

Developing Critical Reading Skills of the Undergraduate Students through Working in Groups

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ABSTRACT

Most of the reading comprehension tasks which are found in our school textbooks deal with facts. The majority of these are in the form of true or false items, multiple choice statements and vocabulary type tasks, leaving little room for inferential and evaluative type of comprehension. Surprisingly, even after being exposed to (10+2 years) of learning English, course-books prescribed for the undergraduate students of Osmania University still deal with the factual level of comprehension. Consequently, even after graduation, students still find it difficult to write exams such as CAT, GRE and GMAT, because these exams have comprehension tasks based on critical and evaluative reading skills. A pilot study proved that the learners had little practice with critical reading skills. The present paper aims to address this issue by teaching critical reading skills using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) approach. This theory highlights the benefits of working in small groups where at least one student can communicate effectively in the language and assist in learning development. Therefore, this paper primarily explores the feasibility of Working in groups i.e. classroom discussions, peer discussions and student-teacher discussions and their impact on the development of critical reading skills of the undergraduate students.

Keywords: Critical Reading skills, Undergraduates, ZPD, Working in groups.

Introduction:

'Reading' as a literary skill has been a significant cultural and social practice ever since the modern era witnessed the explosion of print technologies. Most of the population in the world can read and "a little more than 80% of the world's population can read to some extent" (Elley, 2001; Tucker, 2007; Grabe, 2009, p.4) in their formal and informal settings. In non-academic contexts, we often read to seek information or for pleasure, aiming to understand the content broadly rather than remember specific details. However, this kind of proposition is distinct from the following six different purposes of "reading" especially in an academic setting: (Grabe, 2002, 2009, p.7).

- 1) Reading to search for information (Skimming and Scanning)
- 2) Reading to learn from texts
- 3) Reading to integrate information
- 4) Reading for general comprehension
- 5) Reading to write or searching for information that is needed for writing
- 6) Reading to evaluate, critique, and use information

Initially, an individual cannot voluntarily bring around the ideas and meanings associated with the book in his/ her first contact with the text. But, the real significance lies in "skillful reading" developed through repeated interactions with

texts. It cannot be denied that citizens of the modern society are expected to be accomplished readers to be successful. Grabe (2009) emphasizes in a similar tone that “reading skills do not guarantee success for anyone, but success is much harder to come by without being a skilled reader” (p.5). These six purposes of reading are fulfilled through a better comprehension of a text.

F. SusarKirmizi, (2011) defines reading comprehension as an act of thinking and constructing meaning before, during and after reading by integrating the information processed by the author with the reader’s background knowledge. This process is crucial for achieving the deeper understanding which is a predominant feature for academic success.

Literature Review:

Critical reading is fundamental to reading comprehension, providing a platform for readers to think independently and engage actively with texts. It equips learners to resist propaganda, make judgments, and set standards, enhancing overall reading skills. Despite its importance, critical reading skills receive hardly any attention at the primary and secondary levels, where most reading comprehension tasks consist of multiple-choice items, true-false statements, and vocabulary tasks (Rosane Correia, 2006). While these exercises help teachers check superficial understanding, they do not foster opportunities for students to read between the lines or question the reliability of the information (Tomitch, 2000, as cited in Rosane Correia, 2006).

Many researchers believe that children naturally develop critical reading abilities as they grow older, leading to the encouragement of passive reading behaviors, such as silent reading for multiple-choice exercises and superficial comprehension questions (Davies, 1995, as cited

in Rosane Correia, 2006, p.16). However, this view has been challenged by experts who argue that critical reading and thinking skills must be explicitly taught, emphasizing the responsibility of schools to cultivate these skills (Stauffer, 1977; Cioffi, 1989). At primary and secondary levels, texts focus on literal comprehension, training students to consume and reproduce information without questioning it (Rastogi, 1995). As a result, even college students rarely challenge textbooks, verify facts using supplementary sources, or organize material from various sources, relying heavily on textbooks as their primary resource (John S. Debor, 1946).

