

Critical Thinking and Reading Skill in an ESL Classroom at Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is a mental process that facilitates the formation of opinion over any matter of conflict. In brief, we can say that critical thinking accounts for such attributes as reasoning, comparing, determining, synthesizing, analyzing, judging etc. According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002) "Critical thinking is a level of reading comprehension or discussion skill when the learner is able to question and evaluate what is read or heard. In language teaching this is said to engage students more actively with materials in the target language, encourage deeper processing of it, and show respect for students as independent thinkers". Reading skill is the key to improving other aspects of language like grammar, spelling, pronunciation, passion for learning and advancing knowledge of the language. The purpose of this article is to reveal how to develop the critical thinking and reading skills of ESL students at the secondary level in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Critical, conflict, assimilated, attributes, synthesizing, encourage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is the key to improving other aspects of language like grammar, spelling, pronunciation, passion for learning and advancing knowledge of the language. It is marked by the tendency to find and call attention to errors and flaws in the presented material and can be applied in a variety of learning situations of language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Reading is an activity that involves two basic steps: the first is the interpretation of a written text and the second is comprehension or understanding of the text. Interpretation is just the decoding of encoded texts and comprehension is formed by the readers' background knowledge, purpose and method of reading. Critical thinking is based on observation, analysis, personal experience and experiments. Critical thinking also evaluates the meaning and makes decisions about the text presented in the classroom by the teacher. Thinking critically is the major goal and purpose of education because a critical mind thinks very differently from others. Critical thinking is not just gathering or recalling information from any source. Thinking critically entails an active and skillful process of conceptualization; it calls for the evaluation of gathered information by hypothesizing, applying, analyzing, and synthesizing the same. Readers' that is to say the learners' observation, experience, reflection, and reasoning play a very crucial role in critical thinking.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature has taken into account the works closely related to critical thinking and reading skills in

language classrooms. The researchers looked for a method that would be helpful to design and cultivate the reading abilities of learners. Teachers would take the duty of modeling the obligation that may be instilled in students not to merely engage with a language but also to build critical thinking around the subjectivity of communication through that language.

The concept of critical thinking in reading skills has influenced the field of English Language Teaching in the last few decades. Critical thinking comes under the domain of metacognition. Critical thinking and metacognition are interrelated to each other. When an individual uses metacognition, critical thinking takes place. Critical thinking is a practice of logical and analytical thinking which is used for problem-solving and decision making. Facione (1992) defines the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension: he also stated that "the improvement in one is paralleled by improvement in other". Many educators and syllabus designers started incorporating critical thinking-based reading activities in the language teaching curriculum.

Jennifer Reed (1998) pointed out the broad concept of critical thinking that has brought forth different definitions and terminologies by scholars. Reed states that the lack of consensus on the definition of critical thinking and also its terminology has rested in the grounding of various theories and models in two distinct disciplines namely Philosophy and Psychology. Philosophers have focused on the nature and products of critical thinking, while Psychologists have concentrated on the process of cognition and seeking the conclusion in empirical research.

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Reading is one of the important keywords of this article. It requires some explanation before moving further toward critical thinking and reading skills. The practice of teaching reading has changed from time to time. Many transformations and reforms took place in reading pedagogy. Alexander and Fox (2004) make an attempt to arrange changes and development in the area of reading pedagogy.

Willingham (2007) says “critical thinking is a type of activity in which even three-year-olds can engage in and even trained scientists can fail in”. The major focus of this article was on the practice of critical thinking according to the learners’ background information. The teacher should work on both thinking and knowledge area for effective teaching of critical thinking.

Mansoor Fahim & Maryam Sa’ee pour’s research article “The Impact of Teaching Critical Thinking Skills on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners” published in 2011 presents an important discussion on the teaching of critical thinking with reference to EFL learners. This paper tries to explain the impact of critical thinking on reading comprehension. In this article, they try to answer two questions about the teaching of critical thinking – significance on reading comprehension and the role of debate in improving critical thinking ability. It is strongly believed that teaching thinking capabilities are vital for the development of language proficiency. However, enforcing critical thinking principles in the present study is still regarded as an innovative proposal to syllabus and material designers, instructors, college students and test developers. (Fahim. M & Sa’ee pour. M 2011)

Lotfollah Karimi & Farshad Veisi (2016) advocated the need and importance of critical thinking in reading comprehension. They also recognized the logical connection between critical thinking and reading skill. They stated “Critical thinking involved all learners in presenting their own ideas through accessing the prior knowledge and information. It fosters active learning through mental activity and spontaneous discussion in finding new opinions, ideas and views. By applying critical thinking skills in the classroom, students synergize their learning with that of their peers, and thus, enhance their current level of knowledge. They contextualize and organize their thought and reach group consensus”.

