can recognize around 5,000 words. Many adults have a strong sense that their vocabulary can be improved. In

doing so, it would likely have a positive impact on their reading skills. The secret to reading well is the ability to comprehend and extract the appropriate meaning and relevance of what is being read. Comprehension depends on the complexity of the text, and the sophistication of vocabulary.

Strategies in Implementing Critical Reading

Students who have limited exposure to effective comprehension strategies will likely experience a reading as such bored activity. For most students, it is imperative that teachers provide strategy instruction by modeling, demonstrating, and explaining. Students then need to apply these strategies through much shared, guided, and independent reading. "Surprisingly, many of the studies that examined the thinking of proficient readers pointed to only seven or eight thinking strategies used consistently by proficient readers. Even more surprisingly, the researchers described the same seven or eight strategies in their findings," (Keene, 1997). The teacher can introduce the strategies in implementing critical reading that include monitoring comprehension, understanding text structure, predicting, generating question questions, answering questions, using mental image (visualizing), and summarizing.

Monitoring comprehension means that the students determine how well they are making sense of the text and what to do when their comprehension breaks down. Often, the students do not realize where or when they do not understand. They just keep reading.

Students need to know that reading must always make sense. When comprehension breaks down, it is important to use appropriate fix-up strategies. Students need to determine if a word has been incorrectly decoded or if a word or sentence has been misunderstood given the context. They also need to review whether they understand how the text is organized. Loss of interest or concentration also affects comprehension. In addition, to become successful, proficient readers, students need to be exposed to, and learn about, a variety of text formats. Different kinds of texts are organized in different ways. The students have to know that the story will have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will have at least one problem and solution and will involve one or more characters. The students should know about setting, plot, and main idea.

The next strategy is Using Prior Knowledge/Predicting. Predicting happens before, during, and after reading. Students use information from their own knowledge base to make sense of what they're reading. This base includes personal knowledge, knowledge of reading, and world knowledge. By making connections with what they already know, students are better able to understand new ideas and information presented in a text. Since students' life experiences are diverse, all students bring their own ideas to the text being read. This diversity of backgrounds accounts for differences in students' understanding of the same text. Each reader "personalizes" the text.

Furthermore, generating questions change reading from a passive to an active pursuit. Generating or asking questions about a text helps students clarify their thinking and better understand what they are reading. Effective readers are always asking themselves questions; less effective readers rarely question. Questioning can occur before, during, and after reading. The kind of questions asked often depends on the genre of the text. Readers ask questions to clarify meaning, speculate about text, determine an author's style, intent, content, or format, locate a specific answer in the text, and consider rhetorical questions inspired by the text (Eskey and Grabe, 1988).

Similarly, Students benefit from responding to questions that they, their peers, or the teacher generates before, occasionally during, and after they read. Thinking about answers and listening to others explain their answers help students understand the text. It is important for students to not only be asked questions, but also to be taught how to find the answers. When higher-order responses are required, students learn to pay attention to more than just factual details.

In addition, visualizing refers to the mind's capacity to imagine what is being suggested by the words on a page." By visualizing, or making mental images, students are able to relate what they are reading (abstract) to something concrete—a visual image, a feeling, a sound, a smell, or a taste. This ability to "image" helps anchor new ideas in the students' minds and enables them to

recall the ideas in a visual way when appropriate.

The last strategy in critical reading is summarizing. It is important strategies for developing student comprehension and oral language proficiency. When students summarize, they identify what is important from what they have read, relate what they have read to their personal experiences. A summary provides the gist or essence of what has been read or heard, and may consist of only a sentence or two. Summarizing helps students to improve their grasp of the main idea, an important skill in comprehension, but it may also include making references to personal experiences or other texts. Summarizing also incorporates students' ability to infer. When students infer, they go beyond the literal meaning to what is implied. They use their own experiences and background knowledge to help them make sense of, and gain deeper insights into, the text. Readers might make inferences about the deeper, underlying meaning of a text character's emotions and feelings, the significance of various events, and lessons that the author may be trying to teach.

Futhermore, Lindsay, (2006) define active learning as learning environments that allow "students to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content through problem-solving exercises, informal small groups, simulations, case studies, role playing, and other activities - all of which require students to apply what they are learning".

C. Conclusion

Many studies show that learning is enhanced when students become actively involved in the learning process. Instructional strategies that engage students in the learning process stimulate critical thinking and a greater awareness of other perspectives. Although there are times when lecturing is the most appropriate method for disseminating information, current thinking in college teaching and learning suggests that the use of a variety of instructional strategies can positively enhance student learning. Obviously, teaching strategies should be carefully matched to the teaching objectives of a particular lesson.

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