The Effect of Teaching Critical Reading through Critical Discourse Analysis on High School EFL Learner's Reading Comprehension

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Abstract
This study tried to demonstrate the impact of critical reading through critical discourse analysis on reading comprehension ability of the female high school learners in Kermanshah. To do this, a proficiency test of forty items chosen from the book series by Tajik (2005) was administered to 100 students, and 50 of them who got the highest scores were randomly divided into two homogeneous classes. The control group class was taught reading through the traditional approach, and the experimental group class through the critical reading approach based on a model provided by Cots (2006). Three intermediate level reading comprehension texts were chosen from Selected Reading by Linda Lee and Eric Gundersen (Oxford University Press, 2001). The subjects were given two reading comprehension tests to test the effect of the treatment. The subject's performance on the tests was analyzed by the use of an independent T-Test. The results showed that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the learners from the control group.

Key terms: Critical reading approach, Critical discourse analysis, Traditional approach, Reading comprehension, Linguistic approach

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for learners of English and for most of the learners it is the most important skill to master in order to ensure success in learning (Anderson, 2003) and the pedagogy of reading instruction has long occupied an important if highly controversial place in SLA research and practice (Askildson, 2008). There have been different approaches to teaching reading comprehension such as phonics, whole language, balanced approach, "look and say" approach, linguistic approach, language experience approach, competency based approach and Freirian approach.

The first approach is phonics. According to Hempenstall (1997), the objective of phonics approach is to sensitize students to the relationship of the spelling patterns of the written language to the sound patterns of the written language (cited in Mcgahey, 2002). The second approach is whole language. Hall (1999) suggests that the whole language approach has two main areas of emphasis. Firstly, that the overall purpose of reading is to gain meaning from the text, and secondly, that the skills of reading will be acquired from the experience of reading and need to be explicitly taught (cited in Hinman, 2005). As Krashen (2002) claims, "reading wars" between those who support phonics approach and those who support the whole language approach show no signs of stopping.
The third approach, i.e. balanced approach, is a reaction to the war between the advocates of phonics approach and whole language approach. Most educators claim that an approach balanced between phonics and whole language is the best method of teaching beginning readers (Raven, 1997). Another approach is "look and say". It stresses helping children develop a stock of words that they can recognize on sight. To help the children learn the basic words such as and, I and the, teachers use devices like flashcards (Weaver, 1994) (cited in Meehan, 2004).

The linguistic approach is another approach to teaching reading. Advocates of this approach don’t want children to stop and sound words out, rather they are concerned with helping children internalize regular patterns of spelling /sound correspondence (Weaver, 1994 cited in Meehan, 2004). Language experience approach (LEA) is another approach to teaching reading. It draws upon the link between experience and education by using student narratives as the basis for reading instruction (cited in Wurr, 2002). Another approach is competency based approach (CBE). According to Richards and Rodgers, it is an outcome based instruction and is adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers, and the community. Competencies describe the student’s ability to apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life (cited in Weddel, 2006). Freirian approach is another approach to teaching literacy and reading comprehension. It bases the content of language lessons on learners' cultural and personal experiences (Spener, 1992). Learners acquire reading skills through inquiry into the real-problems facing the community of learners (cited in Spener, 1992). Except above mentioned approaches, reading comprehension can be taught critically through critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although it has become popular by discourse analysis researchers, it is rarely used by language teachers.

