



## The Effect of Teaching Critical Reading Strategies on Making Advanced Iranian EFL Learners the Critical Readers

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**Abstract.** The focus of this study was to investigate whether teaching critical reading strategies had any significant effect on making advanced Iranian EFL learners the critical readers. To fulfil the purpose, 96 language learners from Mehr Mahan Gostar English institute in Sari were invited to participate in a paper-based TOEFL test. Lastly, 48 of them whom regarded as a homogenous sample of advanced EFL learners were selected to participate in the study. The instrument employed in the study included five critical reading comprehension texts selected from Critical Reading Workbook for the SAT (2006) by Green and Weiner and one supplementary material from Cambridge IELTS7. After the pretest had been administered, advanced EFL learners had 8 sessions of explicit teaching and practicing the critical reading strategies such as annotating, questioning, summarizing, and inferencing. Then, they had their posttest and finally the mean scores of critical reading pre and post-tests were compared through Paired samples t-test which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Thus, teaching critical reading strategies proved to have a significant effect on making advanced Iranian EFL learners the critical learners.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Critical Reading, Critical Reading Strategies, Critical Reader

### 1.

### TRODUCTION

IN

Learning to read is an important educational goal. For both children and adults, the ability to read opens up new worlds and opportunities. It enables us to gain new knowledge, enjoy literature, and do everyday things that are part and parcel of modern life, such as, reading the newspapers, job listings, instruction manuals, maps and so on. Because reading depends on efficient word recognition and comprehension, instruction should develop reading skills and strategies, as well as build on learners' knowledge through the use of authentic texts. Reading instruction needs to take into account different types of learners and their needs (Pang & Muaka & Bernhardt & Kamil, 2003).

In accord with Yang (2002, p.1) "Reading comprehension ability involves active, dynamic and growing process of searching for interrelationships in a text". Comprehension refers to readers' understanding of propositions\_ the basic units of meaning in the text which include words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Therefore, as long as the reader understands the meaning of a certain proposition, he/she is said to be involved in comprehension.

Based on Garner (1987), reading strategies are operationally defined as "generally deliberate, planful activities undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure" (p.50).

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Critical reading refers to a careful, active, reflective, and analytic reading. It is a skill for discovering information and ideas within a text (Kurland, 2000). Critical reading provides learners the opportunity to think about and analyze the information critically which means being able to look at the context with a wider viewpoint linked to their critical understanding and getting the chance to evaluate the context they face. It is done by critically and frequently exposing to and utilizing the new vocabularies in a meaningful way Wallace (2003).

In order to promote critical reading and higher level thinking skills in reading, a firm attempt towards developing effective strategies, techniques, and model lessons has been made. Different steps in the form of strategies which include inferencing, questioning, annotating, finding the main idea, and summarizing are adopted to fully understand a text and critically analyze it (Sousa, 2004, pp. 105-106).

According to Wallace (2003), a critical reader carries out a mental action on the word-form and makes connections between the context and his own personal knowledge to conclude the word meaning. A critical reader is able to build a bridge between the context and its vocabularies by concentrating on the process of decoding meaning from the passage through involving with text rather than just rote-reading the words.

## 2.

LI

### TERATURE REVIEW

#### A. Critical Thinking

In modern society, people frequently require communicating with complex public and political issues, make decisions, and solve problems even in everyday life. Citizens have to be able to evaluate critically what they see, hear, and read to meet their requirements efficiently and effectively. Moreover, with the great amount of printed material available in all fields in this age of “information explosion” everyone may feel overwhelmed. But often the enormous amount of information piled up on people’s desks and in their minds is of no use. Therefore, they require to read selectively, sorting out the bits and pieces that are interesting and applicable for them. In order to do so, strong critical reading and critical thinking skills are essential (Morgan & Shermis, 1989; Sanacore, 1994).

Critical thinking has been defined by various definitions (Dale, 1965; Feely Jr, 1976; Harris & Hodges, 1981). Ruggeiro (1984) defines critical thinking as “the close examination of a proposed problem’s or issue’s solution to determine both its strengths and its weaknesses. In short, it means evaluation and judgment”(p. 129). As pointed out by Ennis (1987) “Critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (P.10). It is “Disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thought” (Paul, 1992, p. 9). According to Wilson (1988) critical thinking involves predicting outcomes, formulating questions, and responding to text by the means of using one’s own values and beliefs.

