Developing Critical Reading Skills:
A Coursebook Evaluation Study

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss the importance of teaching critical reading skills, particularly in a foreign language context. The paper consists of two parts: theoretical and empirical. In the first part, the theoretical considerations underpinning this aspect of reading are discussed. Two theoretical perspectives are focused on: a psycholinguistic-cognitive orientation, which views reading as a mental process during which the reader constructs their own representation of the text and a socio-cultural orientation, which emphasizes the importance of varied social and historical contexts in text production and text reception. Within each theory, practical possibilities on how to develop critical reading skills are explored. The practical part of the article presents the results of a small-scale coursebook evaluation study, whose main aim was to examine to what extent the *Pioneer Plus* coursebooks can help learners develop critical reading skills. The results of the study point to didactic materials and teaching activities that have the potential to facilitate this important component of language proficiency.

Keywords: *critical reading, coursebook evaluation, teaching instruction.*

Reading skills in a psycholinguistic perspective

Although various approaches to reading have been developed, in my opinion there are two perspectives that have exerted the most impact on both theoretical discussions and practical implications concerning reading: the psycholinguistic perspective and the sociocultural one. In a psycholinguistic perspective, reading is viewed as a cognitive process, a set of mental operations which allow the reader to create their own representation of a text. In theory and empirical research, two levels of cognitive processing are usually distinguished: "lower" – which focuses on letter identification, word recognition and syntactic parsing; and "higher"– which involves discourse processing and activating the reader's knowledge about the topic of the text and their knowledge of text characteristics. It is the higher level of processing that enables the reader to construct their representation of the text; in other words, to comprehend the text. A good example of this theoretical perspective is the model

of van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), according to which information drawn from the text is represented in the reader's memory at three levels: surface form, propositional textbase and situation model. The surface form processing results in understanding words and sentences in the text; the propositional textbase processing enables the reader to reach a literal level of understanding the text while developing the situation model facilitates constructing the reader's individual evaluation and interpretation of the text. At this point of our discussion, it seems useful to refer to Urquart and Wier (1998) who distinguish two products of understanding the text: comprehension (which would correspond to the propositional textbase) and interpretation (which would correspond to the situation model).

The main focus of psycholinguistic studies is the reader and the way they construct a representation of the text in their mind. The following have been the center of investigation: the role of schemata, later conceptualized as background knowledge (e.g. Anderson, 1978; Carrell, 1983; Clapham, 1996; Liu et al., 2009), metacognition (e.g. Carrell, 1989; Kusiak, 2001) and strategies that readers apply to construct their representation of the text (e.g. Kusiak, 2013). Psycholinguistic models offer important implications for teachers. Educators are advised to raise learners' metacognitive awareness concerning their knowledge of themselves as readers and provide students with a suitable strategy training. A useful aim in reading instruction is developing the readers' background knowledge about the text being read; this can enhance the cognitive processes involved in comprehending the text. Both aims - activating readers' background knowledge and raising their metacognitive awareness - are important elements in teaching critical reading skills.

Reading skills in a socio-cultural perspective

According to the principles of a socio-cultural perspective, "texts are primarily socially constructed" (Johns, 1997, p.3), which makes the role of the reader more complex than the psycholinguistic perspective suggests. Reading the text does not only involve applying appropriate strategies, drawing on one's background knowledge and being aware of one's cognitive efforts. A successful reader should identify a model reader of the text and understand the implied message shared by the members of the social group to whom the text is addressed. They should be ready to respond to the text in a culturally specific way. In their creation of comprehension of text, they should take into account not only the information expressed in the text and their own background knowledge but also the historical and social factors that could have influenced the writing process of the text. A good example of approaching texts in this manner is presented in McCormick's (1997) social-cultural model of reading where reading is presented as a cognitive activity that occurs in social contexts. Reading is an interaction between the ideology of the reader and that of the text. Both the text and the reader have their general

and literary repertoires which are derived from their society's literary and general ideologies. In the reading situation, an intersection of repertoires occurs. It may happen that the reader will deliberately choose to read "against the grain of the reading that the text seems to privilege" (McCormick & Waller, 1987, abstract), which will enable them to explore the differences between their repertoire and that of the text.

Studies on text production and comprehension influenced by the socio-cognitive perspective focus on the socially constructed nature of the reader (McCormick, 1997; Smagorinsky, 2015), on writing as a socio-cognitive process of knowledge construction (Zalewski, 2004) and on critical reading in FL education (Wallace, 2005). As regards teaching, socio-cultural perspectives advocate developing critical reading skills in students. It is important to raise the readers' awareness of the nature of their understanding, which, following Urquhart's (1987) terminology, should be named interpretation.

Critical reading

There are a number of aims that both L1 and FL/L2 education plan to achieve in the area of reading. Recently, the attention of reading instruction has been directed to critical reading as a skill that is indispensable in a contemporary globalized world. It is useful to discuss critical reading skills in the light of the critical language awareness (CLA) approach developed by Fairclough (1989). Drawing on this approach, Clark (1995) suggests extending the concept of background knowledge, traditionally viewed as the learner's world knowledge. The use of background knowledge involves also an awareness of the ideological nature of reading and of the social process of production and interpretation of texts, the factors emphasized in a socio-cultural view of reading. It means that when interacting with a text, the reader has a richer repertoire – they can draw on their general knowledge of the world, the knowledge of other texts that the particular text brings in as well as on their world view, i.e. ideology.

