Critical reading skills in ESL students:
Challenges and pedagogical recommendations

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This research investigates critical thinking skills in reading comprehension of English as Second Language (ESL) students in an Australian context and proposes a number of pedagogical methods for ESL teachers and educators. The research has two aims: (1) to gain a thorough understanding of ESL students' ability to read English critically in their transition time from high school to university study, and (2) to design engaging classroom activities to enhance ESL students' critical thinking skills. Specifically, the study provides teachers with information about ESL students' critical reading skills, which according to Freeley and Steinberg (2000) comprise learners' ability to understand arguments, critically evaluate arguments, and develop and defend their own arguments. Findings from 64 responses to a survey questionnaire showed that understanding authors' arguments, text main ideas and text structures were learners' main challenges. A list of critical reading questions is suggested based on Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), the use of Socrative[1] mind maps, and Socratic circles[2] as effective ways to assist ESL teachers in teaching critical reading skills. After the researcher utilised these teaching tools to teach critical reading skills explicitly in reading classes, feedback from 12 participants in two focus group interviews revealed that they became more motivated and critical readers.

Introduction and context

Observation from my teaching experience in an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) college (hereafter, the College), in Melbourne, in Australia, shows that a number of international students in the English language

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1 Note: For those who are not familiar with Socrative, this video is helpful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH2wOE00p2s.

2 For those who are not familiar with Socratic circles, this video is helpful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyMuuSaMdz8

courses tend to struggle with critical thinking in English, especially in reading. Often, students hesitate to collaborate with classmates, or struggle with articulating arguments and counter arguments in discussions before or after reading tasks. Even though students usually strive to grasp and comprehend language knowledge and new skills, it seems to be hard for many of them to apply what they have learned. It appears to be difficult for them to analyse, synthesise and evaluate their knowledge, and these are, according to Harmer, the key elements in the critical thinking process (Harmer, 2015).

Therefore, in January 2017, I undertook an action research project into effective methods to enhance ESL students' critical reading ability. As defined by Burns (2013), action research is classroom-based, and involves researcher-teachers investigating a classroom issue, and searching for solutions and recommendations to enhance teaching and learning. Action research comprises cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting through which researcher-teachers are able to collect evidence to gain a better understanding of a certain issue in teaching and learning, and provide suggestions for improvements. In this project, I initiated and implemented the first cycle in 2017, and two more cycles were completed in 2018. As a full-time ESL teacher myself, I found action research the best approach to keep myself engaged with research, and thus to enhance my professional development and reflectiveness. In addition, the findings of this research could be integrated into the College's curriculum and staff development planning.

In this project, a varied set of class activities and exercises to enhance learners' critical reading ability were designed. One of these activities used Socrative, which was selected as a solution to integrate critical thinking activities into chapter reading lessons in the 20-week English course. Chapter reading, which is one of many initiatives in the curriculum design at the College, aims to help students become familiar with reading in their later university study. Other methods, consisting of the use of a list of critical reading questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), mind-maps, and Socratic circles were also utilised to help students become more critical in reading practices. These methods will be presented in more detail in the 'Actions taken' section of this paper.

Critical thinking and critical reading

In the literature of the field, critical thinking is defined as the learner's ability to 'analyse, criticise, and advocate ideas; to reason inductively and deductively; and to reach realistic or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief' (Freeley & Steinberg, 2000, p. 2). It is described as the learner's internal dialogue in which the learned material is

dissected and analysed, and specific questions are devised and answered (Heiman & Slomianko, 1985). Meanwhile, as a manifestation of critical thinking, 'critical reading involves readers' active engagement to think deeply by applying various skills' (Sultan et al., 2017, p. 160). Critical reading refers to the ability to draw inferences, reach conclusions, make decisions, solve problems, develop reasoning, compare ideas, formulate hypotheses and evaluate ideas (Collins, 1993). Similarly, Barnet and Bedau (2011) describe critical readers as those who have the ability to accurately summarise arguments, identify claims, discover stated or implied assumptions, analyse and evaluate the preciseness of the reasoning, and explain the purpose of the use of facts from a reading text.