Based on Commeyras (1990) “The claim that critical thinking is closely related to reading comprehension is similar to the view that reasoning is an integral part of reading”. Moreover, She declared that “Critical thinking, which involves reasoning, is the process the reader uses to determine which interpretations are consistent with textual evidence and background knowledge”(p.201). This outlook is also corroborated by others such as Colins, Brown, and Larkin (1980).

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The list of critical thinking skills frequently noted in textbooks for teaching critical thinking (Beyer, 1987, p.44; Link, 1985, p.52; Thistlethwaite, 1990, p.587) are very similar to those skills listed as critical reading skills in reading texts and try to define critical reading. Some critical thinking skills such as withholding judgement until confirming or disconfirming evidence is gathered, questioning, being flexible, inferring, predicting outcomes, recognizing bias can also be found in critical reading textbooks as some of the critical reading skills (Sheerborne, 1981). Learning to think is the primary purpose of education (John Dewey, 1916; Halpern, 2003). Based on Carroll (2007) one approach to increase student's thinking is to help students to understand the big picture about the course.

### **B. Critical Reading**

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 134) critical reading is "Reading in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs, going beyond what is said in the text".

In critical reading course, students try to understand what a text says, how it is saying, what it wants to do, and what it means as a whole. They do not read simply to discover the facts and acquire knowledge through memorizing the statements within a text. The students try to understand what a text says, how it is saying, what it wants to do, and what it means as a whole. They attempt to relate the text to their own life experiences, and find themselves in the text (Wallace, 1990).

Based on Flynn (1989), critical reading is considered as "an interactive process using several levels of thought simultaneously" (p.664). "Critical reading" is regarded as teaching the students to think while reading. It is delineated as "learning to evaluate, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on evidence"(Collins, 1989). Actually, students learn to read personally, actively, and deeply (Sweet, 1993). Critical reading described as "turning knowledge into wisdom" is one of the central skills in learning. It is the power of learning from text, to think analytically and critically. Critical reading alludes primarily to teaching the students how to analyze and develop reading and writing assignments from the viewpoint of formal, logical pattern of consistency (Popkewits & Flender, 1999).

Some regard junior high school as the best time to develop critical reading skill (Ericson, Hubler, Bean, Smith, & McKenzie, 1987). They believe that as it is known, in senior high and college most of the instruction is presented through textbooks. Therefore, students at that stage must know how to learn from text. In fact, at college their course work requires a high level of independent learning. Students will need the abilities to interpret a broad range of literature and to defend their interpretations. Efficiently to do so, the skills of questioning, making inferences, predicting outcomes, distinguishing fact from opinion, identifying an author's bias, evaluating the writer's authority, comparing and contrasting information, classifying or categorizing information, analyzing information, synthesizing information from various sources, making judgments, drawing conclusions, and making generalizations are needed. Critical reading and thinking skills are also required for studying. For example, in order to write a satisfactory summary of a reading passage, students have to be able to include enough information, to select the most essential ideas, and to be adequately specific or general. Moreover, it is necessary to have the ability to monitor the process by which they read the passage, arrive at a mental summary, verify it with the source text, write the summary, and, finally, check the written summary against the source text. Furthermore, the audience and the purpose of the summary must be considered since both affect what will be written or retained in the summary (Taylor,

1983). Of course, students need guidance to achieve active and critical reading comprehension of difficult text concepts. Teachers have to creatively combine the strategies of learning from text (Bean & Ericson, 1989).

### C. Critical reading strategies

Three of the critical readings strategies provided to the participants of this study by the means of some pamphlets, and were directly instructed to them by the researcher are fully explained here:

The first strategy used in this study was *annotating* which was explicitly taught during reading by the researcher. According to Diyanni (2002) annotating is actively reading the text while reading and marking, circling, or writing some key words, and the meaning of unknown words (synonym and antonym) and the definitions in the margin. Based on Sousa (2004) by utilizing this strategy, the learners pay attention to the unknown words and they are not ignoring the unknown words in the text. The learners should also have a pencil in hand to "annotate" their text. Signaling the main information can be found with key words or symbols in the margin. Another helpful step is writing short summaries in the margins at the end of sub-sections, and tracking or tracing steps in the process by using numbers in the margin; furthermore, the learners are allowed to write questions in the margin next to the section where the answer is, and recognize any ideas that challenge the knowledge, beliefs or attitudes of the audience. They are also allowed to note any personal experience with the reflection on the topic. Marking, circling, or underlining any words that define voice, tone, attitude or diction, and recognizing any information or evidence that defines the text's historical, biographical, or cultural context are recommended. The learners are also taught to make any associations to other sources they already have read on the issue.

