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Encouraging Critical Reading in the EFL Classroom

Some years ago while my EFL class was doing a reading comprehension activity, I noticed a student doing some calculations on a notepad. I asked him why he was doing his math homework instead of reading the text, and he replied that he had answered 124 true-false statements that week in English, history, geography, science, and Portuguese classes. "That's 496 a month," he added. I marveled that my student had bothered to count how many times he had done such exercises during the week, and since that incident, I have reconsidered the value of this type of reading activity if our goal is to make our students critical readers.

A quick search of a few EFL textbooks showed me that the most frequent types of reading comprehension exercises involve multiple choice items, true-false statements, and vocabulary work of the type that requires students to supply a synonym or antonym for the words given. These tasks have their merits: they make it easy for teachers to check whether their students understand the text at some superficial level, and because they have only one correct answer, they are also easy to mark. However, there are reasons why they should not be used as the *only* kind of reading activity in the classroom. First, as Davies (1995) points out, they encourage passive reading behavior: to find the answer to a question, students have to locate the information in the text. Second, as Tomitch (2000) argues, such tasks do not encourage students to read between the lines or question the veracity and source of the information contained in the text. Third, these tasks generally refer only to parts of the text, not to the text as a whole. Finally, such tasks are neither challenging nor fun, especially for young learners.

The aim of this article is to present, through a sample reading lesson, alternative possibilities for reading activities which, besides being more interesting for students, can help them become more active, and more critical readers.

Active vs. passive reading tasks

Davies (1995) groups reading activities into two kinds: passive and active. Passive reading tasks include silent reading to respond to multiple choice exercises, superficial comprehension questions, gap filling exercises, true-false statements, vocabulary, and dictionary work. Such tasks involve silent reading and they do not require students to read deeply to answer the questions, as once students locate the information in the text, they are likely to find the "correct" answer. Thus, these tasks offer limited potential for learning.

Active reading tasks, on the other hand, require students to go beyond a superficial reading of the text to read "between the lines." The tasks typically involve students working together in pairs or groups, with or without guidance from the teacher, in order to negotiate answers to questions. Tasks considered active may include creating diagrams and filling in tables. Grabe (1997, 6) presents strong evidence that by making use of diagrams and tables when reading texts, students can better understand the coherence and logic of the information being presented, and as a consequence, "will be able to locate the main ideas and distinguish them from less important information." The effort to teach students how to make graphic representations of texts can be time-consuming, but it can help them become more efficient readers.

Book reviews, summary writing, and note-taking are other kinds of active reading tasks mentioned in Davies (1995). These require students to work individually with guidelines from the teacher.

Active reading tasks have the fundamental advantage that they enable students to interact with the text and each other. During pair or group work students are actively communicating with one another and have an opportunity to raise questions. The teacher plays the role of facilitator, rather than inquisitor, and if deemed desirable, can even participate in the group discussion. Depending on each student's background, there may be different interpretations of the text. However, this fact will only make the discussion more interesting as each student makes his or her hypothesis explicit and tests it against the evidence offered by the text.

Further, with active reading tasks, there is less of a tendency by students to accept texts at face value or to assume that the printed word has to be true. Active reading tasks encourage readers to voice their own opinions about the text and discuss those opinions with other students and the teacher. Another advantage of such tasks is that they contextualize reading; that is, they allow the readers to see the text as part of a broader social context that includes the writer and the readers (Tomitch 2000).

Improving critical reading: a case study

This section describes critical reading activities used with a group of eight advanced university students in Brazil who had been studying English for about five years. In my search for authentic materials for my students, I heeded the advice of Huckin (1997), who counsels teachers to consider students' age and interests so that the lesson will be more relevant to their experience and thus more profitable. Huckin (1997) emphasizes the importance of assigning reading material that pertains to a subject and culture with which students are familiar. Such material can often be found in English-language newspapers and magazines that deal with topics of local interest.

As Brown (1994) suggests, there should be three phases to the teaching of reading. The first phase is *pre-reading discussion,* which involves introducing the topic and preparing students for the text. The second phase includes *while-reading tasks,* in which students are provided with a set of instructions to give them a purpose for reading and to serve as a guide for them as they read. The third phase includes *post-reading exercises,* in which students are given short comprehension questions, vocabulary work, opportunity for discussion of the topic and the author's reasoning, and/or a summary writing assignment.

My students were provided with a copy of a newspaper article appropriate to their age and interests. As a warm-up activity, we discussed the kinds of Portuguese and English-language newspapers and magazines found in Brazil and the typical readers of such publications. This discussion was based on Huckin's observation (1997, 85) that it is best to begin an analysis of a newspaper or magazine article by "trying to put oneself in the reader's position, that is, by imagining a typical reader and how he or she might typically deal with this text."

After the warm-up activity, I asked students to read the headline and the first sentence of the

text and try to predict what the article would be about. The aim of this activity is to activate their background knowledge, one of the reading strategies described in Alderson (1984). By doing this, I could also elicit from students their opinions on the issue discussed in the reading. I did not tell students what the text would be about because I did not want to influence them in any way.

As a pre-reading activity, the students were asked to prepare in groups two questions they thought would be answered in the text. Tomitch (2000) calls this technique "ReQuest," which stands for *reciprocal questioning.* The questions provide students with a purpose for reading. The students wrote their questions on slips of paper, which were collected and reproduced on the blackboard. The technique was motivating for my students because they had become accustomed to the routine of answering comprehension questions prepared by the textbook writer.

