

Giving EFL Students an Identity: Developing Critical Reading Skills ¹

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The position of reading in the EFL classroom is undergoing constant development and review. Second language approaches to reading no longer see the reader as solely reconstructing author meaning. Effective reading is not just the activation or application of second language reading skills and strategies, e.g., skimming and scanning. Reading has to take into consideration existing first language skills and knowledge and the reader's socio-cultural background knowledge and experiences. L1 knowledge and experiences need to give the L2 user an identity so that she can successfully interact within the L2 reading context.

This article argues that readers are still not being given sufficient opportunity or a comprehensive reading framework to deal with real-life texts. The reader is not encouraged as an individual to bring socio-cultural background knowledge and experiences to EFL or "authentic" texts. The reader often lacks an identity. Reading must inevitably fail if it cannot be positioned within an existing world knowledge (Scholes 1985: 21). This article looks at an attempt to develop critical reading skills among university-level students by encouraging them to respond to texts by examining their own position as the reader of a text. This means examining what is critical reading and looking at the purposes of producers of texts, the implications behind texts and different ways of interpreting texts.

Introduction

Changing perceptions regarding an understanding of the nature of reading has led to a "repositioning" of this "skill" within the EFL classroom. Effective reading is not just a matter of practising pre-identified skills and techniques: It involves producing "a text within a text" (Scholes 1985:24). The construction of "a text within a text" goes beyond practising reading

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skills to building the necessary linguistic, social and cultural framework representing different cultural perceptions, values and beliefs. It means developing critical reading.

This framework needs to give EFL readers real-life reading expectations from a text. Artificial pre-reading prediction exercises (while useful in developing L2 reading skills) are often imposed on the L2 readers in order to substitute missing L1 expectations. Possible problems over differing cultural perceptions of texts are largely ignored as L2 learners are expected to share the same cultural expectations and responses as L1 language users even though L1 texts often do not represent authentic contexts for the L2 classroom (Widdowson 1994: 21).

Background

Reading has traditionally been seen as a "receptive" skill (Harmer 1983: 16). Nuttall summarizes this view in the following way:

The text is full of meaning like a jug full of water, and it can be poured straight into the reader's mind which soaks it up like a sponge. In this view, the reader's role is a passive one; all the work has been done by the writer and the reader has only to open his mind and let the meaning pour in. (Nuttall 1982: 5)

Reading is now seen more as an active or an interactional process between the reader and the text and brings into play a wide range of L1 and L2 linguistic, discoursal, social and cultural "knowledges". Meaning is not waiting to be uncovered:

Reading is no longer viewed as a process of decoding but rather as an integration of top-down processes that utilizes background knowledge and schema, as well as bottom-up processes that are primarily text or data-driven.

Process approaches to reading give much more importance to the status of the reader while reexamining the nature of reading. To give reading purpose, the reader needs an identity. There is no idealized ELT reader. Readers are individuals each with an individual purpose for reading. Reading is only meaningful if it relates to real-life contexts and involves "different possible ways of approaching, interpreting and evaluating texts" (Wallace 1992a: 103). Text is a product, the perceived outcome of a communicative act on the part of the writer who assumes that the reader will understand the message. But the reader has to rebuild that message and, as a consequence, may develop his own interpretation of this communicative act which is radi-

cally different from the writer's intended message. Reader interpretation is not necessarily the same as being able to understand or interpret the meaning that the author may have had in mind: we identify "a text not by its linguistic extent but by its social intent" (Widdowson 1994: 11)

Differing perceptions of meaning may occur due to: the reader's conception of the world; the reader's social and individual reality; and reader's values, beliefs and prejudices. (Widdowson 1994: 14) Therefore, reader and writer can be at odds with each other. Meaning is not just a linguistic or discursal process: Any analysis of meaning must be related to the social context of the reader and the writer. While a text may appear to have only one possible interpretation for its author, this may not apply to the readers:

They derive different discourses from it depending on what they bring to the text from their own world. They read their own reality into it... (Widdowson 1994: 19)

Therefore, meaning must be negotiated. At the same time "encoding" by the writer and "decoding" by the reader are not an all-or-nothing process. Writers do not say everything they want to say in a text. That would make communication too cumbersome and difficult to handle. They make assumptions about their readers, about their readers' knowledge of the subject, about their readers' interests, about their readers' cultural perceptions, values and beliefs and about the questions the readers may ask while reading the text. Meaning in a text was never designed to be complete or total. In second language teaching and second language learning, different approaches have been adopted to promote active and critical reading. However, Wallace argues that the problem is that second language readers are often not treated as serious readers:

In short, EFL students are often marginalized as readers; their goals in interacting with written texts are perceived to be primarily those of language learners. (Wallace 1992b: 61)

The language content in a text is often seen as the most important indicator of text suitability. Given such a prevalent attitude, it is difficult to see how L2 learners will become effective L2 readers.