Scholarship on Critical Reading:

Scholarship on critical reading in SLA describes critical reading in the following way: Critical reading includes a wide range of reading abilities such as the skills of questioning, making inferences and drawing conclusions, identifying emotional appeals, biases and personal prejudices, distinguishing fact from opinion, predicting outcomes, comparing and contrasting information, recognizing intent, attitude and tone, and detecting faulty logic and determining whether to accept or reject the information. (Priozi, 2003), John J. Deboer (1946), (Hafnor, 1974, as cited in Hujji, 2010), Loni Kreis Tagliber (2003) and (Schwegler, 2004, as cited in Hujji, 2010).

Scholarship Critical Reading in SLA:

Critical reading gained importance in Western education from the mid-20th century, as teachers sought to develop students’ abilities to scrutinize the growing volume of information (Altick, 1951, as cited in Macknish, 2011). However, opinions on incorporating critical reading skills in ESL classes vary. Some literature suggests that English language learners (ELLs) have limited capacity for criticality due to different educational

backgrounds and cultural contexts, as well as a lack of confidence in using the language (Richards and Skelton, 1991 and Meldrum, 2000, as cited in Macknish, Cynthia Jean. 2011). This implies that teaching critical reading to non-native thinkers might be challenging (Atkinson, 1997).

Contrarily, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) argue that Chinese students' lack of critical responses stems from their educational focus rather than inherent inability. Sengupta (2002) supports this, suggesting that exposure to critical reading skills can enhance ELLs' critical responses, regardless of cultural familiarity. Wallace (2003) highlights the barriers to critical reading discussions for ELLs, such as limited class time, large class sizes, and curriculum focus on linguistic structures.

Wallace (2003) also argues that critical reading can be taught and is not tied to innate linguistic competence but is socially and educationally learned. She observed that when teachers value and encourage critical reading, students demonstrate these skills. Wallace's study of ELLs in the UK found that both language awareness and critical reading can develop together, with analytic reading and critical discussions providing learning opportunities. Thus, teachers can simultaneously enhance language proficiency and critical reading skills.

Methodology:

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in this study. Data were collected from students and teachers through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, pre- and post-tests and informal discussions.

Sample:

The selection sample [twenty six students (male

and female)] was done randomly as this method eliminated bias by giving people equal chances. They hail from a reputed government degree college (Nizam College) in Hyderabad and speak Telugu as their first language.

Research tools: The following are the tools used for the study:

- Classroom observation:
- Pilot study & Pre-test:
- Semi structured interviews
- Post-test

The intervention process:

A pilot study assessed the factual and critical reading abilities of the target group. Based on its findings, a pre-test, focusing on critical reading skills, was administered using material from "College Board, the Official SAT Guide."

The teaching intervention was carried out for twenty hours in order to teach the identified skills from the Pilot study and the pre-test. It was concluded from the preliminary study (Pilot study and Pre-Test) that the students required instruction with respect to the following critical reading skills.

Code Particulars Skill

| | | |
|----|---------|--|
| L1 | Lesson1 | Identifying the main idea |
| L2 | Lesson2 | Identifying the tone |
| L3 | Lesson3 | Identifying the purpose |
| L4 | Lesson4 | Vocabulary-in-context |
| L5 | Lesson5 | Identifying the underlying assumptions |

Rationale for the sequence of skills:

The rationale for the sequence of skills has come primarily from the two renowned theories. They are: a) Blooms Taxonomy b) Stephen Krashen’s Natural Order Hypothesis.

Major findings:

- Through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students, and informal discussions with teachers, the researcher successfully identified that the

students were unaware of critical reading skills.

- The pilot study was conducted following informal discussions with teachers and students. One week later, the researcher administered the pilot test to a class of thirty-six students to ascertain their factual and critical reading abilities. The test revealed that students could answer factual questions but struggled with critical reading ones.

