



## DEVELOPING THE CRITICAL READING SKILLS OF ESL STUDENTS THROUGH SHORT STORIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract:

Language is considered vital in our life. Critical reading skills are very important in attaining proficiency in language learning. Critical reading implies a lot of background knowledge of any text that is social, political and psychological. These skills enable learners to identify prejudice, misleading opinion, and illogical conclusions in any form of literature. Critical reading of a given text implies a critical analysis of the concepts used in the text. The reliability of the arguments, the value and relevance of the interpretations and the background on which the text is specified are also crucial in critical reading. The learners of any language should therefore be familiarized to read a text in a way that contributes to their critical reading skills. This research paper focuses on the approaches to develop the critical reading skills of ESL learners through short stories. The main emphasis here is not just to read short stories to answer comprehensive questions, rather cultivate the skills to analyse the various elements of a short story critically.

**Key Words:** Critical Reading Skills, Short Stories, Language Development, Critical Analysis

Using literature to teach language has several advantages such as contributing to a better linguistic understanding, a development of creative skills, an authentic model of language use with its rich potential (Ramsaran 1983; Collie & Slater, 1987). Short story seems to be the most suitable one since it is short, and aims at giving a 'single effect', there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. Also, research on short stories in EFL classrooms state that they can be a good indicator of increased motivation, increased interest in reading and improved reading skills (Vural 2013; Saka, 2014; Pardede, 2011). When we read critically, we think about and reflect on our reading. It entails a conscious reading approach, in which we predict what we are reading, we seek information, and we have expectations. It also means that we analyse and evaluate our reading process and materials with the intention of judging their value. Although we can define universal characteristics of critical thinkers, it is important to mention that different school subjects and academic disciplines approach texts in different ways. Critical thinking and reading involves, when students develop critical literacy skills they are able to rely on different types of arguments and use different types of evidence to prove a point. For example, hard sciences such as physics or biology progress by integrating lower levels of learning and understanding into newly presented ones. Each new area of knowledge is built on a previous one in a pyramid-like manner. On the other hand, humanities like literature and visual arts often progress as separate entities along a horizontal line, as explained by educational sociologists such as Basil Bernstein (1999). Critical thinking and reading so important as The proliferation in use of terms such as 'fake news' and 'misinformation' shows how easily readers can be misled by different information portals. Another burning issue of contemporary literacy skills is the ability to distinguish opinion from fact. The main component of critical reading is the ability to reinterpret the text and reconstruct it for improved clarity and readability. While doing a critical reading, a reader should identify the possible ambiguities and imperfections in the author's writing. The ability to address the text carefully is essential to this process. Thus, critical reading, much like academic writing, requires the connection between evident points to corresponding arguments. A critical reader should reflect on:

- What the text says: After critically reading a text, the learner should be able to take notes and paraphrase the key points in their own words.
- What the text describes: The learners should be confident that they have understood the text appropriately and able to use their examples to compare and contrast with other writings.
- Interpretation of the text: The learners should be able to analyse the text, appreciate and criticize the text as a whole.

Critical reading is a reading process that involves critical thinking. Understanding the nature of critical reading requires an understanding of the meanings of critical reading and critical thinking. Recent theories indicate that in addition to looking at reading as a process of extracting meaning from a text, reading is also seen as a process of connecting information in the text with the knowledge the reader brings to the act of reading. Grabe (1997) defines reading as - a dialogue between the reader and the text which necessitates the reader to analyze and evaluate information and ideas. In other words, the reader reads critically. Kurland (2000) defines

critical reading as a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading which involves reflecting on the validity of what one has read in the light of his prior knowledge and understanding of the world. Murdoch (2002) indicates that -short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency (p. 9). Sage (2005) claims that the use of short stories is a useful technique in language classes. He also points out that since short stories are short in length, it helps both the teachers and the students to use them easily in classroom contexts. In addition to this, Hismanoglu (2005) states that class discussions about the story will help students to think critically. According to Mourão, S. (2009), stories help develop EFL learners creative powers and other higher level thinking skills and they can contribute in developing emotional intelligence as well. From these definitions, critical reading can be understood as an active process of constructing meaning from the texts by involving interpretation, making inference, analysis, giving judgment and evaluation.

Use of Short Stories in the Language Class, A short story is a fictional work of prose that is shorter in length than a novel. Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," says that a short story should be read in one sitting, anywhere from a half-hour to two hours. Stories that are not complicated for students to work on their own can be helpful for developing EFL learners self-dependency while learning a foreign language. Brumfit and Carter (1986:194) point out that stories are easy to finish, definite to understand and attract the students attention more than any other normal passage. According to Collie and Slater (1991: 196), stories are practical for the English language teachers to use as their length is long enough to cover, entirely, in one or two class sessions.