After reviewing the existing literature on critical thinking, this paper will meet up how to set learners in EFL classrooms to read to comprehend through critical study of texts. It further aims to put into practice critical thinking among teachers, learners, syllabus designers

and test developers. Henceforth, these researchers look for a critical thinking approach to teaching English appropriate for the secondary level learners of Bangladesh.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Reading is a very important cognitive and developmental process of comprehending a written linguistic text which ensures visual evaluation followed by comprehension. Gordon (1982) noted that there are three distinct sets of competencies that a student must develop in order to become an effective reader. These sets are reading skills development, reading comprehension, and reading research. Reading is not merely moving eyes over letters, words and sentences; it is, rather, the comprehension of the text. The reader comprehends the text as a whole with its central idea along with supporting details. It helps one to become an independent learner and a better conversationalist. Reading, nevertheless, improves learners’ wisdom, hence, it is advised to develop this skill in their early stages of learning.

Wallace (2006) identifies three personal reasons for reading: we read to survive (reading for survival), we read to learn (reading for learning), we read for pleasure (reading for pleasure), the reading process starts with identifications of sound symbols, then learning of word by joining the sounds. Reading plays a significant role in one’s life to grow morally, intellectually and spiritually. It connects a person both to the inner and outer world. One can understand the different facts of life through the habit of reading.

Reading is the most important inductive skill in an ESL classroom. It supports not only the learning of other skills but also helps in improving two major areas of language learning i.e., grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, critical thinking is a technique that activates learners’ minds. It challenges language learning abilities and makes them capable of having accurate comprehension. It is important in contemporary language pedagogy. The incorporation of critical thinking in the teaching language has been taken seriously by educators and other stakeholders. Reading has long been regarded as a very important skill for learning any language, and if critical thinking gets involved in reading, the reader not only comprehends but also can judge the authenticity and reliability of the text.

4. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The proposed study thus intends

- to highlight the use and need of critical thinking for reading skills in an ESL classroom
- to study the effects and limitations of critical thinking on reading skills in an ESL classroom.
- to trace the benefits of critical thinking on the reading skill of ESL learners.
- to investigate the possibility of teaching critical thinking for reading skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh.

5. TEACHING READING SKILL

A Language has four major skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All of these are interrelated to one another and are equally important for acquiring a language. We need to focus on all these skills and they must be taught in a language classroom with equal importance. Nowadays, we are blessed with the availability of text especially due to technological advancement, but earlier due to the lack of a textbook with students, teachers used to read aloud and students were supposed to repeat and memorize. Memorization and learning were the approaches usually followed by the teacher. It was the traditional teaching method when the teacher was supposed to be the torchbearer, knowledge giver; purist, and active speaker and his teachings were normally unquestionable. Learners' minds were considered as core plain slate and whatsoever was taught to them they learned without self-discovery and questioning. It is like pouring knowledge into an empty vessel and learning material was regarded as like knowledge carrier.

Communicative Language teaching marked a revolution in language teaching and it changed the whole system of pedagogy by adding new concepts while retaining the effective element of previous approaches. This approach focused on communicative competence and communicative performance of the learner. Students can actively participate in learning and teachers are supposed to act as facilitators or resource persons. In the class, the teacher plans different activities, viz., discussion, role play, dialogue, story development, task base activities and picture reading. These activities included grammatical, logical and cultural clues that stimulate learners' imagination. The teacher also uses multimedia tools that excite learners' minds for thinking. The main element of this approach is to make favorable situations for communication with the focus on language use with or without mistakes.

Reading helps a person to travel across cultures and nations. Those who read are conscious of the feelings, emotions, and sufferings of others. Reading gives huge confidence whenever one needs to speak on any topic. It is with the help of reading that a person can offer different solutions to the problems related to society. Reading plays a significant role for learners in their personality development as well as their career development. Reading sometimes becomes a crucial factor in relieving the stress of the students. It becomes a kind of great source of satisfaction and pleasure. Hence, it is important that reading should be developed among the students to inculcate their inner skills of creativity. It is with the help of reading that a person can teach the lessons of wisdom and knowledge to the whole of humanity. However, reading is a primary source of knowledge that enhances vocabulary and develops creativity and mental ability. When we read with meaning, it does not only improve our knowledge but also gives enjoyment. Nowadays, it becomes necessary to improve reading skills in order to pass academic tests too. Reading comprehension is part of many entrance tests that check ones' reading skills. Without effective strategies, a large number of students fail to understand the text. So, we need to follow strategies of reading to become effective readers and to apprehend the text to the full extent.

