Title: Critical reading skills: Some notes for teachers
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INTRODUCTION

While the importance of incorporating critical reading and thinking have been acknowledged by educationists and classroom teachers, little research has been conducted to discover the nature and the skills or subskills underlying this ability. Teachers need to know what critical reading is and the skills which constitute critical reading ability before they can teach or enhance those skills in their students. This article describes the subskills which have been identified for critical reading by different researchers and the implications for teaching the more complex skills.

WHAT IS CRITICAL READING?

Critical reading is normally defined as the ability to obtain a level of interpretation higher than that needed for literal interpretation, Smith (1982) for example, placed it at the highest level beyond the literal as well as the interpretative level of comprehension in his hierarchy of reading skills. According to him literal reading, that is the understanding of the denotation of words, ideas, or sentences in context, was the lowest; then comes interpretative reading, which is obtaining deeper meanings not directly stated in the text, and, finally, critical reading, the highest level, which includes skills such as evaluating the quality, value, accuracy, and the truthfulness of what is read.

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE READING

There is confusion about defining what skills are involved in critical reading and creative reading comprehension, although most reading theorists contend that they are at the highest levels in the hierarchy of reading skills if there is any hierarchy at all (Turner 1988). Some explanation to address this confusion is indirectly provided by Cunningham (1987) who advanced a useful distinction between the ‘process’ of discourse comprehension and the ‘product’ of comprehension. While both the process and the product of comprehension involve the use of prior knowledge, he asserted that it is the product of comprehension, that is, what is retained in semantic memory, that may be described as literal, inferential and creative depending on the mixture of textual and schematic elements which make them up. These distinctions, he added, are not distinct levels of comprehension, but are levels for overlapping areas on a continuum between the purely textual or literal and the purely schematic or creative.

According to Cunningham (1987), literal comprehension products are simply those products that have deep structure equivalents in the text. A literal product of discourse processing would be one that, if it could be compared to the text, would be synonymous in meaning to part of it. Cunningham argued that inferential comprehension products are those that contain a mixture of textual and schematic elements. They lack deep structure equivalents or equivalence in the text,
neither deny nor ignore any part of the text and complete or extend the text consistent with the comprehender's expectation, purposes for comprehending, or knowledge. Therefore, inferential comprehension products that consist almost entirely of schematic elements are termed creative response. This term could be a level by itself or a sub-level of inferential comprehension. Critical reading, here is synonymous with creative reading, as to a large extent the process of inferring also involves critical evaluation.

CRITICAL READING AS A PROCESS OF READING COMPREHENSION

Seen as a product of comprehension, critical reading is a state where the reader, bringing his background knowledge and experience, is able to uncover the implicit meaning of the written word, and motive of the writer. This state of comprehension has been described by Smith (1982) as a condition where no uncertainty exists, that is when we have no unanswered questions. In other words, a critical reader has achieved the state of critical comprehension when he or she is satisfied that the inferences or meaning obtained from reading is consistent with his or her own interpretation, when all contradictions are resolved.

As a process of achieving comprehension, reading critically means actively working out the meaning of the text as it should be intended by the author or as what seems to be true to him. The reader not only engages actively as a responder to the text but also reflects on and contributes his or her own past experiences and pre-existing world knowledge in the process. Critical reading then can be seen as a process of communicating with the author and the texts before any judgment on the validity or the veracity of the text is arrived at. Hence the ability to read critically entails the ability to recognize, comprehend, apply, analyse, synthesize and evaluate written texts in an open-minded, logical and rational manner.

LOCAL RESEARCH ON CORE CRITICAL READING SKILLS

Besides understanding what critical reading entails, teachers need to know what skills or subskills are involved in critical reading. Many researchers such as Worden (1981) who tried to extract critical reading skills as separate from general reading ability failed to find a clear distinction between the two constructs. In a more recent study on the critical reading ability of Singaporean Malay pupils (Abdullah 1994), a clearer picture of the skills underlying critical reading and thinking abilities was obtained.

The main objective of the study was to identify the set of skills, apart from reading comprehension skills, which can be safely categorized as critical reading skills. Through students' responses on test items pertaining to the skill, information on their strengths and weaknesses on these skills were obtained and subsequently utilized for planning appropriate lessons to enhance these critical skills.

