

Some Classroom Strategies. Developing Critical Literacy Awareness by Chitra Varaprasad

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Texts are usually treated with reverence in the classroom. Published materials are viewed as objective, unbiased truth reflecting the view of respected institutions such as newspapers or publishing houses. Teachers and students therefore usually accept the printed word without actively challenging the content or implied assumptions expressed by the language. However, in an age when students are inundated with print, it is important for them to be able to view and question texts critically. This implies taking assertive positions against a text's "obvious" and "taken for granted" stance (Wallace 1990).

Several strategies can be used in the classroom for developing critical awareness while reading. The underlying concepts with modifications can be used across all levels, depending on the students' language proficiency and maturity level. This paper will describe strategies that can be used at *the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading* stages, with a focus on both language and content. The term *literacy*, as used here, encompasses developing critical reading, thinking and writing abilities. While this paper will focus on reading and thinking in some detail, writing will be dealt with very briefly. The assumption is that developing critical reading awareness and critical thinking ability among students is bound to influence their writing as well.

Definition of critical reading

Harris and Hodges (1981) define critical reading as the process of making judgments in reading: "evaluating relevancy and adequacy of what is read." According to Thistlethwaite (1990:587) "in critical reading, readers evaluate what they have read and make a decision. This decision may be to accept what the writer has said, to disagree with it or to realise that additional information is necessary before an informed judgment can be made."

Students' attitude to reading texts

The student's attitude to texts is that the "text knows best." Students tend to "passively accept what is found in reading texts simply because it is so often presented as obvious" (Wallace 1990). Secondly, teachers generally use texts as a means to impart grammatical, vocabulary, and content knowledge. They are more concerned that students comprehend these different elements in a text and therefore seldom enable students to question a text's "obvious" and "taken for granted" stance (Wallace 1990). So the term critical here implies that students do not blindly accept the "obvious" statements in a text. They need to move beyond challenging overt statements to taking an assertive stand against the text's assumptions. Teachers need to guide students to question the information content and the ideological assumptions that the writer puts forth.

This paper will look at texts from two angles, that of content and language. The following two questions will be addressed:

- What strategies can students be imparted so that they will learn to question content in a text?
- How can we get students to look at the way language is used in a text to convey its ideological meaning?

Stages in the reading process

Different types of tasks can be designed for developing critical reading strategies among students in the context of the three stages in the reading process: the pre-reading stage, the while-reading stage, and finally the post-reading stage.

Strategies for the pre-reading stage: In conventional pre-reading activities, students are asked to do the following:

- find answers to given questions based on the text;
- give their personal opinion about the topic;
- predict the continuing text.

In critical pre-reading activities, students can be asked to consider:

- the reason the author is writing about the topic;
- the whole range of ways to write a particular text;
- the generating of their own list of questions.

Thus, in critical pre-reading activities students can be asked to provide answers to questions that are not text-based but are based around the text. This will develop in them a critical awareness of how and why texts are written. Some questions that students can be asked to consider are:

- What is the topic/title of the text? What does it tell me?
- What is the purpose for writing: to inform, persuade, entertain?
- How is the topic written? Formal or personal style? What other ways are there of writing about the topic?
- What is the genre of the text: a letter, an article in a newspaper, an essay, an advertisement?
- Who is the writer? How much do I know about him/her?
- What does the information reveal about the writer?
- What other information is revealed about the period when the text was written, for example?

Who is the reader?

Questions such as these can be modeled by the teacher initially. Gradually students can be asked to generate their own questions in groups. By doing so, students are not merely comprehending a text, but are developing strategies for interpreting and problem solving crucial to critical reading of texts. More importantly, since the questions are self-generated instead of teacher-generated, students are bound to take more responsibility for their learning.

One point that teachers need to bear in mind is that texts cannot be understood as self-contained products, as they are always produced in social, cultural, and other contexts. Generating questions such as the above helps students view texts from a wider perspective. Attempts to answer questions about the context in which a text was written or to gather information about the background of the writer, will help students understand the text's social, political, historical, and cultural context. Previewing for genre will equip students with a set of expectations to guide their reading. By making a tentative decision about the genre of a text, students will be able to find out why the piece was written, and how the writing situation affected the particular way it was written. In the process they will also develop problem-solving and interpreting strategies. Thus, at the pre-reading stage, it is possible to generate questions around the text which will enable the reader to look at the text critically.

Strategies for the while-reading stage

What is generally done at this stage while teaching reading comprehension is that texts are brought into the classroom or are reproduced in a textbook. These texts are then treated to various forms of analysis, such as asking students to provide answers to multiple choice questions, true or false statements, or particular questions. Although these activities contribute to fostering higher-level critical literacy skills, they are not sufficient. Reading should be treated as a creative and challenging activity where students' questioning and interpretive abilities are triggered.