The second strategy utilized by the researcher was *inferencing* which occurs after guessing. According to Laufer (1997) a learner who has learnt guessing strategies would not automatically produce correct guesses while reading. The factors, clues availability, familiarity with the clue words, and misleading clues presence will effect guessing. Based on Brown (1993) a number of learning texts and contextual factors that influence the success of L2 lexical inferencing have also been recognized in on the subject. Inferencing was one of the strategies which the researcher has used while reading. This strategy is more applied in critical reading. Reading is a holistic process which cannot be separated into discrete units. The reader is actively engaged in building meaning through interacting with the text. And the meaning inferred by the reader is affected by the context, the reader's intension for reading and the situation in which the reading occurs.

The last strategy applied in this study was *summarizing* which help the learners to self-correct through re-reading the text, checking the topic sentences, determining the main ideas, and relating passages to one another. Research on the topic has also identified a number of learning text and contextual factors that influence the success of L2 lexical inferencing (Brown, 1993). The participants first looked for chief information while their reading and then they switched to style, details, and examples in the later readings. In the case the participants were being asked to summarize a particular piece of writing or the texts, they would want to look for the main points. An important way to check the participants' understanding of the text was summarizing the text which has been read by them. By the means of summarizing a text, the participants were able to find and write down the main points of the text. They restated a summary which reflected the author's main point, purpose, intent and supporting details in their own words. Furthermore, they were also able to discard information seemed redundant or trivial from their summary on their reading assignment. Summarization promoted their understanding of the text, as they required to be able to recreate the meaning of the text in their own words.

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Summarizing made it possible for the participants to analyze and review the original text. In order to understand the material they need to read it over as many times as necessary and pay attention to the unfamiliar words at the same time.

### **D. Critical reader**

The critical readers reply to the text in their own voice, they ask questions, they connect the text to other sources, they think of examples to reinforce or challenge the text, they play with the ideas, develop or elaborate them, they associate the text to their own intention or experience (Wallace, 1995). As stated by Luke (2000), students require to take part in co-constructing meaning from the texts to truly involve with reading. Actually, good readers join the reading process with specific assumptions: that what they read will be related to a consistent whole, that it will include "layers of meaning", that the ideas being read are related to other ideas they have previously faced and are personally relevant to them (Harste, 1986 cited in Rings, 1994). Before being good readers, they look over what they are to read, noting such aspects as the title, author, and chapters, then they put this reading into a category. During reading, they ask questions, remind fascinating features of the text, and describe their experience as a reader (Rings, 1994). Rings (1994) pointed out that reading can be regarded as an interaction between the reader, the author, and the text.

### **3.**

### **M**

#### **ETHODOLOGY**

This study has examined the effect of teaching critical reading strategies on making advanced Iranian EFL Learners the critical readers, and it has tried to answer the following research question:

Does teaching critical reading strategies have any significant effect on making advanced Iranian EFL learners the critical readers?

#### **A. Participants**

The learners' English proficiency level was the first criterion for choosing the participants. First, 96 language learners from Mehr Mahan Gostar English institute in Sari were invited to participate in a paper-based TOEFL test (Paper-Based TOEFL Practice Test, 2003) in three phases. The researchers selected the participants who passed the TOEFL exam by the score of above 515 in order to make a homogenous sample of around 50 participants. According to the participants' performance on the TOEFL test, they were considered to be advanced language learners for the study.

The participants were 48 students of different social classes and university degrees, but of a homogenous advanced level of English proficiency in the north of Iran. The sample subjects who had voluntarily agreed to take part in this research were male and female EFL learners whose first language was Persian, with the age range of twenty to thirty-one (mainly adults). They were 31 males and 17 females, and none had ever lived in an English speaking country.

#### **B. Instrumentation**

Firstly, the instrumentation included five Critical Reading comprehension texts which had been selected from Critical Reading Work Book for the SAT (2006), by Weiner Green and Mitchell Weiner, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition. It contained three sections each of which included some closes tests and some reading comprehension tests. Section 1 included twenty four questions and the

participants were given twenty five minutes to answer, Section 2 included twenty four questions and the participants were given twenty five minutes to answer, and Section 3 included nineteen questions and participants were given twenty minutes to answer. The instrumentation also contained texts and critical reading comprehension questions. Additionally, the researchers used a non-critical text from Cambridge Book for the Cambridge exams, Cambridge IELTS 7 as a supplementary material in order to assess the participants' critical performance on the text which based on learners' interests in the title of Ant Intelligence which attracted the participants who were mainly males.