Previous research has shown that a large number of university students are not competent in reading critically, and in fact, it is difficult and time-consuming to master critical reading skills (Sultan et al., 2017). Wilson claims that 'many EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students do not have a great deal of experience in critical reading and critical thinking – or at least of the kinds of critical thinking expected in tertiary education' (2016, p. 257). In addition, findings in Zin et al.'s (2014) research reveal that many students are unable to identify the purpose of the author. In the same vein, students often find it far more difficult to evaluate and reflect on a text than to interpret the text (Puteh et al., 2016).

In this article, critical reading activities are analysed and designed based on Flemming's (2012) model, which involves predicting the purpose of a text, identifying the main ideas, analysing arguments, evaluating ideas, connecting information and drawing a conclusion.

Research questions and participants

This research aims to gain a thorough understanding of ESL students' ability to read English critically, to help ESL students improve their critical thinking skills, and to create engaging classroom activities. Therefore, the purpose of the project is to answer the following questions:

1. How well do ESL students critically read?

2. What should ESL teachers do to enhance their students' critical reading?

Sixty-four ESL students (out of 144 students) in an English course were involved in the research. These participants provided responses to the survey questionnaire. They were aged between 18 and 21 years old and were largely from China, Vietnam and Indonesia. The majority of these students achieved an overall band score of 5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, and thus were enrolled into a 20-week English course. Despite the fact that many of them (69.84%)

had learnt English for more than eight years in their home countries, one-third did not feel confident about their reading skills due to their limited use of vocabulary and complex sentence structures in English (Survey, 2017). These students joined the English program to develop their English and academic study skills to transit successfully into university study. In addition to these participants, 12 students in two ESL reading classes voluntarily participated in two focus group interviews in the last weeks of the course. These 12 students were aged 18–20, with a majority from China and two from Vietnam.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection process for this study included two main stages. The first stage in this project was to form a foundation for the research with a brief overview of critical thinking in the literature, and of data collection of students' critical reading ability. In relation to data collection, a survey questionnaire was designed with support from a colleague. The survey, comprising 15 questions related to critical reading and class activities, was delivered to the students in May 2017. Students showed their consent by agreeing to answer the questions, and 64 responses were recorded (refer to Appendix A for the survey questions). I also contacted the Assessment team of the College for an analysis of the latest reading test results. Subsequently, findings from the survey together with the data provided by the Assessment team gave guidance for the content as well as the focus of the reading tasks and activities that were subsequently designed to enhance students' critical thinking ability. A list of critical reading questions was created to guide teachers in preparing questions and scaffolding students to make their own questions. Socrative quizzes, mind maps and Socratic circles were used to get students' feedback and help students form a habit of revising and reflecting on what they had learned in class after each lesson; as discussed by Jitendra (2002), these are crucial steps for critical thinking. Some sample tasks will be presented in more detail in the 'Actions taken' section.

In the second stage, evidence gathered from classroom observation and two focus group interviews reflected students' feedback on the reading class activities. Classroom observations consisted mainly of self-observations, and one peer observation. An observation sheet was used to record levels of students' engagement in each reading class. It included photos of group work in drawing a mind map and discussions in Socratic circles and records of Socrative quizzes.

The two focus group interviews were conducted with two reading classes; each interview had six volunteer students from each class (refer to Appendix B for interview questions). The interview was semi-structured with an aim to generate richer information and in-depth responses about how students felt about reading

classes. Because of the uneven power relationship between teacher and students, it was essential to ensure that my status as their teacher did not affect the students' responses. Thus, one of my colleagues who did not teach the participants led the interviews, and responses were audio-recorded for an accurate record of what the students said about the reading activities. The purpose of the interviews as well as what would be done with the information was clearly explained to the interviewees before each interview.