1.1. Critical reading

Critical reading refers to an awareness of the fact that all texts are crafted objects, written by persons with particular dispositions or orientations to the information, regardless of how factual or neutral the products may attempt to be (Freebody and Luke, 1990). Lessons that include critical literacy perspectives help learners examine biases and purposes of texts; assess the broader societal messages about values, attitudes, and power relationships that are being conveyed through the text. Thus, these lessons will contribute to learners' more comprehensive understanding of texts and the larger society (Brown, 1999; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996; Lohrey, 1998) (cited in Duzer and Florez, 1999). Certainly, teachers most often choose reading skills texts that present functional survival or general interest material of a safe nature and the main reading tasks are analyzing linguistic structure or new vocabulary items. During interaction with such texts readers take up a rather submissive position. Critical reading approach is trying to change this situation by offering students clues how to become more assertive and more confident readers (Wallace, 1992). It is the responsibility of teachers to foreground power, inequities, politics, cultural systems, and counter silence that is caused by taken for- granted assumptions of class, gender, age, race, family, religion, and culture (Pietrandrea, 2008). At the center of a critical literacy curriculum is the focus on students learning how to ask critical questions, how to support one another, how to work toward positive social change, and how to take individual action upon the world (Singer & Shagoury, 2005). The aim of all literacy programs should be the development of a critical literacy where learners focus not just on the mechanics or content of written texts, but on the construction and the way that readers are positioned within the texts (Hammond et al., 1992). Reading does not just involve decoding the meanings in the text. Readers are often also deciding whether they agree with the content of the text and with the particular ideological positions or beliefs that the writer presents (Hood, Solomon and Burns, 1996).
Cots (2006) aimed at demonstrating in a very practical way how CDA can be implemented in foreign language teaching and wanted to show that the choices teachers or materials developers make in selecting or adapting texts to represent language use can be critically analyzed, and that this analysis can be made in the classroom together with the pupils. By doing this, he adds, the EFL teacher’s task can go beyond linguistic training and become a really educational undertaking, with the aim of helping the pupils develop their internal values and capacity to criticize the world. Bean and Moni (2003) supported reading young adult novels to encourage debate and discussions of societal conflicts. Students may be assigned supplementary fiction because it focuses on an important societal issue such as racial discrimination, slavery and marginalization (Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Johnson & Ciancio, 2003) (cited in Behrman, 2006).

Biabcarosa and Snow (2006) claimed that high school students lack experience reading and interpreting complex texts: high schools typically teach students to read receptively. Many freshman college students have not been taught to read actively or critically and to construct knowledge as they read (Downs, 2000; El-Hindi, 1997; Valerigold and Deming, 2000) (cited in Bosley, 2008). The authors support instruction that encourages students to take a critical perspective when reading text, recognizing that texts are necessarily written from specific perspectives that reflect only one version of the world (cited in Stribling, 2008). Teachers must invite and make space for discussions that are of concern to the students in their classroom and the larger society (Michell, 2006). Students are no longer depositories for teacher-given knowledge; instead, teachers and students become problem-posers. Educators have a responsibility to help their students develop a language of critique which enables them to enter into conversations that focus on the transformative process of reality (Gilbert, 1997). EFL students are capable of thinking critically and would benefit from curricula designed to encourage them to take a critical stance toward reading and writing (Falkenstein, 2003).

1.2. Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a new approach to text analysis and although it has become popular by discourse analysis researchers, it is rarely used by language teachers. If, however, teachers understand the nature of this approach, they will find it useful in teaching critical reading to their language learners. Lessons that incorporate CDA perspectives can help learners examine the source of a text, including its biases and purposes; question the veracity and applicability of the information being provided in terms of their own lives; assess the broader societal messages about values, attitudes, and power relationships that are being conveyed through the text; and consider their own biases, reactions, and realities in relation to the text (Brown, 1999; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996).

1.3. Objectives of the study

This study, inspired by Cots framework (2006), tries to investigate if teaching critical reading based on critical discourse analysis would have any effect on learners overall comprehension. Therefore, this study will be conducted to answer the following questions:

1.4. Research questions

R.Q.1: Is there any significant difference between reading comprehension ability of the group of students who received instruction through critical reading based on critical discourse analysis and the group who are instructed through traditional approach?
R.Q.2: How do the approaches affect reading comprehension?
2. Method

2.1. Participants

The subjects of the present study were fifty high school female students of grade four in a high school in Kermanshah. The high school included three classes of humanities, one class of mathematics and five classes of natural sciences, and all of the students were in intermediate level of English proficiency. One hundred of them were chosen randomly to participate in proficiency test. Then fifty of them who got the highest score were randomly divided into two classes of control and experimental. They all were from Kermanshah and their ages ranged from 17 to 18 years of age.

2.2. The proficiency test

Since a specific degree of proficiency in English is needed as a prerequisite and precondition for learners taking part in the study, a proficiency test of forty items chosen from the book series called High School English Tests 1, 2 and 3 by Parviz Tajik (2005) was administered to one hundred students of grade four who studied in three different majors, namely a. humanities b. natural sciences and c. mathematics, in order to choose fifty learners whose scores were the highest. The test was composed of five different parts of structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, cloze and comprehension and consisted of 40 multiple-choice items. The test of structure and the test of vocabulary contained 24 questions. The test of pronunciation consisted of 3 questions and cloze test had 4 questions. The comprehension part included two parts, part one a passage with 4 questions and part two 5 comprehension questions. The time allocated to answer the test was 40 minutes.

Regarding the reliability of the test, it was %73 and was calculated by KR-21 formula. Three scholars approved the test as valid.