6. CRITICAL READING

Critical reading is an investigation and critique of the validity of arguments expressed in reading passages (Walz, 2001). Our world is full of differences among people. There are differences in faith, belief, fashion, food habit, language, culture, and tradition. It is a fact that people more or less are biased by their own faith, belief, fashion, food habit, language, culture, and traditions. The text that we read in our daily life has always some reflection of bias. Even people propagate false propaganda and distort facts to support their argument or reason. Not only ordinary texts but the religious texts are interpreted differently by scholars.

Critical reading is not an easy job. It requires intellectual independence and it demands a close examination of facts by keeping apart ones' own beliefs and emotions. Critical reading is a very active and well-reasoned activity in which readers read between the lines. In other words, reading beyond what is mentioned in the text. Reading between the lines refers to the historical, philosophical, psychological and scientific reasoning behind the argument in the text. The critical reader always recognizes the authors' purpose, checks beliefs and concepts, identifies authors' weaknesses and strengths, distinguishes facts and opinions, checks errors,

seeks evidence behind the argument, involves deep questioning, and detects error as well as biasedness.

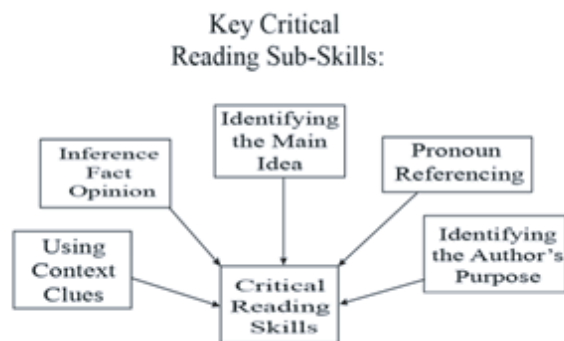


Fig. 1: Sub-Skills of Critical Reading

Retrieved from teaching critical reading skill-sneak to peek, www.youtube.com

7. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative, quantitative, and empirical in nature. It will provide researchers' analysis, observation, and views on the basis of data collected through a questionnaire that will be provided to the ESL learners on the possibilities of critical thinking on reading skills in an ESL classroom at the Secondary level in Bangladesh.

7.1 Data Collection

Above these, 15 questions were intended to test language skills in which importance, proficiency, difficulty, adoption, and critical thinking of language skills were asked. Four language skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills were given as options, and respondents were asked to rate (percentage) them according to their access to these skills. The survey was conducted in the year 2021. The process of data collection began with a short introduction about the aim of the survey and questionnaire. The respondents were made sure about the confidentiality of their responses. Instructions and some questions were explained orally to the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed among the students of different classes of secondary level schools in Bangladesh. One hundred questionnaires were distributed equally among male and female respondents.

7.2 Findings

The questionnaire had fourteen questions intended to identify how the critical thinking abilities of the learners apropos four skills of language use were explored in language classrooms. Four language skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing were given as options, and

respondents were asked to rate them in percentage as per their use in learning situations. The sample involved in the present study is 100 participants (students and teachers) from different schools at the secondary level in Bangladesh. The questionnaires were served among the students and teachers of the secondary level at different schools in Bangladesh. In the response to the first question, 100% of students said that they mostly used the Bengali language in the classroom. In response to question no. 2, 95% of respondents said that they mostly used to speak Bengali, and 5% of respondents said they mostly used to speak English in the classroom. In response to question no. 3, 45% of students said the classroom discussion was rarely conducted in English, 45% of students said sometimes the classroom discussion was conducted in English and 5% of respondents said the classroom discussion was often conducted in English. In response to question no. 4, 5% of students said always they read newspapers, magazines, and comics, 45% of students said sometimes they read newspapers, magazines, and comics, 35% of respondents said they rarely read newspapers, magazines, and comics, and 15% of participants said never they read newspapers, magazines, and comics. In response to the question no. 5, 10% of the students rated 'very good' to evaluate their proficiency ability in the English language while 36% of the students rated 'good' and 40% of them rated 'average' to mark their ability. On the same item 16% students said they were 'weak' in English language. In response to the question no. 6, 25% students said they were very in listening, 15% students said they were 'very good' in speaking, 40% students said they were 'very good' in reading and 20% students said their writing skill was 'very good'.