The while-reading activity required the students to read the article for the purpose of answering the questions they had raised. In fact, not all of the students' questions were answered in the article. We then discussed the reasons why the author did not include the details the students might have expected, based on their questions. If none of the answers for the students' questions could be found in the article, this generated more discussion as we tried to guess the answers from the students' knowledge of the issue discussed in the text. When reading a text, students should be aware that the details omitted are often as important as those included, since omissions may tell the reader something about an author's bias. Identifying bias in texts should be an essential part of a reading lesson aimed at developing critical reading skills.

As a post-reading activity, I wrote on the board three questions, which had to do with the author's choice of verb tenses and words used in the text. Below are the three questions. (For a list of other questions designed to help students develop critical reading skills, see the Appendix.)

1. What verb tenses are used in the article?
2. Which subjects are described using the passive or active voice and why?
3. What purpose do the metaphors serve in the text?

One purpose for these questions is to help students read more critically and consider whether the article was meant to inform, influence, or merely entertain readers.

To discuss such questions students have to rely on their own experience as readers of newspapers in their own language as they are familiar with the language and the genre of newspaper articles. At this point the teacher and students can discuss the structure of newspaper articles. Typically the information presented first will be interpreted by most readers as more important and whatever appears last will be considered least important (Huckin 1997).

An analysis of verb tenses and voice provides students with the opportunity to discuss the author's purpose in choosing the particular tense or voice he or she did. For example, a text written in the indicative mood and simple past tense, the same modality of historical discourse, tends to report events in chronological order, implying that the issues described in the article are facts, absolute truths, and not amenable to discussion or negotiation. But this may not be the case. Likewise, the use of the passive voice can emphasize the facts reported but at the same time minimize the role of the participants in the events. Students need to consider the significance of such choices.

Although news reporting discourse is supposed to be objective, the use of emotional language and metaphors can show an author's bias (Huckin 1997). Metaphors can serve the purpose of highlighting or trivializing a participant's actions in a reported incident, so working with metaphors found in newspaper and magazine articles can be a rich source of group discussion in a reading class and can contribute to critical reading.

After discussing the questions, the students, working in pairs, were asked to write a summary of the article. As summary writing is a difficult task, the teacher should offer students some advice on how to write one. After brainstorming in pairs about the qualities of a good summary, the students decided the summary should consist of short statements of the main ideas of the text in coherent, well-linked sentences and that it would be inappropriate to copy words from the text, especially those that appeal emotionally to readers. I then wrote on the board the following list of guidelines for summary writing, which are based on Bell and Gower (2000):

- After getting the general meaning of the text, decide what the aim of each paragraph is.
- Decide which parts of the article you can ignore (e.g., details, personal opinions, quotes), and underline the main points to be included in your summary.
- Make notes of the important points in your own words and put them in a logical order.
- Write the first draft.
- Check for mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary.
- Check if the length is appropriate and if you included all important information.

After writing their summaries, the students exchanged them with their classmates. They observed that even when all of the main ideas were included in the summaries, there were a variety of possible interpretations, each based on the particular student's perspective on the text. This generated more group discussion as students agreed or disagreed with their friends' interpretations of the text. It was important for the students to realize that writing is never totally objective and that the critical reader can always find something of the writer's bias or particular point of view in a text. From this summary writing exercise, students discovered that multiple interpretations are acceptable and, indeed, should be encouraged in a reading class that aims to develop critical reading skills.

Conclusion

The major benefit of the lesson on critical reading described here was the high level of enthusiastic student participation. This was attributable to some extent to the novelty of the task they performed: coming up with questions they thought would be answered in the text, rather than trying to answer superficial comprehension questions or true-false statements prepared by the textbook writer.

Students pointed out during the feedback part of the lesson that, although they were fluent readers in L1 and L2, they felt they had tended to accept printed material at face value, without questioning the veracity or bias of the text. Students also said that they considered themselves critical readers in Portuguese. However, when reading EFL texts, they felt they needed help from the teacher to read "between the lines" or to question the message the author was trying to convey.

Although developing critical reading skills can be time-consuming and difficult for EFL students, it can be accomplished with practice, and it is worth the effort. As Wallace (1992, 80) points out, the way to work with texts in EFL reading classes should "help EFL readers feel they have options in the way they choose to read the text and to help them feel in a more equal relationship with the writer."

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General questions for the analysis of the text

1. Where and when was the text written?
2. Why was it written?
3. What is the text about?
4. Who is the text addressed to? Who are its probable readers?
5. What genre is the text?
6. Does the author establish an interactive, friendly relationship with the readers or is he/she distant, formal, and impersonal?
7. Are there elements of promotional discourse, such as positive evaluative words?

Lexical choice

1. What kind of vocabulary predominates in the text? (Are there formal, technical words or informal and colloquial expressions?)
2. Does the vocabulary appeal to emotions, or is it logical and argumentative?
3. Are there words that are ideologically significant?
4. What metaphors are used? What purposes do they serve in the text?

Grammar

1. What verb tenses are used and why?
2. Which subjects are described using the passive or active voice and why?
3. Are the agents of the actions explicit or implicit?

Visual elements

1. What visual resources are used besides the text (colors, symbols, figures)?
2. In what ways do the illustrations relate to the text?
3. What sociocultural aspects can be identified in the visual signs?

Gender issues

1. Does the text contain signs of asymmetry in male-female relationships?
2. Are there traces of sexism?
3. Are there signs of stereotyped attitudes?

(Adapted from Heberle 2000, 131–33)