The scores were arranged from the highest to the lowest, 50 students scoring the lowest were dismissed from the study and just 50 students participated in the study. Then these 50 students were classified randomly to two classes, experimental and control class, with each class containing 25 students.

2.3. The instructional material

Three intermediate level reading comprehension texts were chosen to be instructed. The book used for the study was called Selected Reading by Linda Lee and Eric Gundersen (Oxford University Press, 2001). The three texts that were chosen for instruction were (1) Public Attitudes toward Science (2) The Art of Genius and (3) How to Make a Speech. Each reading text was composed of three parts: Pre-reading, main text and after reading part. Pre-reading part was a part that was used as warm up and included some pre-reading open ended questions followed by some Yes-No questions which were related to the title of the text. In teaching texts the questions presented in pre-reading part were asked from the learners in order to make them ready to go to the main text part. Finally, After Reading part composed of reading comprehension questions, reading skill (for example using context to guess the meaning of the italicized word), word forms of a new word (different forms of a new word such as noun, verb and adjective), language focus (grammar focus), discussion and writing, and crossword puzzle that was supposed to be completed by the words from the passage.

2.4. Procedures

The training program was composed of 6 successive sessions and each session lasted for one hour and a half.
In control group class, sessions one, three and five were allotted to teaching reading texts, and sessions two, four and six were devoted to doing exercises. In teaching the text, the traditional method was adopted as follows: After reading each paragraph by the teacher, it was translated into Persian with the focus on the areas of 1) grammar 2) vocabulary and 3) pronunciation. Then, in after reading part, the focus was on doing the exercises and all the exercises were done one by one.

In the experimental class, the model for teaching reading comprehension based on Fairclough approach, was applied. The procedure followed in the experimental class included three stages:

2.4.1. Stage one

This stage was composed of two sessions. In the first session, I read the first text, i.e. Public Attitudes toward Science, for students. While reading the text, students asked questions regarding the meaning of the new vocabularies and the meaning of the sentences. I answered their questions, but I didn’t focus so much on them. After that I had a quick look on the grammatical points of the text, so that students noticed that I didn’t focus so much on the vocabulary, grammar and translation of the text into Persian. In the second session, I taught them how to analyze the text by using a list of questions provided by Cots (2006).

2.4.2. Stage two

The second stage lasted for two sessions. In the first session, another reading comprehension text, i.e. "The Art of Genius", was read to students. The students were required to practice critical reading with the text with the use of the list. According to Foss (2000), students can be encouraged to peel different layers of meaning from a text and to explore how the same reader might approach a text from different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion (cited in Behrman, 2006). Moreover, Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) suggest that readers need to become “text-resistant”. Then, the class was divided into three groups, with each group working on one part of the list. In the next session, i.e. fourth session, I wanted some students from each group to represent the results of their analysis. That part was followed by a discussion on what role social context plays in readers’ personal understanding of the text and its writer’s ideology. A critical dimension to reading can be added to usual classroom practice by incorporating additional questions to the ones you usually ask in the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages (Brown, 1999; cited in Haig, 2000).

2.4.3. Stage Three

The third stage, also, lasted for two sessions. In the first session, the reading text called "How to Make a Speech" was read for students. Moreover, another text with the same title chosen from their course book was given to them. They were asked to conduct a contrastive analysis of the two reading texts and present them next session. According to Behrman (2006), one classroom activity to develop a critical perspective is reading multiple texts on the same topic. Spires (1999) and Mellon and Patterson (2000) have used it in their studies. By experiencing different treatments of the same topic or event, students begin to recognize that text is not "true" in any absolute sense but a rendering as portrayed by another. To read critically children need to question, recognize, infer, compare and contrast, anticipating meaning and combine past experience to the current reading (cited in Dignazio, 1997).

Session seven was allocated to the administration of two unseen reading tests. The tests were two reading comprehension tests chosen from national entrance examination. One of them was chosen from the general question part of the mathematic group in 1387 (2008),
and the other one was chosen from the general question part of the language group in 1386 (2007). Each reading comprehension test was composed of 5 questions and two tests had 10 questions. Each question allotted 2 scores, so the score of students was counted from 20. The students had 25 minutes to answer the questions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviation of the both experimental and control groups are given in Table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.6800</td>
<td>3.30051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.6000</td>
<td>2.88675</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it is obvious from Table 4.1, mean and standard deviation of experimental group is higher than control group.