As regards instruction, scholars such as Clark (1995), McCormick (1997) and Johns (1997) suggest that the teacher should not only activate the reader's background knowledge but also facilitate their awareness of their reactions to the text. Raising the reader's metacognitive awareness, emphasized in psycholinguistic theories of reading, does not only involve the awareness of one's strategies applied in reading. The reader should be aware of their own beliefs, standpoints and cultural values activated during their reading. Clark (1995) argues: "You read differently when you agree, when you subconsciously disagree and when you consciously agree" (p. 69). The reader should be also aware of "reader positioning" or the way in which the writer attempts to influence the reader. A good example is the use of the pronoun "we" by the author of the text in order to establish a shared viewpoint between

the reader and the writer. Another ability important in critical reading instruction is raising the learners' awareness of their social role as readers. Texts are directed, often implicitly, to members of social groups determined by factors such as gender, social class or nationality. Critical readers should know how to "explore the ways in which a specific readership is written into the text" (Wallace, 1993, p.111). Another important aim of teaching to read with a critical eye is to make learners realize that as critical readers, they should be prepared to take control over and responsibility for their own reading, which can mean being aware of the consequences of decisions that the reader can make in relation to their interpretation (as emphasized by McCormick, 1997 and Johns, 1997). Being critical is particularly important for FL readers as "they may be disadvantaged in interaction with a text in a foreign language, not so much because of inadequate linguistic or schematic knowledge but because of an over-deferential stance towards the text" (Wallace, 1993, p.103).

Critical reading is often considered to be the most advanced level of reading. Dechant (1991) calls critical reading "evaluative comprehension" and views this type of reading as the one that involves the higher order cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Dechant (1991) claims that "critical readers are as much interested in why something is said as in what is said" (p. 454). Therefore, the scholar underlines the importance of sensitizing learners to the language of the text. Paying attention to how words are used enables readers to recognize oversimplification, overgeneralization, inaccuracy and distortion in the text. Wallace (1993) and McCormick (1997) suggest that critical readers should act as interrogators or detectives of texts and of their reactions to reading. They think that one of the most effective technique of teaching critical reading is to instruct learners to ask questions while reading.

To sum up, developing critical reading skills seems an important part of reading instruction, especially the one directed to more advanced learners. This type of reading is a prerequisite for successful participation in contemporary social life, where reading printed and online texts is an everyday activity. Although the value of critical reading has been recognized in literature and critical reading has become a subject of many reading studies (e.g. Skopinskaja, 2011; Kaura & Sidhub, 2013; Weninger & Kan, 2013), I think it is still a neglected skill which deserves more attention in school instruction. The evaluation of how critical reading skills are practiced in a school setting is the focus of the next section of the paper.

Critical reading – a coursebook evaluation study
Aims of the evaluation

I present hereunder the results of the evaluation of a series of four coursebooks published in 2019 by MM Publications, meant to be used in teaching English as a foreign language in Polish secondary schools: *Pioneer Plus Elementary*, *Pioneer*

Plus Pre-Intermediate, *Pioneer Plus Intermediate B1* and *Pioneer Plus B1+*. All the components were written in accordance with the specifications suggested by *The Common European Framework for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and *The Core Curriculum* (MEN, 2018), the document produced by the Polish Ministry of Education.

The main aims of the evaluation were to answer the following questions:
• Is it possible to develop critical reading skills in learners when teaching from the *Pioneer Plus* coursebooks?
• What materials and what tasks are provided in the books to teach critical reading skills?

The analysis of the coursebooks

First examined were the types of texts provided to learners to develop reading skills and the types of tasks that accompany the texts. Then, the potential of texts and tasks in facilitating critical reading skills was evaluated.

The analysis revealed that the books provide a variety of texts. The following are the most common: signs, blogs, internet advertisements, extracts from adapted versions of novels, science texts, online reviews of products, emails, online quizzes, dialogues, dictionary entries, comic strips, flyers, tickets and receipts, maps, web pages, customer reviews and magazine articles. In my opinion, familiarizing foreign language learners with such a rich a variety of texts gives learners a good introduction to reading authentic texts in real life. It can show learners that different texts are written for different purposes and by different authors. Developing this sensitivity will undoubtedly prepare learners to read texts with a critical eye, as suggested by the socio-cultural perspectives to reading.