The sample utilized for the study comprised of 1444 Secondary 1 to 5 Malay pupils in the Express as well as the Normal stream. A standardized test called the Malay Language Critical Reading Test (MLCRT) was designed and revised before evidence of the core skills underlying critical reading ability in the Malay language, obtained...
through statistical analysis, was proposed. The final test consisted of 65 items subsumed under nine critical reading subskills.

The nine core critical reading subskills identified are listed below according to their difficulty levels, sequenced from the easiest to the most difficult. They are the ability to:

- identify similarities and differences,
- evaluate inductive inferences,
- identify facts and opinions,
- evaluate generalisations,
- evaluate strengths of arguments,
- identify biased statements,
- identify relevant and irrelevant materials,
- identify author's motives, and
- recognise hidden assumptions.

RESULTS

In the study, it was found that the Malay pupils displayed a range of skills in critical reading abilities and among the nine subskills found some more difficult than others. Significantly larger number of pupils in the various grade levels found questions on recognizing hidden assumptions, identifying the author's motives, identifying biased statements and evaluating the strengths of arguments difficult to handle. The easier subskills were identifying similarities and differences, evaluating inductive inferences and identifying facts and opinions.

Subsequently, in a later study, an English version of the critical reading test was administered to another group of Secondary 1 and Secondary 3 Singaporean pupils, the majority of whom were Chinese. (Abdullah and Lim, 1995). Generally the same pattern of responses with regard to the difficulty level of the critical reading skills was obtained. Interestingly it was found that the ability to recognize hidden assumptions in statements proved the most difficult skill to acquire in both studies. This shows that whether the language of the test is in English or Malay the same or similar underlying construct is functioning.

CONCLUSION

The above two local studies show that while some of the critical reading skills may be easy to acquire, certain other skills such as analysing hidden assumptions need to be taught in our classrooms, through either language or literature lessons, or in other subject areas where reading is required. The beneficial effect of critical reading instruction as a key element in enhancing critical reading and thinking skills should be recognized. There is no doubt that teachers, specifically their questioning techniques, play a significant part in the training process. They need to create a more accepting and open environment where students are able to share their critical thoughts. Teachers themselves should be good models of critical thinkers; they should accept criticism graciously and objectively, assess situations rationally and above all avoid making any hasty judgements.

Sam Cheah
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

With reference to the above studies, these are some suggestions for teachers to use in order to develop the following critical reading subskills:

1. **Recognizing hidden assumptions.**
   Train students to list the assumptions or opinions not explicitly stated, for example in the statement: "Mr. Marzuki, a lawyer of high moral character, would not have committed the burglary" teachers can pose questions such as "What is the hidden assumption of the author in writing the statement? Would Mr. Marzuki have committed the burglary if he was not a lawyer? Would a lawyer commit such a burglary? What are people's expectations of a lawyer?"

2. **Identifying author's motive**
   Promote awareness and discussion of the author's motive in writing as authors use a variety of styles and expressions to convey meanings. Pose questions such as, "What is the author's intention in saying it? What is he trying to promote? Why is he saying it in such a way?"

3. **Identifying biased statements**
   Expose students to biased statements of different sorts including positive and negative biases. For example, let them identify the party who the bias is directed at in the following sentence: "as expected, the armed robbery had been committed by three young Malay males who sported long hair".

4. **Evaluate the strength of arguments**
   Give students exercises where they have to sift through information, give reasons and weigh evidence before they can arrive at a certain conclusion or point of view. Let them be aware of the criteria used in the evaluation.

5. **Identify sources of materials**
   Expose student to various types and genres of writing. Show them the unique style of writing and appropriateness of the style for the purpose of the written materials. Give them questions where they have to identify or guess the sources of the materials.
6. In general teachers should
- train students to get to the deeper meaning – to read between the lines and beyond the lines in any piece of writing.
- ask more higher-order questions in order to promote higher-order thinking.
- encourage students to ask questions.
- create a more open and conducive environment for stimulating critical thinking.

SOURCES


