INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING (IJEPC)

www.ijepc.com

THE USE OF CONFLICT IN CRITICAL READING PRACTICES: ESL STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CRITICAL READING MODULE

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Abstract:

Critical reading is regarded by many as the most important of the four skills, and the desire to enhance the ability of ESL students to read critically is grounded in the knowledge that increased capability will give them an extra advantage in not only extracting valuable information from texts and acquiring knowledge but also in using it more effectively in their academic assignments. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully consider how to develop a module aimed at such outcomes, and this paper reports on a study that examines the opinions of a group of Malaysian undergraduate students at a Malaysian University with regard to their experience with the Critical Reading Module and to highlight the development of these ESL readers. Data for this paper was collected from a questionnaire distributed at two phases (week 1 and week 14) to sixty undergraduate students. The findings show that at the start of the research this group of Malaysian students demonstrated a lack of analytic skill. However, post-research they did show increased confidence as readers and they became more critical in their reading.

Keywords:

Critical Reading, ESL Reading Skill, Opinion

Introduction

In present-day ESL situations in Malaysia, the teaching of reading and its subsequent mastery has attracted a great deal of attention amongst ESL practitioners. On one hand, it is generally accepted that critical reading is of paramount importance to ESL students, and especially so in teaching/learning contexts that make extensive use of academic references written in English (Carell, 1988; Hillman 1990; Larking, 2017; Ya'acob, et al. 2020). The ability to read critically will enable ESL students to make greater advancement and development in all academic areas. On the other hand, however, and in spite of its importance, it has been estimated that 90% of Malaysian "students seeking (and gaining) university entrance in local universities are ill-equipped to use English for academic purposes with 44% categorised as 'weak' and 19% as 'very weak' in the language" (Mohd. Faiz Sathi Abdullah, 1992; Din, et al., 2017; Pudin, et. al. 2020). Hence, the interest in critical reading skills has been greatly aroused due to the falling standard of English language proficiency amongst Malaysian ESL learners. In view of this, there is an urgent need for Malaysian ESL students to bridge the gap between their level of reading competence and the level required for independent learning at university. This is indeed a challenging task for teachers of second language reading skills.

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A contributing factor to this situation is, as mentioned earlier, the fact that Malaysian national school leavers have not been able to master any single English language skill even after being exposed to English for at least eleven years. One explanation offered for this unfortunate circumstance is that the syllabus has given 'equal weightage' to all four language skills (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1982:47; Nair, et al. 2017;), and thus no single skill can be properly mastered. In national schools, where Malay is the medium of instruction, English is used and taught only in the English language classroom. For this reason, students in national schools, as opposed to those who go to English-medium schools, are disadvantaged in terms of contact time and opportunities to practise using the language. Against this backdrop, the decline in the standard of English that is currently being experienced in the country is hardly surprising.

In relation to this, local ESL practitioners have suggested that the acquisition of reading skills should be the main objective and given the greatest emphasis in English language teaching in Malaysia (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1982: ibid.; Kaur, 2013; Lee, et al. 2020). This may help students to be at least proficient in reading and understanding written English during their school careers.

Critical reading is a further dimension of in-depth reading, which requires that a reader does not merely accept what he/she is reading at face value. This does not necessarily mean that the reader should find fault with a text, but rather that he/she should question and judge the merit and worth of the information it contains. The use of conflict-based reading materials will develop critical reading skills. Teaching these skills would enable students to gain knowledge and information from the published media more effectively. In an ideal language teaching and learning situation both the speaking and writing skills should receive similar treatment as they are equally important tools for gaining mastery of a language. However, in

the light of time limitations and the emphasis on the implementation of the national language policy a logical and practical solution is to single out the skill (i.e. reading) that is most relevant to the present situation and to concentrate on its mastery.

Consequently, a study is needed in order to identify, and thus propose, an alternative approach to the teaching of reading skill in a Malaysian ESL context, and this current paper is motivated by that requirement. This paper reports the findings from Pre- vs. Post-Intervention Questionnaires.