Data generated from the survey were treated quantitatively and summarised in numerical form. Meanwhile, evidence collected from the observation and interviews was analysed qualitatively. Records of the two group interviews were listened to by the researcher, and short extracts that were noticeable, important, and illuminated students' feedback on the reading class activities were transcribed. The main threads in the transcribed extracts were then grouped in themes.

Findings

The test results revealed that the majority of students experienced difficulties in understanding the purpose of reading texts (80%), identifying authors' arguments and main ideas (76.19%), matching headings (72.5%), and filling in missing information (74.5%).

Complementing the data gathered by the Assessment team, the results of the survey indicated that the ESL students had trouble in understanding, evaluating, developing and defending their own arguments. The most challenging problems in understanding arguments included understanding authors' opinions and main ideas. More than two-thirds of the participants claimed that they could not find the author's ideas accurately, and a similar number found it hard to match headings and paragraphs correctly. Further, most of them wrote a summary of a reading text only when it was a compulsory task assigned by their teachers. One of the survey participants stated: *'because I need to select the main idea and also paraphrase in shorter sentences than the article. If I meet some unknown words I even can't paraphrase clearly'* (Student survey).

In addition, the majority of students (80%) were unable to gain a clear understanding of the text purpose and text structure. Their reasons were *'sometimes fill [filling] the gap with the 'wrong' answer might make sense but appearing [show a] different meaning from the original text',* and *'sometimes, I can hardly find out the relationships between sentences'* (Student survey). Further, nearly 40% of students claimed that it was hard to find implied meanings in a reading text, and one of their arguments was *'Everyone have [has] their own ideas, so including do [does the] author. If the author don't [doesn't] show it out, it's hard to say we are right'* (Student survey). Other findings reveal that a discussion before/after a reading task was useful for

43.8%, while most of them preferred reading by themselves in silence in class reading activities (65.8%).

Actions taken

The findings of the project have given rise to a number of pedagogical implications in teaching reading critically. Four main tools were designed with the teacher's careful scaffolding and used in my reading classes to assist students to better understand reading text structure, main ideas, implied meaning, and then to scaffold students in summarising the main ideas, and developing and defending their own arguments.

The first method selected was the use of a list of critical reading questions (refer to Table 1). The list was based on Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, herein referred to as Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). The Taxonomy proposes three main domains of learning comprising the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective (Nentl & Zietlow, 2008). The main area that was applied in this project is the cognitive domain with its six successive stages of learning: knowledge, comprehension, and application (considered as lower-order thinking skills); and of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (higher-order thinking skills) (Nentl & Zietlow, 2008). The following table summarises the aims, achievement criteria, suggested verbs and questions for each stage that teachers can use to design specific questions for each reading task, and to scaffold students to design their own questions critically.

Table 1

Six Stages of Critical Reading

Stages	Aims	Achievement criteria	Verbs to ask scaffolding questions	Sample scaffolding questions
1. Knowledge	Gathering information	Students can recall the learned information.	Recall, describe, define, list, name, define, identify	Who, what, where, when, how?
2. Comprehension	Showing basic understanding of the text	Students can comprehend, organise and select facts and ideas.	Paraphrase, summarise, outline, explain, classify	What is the main idea? Can you summarise/write it in your own words . . . ?; Can you provide a definition for . . . ?; Is it true or false that . . . ?
3. Application	Making use of knowledge, and applying knowledge to new situations	Students can use facts, rules, and principles to complete a problem or task.	Apply, conclude, relate, illustrate, interpret, solve, use, construct	How is . . . related to . . . ?; Why is . . . important?; Do you know of another instance where . . . ?; What factor would you change if . . . ?