3.1.1. Comparing the two means

In this section, the mean scores for the two independent groups drawn from the population are compared. The experimental group has undergone a special instruction, i.e. critical reading approach based on CDA, whereas the control group has not received the same treatment. A comparison is to be made between the means of the two groups to see whether or not the instruction results in higher scores in the experimental group and thus be an indication that critical reading approach plays a significant role in EFL learner's reading comprehension. The level of significance chosen is .05. The results of running independent T Test are shown in Table 4.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.390</td>
<td>2.372</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>2.08000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance >.05

3.2. Discussion

The present study was implemented in one of the high schools in Kermanshah province in Iran. In this high school, like all other high schools in Iran, reading is taught traditionally. It means reading is viewed as a skill that emphasizes memorizing vocabulary
items and grammar and training in language skills, and educational system, teachers, students and texts regard reading as decoding the meaning.

As an English teacher, I noticed that educational system takes for granted some crucial concepts such as issues of power structure, hegemony, critical awareness and critical literacy, and its dominant goal is grammatical and syntactical correctness. I was bored by a curriculum that put a strong emphasis on grammar and paid little attention to critical thinking and multiple ways of knowing. I questioned how I could work towards a curriculum that its goal is putting emphasis on social justice and critical reading because literature shows that reading is not just decoding of meaning (Hood, Solomon and Burns, 1996), but it is a social act (Wallace, 2005).

Actually, in recent years, researchers have done studies regarding the effectiveness of incorporating critical issues in the curriculum. Researchers hold that curriculum, teaching, all literacy programs, language education and educators must help students explore issues of equity and justice and help their students develop a language of critique (Michell, 2006; Haig, 2000; Gilbert, 1997; Behrman, 2006; Banks, 1988; Wallace, 2005). I, as a teacher, challenged the literacy program's ignorance toward critical issues and like all these researchers, tried to explore the effectiveness of teaching critical reading on my students.

I believed that I should trust my students and their abilities to be critical thinkers and critical readers and don't underestimate their potentiality in evaluating and criticizing texts because many teachers and researchers have done work to demonstrate how critical literacy can work within classrooms of all age and ability levels (Jewett and Smith, 2003; Morrell, 2004; Bean and Moni, 2003; Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Johnson & Ciancio, 2003).

Both the observations that I had from my classroom and exposure to alternative viewpoints in M.A. coursework, guided me to question curriculum and educational system and also my own teaching practices and implement critical reading practices in my own classroom, because according to Pietrandrea (2000) even working within a mandated curriculum, teachers can effectively create space for a critical literacy curriculum and critical literacy practices should be integral into the school classroom (Stribling, 2008; Appleman, 2000; Morgan, 1997; Comber, 2001a; Kempe, 2001; O'Brien, 2001).

It is not just the educational system that ignores incorporating social issues into the English classes. English teachers, also, don't teach students how to be critical thinkers. At first I thought it may be difficult to teach reading critically, because I had been taught with teachers that taught reading traditionally and also my students had been taught reading traditionally.

But, as the result of the study shows, this critical aspect should be the main concern of English language teachers, and literature shows that it is necessary for teachers to teach students critically, involve them in focused discussions, let them challenge their assumptions, develop a critical perspective, argue, debate and take risk in their thinking and learning (Dignazio, 1997; Banks, 1988; Lewis, 1992; Wallace, 1992; Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Singer & Shagoury, 2005; Michell, 2006; Gee, 1992; Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006; Leland & Hartse, 2000; Pietrandrea, 2008; Cots ;2006; Freire, 1970).

So, I as a teacher, admitting the crucial role of teachers in teaching critical thinking skills and critical reading, implemented critical reading and the results was in line with the ideas of other researchers in the literature. In the experimental class, each student had a voice and was responsible for her own learning. They engaged in critical reading, problematized the status quo, deconstructed and analyzed the texts, and employed problem solving through meaningful discussions and practiced critical reading approach. They had to be able to take part in discussions, identify the presented arguments and evaluate them, and to see how ideas have developed over time.
In the English classroom, students were given the opportunity to think critically about language and question author's intents. My interpretation of student's responses was that they were capable to deal with critical reading. They had space to discuss in-class experiences with critical lenses and classroom reading engagements, in order to investigate the social structures and equity issues, because many researchers believe that learners need practice to learn to develop skills to identify non-neutral aspect of language and question the social, political, and ideological elements in texts (Brown, 1999; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Duzer & Florez, 1999; Hood, Solomon and Burns, 1996; Pietrandrea, 2008; Freidman, 1980; Gilbert, 1997; Falkenstein, 2003; Kress, 2007).