Students at this stage can be asked to read and react to content and language in a text by *annotating* and *analysing*.

Annotating: The strategy of annotating is essential to critical reading because it focuses the reader's attention on the content and language of the text. As students read, they can be asked to annotate directly on the text. Three useful ways of annotating are *underlining*, *questioning*, and *outlining*.

Underlining: As a first step, ask students to read through the passage and underline difficult words and phrases, while getting a general idea of the whole passage. Next, ask them to figure out the meanings of these words and phrases from context, and if necessary, look them up in a dictionary or another relevant book, encyclopedia, etc. The answers can be discussed as a group with constant input from the teacher.

Questioning: Questions are the most notable aspect of the annotations. Next, we could get our students to read the text again and express their doubts in the form of questions in the margin. Initially, questions would reflect students' lack of knowledge as these questions would identify information that is needed. They may even represent doubts, confusion, or comments.

Outlining: Outlining helps to focus on the most important ideas of a text, separating what is central from what is peripheral. Outlining also shows how information is organised and supported in a text. Like the other activities, outlining can be done as a group activity. Ask students to identify the main ideas in each paragraph and look for sentences that carry the main thrust of the arguments. For this purpose, remind students that:

- writers generally place the main thrust of their arguments either at the beginning or the end of a paragraph

connectors such as: *as a result of*, *consequently*, etc., play a crucial role in advancing the main thrust of the writer's argument. Similarly, other connectors such as *for example*, *firstly*, *in addition*, reflect supporting arguments. By actively searching for such connectors, students are able to focus on the most important ideas of a text, separating what is peripheral from what is central.

Having gone through the processes of underlining, questioning, and outlining, with each activity providing the basis for the subsequent activity, students are bound to have a good understanding of the writer's stand.

Analysing: Having ascertained the main thrust of the writer's arguments from outlining, the students next have to be guided to analyse arguments and language.

Arguments: An argument is basically a group of statements that have a special relationship to one another: One of the statements (the claim or conclusion) is asserted as true on the basis of the other statements, such as reason, evidence, or assumptions. Some questions that the students can be encouraged to ask are:

- What point is the writer attempting to establish?
- What is being asserted as true?

In addition to identifying the main argument or idea in each paragraph, students can be given a checklist of questions that they can bear in mind while reading texts to evaluate arguments such as the following:

- Why should I accept this claim as true?
- What reasons or evidence does the writer give for this claim?
- On what basis should I accept this claim?

A critical reader seriously thinks about what s/he is reading. This means that s/he:

- does not believe everything s/he reads;
- questions everything that doesn't make sense to him/her
- analyses arguments;
- discounts arguments based on faulty reasoning;
- has good reasons for believing some things and not believing others

So a very important critical reading skill is to be able to distinguish fact from opinion. This is an essential first step in acquiring critical reading ability.

One way of doing this would be to give students several sentences expressing facts and opinions and ask them to differentiate between the two. It is important to make students aware of how language is used to express facts and opinions.

Language:

One way of analysing language is to look for patterns or repetitions of any kind such as:

- repetitions or patterns of recurring images;
- repeated descriptions;
- consistent ways of characterising people or events;
- repeated words and phrases, examples or illustrations;
- reliance on particular writing strategies;
- use of opposites/opposing ideas to reveal contrasting perspectives;
- use of figurative language to reflect the authors' attitudes, tone, and feelings.

An important question to consider is how such figures of speech in a text are used, which reveals something of the writer's feelings about the subject. Taking note of these language devices can provide insights into the tone of writing and the text's emotional effect on the reader. So important questions to ask students to consider are:

- Does the author write emotionally?
- Does s/he use sentiment, name calling, or other emotional means to make his/ her point?

Thus, central to the idea of critical reading is an awareness of the role that language plays in conveying, not just a propositional message, but an ideological one as well. The analysis of language can be very useful for ascertaining the writer's ideology.

Students can also be made aware of the following:

- The use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns to represent self, subject, reader, etc.;
- The way nouns function, i.e., as actors or acted upon, and the reasons for their selection;
- The kinds of verbs used: action verbs, verbs denoting mental processes etc.;
- Why the writer uses them, the purpose they serve, the meaning they convey;
- The use of modal verbs, what they convey about the writer's attitude and mood: affirmative, negative, imperative, or interrogative;

The use of connectors, not just to convey ideas, but also to convey the writer's stand or position on the matter. So, rather than just focusing on form for its own sake, as in traditional language and reading exercises, students can adduce evidence for the text's ideological positioning.