Literature Review

Educators have long since recognised the importance of the role of thinking in academic reading. As long ago as the early twentieth century Huey (1908, cited by Mize 1978) noted the importance of the role played by thinking in academic reading, setting out his belief that reading should be taught as a tool "for putting the child into a vital relation to the materials to be read" and not as "an end in itself" (Mize 1978 :144). This view gained support in Britain at a time of growing concern that schools had failed to develop critical reading skills in learners. The concern is aptly expressed by the following words of Noll, cited by Ruggiero (1988 :4), in a book published in 1935 called "The Habit of Scientific Thinking: A Handbook for Teachers" where he is reported to have said that "the school has largely been concerned with imparting information to its pupils. We have always poured facts into the more or less docile pupil until he could reproduce enough of them to pass a final exam, or he could hold no more … this kind of education is not meeting the needs of the times".

There is a concern in today's educational circles that the emphasis remains on students being prepared mainly to recall and reproduce factual content, resulting in a type of literacy that emphasises "the consumption of information" (Kern, 2000 :33; Warner, 2018). Kern calls this strand of literacy enquiry 'receptive literacy'. Students are taught "the ability to understand information, facts, rules and instructions that allow individuals to function in society" (Kern, 2000:ibid.), with critical reading being seen "as an 'add-competence', a skill to be acquired when the basic structures of functional literacy are firmly in place" (Smith, 2000 :32).

This is precisely the kind of literacy that is currently being pursued in the Malaysian educational context (Manan, 2001; Hasbaini, 2017), where students who have been educated using this model of reading practices are typically good at remembering facts and can reproduce by rote what they have read or learned, but, as would be expected, have difficulty in dealing with reading which is situated as a social, critical process (Wallace 1992, 2001; Baynham 1995; Nur Azni Abdullah, 1993; Frankel, et al. 2016;) . At the opposite end of receptive literacy is what is known as critical literacy, which entails "the ability to think about and through written texts: to read not only for facts but also for intentions, to question sources, to identify other's and one's own assumptions, and to transform information for new purposes" (Kern 2000:op cit.). Thus critical literacy requires the examination and evaluation of other people's arguments and points of view as well as one's own. In this sense, critical literacy is inherently rhetorical.

The need to develop a critical approach to reading is made more imperative when one considers the additional media pressures faced by students today, resulting in a requirement

that they have the ability to critically appraise information received. Whilst modern communications and information technology provide easy access to the tools crucial for coping with many aspects of modern life, as members and consumers of 'competitive-commodity-promoting' societies of the twenty-first century, students will be bombarded with a multitude of printed materials that promote certain agendas, be they social, economic or political (Hoggart, 1998). In order to be able to fully participate in, and contribute to, a democratic society, students have to read these materials in a critical and "constructively sceptical [manner] especially when complex things are presented as though they were common sense" (Corson, 2000 :112) and be prepared and able to challenge their agenda. Others also share this view. Scholes (1985 :16), for example, states that in "an age of manipulation when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assault of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts". Thus, makes it vital for us to develop a keen critical stance.

Research has added weight to the argument that it is necessary to inculcate critical reading or critical thinking in reading. The findings of a study carried out in the United States prompted calls for critical reading to be taught at all levels of education. This 1981 study explored the effectiveness of standard methods of teaching reading in promoting higher-level cognitive processes in American junior high schools, producing results indicating that the methods used to teach reading did not equip students with the ability to undertake a critical analysis of texts studied. The findings, published in the National Assessment of Education Progress, revealed a significant disparity in the ability of students to comprehend text and their ability to summarise in their own words the structure and meaning of text written by others. Whilst 85% of students could successfully complete a multiple-choice check on comprehension, only 15% could write an acceptable summary of a paragraph they had read. The report noted that standard reading classes rarely invited learners to make an evaluative interpretation of texts. In short, the report concluded that learners generally demonstrated a lack of analytic skill (Collins, 1993).