The Critical Reader

Critical reading aims to give language users their own identity as readers and highlight an individual purpose for reading a text. This means build-

ing on existing approaches to developing reading skills. Rejecting a role as the passive receptor of texts, the critical reader constructs her own meaning. The reading text is related to the reader's world view. Readers are encouraged to question texts and especially the position of the author of texts. Second language critical reading skills are often transferable from the mother tongue and may only need to be highlighted within the L2 environment.

It may be argued that critical reading and, therefore, a critical reading framework, can also be developed at basic levels, especially if it is accepted that "basic" refers only to second language ability and not to text interpretation abilities.

Critical Reading in EFL Teaching

Critical reading focuses on the individual and individual experiences. A key question is whether critical reading is ignored in EFL teaching. Often due to institutional academic pressures, meaningful individual experiences are often missed. Large classes often reflect different language levels with little opportunity to focus on individual reading experiences. Course programmes, suffering from academic pressures, have to be completed. "Product" objectives of courses (e.g., passing examinations) have to be fulfilled. Due to heavy workloads (and perhaps with more than one job), teachers may have little time for creative reading. As a result, the development of critical reading skills may be given a low priority in the EFL classroom or even ignored altogether.

Often individual student knowledge is only important as so far as it provides a lead-in for activities or as a post-reading consolidation exercise. Individual experience during a reading is seldom the key consideration in promoting reader reaction. Current ELT practice and textbooks often focus on intensive courses for a mass market. Readers may be given little opportunity to react critically to texts: Do their opinions matter in the language-focused classroom?

Furthermore, ELT often seems to focus on reproducing the *status quo* or presenting a stereotypical view of society rather than questioning values, beliefs and existing power structures. Language learning is not seen as a liberating experience which has the intrinsic benefit of making language users more aware of their own culture. Critical reading, however, has the potential to do this.

Approaches to Reading in the EFL Classroom

Approaches to reading—critical and non-critical—in the L2 classroom can be loosely divided into language, skills and discursal categories.

A language approach seems to adopt a building block perspective where a focus on the “parts” is aimed at completing the “whole” picture. This treatment of reading seems to be reflected by Rivers and Temperley (1987: 4) within the skill-getting and skill-using schema.

A skills approach to reading attempts to give L2 readers the necessary techniques in order to tackle second-language texts. The focus is often on building up efficient and effective reading techniques: “Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible” (Grellet 1981: 3). This is often attempted by identifying different ways of approaching texts, e.g., skimming, scanning, extensive reading and intensive reading (Grellet 1981: 4) or through pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading tasks. A skills approach recognizes that “meaning is not inherent in the text, that each reader brings his own meaning to what he reads based on what he expects from the text and his previous knowledge” (Grellet 1981: 9)

The discursal approach emphasizes overall reading strategies both at and above the sentence level. The focus is on promoting both local and global oriented processes and, at the same time, encouraging the reader to assume control of the reading process by positioning him or her within a process framework rather than within a product framework. Reading is not seen as an already given and completed communication but rather as the basis for an interactive communication between the reader and the writer. The discursal approach goes beyond the debate between top-down and bottom-up processing strategies and focuses on the interplay between discursal factors in the reading process.

Development of Critical Reading Skills

Not rejecting language, skills and discursal approaches to reading, this proposed framework calls for the development of a social and cultural setting to promote effective reading. Building on this framework, Guadalajara (Mexico) university students were given the opportunity to develop their identities as readers within a general reading and writing course. Students

had previously studied the equivalent of 480 hours of general English. The proposed framework aimed to help students:

1. Relate reading purpose and interpretation to their socio-cultural context.
2. Highlight reading as both an individual and collective interaction positioning the reader as both an individual and as a group member.
3. Allow readers to develop roles as both reader and interpreter.
4. Encourage readers to react to and interact with reading texts.
5. Examine motives and purposes of the producers of texts.

This framework attempts to replicate the Wallace (1992a: 114) framework:

1. Why is this topic being written about?
2. How is this topic being written about?
3. What other ways of writing about the topic are there?

The Framework

Initial Study: An initial study of reading responses asked students to examine an intermediate-level text "After the Earthquake"³, which looked at the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Students were asked to consider: i) possible reasons the textbook authors had for choosing the text; ii) possible reasons for writing about the subject; iii) other possible ways of writing about the topic; and (iv) who was not mentioned in the text.

Aim: To encourage students to reflect on reading purpose and relating interpretation to their own socio-cultural context.

The following are a sample of classroom activities were undertaken during the reading and writing course with the aim of raising students' critical reading skills:

³ Taken from *Insights* by M. Farthing & A. Pulverness, 1989: 83.

Raising Student Awareness: To raise reading awareness, students examined two magazine covers, "Mexico"⁴ and "Mexico: The Peso Crash"⁵ which focused on the Mexican economy. Students were asked to consider who produced the text, why the texts had been produced, to whom the texts were addressed and what were the texts about.