Strategies for the post-reading stage

The logical strategy to use at the post-reading stage is to extend the understanding obtained from texts at the pre-reading and while-reading stages into writing tasks, such as summarising, evaluating, synthesizing, commenting, and reflecting.

Summarising is an excellent way to learn from reading and, most importantly, to remember what is read. But a summary writing task does not have to be just a summary. Students can also be asked to evaluate, to synthesize, to comment, or to reflect on what they have read. All of these strategies will help students to consolidate in writing the critical understanding and interpretation that they have derived from their interaction with the text or texts.

As mentioned earlier, the term literacy, encompasses developing critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. The main focus, as can be seen, has been on developing critical reading awareness in students by questioning and thinking through a text and extending this awareness and understanding into writing activities.

Pedagogical implications and suggestions

The implications for adopting and adapting these strategies in the classroom can be discussed under two broad headings: methodology and materials.

Methodology: The teaching methodology advocated for the classroom would be one of group work and cooperative learning. If the class size is large, and students are generating their own questions rather than discussing answers to teachers' questions, group work is definitely more efficient. The effectiveness of such group activities would, of course, depend on the teacher, whose role becomes even more crucial. A lot of thought and planning would be required outside class in choosing materials and organising lessons that focus on developing critical reading abilities. Once the focus and direction are set in class, there will be very little teacher-talk. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator who walks around the class listening to discussions, guiding students to keep their discussions focused, and giving them input wherever necessary. This implies that the students take responsibility for their own learning.

This being the case, it is important that students be given very clear guidelines on what is expected of them. Activities should be initially modeled by the teacher to enable students to handle such tasks confidently.

Since students would be gathering information in the classroom, dictionaries and reference books and other relevant materials have to be made available. Alternately, work involving dictionary searches or research about the writer can be given as homework assignments.

Reading experts agree that all of these critical reading strategies cannot be acquired permanently in a few sessions. Rather, these strategies are acquired in a developmental process. They grow as a continuum that starts during early childhood and continues at each succeeding grade and stage. Teachers, should, therefore, incorporate critical reading activities in all appropriate classrooms. I am referring not only to the language classroom, but also to content area reading classrooms such as history or social studies. We would, of course, need to bear in mind the proficiency, maturity level, and attitude of our students.

Materials: Research shows that critical reading can be taught and that students do not become critical readers without instruction. Reading experts also confirm that the reading process becomes a critical act if the students are challenged by provocative reading materials and learning activities. Based on the characteristics of critical reading, which is to question, analyse, and evaluate texts, a wide variety of materials is necessary for critical reading. No single text book is sufficient. Fox (1988) indicates that tabloid articles are among the best materials to use to introduce critical reading. Thistlethwaite (1990) also suggests many kinds of critical activities arising from a variety of authentic reading materials: books, magazines, and newspapers in particular. According to her, many parts of a newspaper can be presented as stimulation for reading critically. For example, teachers can use newspaper editorials that present conflicting viewpoints to urge students to share their initial thoughts on the topic. Teachers could also have students focus their attention on the editor's use of emotional language and then have them rewrite each emotive sentence found in the editorial to make it more objective and less emotional. Yet another strategy would be to make students aware of the way language is used for simple reporting versus straightforward expression of approval or disapproval. Since the purpose of critical reading is to evaluate texts, a good strategy would be to have students discuss pre-reading questions for a variety of text types, such as advertisements, passages from textbooks, warning notices, and an excerpt from a novel. This will give students an idea of the purpose, the audience, and the genre of the text, and the reasons it has evolved the way it has. These discussions will also give students insights into the writer's intention and attitude, which are very crucial for critical reading as texts do not exist in isolation. Besides, the diversity of texts can allow for more varied analysis of content and language. Movie reviews and advertisements using the language of sales can serve as excellent materials for critical reading.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has tried to describe critical reading briefly and explain what it entails as well as discuss strategies that can develop critical reading ability among post-secondary students. These were presented in the context of the three stages of reading. The emphasis was on questioning, analysing, and evaluating. The purpose of these stages is to get students to examine texts in more critical, reflective ways, to encourage them to take assertive positions against texts, and to feel that they have options in the way they choose to read texts.

Some ideas on teaching implications have been provided and suggestions have also been made regarding the kinds of materials that can be used in the classroom. The change in teaching suggested by a critical reading approach will foster better readers by helping students to focus on the ideology and assumptions behind the author's words. This places the author of the text in a sharper focus. This fosters a more meaningful "dialogue" between the student reader and the unknown writer of the text. The critical reading approach can be used with a wide variety of genres, but texts such as advertisements, which have a clear agenda, are a good place to start. All teachers work within certain constraints in the classroom, but the need for developing critical reading strategies among our students cannot be ignored. The approach described when dealing with reading texts in language can also be extended to content- subject classrooms.

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