Stages	Aims	Achievement criteria	Verbs to ask scaffolding questions	Sample scaffolding questions
4. Analysis	Separating a whole into component parts	Students can see patterns, and recognise hidden meanings.	Analyse, compare, contrast, debate, deduct, distinguish, examine, outline	What similarities and differences exist between . . . ?; Can you outline . . .? How does . . . compare and contrast with . . . ?; What are the features of . . . ?
5. Synthesis	Combining ideas to form a new proposal or plan	Students can create new ideas based on the learned ones, predict and draw conclusions.	Propose, predict, plan, change, combine, reorganise, create, design	What would you predict from . . . ?; What idea can you add to . . . ?; What solutions would you suggest for…?
6. Evaluation	Developing opinions, judgements or decisions	Students can assess value of evidence, and make choices.	Choose, decide, evaluate, conclude, rate, value	Do you agree that . . . ? Explain your ideas; What do you think about . . . ?; What is the most important?; Do you think . . . is a good or bad idea?; Is there a better solution to . . . ?; What changes to . . . would you recommend?; What do you think about . . . ?

Adapted from Bloom, 1956, and Nentl & Zietlow, 2008

Suggested questions in the list are helpful and convenient for reading class teachers to select and design specific questions for each reading text. Teachers can also post the questions in a Socrative quiz or a Socrative 'space race' before or after reading tasks in order to improve students' ability in comprehending, applying, analysing, synthesising and evaluating the text critically.

Socrative is an effective tool in teaching critical reading skills: its exercises and activities encourage students to respond to, transfer and interrogate the information from the reading text. Teachers can create online multiple-choice quizzes, open-ended quizzes and 'exit ticket' questions in their Socrative 'rooms' (Kaya & Balta, 2016, p. 5). The quizzes may ask students to describe learned information, express their own opinions and evaluation, and to connect reading texts with their own background knowledge. Consequently, Socrative allows teachers to design a variety of activities and exercises to get students actively and critically engaged with the reading text, and thus will foster a student-centred classroom where learners can develop critical reading and thinking skills (refer to the 'Sample reading lesson' for more details). Socrative also supports teachers to maximise learners' individual work by encouraging students to work independently (Kaya & Balta, 2016).

The third tool is the mind map, which helps students effectively find the text structure and main ideas of reading texts, and subsequently students can use their mind map in pair or group discussions or presentations. By definition, mind maps are visual tools or graphic organisers that help understand, organise, develop and process information effectively, and thus they are effective tools to develop language learners develop critical thinking skills (Dahbi, 2015). In a reading class, teachers can use mind maps to critically activate students' previous knowledge, find patterns of information in a reading text, understand the structure of arguments, and establish a link between new concepts and existing knowledge.

Another effective tool in this project is Socratic circles. This tool is especially useful in post-reading discussions or debates. Socratic circles are useful for students to discuss open-ended questions in a group discussion so that they can seek better comprehension of a text that they have critically read (Brown, 2016). For this activity, teachers can divide the class into two groups of eight or nine students. The two groups sit in two concentric circles. While the students in the inner circle examine and evaluate the text, those in the outer circle observe, and then provide feedback on the ideas and raise further questions. They can also provide feedback on pronunciation, turn-taking, manners, grammar, body language and discussion language to the inner circle discussants. The length of a Socratic circle discussion may vary depending on the pre-reading and reading tasks. However, Copeland (2005, cited in Brown, 2016) suggests a minimum of three to five minutes for one group to discuss one question. By participating in a Socratic circle discussion, students will be able to gain a thorough understanding of reading texts, critically discuss and analyse the topic from diverse perspectives, and actively share their opinions about the text with classmates.

Sample reading lesson

The following sample reading lesson illustrates the use of the list of critical reading questions, Socrative quizzes, mind maps and Socratic circles to enhance students' critical reading skills.

Stage 1: Knowledge

The teacher first shows students the title of the reading: 'Two views of the change process' and two pictures, and asks students to guess the content of the text. Guiding questions in a Socrative quiz – 'What do you think the text is about?' and 'What do you see in the two pictures?' – help attract the students' attention. Students post their answers, and then discuss in pairs what they expect to read in this text. This activity helps them anticipate the main idea and the structure of the text, and activates their prior knowledge and experiences of the topic of 'change'. The use of a

Socrative quiz has two advantages: it allows students time to brainstorm ideas about the topic, and teachers can project the responses in class for students to discuss.