Second-language educators have added their voices to the calls for the development of critical and analytic skills in reading, which as Wallace (1992) notes, have not generally been encouraged in 'traditional' English as a Second and Foreign language classrooms. Rather, reading has been seen as an ancillary skill that naturally developed 'when reader meets text' (ibid.). Wallace comments that EFL students are being marginalised and that the teaching being provided to them fails to place reading activity and written texts in a social context, avoids the use of texts which are controversial or provocative, and does not provide students with an interpretive methodology that addresses ideological assumptions as well as propositional meaning (ibid).

From the literature discussed so far, a description of what critical reading ought to look like is conjectured. People who read critically:
- are flexible in their approach to text
- recognise text as an artefact, a made thing, and know that they can exercise control in the matter of making it mean
- enter into the play of reading. They enter into the what-if-ness of the story, but also ask, what-if-not?
- measure the word of the text against the world of their experience and therefore

- do not take on everything they take in.
- juxtapose discourses

Teachers, on the other hand, need to become more tolerant of "conflict," or confrontation, in the classroom. They need to raise issues that create dissonance and refrain from expressing their own bias, letting the students debate and resolve problems. Although content area classroom which encourages critical thinking can promote a kind of some psychological discomfort in some students as conflicting accounts of information and ideas are argued and debated, such feelings may motivate them to resolve an issue. They need to get a feel for the debate and the conflict it involves.

Tom Fox (1990) suggests that a reading pedagogy that includes studying gender, class, and race, allows the students to explore the ways in which education and culture can silence, transform, and/or inhibit students from disclosing the selves they wish to expose in their writing. Fox suggests a teaching approach that includes focusing on teaching students how to interpret their own and other's language in these terms, and suggests that when students use these new ways to recognise the role that language plays in signalling and creating boundaries of privilege they will recognise that the effects which this role has on discoursal choices, can lead to a more democratic classroom.

Fox also points to the political advantages of such an interpretation: an understanding of how society and privilege shape literacy, and how interpreting acts of literacy can be critical and liberating for students. He is asking students to concentrate on the sources of conflict in our culture. He suggests that by examining these conflicts, students will recognise that there is a link between language and social and political struggle. And this is the question that this paper sets out to answer, i.e. whether conflict-based teaching materials help L2 learners to be more critical in their act of reading?

Methodology
This quantitative case study explored the experience and perceptions of sixty ESL undergraduates enrolled in a Critical Reading Intervention Class and also as the control group. who consented to take part in this fourteen-week project. The groups had just completed a semester-long Listening and Speaking Module and they were given the choice as to which class they registered for so that there would not be any problem of timetable clashes and this will also ensure random sampling. The students were of similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Only the experimental group was exposed to the treatment proposed by the study, i.e. critical reading, while the other was taught using the normal reading module. Due to the pandemic the class was run online via MS TEAMS and the questionnaire was distributed using Google Form.

The Intervention
These two classes met once a week and each session lasted for three hours over a period of fourteen weeks. The actual trial of the teaching materials continued for a total of fourteen weeks, with one three hour period each week. The trial started with the first unit, which was on 'Logging'. The second unit on 'Ecotourism', the third unit 'Immigration', the fourth unit 'War and Terrorism', the fifth unit 'Drug and AIDS', and the final unit, 'Women Issues'. Each unit was divided into three parts, namely pre-reading, while reading, and post reading

activities, and at least two reading passages featured in each unit. In order to support the students' language needs, an enabling language section accompanied each module.

Data Collection Method

In the first questionnaire administered in this study (prior to the delivery of the critical reading skills module and the normal mainstream module), eight open-ended questions were asked of all the participating students (sixty in total) from the control and experimental groups. This set of questions was developed to assess the learners' understanding of critical reading skills.

In the second questionnaire administered in this study (after the students had followed either the experimental module or the mainstream module), both closed, and open-ended questions were featured, since it was intended to capitalise upon the advantages offered by each as just discussed.