The result showed that they could read with a suspicious eye (Wallace, 1995), be text analyst (Luke, 2000), “text-resistant” (Hammond and Macken-Horarik, 1999), become problem-posers (Gilbert, 1997) and examine the power relationships inherent in language use (Lankshear, 1997; Morgan, 1997).

Regarding using the appropriate texts in critical reading class, there are two viewpoints. I believe critical reading can be done with any text. What is important is not the text, but the exercises that are in the texts and the way they are taught. I questioned the appropriateness of the exercises already in use in the high school texts, as it doesn’t require students to do anything more than memorization of vocabulary items and grammatical points. The exercises just involve fill in the blanks activities, and don’t feed the minds of the learners. They actually don’t take into consideration students experiences (Falkenstein, 2003). So, I used the list of questions introduced by Cots (2006) which made my students aware of critical issues in reading and of the inappropriateness of the exercises introduced in their text books.

The results of the present study showed that teaching reading comprehension critically based on critical discourse analysis approach enhanced the reading ability of high school English learners. The literature confirms the result in that developing students’ critical awareness and critical reading increases students understanding and grammatical accuracy (Fraser, 1998; Alvermann and Xu, 2003; Michell, 2006; Brown, 1999; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996; Wallace, 2005).

I concur with researchers and argue that critical reading should go beyond textual meaning to evaluate the author’s purpose and attitudes. To make this statement more concrete in a reading classroom, the teacher may ask students to compare and contrast their own values and beliefs with those represented in the text by the author, evaluate the logic of arguments and draw analogy between what they read and the real-life world around them.

Therefore, critical reading approach based on CDA can be a useful approach in teaching reading in EFL educational program. One could think of two possible explanations for the outcome of the measurement and results of the study:

The first explanation refers to the potential differences between critical approach and traditional approach on the one hand, and other approaches mentioned in chapter two on the other hand. The second explanation is referred to the newness and attraction of the critical reading approach based on CDA.

4. Conclusion

In Iran, reading comprehension is an established requirement for all learners. Actually, one of the main objectives of teaching English in Iran is to enable students to get information from the original sources (Mirhassani and Farhady, 2005). So, implementing effective approaches in reading classes to increase learners reading comprehension ability is
of high priority and it is better to start it from high school in order that the learners become ready for bulky texts at university.

As far as the literature shows, none of the approaches to teaching reading comprehension addresses the issue of teaching reading comprehension critically based on critical discourse analysis. In this study, the researcher investigates the effect of critical reading approach based on CDA on increasing high school students reading comprehension ability. The empirical data showed that it had a positive effect on learners reading comprehension, in comparison with the traditional approach. So now we are in a position to answer the research questions:

R.Q.1: Is there any significant difference between reading comprehension ability of the group of students who received instruction through critical reading approach based on critical discourse analysis and the group who are instructed through traditional approach?

The significant value which is shown in Table 2 is .022. This led to the conclusion that there was indeed a significant difference between reading comprehension ability of the group of students who received instruction through critical approach based on CDA, i.e. experimental group, and the group who are instructed through traditional approach, i.e. traditional group.

R.Q. 2: How do the approaches affect reading comprehension?

Results of the analysis of the independent T Test showed that the learners who received instruction through critical reading approach based on critical discourse analysis scored significantly higher than the learners from the control group. This means that teaching reading texts critically can and does improve English Foreign Language high school learners reading comprehension.

Regarding the traditional approach, I should say that it had not a positive effect on increasing reading comprehension of the learners in comparison with critical approach. The reason was that students in the control class just focused on the literal meaning of the words and rote memorization of grammatical points. The activities involved mainly fill in the blanks activity and answering reading comprehension questions by using information provided in the text. There was no talk of broader issues and the texts were treated as neutral. From the discussion that I had with them they told me that the class was really boring. They wish that they had more time to talk about the lessons to their fellows and to me and ask whatever question came to their mind regarding the lessons. They also criticized the traditional approach of teaching reading and confessed that their English class is like a prison for them.

But in the experimental class, the students were engaged in critical reading, were responsible for their learning and analyzed the texts critically. They had meaningful discussions and questioned the social, political, and ideological elements in texts. Critical reading was new and interesting for them. Actually, I felt from the discussions in the class that the approach was attractive to them. One of the students confessed that she didn't know how time passed because she was totally involved with hot discussions with her classmates. They confessed that they wished their English teacher could teach them reading through critical approach, so that they can take part in debates and don’t experience uninteresting classes of traditional approach.

One important outcome of the present study was to bring into focus the fact that critical reading approach based on CDA can be viewed as an effective approach on increasing students reading comprehension.
References