As regards types of reading tasks, three types of tasks were identified: tasks that students do before reading the text (pre-reading tasks), tasks that learners complete when reading the text (while-reading tasks) and tasks in which students are engaged after they have read the text (post-reading tasks). Let us first look at the while-reading tasks provided in the coursebook series. The most common tasks of this type are answering open ended questions, matching headings with parts of the text, True/False statements, putting parts of the text in the right order and completing the gaps with the words provided. The skills that students should develop when completing these tasks, as specified by the authors of the coursebooks at the beginning of each unit, are skimming (reading for the gist), scanning and reading for specific information. It is worth underlying that in the coursebooks for B1 and B1+ learners, tasks directly connected with developing critical reading skills also appear. These are: identifying the intention of the writer, drawing conclusions on the basis of the information presented in the text, identifying the purpose of the text, guessing

the source and type of text. Another important element of reading sections are *TIPS* boxes, in which advice concerning effective reading strategies is offered, also the one that can help students to become critical readers. For example, in *Pioneer Plus B1+*, learners are instructed on how to read between the lines and thus interpret what the author wants to convey although it is not explicitly stated.

Pre-reading and post-reading activities also lend themselves to making critical reading the focus of instruction. In the coursebooks analysed, the most popular pre- and post-reading tasks are open ended questions. In most cases, students should discuss the questions in pairs / groups; sometimes the questions are meant for individual reflection, without engaging learners in any discussions. The questions are of two types: questions that allow personalization, which means asking learners to relate the issue that is discussed in the text to their life and general questions, which elicit the learners' opinions about issues that are connected with the topic of the text. An example of a personalization task is the one provided in *Pioneer Plus Elementary* on p. 32. Before students read the website of the Superfit Club, they are asked to discuss the following questions: *Do you like exercising? Are you a member of a gym?* An example of the other type of a pre-reading task is asking students a general question: *Do you think money will exist in the future? If not, why?* (*Pioneer Plus B1+*, p. 62) before they read an extract from an adapted version of *The Sleeper Awakes* by H.G.Wells.

Let us look at several examples of how the pre- and post-reading tasks provided in the coursebook series can contribute to developing critical reading skills. In *Pioneer Plus B1+,* unit 1a, p. 8, students read texts in which people describe their jobs. The pre-reading questions require learners to answer two questions: *Why do people work? What factors contribute to job satisfaction?* The questions invite students to think about their personal opinions and then share them with their peers. They help students reflect on everyday issues and then compare their thoughts with the opinions expressed in the text. This reflection is likely to make readers realize that their point of view can influence their evaluation of the text (i.e. their interpretation of the text, as specified by the psycholinguistic perspective on reading). As examples of post-reading questions, let us discuss two tasks. The first is taken from *Pioneer Plus B1+*, unit 8b, p. 99. After reading the text about bullying, students answer the question: *Did the text affect the way you see bullying? Why?* A similar type of question is suggested in *Pioneer Plus Intermediate B1,* unit 9a, p. 88. After reading the text concerning making decisions, learners discuss the questions: *Do you agree with the information presented in the text? Do you think you will change the way you make decisions from now on?* In both cases, the questions ask readers to think about their reactions to the text, which reflects the principles of the sociocultural perspective on reading. This activity can raise learners' awareness about a possible influence of the text on the reader. An additional exercise could be to instruct students to think about what aspects of the text could have had an impact on their opinions.

The other example of post-reading question to be discussed here is the one suggested in *Pioneer Plus B1+,* unit 9a, p. 105. After the text "Prevention is better than cure", students are asked to discuss the following: *What health issues are there in your country? Who is responsible for health issues: the individual, the state, or is it an international responsibility?* Reflection on such questions encourages students to think more deeply about the issue presented in the text by relating the issue to one's country, thereby facilitating students' intercultural awareness. It may also stimulate learners to search for new information on the internet or in some other sources. I believe that both intercultural awareness and the ability to find information, are important components of the critical reader's competence.

To conclude, it seems that *the Pioneer Plus* series offers questions that can be very useful in teaching learners how to approach a text in a critical way. The questions that students are asked to answer before they read the text help them to see the issue presented in the text in a wider, more general context and to notice different aspects of the topic besides the one discussed in the text. Questions asked at the post-reading stage encourage readers to reflect on how the topic is presented and invite students to evaluate their own understanding of the text.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed that the coursebooks analyzed in the present study provide teachers with materials that can be helpful in teaching critical reading to foreign language learners. The most useful aspects of the coursebooks are a variety of authentic texts and reading tasks offered in the reading sections. The number of activities is not very impressive but may be considered sufficient if the teacher is prepared to supplement the coursebook with additional texts and with their own ideas. There are some universal questions that the teacher can ask in reference to almost every text. Kress (1985 as cited in Wallace, 1993, p.114) suggests the following general questions:
• How is the topic being written about?
• Why is the topic being written about?
• What other ways of writing about the topic are there?

The following questions may explore the readers' reactions to the text:
• Is there anything that the text wants me to do?
• Do I agree with what the text wants me to do?
• Can I argue with it?
• Are the issues it raises the ones I think are important?
• Are the assumptions behind those issues the ones I share?
• What are the implications of reading with or against the grain of this text?

Another useful activity could be comparing two or more texts that discuss the same issue (or the same event) in terms of their presentation of the topic and the use of language. A good idea can be to encourage learners to look for such texts and present them in class. More advanced learners should practice reading and evaluating on-line texts. It is crucial that both the teacher and the learners realize that a critical approach to the text does not only entail extracting information from the text but it also requires the reader's reflection on its content, on the author and on one's role in the whole reading situation.

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Bio-note

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