Regarding multiple choice questions (which were included in the post-treatment questionnaire), there is no clear consensus of the number of choices that should be presented to respondents. Obviously, there must be sufficient to fully cover the range of answers, but not so many that the distinction between them becomes blurred. For questions that measure a single variable or opinion, such as ease of use or liability, over a complete range (easy to difficult, like to dislike), many researchers (Fowler, 1995; Oppenheim, 2000) say that there should be an odd number of alternatives, since this allows a neutral or no opinion response. However, other schools of thought contend that an even number of choices is best because the neutral answer is often over-utilised, and an even number of responses forces a considered response, rather than allowing the respondent to sit on the fence. However, where a respondent really does not have an opinion, a false response may be given, thereby invalidating the data.

For this study, a six-point Likert scale was utilised in which a higher number indicated more agreement with the attitudinal statement presented, the rationale being simply that such a scale is considered to have the advantages of being easy to construct and administer, and causes no problems for respondents in understanding it (Malhotra, 1993).

The questionnaire was divided into three sections; the first two asking closed questions, and the third posing open-ended questions.

The first section aimed to secure demographic detail regarding the participants, and was comprised of nine such questions. It was envisaged that these could be used to correlate performance and satisfaction with the module among different groups of learners. One obvious argument in favour of introducing the questionnaire with demographic questions is that background questions are normally easier to answer, and can ease the respondent into the questionnaire. The second section contained 31 closed questions, and the final section consisted of four open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis of the quantitative data employed descriptive statistics and comparative techniques, in which the output from SPSS included cross-tabulations based on categories such as gender, ethnic background, age, and educational levels.

The non-parametric techniques are deemed appropriate for this study as most of the data were collected according to a nominal or categorical scale. Pearson's chi-square was employed as the main comparative statistical tool, in order to establish whether any statistically significant relationship existed between reading ability and the use of conflict in the reading texts. The two independent variables within this analysis are the experimental and control groups, and the dependent variables are these two groups' responses to the specific items of the questionnaire. A reading score of 0.05 or less on the Pearson Chi-Square is commonly interpreted by social scientists as justification for rejecting or accepting the association of two variables (Cookes and Steed, 1999:202) and this convention is adopted in the analysis and interpretation of data from this study.

Findings

Manan (2001) claims that the kind of literacy that is currently being pursued in the Malaysian educational context is very much like what Kern (2000:33) calls 'receptive literacy', where the development of reading skills primarily involves "the ability to understand information, facts, rules and instructions that allow individuals to function in society".

From the results of the study, it can be said that the majority of the students involved, i.e. the control and experimental groups (before being exposed to the CR Module) share the above assumptions, being readers who are good at remembering facts and regurgitating what they have read or learned, but less accomplished in dealing with reading which is situated as a social, critical process (Wallace 1992, 2001; Baynham 1995; Nur Azni Abdullah, 1993).

The pre-treatment questionnaire findings confirm that most students in the study had no genuine understanding of critical reading before being exposed to the CR module, reading primarily for information. The approach to a text was characterised by asking 'What information can I get out of it?', and the expectation was that this would be a truth. However, the students were well aware of their own shortcomings in this respect and when asked to rate their critical reading skill, almost all of them answered 'quite poor'.

The pre-treatment comprehension tests revealed similar findings for the experimental group, the majority of students managing to answer the 'low-order' (Carter and Long,1992) questions, and displaying the ability to make simple inferences and establish causal relationships for the 'high-order' questions depending on their available background knowledge. However, comprehension of new texts was difficult when no background knowledge existed.

A similar outcome was seen when the students were asked to articulate the connections among the pieces of evidence, and how each piece works to support the argument. More students were able do this exercise compared to before treatment, where most of them seemed to rely on 'cut and paste' and rephrasing the explanation given by the text without discussing or weighing up how the pieces of evidence support the argument. This interesting

observation also appears to suggest that this group of Malaysian students demonstrates the same lack of analytic skill as reported by research on this in Britain (Hawkins, 1992) and the United States (Collins, 1993).