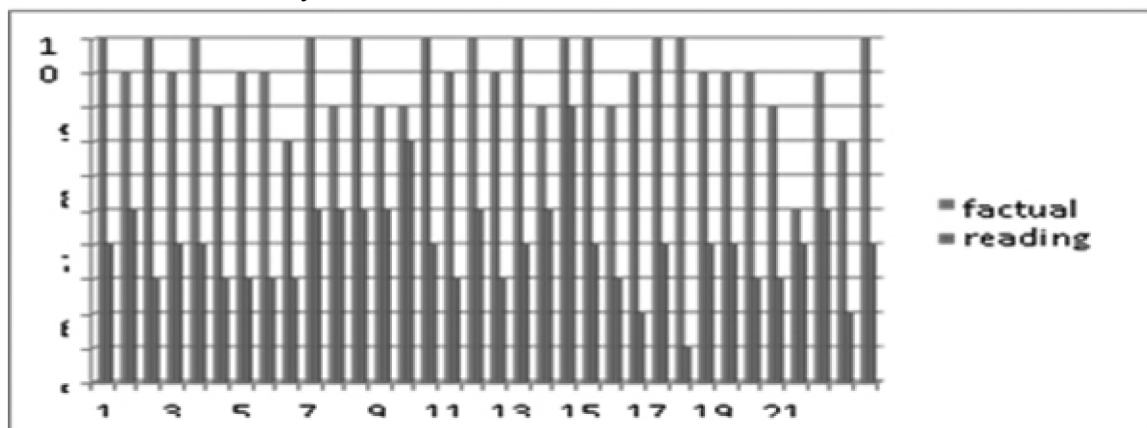


Figure 1: Factual and critical reading skills

- There is clear evidence from the quantitative analysis of the two tests that the subjects’ performance in Test I was very poor, whereas the subjects’ performance in Test II was better than the Test I. In terms of standard deviation, it was clear that the variation of performance of Test II was less than that of the Test I.

Findings from the pre and post-tests indicated significant improvement in student performance in the post-test, suggesting that the teaching intervention effectively improved their critical reading skills. This demonstrates that critical reading skills can indeed be developed through working in groups.

Figure 2. Pre and post-tests results

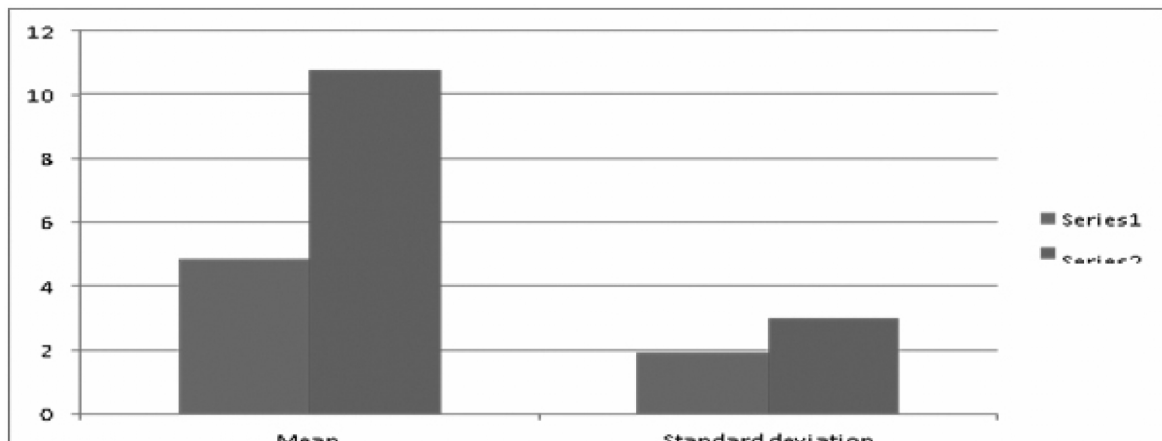


Figure 3. Mean and Standard deviation of pre-test and post-test

Limitations of the study:

This study is limited to students studying in English medium, in an autonomous college, affiliated to Osmania university; Telangana. It can also be done on a larger scale. Such studies can also be carried out in rural and regional medium colleges.

Conclusion:

It is a known fact that the contemporary world is information-driven. Therefore, the students should need to know how to explore, analyze, evaluate and synthesize information in order to make a survival in a rapidly changing world, which calls for the inclusion of critical reading skills in academics.

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