Stage 2: Comprehension
After reading and answering questions on the text, students are encouraged to write two true and two false statements based on the text, and they can share their statements with classmates. Subsequently, students work in pairs to draw a mind map of the main ideas mentioned in the text.

Stage 3: Application
In groups of four, students are directed to share their mind map, summarise the main ideas, and relate the ideas to their own personal situation by answering the question 'How is the concept of change related to your life?'

Stage 4: Analysis
In this stage, students start by reading the text more closely and write three questions to ask their classmates. Subsequently, they compare and contrast the two views of the change process. Again, teachers can pose prompt questions such as 'What are similarities and differences between the two types of changes?' in a Socrative quiz or space race. By answering these Socrative questions, students are able to understand more thoroughly the implied meanings 'between the lines' in the text. Such Socrative questions give the students more time to reflect on the reading, and get themselves ready for group or class debates in the post-reading session.

Stages 5 and 6: Synthesis and evaluation
In these stages, teachers can use Socratic circles. Questions like 'What should managers do to deal with changes in their companies?', or 'What are major changes in people's lives? And what should we do to manage such changes?' or 'Do you agree with the author's ideas? Why or why not?', give hints to prompt students to develop their own arguments.

Impacts of the methods on ESL learners' attitude and critical reading ability

Observation in my reading class (both self- and peer-observations) showed that the students became more engaged and active in all class activities. Further, they showed higher confidence in finding main ideas and the author's position, knew how to evaluate arguments, and did reflection after each reading lesson. Although some of them still found it hard to participate in a Socratic circle discussion after a reading task due to a lack of discussion skills, they were more capable of summarising the main ideas and developing their own opinions. In addition, Socrative quizzes and exit tickets were perceived by students as an effective tool to better understand the main ideas of a reading text, implied meaning and authors' opinion because teachers could

choose to enable student-paced, immediate, right/wrong feedback and explanations after students answered each question. In addition, students could learn from each other's responses in open-ended questions where they had to evaluate arguments, and connect with learned knowledge and own experience via a live results table.

Feedback from the students in the focus group interview showed three main threads. Some of them formed a new habit of critical reading by sharing and talking about the class reading with housemates, or setting a goal for themselves to read every day, or reading at least three long articles every week. In addition, many students developed a positive attitude towards reading classes. Some general comments from the focus group interviews included: *'The chapter reading task is my favourite part in academic reading capabilities, that feeling is so good when I focus on study';* *'Reading class has relax [relaxing] atmosphere, interesting methods, and encourage [encouraging to] us', '[the] teacher always make [makes] the reading task more active so that we feel interesting about [interested in] it.'* Finally, many students claimed that their reading skills improved significantly after the course because *'the goal of reading is very clearly [clear]. We can gradually know the content about the reading by doing [answering] the question (on Socrative.com). Main idea is very easy to point out'* (focus group interview), and even for one student *'some articles I think [are] hard to understand, but now I can identify the structure easy [easily]'* (focus group interview).

Discussion and recommendations

This project is significant in the way that it equips ESL students with critical reading skills, which prepares them for university study. It also familiarises students with Socrative, which is commonly used at university (Kaya & Balta, 2016). The project follows a learner-centred approach, integrates technology, and enhances critical thinking and promotes independent study in English language teaching and learning.

This research confirms that ESL students are often not competent in critical reading, which complements the findings by Zin et al. (2014) that students struggle with finding the main ideas and the purpose of a reading text. However, the project argues that if teachers apply effective teaching practices, it is possible to scaffold students in evaluating a reading text, and critically integrating the text in their own writing. Understanding the main ideas of a text is one of the most crucial steps towards critical reading. The use of a mind map together with proper scaffolding in class reading time would support students in finding the text structure and main ideas. Further, the list of critical reading steps and the other tools proposed in this paper would definitely assist students to engage actively in reading tasks, and subsequently enable them to evaluate the text critically.