The literature has much to offer in respect of the second research question. Frager and Thompson (1985: 677) suggest that when readers experience dissonance created by conflicting views, the efforts directed towards alleviating that dissonance may "well result in the activation of cognitive processes or behaviours which we call critical reading and thinking". But the degree of success for the teaching of this approach, according to Frager and Thompson (1985:678), depends very much on the 'right' reading selections because some texts are more critical reading-friendly than others. This view is not dissimilar to that of Carter and McCarthy (1995), Cooke et al (2004), and Johnson and Johnson (1995) who specifically believe that conflict through creative and constructive use of controversy can be used to encourage students' involvement in "learning, intellectual curiosity, intrinsic motivation to learn, higher achievement, and higher-level reasoning" because it is "the heart of all drama, a major tool for capturing interest and attention". To obtain the benefit from conflict, a co-operative context must be created so that students can "work together to achieve shared goals" (1995:9:3).

After attending the CR module, the students' views about reading changed, and questions were no longer perceived as having single, or even simple, answers. The students started to realise that authors draw finer and finer distinctions and that as readers they must recognise the diverse perspectives, and distinguish between social, political, and economic factors, or between personal, social, and institutional concerns. For example, prior to discussing the article on immigration, they perceived immigrants as a homogenous group, but after the treatment they began to appreciate the diversity of the cultures, the individual concerns of the various nationalities and how these factors led them to become immigrants. For the students, the act of reading involved a deeper understanding. They started to realise that, as readers, they must recognise and appreciate alternative understandings and perspectives, and that they must distinguish between fact, opinion, and belief. This finding seems to reflect the same observations as the research discussed above and confirm that 'conflict-based teaching materials do help L2 learners to be more critical in their act of reading'.

Discussion
Therefore the objectives of the research have been achieved, i.e.:
- to design a module using conflict-based teaching materials to help teachers at university level develop a useful approach for fostering students' critical reading and reasoning abilities.
- to discover whether the approach has any impact on the learners and, if it has, what kind of impact.

To read critically is to make judgements about how a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring the reader to 'stand back' and gain some distance from the text he/she is reading. The employment of controversial issues assists the students to acquire critical reading skills by, in pedagogic terms, helping the students choose a stand with regard to a controversial topic. This involves researching and preparing a position, presenting and supporting one's position, refuting differing stances and rebutting attacks on one's own,

swapping perspectives and creating a synthesis that most if not all group members can agree with.

When asked about the use of conflicts or controversial issues in the reading classes, both groups of students believed that the approach was helpful in developing critical reading skills, the majority believing that controversial issues not only help make reading activity more interesting, but also teach them to view the issues with a positive and open mind, so that they are able to debate. However, issues concerning religion, politics and race were not considered suitable for classroom discussions. During a class discussion on immigration issues for example, the Sabahan students became very emotional and defensive, especially when students from the peninsula questioned why they required a permit to enter and remain in Sabah for an approved duration, when Sabahans were not subjected to the same inconvenient process when entering the peninsula.

An equivalent phenomenon is described by a few researchers (Carrell and Eisterhold,1988; Yousef, et al. 2014; Ali, et al. 2015; Joynes, et al. 2019) about culture-specific values that can be a significant source of problems in comprehension when the values expressed by the text differ from those held by the reader.

In this connection, it was also interesting to observe the students' uncertainty with regard to whether they would be more involved in classroom discussions if the teacher utilised controversial issues in the classroom. Such reservations might result from a reluctance to deal with controversial issues, or may just as easily reflect of lack of confidence in their use of the English language itself, which could be the underlying basis of difficulty with reading-related skills. What frequently happens in L2 classes, which are generally large, is that when the answers to comprehension tasks are given orally, the activity is dominated by the small minority of the better students, and frustration causes the weaker students to opt out of more and more reading activities, knowing that they would not have time to complete them and most likely would not be asked to answer. So the gap between the few best students and the silent majority widens steadily.