Lesson Plan for Critical Reading Using a Short Story, when teaching critical reading skills using short stories, it is imperative to have lesson plans that focus on the components of short stories. Before preparing the lesson plan, the teachers should consider not only the comprehensibility of the short story but also the components of the short story as a creative medium, the didactic aspect of the short story and the various elements of analysis in a short story. Students can be made to critically analyse the title, the characters and characterization, setting, plot, and climax.

Reading strategies for critical analysis Selecting a suitable short story to read in the class is the first major task for a teacher. To make the readers involved and occupied in the reading process, it is crucial to select an appropriate text which the target group would empathize and associate with. Next, it is necessary to prepare pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities that motivate the students to read and analyze the story. These activities help students develop their language skills, critical thinking skills, cultural awareness and creativity as they read and interact with the story. Students will also become familiar with the habit of reading a short story in a way that contributes to their critical reading skills. The various strategies and approaches help to develop their critical reading skills through short stories. The main emphasis here is not just to read short stories to answer comprehensive questions, rather cultivate the skills to analyse the various elements of a short story critically.

Pre-reading activities are helpful to gain the background information necessary for comprehending the text. It also helps the readers to clarify cultural details which may otherwise cause comprehension difficulties. Pre-reading activities also familiarize students with the genre of the text. The role of a teacher here is to encourage students to make predictions based on the title and the opening of the story. Students must also ponder about the genre of the story, as well as information about the characters, setting and development of the plot, before making predictions about the story. Prereading activities help them to use their prior knowledge to think about the topic and make predictions about the probable meaning of the text. Some possible leads that the teacher can infer here are:

- Predict what the short story will be about by analyzing the title.
- What is the prior knowledge you have about the author's writing?
- What is the setting and genre in some other stories by the same author?
- Is there any school of thought or writing style of the author that you should know before reading a particular author's work?

While-Reading a text, the readers should reflect on the ideas and information in the text. The teachers should question about what is happening. The students should be given room to make predictions about what might happen next and express their opinions about what is going on. Students must also be encouraged to take notes, which helps to jot down the points as they read. They should also reflect on the portrayal of characters, the setting, conflict, and the point of view. Moreover, they can guess where the storyline is going and make connections to what they already know. They should be guided to emphasize the characters of the story. The following questions will be helpful for the students during the while-reading phase:

- What do you feel about the opening of the story?
- Do you feel the story is happening in the right path?
- Is the text organized or lacks focus?
- How are the characters portrayed in the short story?
- Is the author biased or neutral?

- How is the presence of the authorial voice?
- Comment on the narrative technique.
- Has the author employed any literary techniques such as symbolism, metaphor, etc.?

Post-reading During the post-reading session, the students reflect upon the ideas and information given in the text. They should relate what they have read to their own experiences and knowledge. The teachers can check their understanding of the text and extend their understanding in critical and creative ways. At this stage, the teachers can ask the students to reflect on the following questions:

- What aspects of the short story surprised you as a reader?
- What were you thinking when you finished reading?
- What did the author hope to accomplish in writing this story?
- Did the author achieve the purpose?
- What remains unresolved in your mind?
- Does the conclusion effectively tie the happenings together?
- What could be the other possible endings you can draw for the story?
- Did the author use a reader-friendly style and language?
- Has the author done justice to all the characters?

#### **Conclusion:**

Short stories can be used as instructional material to improve learner's critical reading skills at any age of language learning. The main factor to take into consideration here is the selection of the apt text in accordance with the needs of the learners. The major limitation here a teacher faces while dealing with critical reading classes is the time restriction. A traditional classroom does not provide scope to deal with a short story in a detailed manner. The focus of reading a short story in most of the ESL classrooms ends up merely answering the comprehension questions. This approach should be given up and students should be made to analyse and appreciate the various aspects of any literary form right from a young age, as critical reading is a reading process that involves critical thinking which is acquired but not learned. It can be concluded that short stories can be used as an alternative instructional material to improve students' critical reading skills. In relation to this, EFL teachers are recommended to employ short stories in their classrooms to help students develop their critical reading skills. The effect of using short stories to develop critical reading skills at different levels of language proficiency, comparing gender, comparing children and adults, and comparing learners with different learning styles. In addition, investigating the students and teachers' views of using short stories to develop critical reading skills is also recommended.

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