

## ELEŞTİREL OKUMA, ANAHTAR KAVRAMLARI VE YABANCI DİL EĞİTİMİNDEKİ ÖNEMİ

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CRITICAL READING, ITS KEY CONCEPTS,  
AND IMPORTANCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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### Özet

*Bu alanyazın taraması eleştirel okumanın ne olduğu, ilkeleri, pedagojik yönleri, ve yabancı dil okuyucuları için neden önemli olduğu konularında bir anlayış sunmaya çalışacaktır. Eleştirel okuma yaklaşımı okuma becerisine son zamanlardaki yaklaşımlardan biridir. Metinde yatan gizli anlamları (hidden meanings) tam olarak anlamak için okuyucuların metinle meşgul olmalarını ve metni kullanmalarını ileri sürer. Eleştirel okumanın yabancı dil eğitimi için önemi bu okuma modeli yabancı dilde okuyanları okuma eylemi esnasında yeni bir kültürü öğrendikleri için metinlere uzak kalmada daha iyi bir durumda görmesidir.*

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Eleştirel Okuma, Eleştiri için Metni Kullanım, Eleştirel Konuşma, Yabancı Dil Eğitimi, Yabancı Dilde Okuma.*

### Abstract

*This literature review will try to provide an understanding of what critical reading is, what its principles are, what its pedagogical aspects are, and why it is important for the readers of a foreign language. Critical reading approach is one of the recent approaches to reading skill. It puts forward the readers' engagement and using the text to fully comprehend the hidden meanings which lies in the text. The importance of critical reading for foreign language education is that this model of reading sees foreign language readers in a better position to stay distant to the texts since they learn about a new culture during reading activity.*

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*Key words: Critical Reading, Using the Text for Critique, Critical Talk, Foreign Language Education, Reading in a Foreign Language.*

### **1. Introduction**

Reading in a language, either first language (L1) or second language (L2), is a complex phenomenon in that the reader, during reading, carries out various processes. There have been many studies that try to shed light on this inevitable skill of life, which caused the existence of a great accumulation of information on this process. Hence, there appeared different approaches, models, definitions, and types of reading. Critical reading is one of the recent influential approaches. This present literature review aims to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on critical reading, with a focus on its strengths, and to provide the readers with a bibliography of the studies available on critical reading.

#### **1.1. Definitions of Critical Reading**

Among various definitions of critical reading, there have been two different perspectives: one equates critical reading to critical thinking and the other dwells upon critical discourse analysis. The first perspective of critical reading has been criticized as being a weak one and only considering the logical anomalies texts and in arguments of all kinds (Wallace 2003). This study deals with the second perspective and definitions in line with this one are provided. Wilson, Devereux, Macken-Horarik, & Trimmingham-Jack (2004) defines critical reading as "engaging in dialogue with texts- both listening to the voices of the text and responding to them." McDonald (2004) states that "critical ways of reading are intended to construct readers who, for example, can identify texts as crafted objects, who are alert to the values and interests espoused by the text, who recognize their position as compliant or resistant readers" (p. 18). Wallace's (2003) definition is "we might want to call 'critical reading' not 'reading' in the usually understood sense at all, ..... and talk of *using* a text rather than reading it" (p. 44). Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico (2001) views critical reading as a process, and its definition is "critical reading is the process of evaluating the authenticity and validity of material and of formulating an opinion about it."

## 1.2. Rationale for Critical Reading

McDonald (2004) expresses that critical reading stems from the poststructuralist views of reading. This view claims that the subjectivity of the reader is combined with the text when the personal experiences of the reader are integrated with the experiences of the characters. If the reader is positioned by the text, the text's discourses remain hidden and a true critique is difficult (p. 17). Critical reading has its roots in the seminal work of Halliday, "Systemic Functional Grammar" (1994) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Finch (2005) states that Halliday sees language as a semantic system, that is to say, a system for expressing meanings. The user of the language system is presented both syntactic and semantic choices at every level of the system. These choices are made within a particular context which contains three crucial functions; ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These functions are performed by language (pp. 88-92). Halliday (1994), also sees text as 'an interactive process and a social exchange of meanings' which are consequences of these functions. This model of language and the notion of "text in context" of CDA is the basis of critical reading perspective. Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000) explains that CDA sees discourse as "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned". It also states that "discourse is an opaque power object in modern societies and CDA aims to make it more visible and transparent" (p. 448). Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) defines critical literacy, one aspect of CDA, broadly as "the ability to engage critically and analytically with ways in knowledge, and ways of thinking about and valuing this knowledge, are constructed in and through written texts" (p. 529).

Critical reading is seen as an orientation to reading task (Wallace, 2003, p. 22). As readers of a text are both individuals and members of a society, they bring with them sociocultural and individual resources to the reading task. Schema theory, which mainly focuses on text processing as related to readers' prior knowledge, (Singhal, 2006, p. 11) best explains this phenomenon. As developed by Anderson et al. (1984, pp. 243-258), it proposes that "abstract concepts are best understood after a foundation of concrete, relevant information has been established. However, unlike the other approaches of reading, critical reading favors "schema changing rather than schema confirming" which is one of the key principles of critical reading approach (Wallace, 2003, p. 23).