This is further supported by the analysis of students' text, from which it is obvious that before the treatment, the students have problems with the language, as evidenced by their replication of sentences from the text. This not surprising because the mean for the pre- and post-tests marks shows the control group's mean for the pre-test is 50.7333 and the post-test is 51.3667; while the experimental group's mean for the pre-test is 48.5333 and the post-test is 50.7000. The pass mark for the test is 40 marks, which means that the level for both of the groups is lower intermediate.

The researcher realised this problem and the approach adopted was to focus on the content of students' efforts, because he felt that his objective was to develop the skills involved in text comprehension. He also believed that if reading activities were to be motivating and worthwhile, they should ensure the participation of the whole class. Another strategy that was employed by the researcher was to get a number of different students, weak as well as strong; to give their answers, and to refrain from evaluating the answers until several students had been given the chance to contribute. He realised that if he were to give immediate approval to the answer of a particular student, the students would begin to think that all other answers

must be wrong. But this does not mean that the researcher was ruling out attention to correctness. He attended to, for example, linguistic features of a text at a later stage, usually with the students' written answers. An example was asking some of the students to write their answers on the board. While going through the answers the researcher would ask the class to suggest ways of improving the answers. It was at this stage that attention was paid to correctness of expression as well as to the content of the answers. By reviewing and pointing out friends' mistakes, students gained practice in monitoring the written answers.

Conclusion

The pre-treatment comprehension tests revealed similar findings for the experimental group, the majority of students managing to answer the 'low-order' (Carter and Long, 1992; Shahrill & Mundia, 2014; Freahat & Smadi, 2014; Magaji, 2021) questions, and displaying the ability to make simple inferences and establish causal relationships for the 'high-order' questions depending on their available background knowledge. However, comprehension of new texts was difficult when no background knowledge existed.

A similar outcome was seen when the students were asked to articulate the connections between the pieces of evidence, and how each piece worked to support the argument. More students were able to do this exercise compared to before the treatment, where most of them seemed to rely on 'cut and paste' and rephrasing the explanation given by the text without discussing or weighing up how the pieces of evidence support the argument.

This interesting observation also means that this group of Malaysian students demonstrated the same lack of analytic skill as shown by research in Britain (Hawkins, 1992) and the United States (Collins, 1993).

After attending the CR module, the students' views about reading seems changed, and questions were no longer perceived as having single, or even simple, answers. The students began to realise that authors drew finer and finer distinctions and that as readers they must recognise the diverse perspectives, and distinguish between social, political, and economic factors, or between personal, social, and institutional concerns. For example, prior to discussing the article on immigration, they perceived immigrants as a homogenous group, but after the treatment they began to appreciate the diversity of the cultures, the individual concerns of the various nationalities and how these factors led them to become immigrants. This is a highly reflective skill requiring the reader to 'stand back' and gain some distance from the text he/she is reading. For the students, the act of reading involved a deeper understanding. They began to realise that, as readers, they must recognise and appreciate alternative understandings and perspectives, and that they must distinguish between fact, opinion, and belief.

Carter and McCarthy (1995), Cooke, Wallace, and Shrubsnall (2004), Johnson and Johnson (2015) and Tan (2021) who specifically believe that conflict through creative and constructive use of controversy can be used to encourage students' involvement in "learning, intellectual curiosity, intrinsic motivation to learn, higher achievement, and higher-level reasoning" because it is "the heart of all drama, a major tool for capturing interest and attention". To obtain the benefit from conflict, a co-operative context must be created so that students can "work together to achieve shared goals" (Carter and McCarthy, 1995:9).

This finding seems to reflect the same observations as the research discussed above and offers evidence that the L2 learners do show increased confidence as readers, in that they became more critical in their reading as the conflict based reading materials encouraged the students to choose a stand in regard to a controversial issue.

Acknowledgements

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