

A Review of Critical Reading in Second Language Learning: Perspectives, Challenges, and Strategies

Chiranjeevi Jakkani¹ & Konatam Venkat Reddy²

Abstract

This review explores various studies on critical reading, particularly in second language learning (SLL) contexts. The review tries to examine the key arguments regarding the challenges and possibilities of incorporating critical reading into ESL curricula, the factors influencing learners' critical engagement with texts, and strategies to enhance critical reading skills. The studies reviewed emphasise the significance of cultural background, language proficiency, and instructional approaches in developing critical reading skills. Various pedagogical methods, including socio-constructivist approaches, cognitive dissonance, and cooperative learning, are examined as potential avenues for developing critical reading skills. The findings suggest that while challenges exist, critical reading can be effectively nurtured through structured instruction and exposure to critical discourse practices.

Keywords: Critical Reading; ESL Curricula; Second Language Learning (SLL)

INTRODUCTION

Critical reading goes beyond basic comprehension by engaging readers in active interpretation, evaluation, and analysis of texts. It enables individuals to resist propaganda, identify biases, and assess the reliability of information. However, in many educational contexts, critical reading skills receive little attention, resulting in passive reading habits among students.

The State of Critical Reading in Education

Traditional reading instruction at the primary and secondary levels emphasises multiple-choice questions, true-false statements, and vocabulary exercises. While these methods assess comprehension, they fail to cultivate deeper analytical skills. Scholars argue that critical reading should be explicitly taught rather than assumed to develop naturally as students progress through their education (Cioffi, 1992).

Many students enter higher education with limited ability to question sources, evaluate arguments, or synthesise information. The reliance on textbooks as authoritative sources discourages independent inquiry, reinforcing passive reading behaviours (Deboer, 1946). The Ministry of Education (1985) further emphasises the consequences of this educational gap, noting

deficiencies in self-study skills, communication abilities, and critical awareness among graduates.

Definitions of Critical Reading



Several scholars have provided definitions that outline the components of critical reading:

- Priozzi (2003) defines it as a higher-level comprehension process requiring interpretation and evaluation.
- Harris & Hodges (1981) describe it as the application of logical analysis and inference to judge the worth of a text.
- Wallace (2003) views critical reading as a social and interpretive process rather than a mere skill.
- Hickey (1988) emphasises that critical readers must actively engage with texts, suspending judgment until a thorough analysis is conducted.
- Deboer (1946) highlights scepticism and the ability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information as key aspects of critical reading.

Sub-Skills of Critical Reading

Based on scholarly definitions, critical reading involves several sub-skills, including:

- Evaluating source credibility.
- Distinguishing facts from opinions.

¹ Assistant Professor, Professor Jayashankar Telangana Agricultural University, Hyderabad, Telangana.  0009-0001-8266-8113  chiranjeevijakkani604@gmail.com

² Professor, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, Telangana.  venkatciefl@gmail.com

- Identifying biases, emotional appeals, and propaganda.
- Recognising logical fallacies.
- Understanding an author's intent, tone, and perspective.
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions based on evidence.
- Comparing and contrasting information across multiple sources.

Importance of Developing Critical Reading Skills

Developing critical reading skills is essential for fostering independent thought, enhancing academic performance, and preparing students for informed citizenship. As Hafnor (1974) suggests, discussing texts and questioning content can significantly improve students' analytical abilities. Similarly, Adams (1989) describes critical reading as a high-level cognitive process that requires careful evaluation and synthesis of information.

Critical Reading in Second Language Learning (SLL)

Critical reading has been a significant component of Western education since the mid-20th century (Altick, 1951, as cited in Macknish, 2011). However, its incorporation into ESL reading classes has been met with varying opinions. Scholars such as Richards and Skelton (1991) and Meldrum (1998) argue that English language learners (ELLs) exhibit lower levels of criticality due to cultural and educational background differences. Similarly, Atkinson (1999) posits that critical thinking cannot be taught to non-native thinkers. In contrast, Jin and Cortazzi (2006) and Sengupta (2002) suggest that exposure to critical reading practices can enhance ELLs' ability to engage critically with texts, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background.

Barriers to Critical Reading in ESL Classrooms

Wallace (2003) highlights several barriers to critical reading in ESL classrooms, including time constraints, large class sizes, and a lack of emphasis on critical reading in the curriculum. Additionally, some students may be reluctant to question authority due to cultural norms. However, Wallace argues that critical reading is not solely dependent on linguistic competence but is a socially and educationally learned skill. Her research with ELLs in the United Kingdom suggests that simultaneous development of language proficiency and critical reading is

possible when students engage in analytic reading and critical discussions.

STUDIES ON TEACHING CRITICAL READING

Critical Reading in ESL Contexts

Macknish (2011) conducted a study in Singapore with Chinese ESL students and found that a lack of attention to critical reading in their curriculum, combined with culturally ingrained prescribed responses, hindered their ability to engage critically with texts. However, when provided with scaffolding and opportunities for practice, students demonstrated an improved capacity for critical reading.

Similarly, Thistlethwaite (1990) examined at-risk students who tended to accept printed text as absolute fact. He proposed a series of activities—including analysing advertisements, emotional language in editorials, and conflicting viewpoints—to encourage critical engagement with texts. His findings suggest that at-risk students can develop critical reading skills when taught appropriate strategies.

Evaluating ESL Textbooks for Critical Reading

A study conducted by Zabihi (2011) assessed undergraduate reading textbooks in Iranian universities, analysing their ability to promote critical reading. His study developed three evaluation criteria: inclusion of critical thinking items, use of appropriate tasks, and strategic instruction. The findings revealed that while textbooks met the first criterion to some extent, they largely lacked task-based instruction and strategic instruction, which are essential for developing critical reading skills.