Aim: To examine the motives and purposes of the producers of texts.

Audience Focus: To focus on intended audiences of reading texts, students were given "Mexican Rural Violence Rears Anew—Within Reach of Acapulco"⁶ and asked to consider the intended readership and desired effect on that readership.

Aim: To see reading as both an individual and collective reaction to a text and thus positioning the reader as both an individual and as a group member.

Responding to the Text: After analyzing "Mexican Rural Violence Rears Anew—Within Reach of Acapulco", students were asked to react to the text and write to the newspaper editor.

Aim: To encourage readers to challenge reading texts.

Overt & Underlying Textual Meaning: In order to examine overt and underlying textual message, students examined the text "Mexico Gives Free Rein to the Military".⁷

Aim: To allow readers to differentiate roles as reader and interpreter.

Final Assessment: Students were given two texts: "Forces Joined in Fight to Save Certification"⁸ and "Come back Gabo, Sad Colombia Pleads."⁹

Aim: To allow students to respond freely to texts.

⁴ *Newsweek*, March 18, 1996.

⁵ *Time*, January 9, 1995.

⁶ *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995.

⁷ *Guardian Weekly*, January 18, 1997.

⁸ *Mexico City Times*, March 8, 1997.

⁹ *Guardian Weekly*, March 2, 1997.

Evaluation of Critical Reading Practice

Student responses to reading texts were usually written up first and then discussed in class. At no time were students told about developing critical reading skills or the underlying focus of the reading part of the course.

Initial Study: (“After the Earthquake”) Students tended to accept the text at face value saying that it was chosen because it is “important” and “an interesting topic” and because of international interest about Mexico and/or earthquakes. Most students were critical of the way Mexico was portrayed but found it difficult to mention other ways of writing about the subject or who was not mentioned.

Raising Student Awareness: (“Mexico” and “Mexico: The Peso Crash”) Asked to use the Wallace (1992a: 114) framework (*Why is this topic being written about? How is this topic being written about? What other ways of writing about the topic are there?*), students considered the readership of the international editions of these magazines: Mexican citizens? U. S. investors? Tourists? Etc. Students no longer saw general interest as the purpose for media attention and cited political and economic reasons for the texts being written.

Audience Focus: (“Mexican Rural Violence Rears Anew—Within Reach of Acapulco”) Students were asked to consider the intended readership of the article: tourists planning to visit Acapulco? Students were asked to consider the accuracy of the newspaper article as i) an informed tourist; and ii) as a Mexican citizen reviewing the current political situation in Mexico. Students generally saw the story as a warning to tourists rather than an assessment of Mexico’s political situation. In classroom discussion, students said the article failed to reflect the whole truth. As a consequence, students were invited to write letters to the editor.

Responding to the Text: (“Mexican Rural Violence Rears Anew—Within Reach of Acapulco”) Following on from the previous activity, students were asked to react to the “Acapulco” story by writing to the editor. Reactions did not deny the existence of political problems but questioned the accuracy of the newspaper article. Given the difficulty of writing to the Washington Post, the teacher replied to the stories and asked the students to further elaborate.

Overt & Underlying Textual Meaning: (Mexico Gives Free Rein to the Military”) Using a fairly controlled worksheet, students were asked to react to the text. Answers reflected multiple interpretations of the text reflecting public security concerns and examined the role of the military. No interpretations were the same and no students mentioned “interest” or “importance” as media reasons for writing the articles.

Final Assessment: (“Forces Joined in Fight to Save Certification” and “Come Back Gabo, Sad Colombia Pleads”) Students were asked to respond freely to the texts. Once again, answers not only reflected multiple interpretations but raised questions concerning the aims of the “producers” of the articles. For instance, students questioned who exactly in Colombia was asking for the return of Gabriel García Márquez, especially since he had been living outside the country since 1981. Students asked whether the article was written in favor or against García Márquez trying to separate opinion from fact. One student said that uncritical reading of newspapers “just generate anger and confusion if you do not analyze the news.”

Conclusion

A critical reading framework must provide a model that encourages and develops effective reading in the EFL classroom. This will involve the interplay of different processes being employed at the same time, including the use of L1 background knowledge, both L1 and L2 language knowledge, reading skills and interpretative abilities. Meaningful reading also involves increasing the reader’s awareness and the development of metacognition: “the knowledge and control of one’s own thinking and learning activities...” (Langer & Smith Burke 1982). Therefore, this reading framework should aim to develop self-directed, independent and critical readers while avoiding any attempt to point the language user in only one interpretative direction. Developing on the work of Fairclough (1992), Wallace (1992a) and Widdowson (1994), a possible framework might be:

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|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Existing L1 knowledge | Knowledge of the world
Linguistic
Reading |
| 2. Skills Development | Language
Reading |
| 3. Development of Meaning | Language as Choice
Multiple Interpretations |

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