### **C. Procedure**

In order to find the answer of the research question in this study, the researchers arranged two critical reading tests.

### **D. The administration of the Critical Reading pre & post-tests**

The researchers established 8 sessions of explicit teaching and practicing critical reading strategies classes once a week. The participants commenced the program and continued for 11 sessions, each lasted 90 minutes. In the first session, the participants answered critical reading pretest in order for the researchers to understand the participants' early concepts of Critical Reading. There were sixty-seven questions in this test for the participants to answer. According to the tests scoring procedure, one point was awarded to each correct answer. So the maximum possible score was set to be 67. In the next two sessions, the researchers explicitly taught the critical reading strategies by the means of a pamphlet and made the participants aware of these strategies. Annotating is an essential strategy for the readers to read critically. Successful critical readers read with a pen or pencil in their hands, making notes in the text while reading. As an "active reader", the participants already knew that when they read textbook assignments, they should have had questions in their mind (Carter, 2007). Here are some techniques that the readers could use to annotate text: underlining important terms, circling definitions and meanings, writing key words and definitions (Diyanni, 2002), making a signal where important information or key words could be found by the means of "M.P" which implies "important" in the margin, an asterisk, writing "concl" which implies "conclusion" in the margin of points where the writer drew major conclusions (Freshwater & Rolfe, 2004). The learners would get prepared to deal with the strategies during these readings so that they could later utilize them while reading a text. The strategies which participants were less familiar and had more problems with were the focus of teaching. After teaching the strategies through guided practice, the focus was switched to the text by going through reading and then discussing various questions and inferences that the participants had made. Strategies such as inferencing, annotating, questioning and summarizing were taught to the participants who subsequently could promote inferencing and annotating strategies while reading. From the next session on, six selected texts were read in the class by the participants and they were asked to use the critical reading strategies which they have already been taught by the researchers.

In order to check the participants' comprehension, some questions were made and the answers were discussed by the participants. The researchers emphasized the strategies which the participants had more problems with and did not apply while reading. The researchers did their best to involve the participants in the process of thinking, make the participants familiar with the critical reading strategies through reading as much as possible and also tried to extend the strategies in all levels applying their background knowledge experience, connecting various information, making inferences, annotating, and generally being critical as much as possible.

The subjects of this study first searched for basic information while reading and then their focus transferred to style, details, and examples in the subsequent readings. The participants read with a pen or pencil, underlining the key statements, parts, or points even those who were

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found confused. Moreover, they made notes of words or terms which they did not understand. Teaching critical reading strategies in the classroom could help the participants to become autonomous readers.

The aim of post-test was to probe to what extent the participants were familiar with the critical reading ability after almost 3 months. Therefore, at the end of the sessions, the participants answered the same test as the post-test of critical reading, and the results were compared with their answers at the beginning of the first session by the researchers to investigate whether teaching critical reading strategies could make any development in participants' understanding of critical reading strategies.

## 4. RESULTS R

The tests were scored by the researchers who have been English teachers in English language learning institutes and have had sufficient experience of teaching. Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics related to the critical reading pre & post-tests:

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the Critical Reading Pre & Post-Tests

Test	Number	Mean	SD
Pre-Test	48	37.65	3.33
Post-Test	48	55.33	3.86

According to the above table, it can be stated that the participants did much better in post-test than the pre-test. In order to scrutinize whether the differences are significant or not, as mentioned earlier, Paired Samples t-test was applied since it allowed comparing the means of two administrations of a same test on a same group. By using Paired samples t-tests, the researcher could examine the mean difference between two administrations of the same test and decide whether the difference was likely to happen by chance or by treatment effect.

**Table 2.** Paired Samples T-Test for Critical Reading Pre & Post-Tests of the Study

	Mean	Std.Deviation	T value	Df	Sig.(2.tailed)
Pre vs. Post Critical Reading tests	-17.68	1.41	-75.96	47	.00

\*P<0.05

Based on table 2, the results of Paired Samples t-test for comparison of critical reading pre & post-tests displayed the mean of 17.68, standard deviation of 1.4, and t value of -75.96 with the significant level .00 and df of 47 which is statistically significant at the .05 level.