Critical Reading in Early Education

Hickey's (1988) research on primary school students suggests that critical reading skills can be taught at an early age. Using readiness activities and WH-questions, the study concluded that children in grades K-3 could develop analytical thinking skills (Turner, 1988). The research aligns with McCullough's (1957) findings that grade level correlates with success in making inferences and drawing conclusions.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING CRITICAL READING

Cognitive Dissonance and Critical Reading

Franger and Thompson argue (1985) that conflict is a key component in fostering critical reading

skills. Their research is based on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which posits that psychological discomfort caused by conflicting ideas prompts individuals to resolve inconsistencies, thereby activating critical thinking processes. Their inductive approach to teaching includes:

- Asking students to read conflicting accounts of the same topic.
- Increasing cognitive dissonance.
- Providing additional reading where their dissonance is replaced by the feeling of consonance.

Similarly, Cioffi (1992) supports the idea that discrepant accounts of events, whether factual or fictional, provide students with a basis for developing critical reading skills.

Internet and Critical Reading

Joel Walz (2001) argues that with the increasing amount of information available on the internet, students are expected to distinguish between a slanted point of view and an objective point of view. Therefore, he insists the internet is a good place to learn to practice critical reading skills.

Cooperative Learning and Critical Reading

Flynn (1989), in their study, argued that critical reading in the language classroom can be developed with the help of co-operative problem-solving activities and classroom discussions. Similarly, another study conducted by Correia (2006) with Brazilian students also concluded that students will become active critical readers if they are taught critical reading in the EFL classroom.

The Impact of Critical Reading Strategies on Language Learning

A study conducted by M.Khabiri & M.Pakzad with intermediate students from Tehran noted that teaching critical reading strategies was believed to have a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention. He divided them into two groups: an experimental group (Students who are taught critical reading strategies) and a control group (students who are not taught critical reading strategies). After providing 19 instructional sessions, they concluded that teaching critical reading strategies has a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention.

Similarly, another study conducted by Li (2010) offered a four-level hierarchical framework for

assessing critical reading skills. It comprises structural analysis, rhetorical analysis, social relevance, and holistic evaluation. His research concluded that a structured approach helps us evaluate the critical reading proficiency of the learners.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed show that critical reading is a skill that can be taught and developed across different age groups and learning environments. While factors like language proficiency and cultural background shape how students engage with critical reading, structured instruction, scaffolding, and regular exposure to analytical discussions help students develop these skills. Challenges such as time constraints, curriculum limitations, and students' hesitation to question authority can be addressed through specific teaching strategies such as encouraging debates, using collaborative learning and integrating online resources. In sum, incorporating critical reading into an ESL program not only improves language skills but also strengthens analytical thinking, helping students to navigate both academic and real-world situations.

REFERENCES

- Adams, M.J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
- Atkinson, D. (1999). TESOL and culture. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(4), 626-654.
- Cioffi, G. (1992). Perspective and experience: Developing critical reading abilities. *Journal of Reading*, 36(1), 48-52.
- Correia, R. (2006). Encouraging critical reading in the EFL classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 1, 16-19. https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/forum_rosane_correia_0.pdf
- Deboer, J. J. (1946). Teaching critical reading. *The Elementary English Review*, 23(6), 251-254.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Flynn, L. L. (1989). Developing critical reading skills through cooperative problem solving. *The Reading Teacher*, 42(9), 667-668.
- Frager, A.M., & Thompson, L.C. (1985). Conflict: The key to critical reading instruction. *Journal of Reading*, 28(8), 676-683.
- Hafner, L.E. (1974). *Improving reading in middle and secondary schools* (2nd ed.). Macmillan.
- Harris, T.L., & Hodges, R.E. (Eds). (1981). *A dictionary of reading and related terms*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hickey, M. G. (1988). Developing critical reading readiness in primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 41(2), 192-193

- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2006). Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 5–20.
- Khabiri, M., & Pakzad, M. (2012). The effect of teaching critical reading strategies on EFL learners' vocabulary retention. *The Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, 4(1), 73–101.
- Li, H. (2010). Developing a hierarchical framework of critical reading proficiency. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 33, 40–54.
- Macknish, Cynthia Jean. (2011). Understanding critical reading in an ESL class in Singapore. *TESOL Journal*, 2(4), 444–472.
- McCullough, C.M. (1957). Comprehension skills: Hierarchy or continuum? *The Reading Teacher*, 10(5), 217–223.
- Meldrum, M., & Atkinson, S. (1998). Meta-abilities and the implementation of strategy. *Journal of Management Development*, 17(8), 564–575.
- Pirozzi, R. (2003). *Critical reading, critical thinking* (2nd Ed.). Longman.
- Richards, K., & Skelton, J. (1991). How critical can you get? In P. Adams, B. Heaton, & P. Howarth (Eds.), *Socio-cultural issues in English for Academic Purposes* (pp. 39–51). Modern English Publications in association with the British Council.
- Sengupta, S. (2002). Developing academic reading at tertiary level: Longitudinal study tracing conceptual change. *Reading Matrix*, 2(1), 1–37.
- Thistlethwaite, L. L. (1990) Critical reading for at-risk students. *Journal of Reading*, 33(8), 586–593.
- Turner, T.N. (1988). Higher levels of comprehension: inference, critical reading, and creative reading. In E.A. Alexander (Ed.), *Teaching reading* (3rd ed., pp. 184–214). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Wallace, C. (2003). *Critical reading in language education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walz, J. (2001) Critical reading and the internet. *The French Review*, 74(6), 1193–1205.
- Zabihi, R., & Pordel, M. (2011). An investigation of critical reading in reading textbooks: A qualitative analysis. *International Education Studies*, 4(3), 80–87.