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Critical reading emphasizes the social, interpretative, active, and critical aspects of reading as a process not just as a skill. This orientation of reading and its components have a social nature. The author of a text is a member of a religious, academic, and professional community. Texts have a crucial role in critical reading pedagogy. They are seen as the subjective products of society. They have the potential power "to change the malleable reader, for good or for bad" (Smith, 1999). For Wallace (2003, p. 25) texts are "the outcomes of the social collaboration and they are social and cultural artifacts." Wray & Lewis (1997) (as cited in Smith, 1999) states that texts are located in a particular set of social practices and understandings. They comprise choices. This study also claims that these choices, particular social understandings and values underlying texts should be explicitly investigated through critical reading. Readers, also during the reading activity are members of the social interpretative communities. Hence, it must be noted that every reader comes to the reading task with his/her own agenda, cultural identities, and social roles.

### **2. Key Concepts in Critical Reading**

#### **2.1. Critical Talk and Interpretation**

Critical reading has a dialogic nature. The critical reader communicates with not only the text but also the author of the text. Critical reading proposes readers' interaction with the text instead of a view of reading as extracting meaning from the text. Another kind of interaction is carried out between the readers themselves which is a crucial component of critical reading pedagogy. Wallace (1999, pp. 58-60) calls this interaction 'critical talk.' It has a key role in better understanding of written texts. In critical talk the textual meaning is not treated as fixed and autonomous, on the contrary, it is open to negotiation of the participants. She describes its features as follows: "it offers distance on present attitudes and beliefs; it is discursive and exploratory rather than affective; it is mutually constructed in the classroom community". Therefore, critical talk helps students stay distant to their own feelings, beliefs, and views through which resistance to texts is achieved. By being expository and exploratory, critical talk deals with facts and truth. Also, it should be noted that critical talk is achieved by the participation of the readers and the teacher which means it is co-authored. Through this critical talk about a text critical reading enhances mutual empowerment. Talk around a text by the young

readers with an adult provides an enrichment of their interpretative skills and adult readers' talk has the power of leading them to future reading and rethinking of the texts read before.

Interpretation is considered indispensable in this orientation to reading. Wallace (2003, p. 24) defines interpretation as "a revisiting of initial response in the light of textual scrutiny and peer group discussion." For her, as some readers have more knowledge of the language, that is to say, richer lexical knowledge or familiarity with the structure, they are in a better position to present legitimate responses. Hence, interpretation of a text is carried with the peers and a teacher in the classroom and it can take place with the family members and friends outside the classroom.

## **2.2. Resistance to Texts**

An inevitable aspect of critical reading is 'resistance to texts' which does not mean opposition. For Molden (2007, p. 50) when somebody starts the act of writing a text, s/he has at least a purpose in mind. His/her purpose can be for informing, explaining, exploring, persuading, or a combination of some or all of them. The writer will try to have the reader see from the same perspective. The necessity for resistance to texts lies in the critical discourse analysts' view of text as a means to state power relations and ideology. Therefore, the reader should be at a distant position to the text (Wallace, 2003, p. 45). Another study by Wallace (1995, p. 341) states "resistance – a preparedness to challenge – is indeed the *raison d'être* of critical reading." Through resistance to the texts, the reader can achieve to deconstruct and analyze the text, to determine the underlying ideology, to understand the hidden grammar lying beneath the text, which cause him to be more powerful than the text. Through these processes, the reader prevents himself from being controlled by the text. Finally, the reader reaches a better understanding of the world (Smith, 1999). However, being at a distance or resistance to the text does not imply disengaging but engaging with a suspicious eye.

## **2.3. Consciousness**

One of the key concepts in critical reading is consciousness. However, this concept of consciousness is different in that it does not propose just

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'noticing' but it asserts depth of noticing or a closer awareness of the text. Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar proposes that although there are some elements of grammar which are open to our consciousness, there are some elements whose meanings are concealed in the text. He calls these elements "cryptogrammar" which contains "transitivity patterns, the grammatical metaphors and so on" (Halliday, 2003, p. 126). For Wallace (2003) one goal of critical reading pedagogy is to make the readers be aware of these hidden elements. She also states in the same work that this concept of consciousness is the reverse of the term of conventional reading theories 'automaticity' which is favored as being the indication of advances in reading. Also, we should bear in mind that consciousness will help resistance to text and critical talk.

### **3. Pedagogical Aspects of Critical Reading**

#### **3.1. The Audience for the Critical Reading**

"Who is the audience for the critical reading?" is an important issue to be addressed. The audience for this orientation of reading is the readers of both of L1 and L2 either novice or skilled at the elementary or advanced level. L2 readers have complex and interwoven identities. They are not regarded as disadvantaged because of their inadequate linguistic proficiency but they have a disadvantage as they are assumed to lack cultural competence which is necessary to comprehend the texts written for native speakers. This disadvantage can be overcome by providing them with access to cultural meanings. L2 or foreign language students are seen advantageous as they are getting acquainted with a new culture through the texts. They can stay more resistant to the texts. Their another important advantage is that they have the knowledge of the language which Wallace (1992) calls it 'metalanguage.' In other words, they learn the grammar of the language by categorizing the elements such as 'pronoun, subject, object, verb, and etc.'