Therefore, it could be inferred that teaching critical reading strategies did have statistically significant positive effect on making Iranian advanced EFL learners the critical readers and the null hypothesis of the study is rejected.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS DI

Teaching critical reading strategies has caused critical reading activities to be rather easier and more attractive for the participants. Furthermore, it can be claimed that wider application of critical reading strategies on texts, like any other strategy, could provide L2 readers with the support they require to develop their reading skills to become more independent and successful readers. In the other words, critical reading strategies could make the students more independent in reading critically and they themselves took the responsibility for their critically reading.

It seemed that the type of the participants' critical reading activities such as text summarizing, annotating, and lexical inferencing, questioning proved to have a better impact. The researcher felt that through these activities, all students received the opportunity to engage in a type of intellectual discussion and made their voices heard.

The researchers tried to delve into different previous related findings by various researchers and did their best to enjoy the other researchers' results for their study. At last, they compared each aspect of their findings with the correspondent one in other researchers'.

Patching, Kameenui and Carnine, Gevsten and Colvin (1983) investigated the effect of explicit instruction on critical reading. The results demonstrated significant differences on performance of the main posttest between the direct-instruction sample and both the workbook with corrective-feedback and no-intervention samples. The critical reading test showed that systematic instruction on adults utilizing modeling and direct training in overt strategies was significantly more effective than exposing to the same material in a workbook format with no intervention. Therefore, the critical reading strategies were taught in the same way of teaching (explicit training) by the researcher.

The finding of this research was in line with the result of Khabiri and Pakzad (2012). They studied the effect of teaching critical reading strategies on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention. In that investigation, both control and experimental groups were taught almost the same content throughout 19 sessions treatment with the only difference that critical reading strategies were taught to the experimental group while the common comprehension-based approach was used for the control group and the pilot vocabulary retention post-test parallel to the vocabulary pre-test was administered to the participants of both groups after an interval of two weeks. Based on the results, teaching critical reading strategies confirmed to have a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention. The researchers of this study investigated the same effect on a different issue with different methodology on participants of different ages and levels of proficiency; however, they could enjoy the purpose and the results of that study so much.

There was also another report by Linda Flynn (1989) on the study of the developing critical reading skills through cooperative problem solving. He indicated that young readers develop into independent critical readers when they learn how to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate knowledge by the means of thinking their way through problems in a cooperative learning environment, and using critical reading strategies make the students become autonomous. In this study the researchers found almost the same results in developing critical reading skills by adult participants in class which provides a cooperative learning situation.

Kabayashi (2007) in the case of supportive intensifiers highlighted the impact of critical reading orientation on the use of external strategies such as note-taking or underlining duration the reading of an expository text. Trautman (2012) pointed out that young adults' annotation is developed and improved by the help of strategies which focus on reading comprehension skills and critical thinking skills. In this study the researchers taught the participants to apply note-taking and underlining which are the strategies of annotating in order to focus the participants'



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attention on unknown words in the reading texts. They underlined new vocabulary and then inferred the meaning of them.

Based on Zabihi and Pordel (2011) popular reading text books meet the criteria for the development of critical reading that recognizes and probes the presence of those items during reading text books which help to enhance critical reading. The findings showed that autonomy and engagement are prerequisites for improvement of critical reading and that they can be achieved through strategy instruction and task-based instruction, respectively. In this study the researchers also paid much attention to the selected reading texts in order to meet the criteria for the enhancement of critical reading. Furthermore, in order to reach the goal the researchers used the strategies instruction.

### 6.

### C

#### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research improve the understanding of the language teachers towards the nature of the teaching the critical reading strategies and the necessity of this process in making advanced Iranian EFL learners the critical readers. This experimental study upholds the significant role of teaching critical reading strategies in the case and suggests that formal training of critical reading strategies can effectively fortify the learners' ability to read critically, and infer the meaning of unknown words while reading. Based on the findings of this study, a further pedagogical implication recommends L2 language teachers to assign their students as more reading exercises as possible. The more the students read the greater chances they can find to learn. As some other applicable usages of this study for other institutes and educational centers the researchers suggest that critical reading strategies can be included in educational curriculum in order to create a way of teaching. It can be a challenging course and program for future language learning as it helps the learners to independently become the critical readers after their explicitly being trained the required strategies.

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