7, 52% of the students in affirmative to question no. 7. They found themselves proficient 'enough' to understand courses taught in English, 40% of them found themselves 'not enough' proficient to understand courses taught in English. 05% of students said they were proficient 'to some extent' to understand courses taught in English, and 03% of students said they were proficient 'enough' to understand courses taught in English. In response to the question no. 8, 10% of the students said listening skill was the most deficient in English, 55% of students said speaking skill was the most deficient in their English, 15% of the students said reading skill is the most deficient in their English, and 20% the students said writing skill is the most deficient. In response to question no. 9, 10% of students said listening skill was the most important than the others, 30% of the students said speaking skill was the most important in English, 20% of the students said reading skill was the most important in English, and 40% of the students said writing skill was the most important. In response to question no. 10, 10% of the teachers said

listening skill was the most important. 40% of the teachers said speaking skill was the most important skill while 20% said reading skill was the most important, and 30% of the teachers said writing skill was the most important for them.

In response to question no. 11, 10% of the students said listening skill showed a slower improvement in their learning. 55% of the students said their speaking skill improved more slowly than others. 15% of the students found reading skills improving most slowly, and 20% of the students found writing as the most slowly developing skill. In response to question no. 12, 30% of the students said they often adopted listening with ease, and 25% of the students said they often adopted speaking with ease. 35% of the students said the reading skill is the often adopted skill, and 10% of them said writing skill is the often adopted. In response to question no. 13, 56% of the students said that they had the idea of critical thinking and reading analytically, and 40% of them said they did not have any idea about critical thinking and critical reading. 04% of the students responded saying they were somewhat familiar with the concept of critical thinking and analytical reading, and none of them said that they had a greater extent of knowledge of critical thinking. In response to question no. 14, 40% of the students responded that listening skill would improve their critical thinking ability, 30% of the students responded speaking skill would improve their critical thinking ability, 20% of the students responded that reading skill would improve the critical thinking skill and 10% students responded writing skill would improve the critical thinking ability. In response to question no. 15, 10% of the students said that their teacher always trained them to think critically and read analytically in the classroom, 40% of the students mention that their teacher sometimes trained them to think critically and read analytically in the classroom, 30% students marked 'rarely' and 20% marked 'never' in response to the same question.

8. DISCUSSION

The article comprises of a pilot survey and a main study. After having pilot survey with some participants, the shortcomings in the research instruments have been modified. Main study provides question and statement specific statistical analysis and interpretation of questionnaire. Then, it enlisted the results, findings of the study, possibilities and challenges. Case study is important because it gives insight into the development of language proficiency specially reading skills and critical thinking abilities of the students in the second language classroom. Data and result can inform scholars, teachers, language experts and ESL syllabus designers to make

strategies for better pedagogy to develop critical thinking skills in reading. All learners and teachers are not identically adept even if they are in identical learning-teaching situations or settings; there are always differences in standards within the class or the setting. It is hard to find any class as purely homogeneous or identical. There is always some variance in knowledge, talent, aspiration, learning preference, and cognitive skills among learners. These researchers, nevertheless, had unspecific observations during this work: teachers faced the following challenges in their pedagogical efforts while focusing on critical thinking in the ESL classroom.

8.1 Conservative Educational Ideology

It is not easy for the teachers to break the traditions which are being followed for decades. The learners are generally reluctant to accept big challenges or new ideas in the teaching method. Though some learners are enthusiastic and welcome new ideas, teachers' gross response to any challenges, which is very crucial in critical thinking and creative reading, is negative. In an education system where grading or passing examination is on top priority, the learners normally want to do activities that just ensure getting good marks in examinations. Thus, they show reluctance to achieve conceptual, creative, and critical knowledge of the subject. The examination-oriented study leaves students with limited scopes for critical thinking and logical reasoning. In such a system, teachers also feel hesitant to come up with any new ideas which will not be much beneficial for upcoming examinations. They put little importance on developing critical thinking or creative activities of any sort.

8.2 Lack of Coordination

For developing critical thinking among learners there is a need for a positive environment and healthy communication between teacher(s) and learners in the classroom. Most often speech difficulty in the second language leads to poor communication and the learners avoid frequent questioning about lessons and prefer to be silent. When the class becomes silent, the teacher assumes that learners are already known about the lesson. So, it is necessary to be aware of the causes of learners' silence and reluctance to participate in interaction with others. Better coordination among parties involved in learning situations can remove the obstacles on their way to critical thinking and creative acting.

8.3 Challenges of Time Management:

In the light of the above-mentioned signs of a good critical thinker, it can be stated that these fundamentals of thought and reasoning emerge as a baseline in critical

thinking. It is beyond question that intellectual errors or mistakes cannot occur in any of these dimensions. Students need to be fluent in talking about these structures and standards. How one will arrive at it is an important question and needs a specific probing especially when the translation of the thought process becomes dependent. In this section, the attempt is made to map whether the critical thought process is language-dependent.