Hedge (2003, p. 205) claims the necessity for "taking a critical stance to the contents of the texts" as one of the learning goals that a reading activity is to include. Alyousef (2005, p. 147) citing this goal suggests that this goal can be implemented at an advanced level as the advanced learners are at a better position in that not only have they more knowledge about the world they live

in but also they are linguistically more competent. Nevertheless, there have been some studies which try to investigate the role of critical reading at different levels other than advanced level some examples of which are Smith (1999) and McDonald (2004).

### 3.2. Critical Questions

In order to develop a critical perspective of the texts, various authors made suggestions about the critical questions which can be asked during the practice of critical reading. These critical questions may serve to have a better understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic features of the texts. Likewise, they may help the reader to reveal and grasp the concealed meanings in the texts. Clarke and Silberstein (1979) as cited in Hedge (2003, p. 213) suggests some sample questions:

'For what purpose and for what audience is this intended?' 'What knowledge and attitudes does the author presume of the audience?' 'Are you convinced by the evidence presented by the author to support the claims made?' 'Does your own experience support the conclusions reached by the author?' and 'Do you share the author's point of view?'

Wallace (2003, p. 115) lists the questions guiding the critical reading course which she calls "orientating questions," and they were adapted from Kress (1985). These are as follows:

'Why has the text been written?'

'To whom is the text addressed?'

'What is the topic?'

'How is the topic written about?'

'What other ways of writing about the topic are there?'

Molden (2007) gives a more comprehensive list of critical questions which were modified from McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004). This list is provided below as they are thought to be beneficial to the critical reading practitioners during the critical reading classes to have their students analyze the text in a better way:

What is this text about? How do we know?

Who would be most likely to read and/or view this text and why?

Why are we reading and/or viewing this text?

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- What does the composer of the text want us to know?
- What are the structures and features of the text?
- What sort of genre does the text belong to?
- What do the images suggest?
- What do the words suggest?
- What kind of language is used in the text?
- How are children, teenagers or young adults constructed in this text?
- How are adults constructed in this text?
- Why has the composer of the text represented the characters in a particular way?
- Are there 'gaps' and 'silences' in the text?
- Who is missing from the text?
- What has been left out of the text?
- What questions about itself does the text not raise?
- In whose interest is the text?
- Who benefits from the text?
- Is the text fair?
- What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?
- Which positions, voices and interests are at play in the text?
- How is the reader or viewer positioned in relation to the composer of the text?
- How does the text depict age, gender and/or cultural groups?
- How does the text construct a version of reality?
- Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?
- Who is allowed to speak? Who is quoted?
- Why is the text written the way it is?
- Whose view: whose reality?
- What view of the world is the text presenting?
- What kinds of social realities does the text portray?
- What is real in the text?
- How would the text be different if it were told in another time, place or culture?
- What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text?
- What view of the world and values does the composer of the text assume that the reader/viewer holds? How do we know?



- What different interpretations of the text are possible?
- How do contextual factors influence how the text is interpreted?
- How does the text mean?
- How else could the text have been written?
- How does the text rely on inter-textuality to create its meaning?

#### **4. Contributions of Critical Reading to Foreign Language Education**

Wallace (2003) centers her claims about possible contributions of critical reading to foreign language learners around three major points:

I. Critical reading, although its primary focus is not on formal language development, provides readers with chances to utilize their present linguistic resources, and to extend them concurrently through engagement in discussion with the texts.

II. Participating in the critical talk around the texts first requires precision which may enhance grammatical accuracy and general fluency.

III. Foreign language readers, especially readers of English, are able to function in a wider arena than the local through critical talk and critical literacy (pp. 198-201).

Wallace (2003) also states that critical talk which is carried around the texts during the critiquing the text also has contributions to readers. These are as follows:

I. The students offer more opinions and judgment through the use of mental process verbs, for example, 'I think', 'as far as I can see', etc.

II. They comment metacognitively on their own opinion forming and reflection.

III. The students refer directly to the value of having opinions and of being able to articulate them effectively (p. 189).

#### **5. Conclusion**

The goal of this literature review study is to provide an insight to critical reading, its key concepts, and its importance for foreign language education. It is seen that this new perspective to reading suggests students taking a critical stance, using the texts for critique through the utilization of critical questions,

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being conscious, and negotiating to understand the hidden elements in the text. These features may help students enhance their comprehension and have a better understanding of reality which is carried out through texts. Therefore, this study proposes a need for practices of critical reading. Furthermore, critical reading may offer a chance to fulfill Grabe's (1991, p. 396) statement that "students learn to read by reading." However, it should also be noted that the processes that the critical readers carry out during reading and differences of these processes with those of the conventional readers need to be investigated by further studies.

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