It is highly recommended that teachers prepare reading lesson plans with a focus on specific reading and critical reading skills in each lesson. It is essential to teach the skills systematically from basic to advanced levels and from a lower to higher level of critical reading. In addition, it is necessary to provide scaffolding whenever necessary in relation to new vocabulary, concepts and ideas in reading texts. Teachers are encouraged to combine a variety of reading activities (including group, pair, and individual work), diverse reading modes (e.g., reading in silence, or reading aloud), and different reading approaches and reading skills (e.g., top-down, bottom-up, skimming and scanning). By applying the list of critical reading questions, and by using Socrative quizzes and space races, mind maps and Socratic circles, teachers are able to vary class activities, and thus motivate students to read and be more active and critical in class reading tasks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, before the English course, most students claimed that they struggled with finding main ideas and the structure of a reading text, and they were not confident in a post-reading group discussion. After the course, these students became more confident in reading because they were able to locate and summarise the main ideas, discuss the text, and be more confident in presenting their own arguments. The research concludes that teachers should explicitly teach reading skills and critical reading skills concurrently to help students improve their reading skills, find interest in reading, actively answer and ask questions, engage in discussions, and thus become active and critical readers and learners.

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SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

This project aims to investigate the critical reading of English language students and to develop resources that are complementary to the reading program in the course.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. All data will be kept anonymous and confidential and used for research purposes only. Your consent to participate in this study will be implied by the completion and submission of the survey.

This survey includes fifteen questions and will take you ten minutes to complete.

Thank you.

1. How long have you been learning English?

-   1-3 years

-   3-5 years

-   5-8 years

-   More than 8 years

2. Do you think that you are good at reading?

-   Yes, definitely

-   Yes

-   No

-   No, definitely not.

Could you explain your answer? (Please specify)

3. When you are reading a text, it is necessary to know who the author is.

    Do you agree?

-   Yes

-   No

-   I have no idea

Could you explain your answer? (Please specify)

4. When you are reading a text, do you often ask yourself what the purpose of the text is?

    - Yes, always

    - Sometimes

    - Rarely

    - Never

Could you explain your answer? (Please specify)

5. It is difficult for me to understand the structure of the arguments in a text.

    - True

    - False

    - No idea

Could you explain your answer? (Please specify)

6. When you are reading a text, understanding the author's opinions is…

-   always hard for me

-   sometimes hard for me

-   easy for me

-   very easy for me

Could you explain your answer? (Please specify)

7. Do you think it is difficult to find implied meaning in a reading text?

    - Yes

    - No

    - I do not know

What is the reason? (Please specify)

8. How good are you at selecting sentences in a list to fill the gaps in a given text?

    - Very good

    - Good

- Bad

- Very bad

Do you know why you are good or not good at this task? (Please specify)

9.   In your opinion, matching headings with paragraphs is….

- Very difficult

- Difficult

- Neither difficult nor easy

- Easy

- Very easy

Could you explain why? (Please specify)

10. What do you often do if you encounter new vocabulary in a reading text? Please write at least three solutions in the provided space.

11. In the reading class, do you like reading…

- by yourself in silence

- aloud in pairs

- aloud and share ideas in a group

- Other (Please specify)

12.   How often do you write a summary after reading a text?

- Very often

- Often

- Sometimes

- Rarely

- Never

Could you explain your answer?

13. Do you find a discussion before or after reading a text is..

- Very useful

- Useful

- Ok

- Not useful

- A waste of time

Could you explain your answer?

14. How often do you revise reading texts at home?

- Very often

- Often

- Sometimes

- Rarely

- Never

Why? (Please specify)

15. Do you think summarising a reading text is….?

- very hard

- hard

- neither hard nor easy

- very easy

Could you please explain why?

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

1. What do you find most interesting in the reading class?

2. What reading skills do you find most effective?

3. Do you feel confident in finding the main ideas?

4. What is your opinion about group discussions before and after reading a text?

5. What are the good and bad points of Socrative quizzes and exit tickets?

6. Do you think mind maps are useful or not?