Independent of the subject studied, students need to be able to articulate thinking about thinking that reflects basic command of the intellectual dimensions of thought. These researchers find the following fundamental issues that learners need to apprehend to be adapted in critical thinking and critical reading:

- What viewpoint one should have to approach the problem
- How to make sensible assumptions
- How to infer the required information from data
- How to analyze the graph
- How to know the fundamental concept
- What makes the question complex
- How to check the accuracy of data
- How to figure out a credible source of information etc.

With such intellectual language being foregrounded, students can now be taught at least minimal critical thinking which moves irrespective of the subject field. There is no reason in principle that students cannot take the basic tools of critical thought that they learn in one domain of study and extend it to all the other domains. For example, having questioned the wording of a problem in mathematics, one is more likely to question the wording of a problem in the other subjects which he studies. The responsibility of teachers or the educational system lies in designing classes in such a manner that will help students learn to think historically and develop skills and abilities essential to historical thought. Mathematics can be taught so that emphasis is put on mathematical reasoning. Similar can be the case with geography, economics, biology, chemistry, physics, and all other disciplines. Questions of critical thinking are more structure-dependent than discipline-dependent.

English as a medium of instruction does not come naturally to students. It offers a fundamental barrier to thinking especially critical thinking per se. However, to assume such a formulation is not beyond problems. Although thinking is language-dependent and critical thinking itself alleviates language dependency, once developed in any language, it can be applied to any medium of instruction. Critical reasoning is related to thinking through its structures which flow in the student's

attitude, and behavior which they have acquired in their learning process. The acquisition of language that is used in the classroom is very important for effective critical thinking.

9. CONCLUSION

Critical thinking helps learners in every aspect of life, inside and outside of the classroom. It makes learners' minds prepared to think differently and they come to any conclusion after deep questioning and evaluation of arguments. The conclusion of the present study is drawn from the analysis and interpretation of data obtained from ESL learners through a questionnaire. Obtained data reflected the students' overall language proficiency, critical thinking ability, need for critical thinking in reading skills, and teachers' ability for teaching critical thinking at the secondary level in Bangladesh. The teacher can also develop critical reading skills among the students by asking them to review any essay, short story, or book. They can check, motivate and improve critical thinking in the classroom by engaging students in reading. In this context, it is also required that teachers should try to familiarize themselves with different strategies and techniques. A good ESL teacher should always try to evaluate learners' performance. Teachers should regularly test and assess the performance of their students to see whether they are achieving something or not.

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7. Do you think you are proficient enough to understand courses taught in English?
a) Yes 52% b) No 40%
c) To some extent 05% d) To greater extent 03%
8. In which skill area do you find yourself most deficient in?
a) Listening 10% b) Speaking 55%
c) Reading 15% d) Writing 20%
9. In which skill do you think is more important for you than others? (For students only)
a) Listening 10% b) Speaking 30%
c) Reading 20% d) Writing 40%
10. In which skill do you (teacher's point of view) think is more important for you than others? (For teachers only)
a) Listening 10% b) Speaking 40%
c) Reading 20% d) Writing 30%
11. In which skill area do you find yourself slower improvement?
a) Listening 10% b) Speaking 55%
c) Reading 15% d) Writing 20%
12. In which skills do you often adopt?
a) Listening 30% b) Speaking 25%
c) Reading 35% d) Writing 10%
13. Do you have any idea about critical thinking?
a) Yes 56% b) No 40%
c) To some extent 04% d) To greater extent 00%
14. In which skills will help you to improve of your critical thinking?
a) Listening 40% b) Speaking 30%
c) Reading 20% d) Writing 10%
15. How often teacher can train students in critical thinking skill in language classroom at secondary level?
a) Always 10% b) Sometimes 40%
c) Rarely 30% d) Never 20%

APPENDIX

1. What language is mostly used by the student in classroom? (For students only)
a) Bengali 100% b) English 00% c) Others 00%
2. What language is mostly used by the teachers in the classroom? (For teachers only)
a) Bengali 95% b) English 05% c) Others 00%
3. How often the classroom discussion is conducted in English?
a) Always 00% b) Sometimes 50%
c) Rarely 45% d) Never 05%
4. How often do you read newspapers/magazines /comics in English?
a) Always 05% b) Sometimes 45%
c) Rarely 35% d) Never 15%
5. How do you evaluate your proficiency ability in language skills?
a) Very good 10% b) Good 36%
c) Average 40% d) Weak 14%
6. In which skill area do you find yourself most proficient in?
a) Listening 25% b) Speaking 15%
c) Reading 40% d) Writing 20%