

# Analysis of Critical Reading Strategies and Its Effect on College English Reading\*

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**Abstract**—Reading is very important in foreign language learning. In college English reading teaching, the teachers sometimes are confused that the students work hard and read a lot, but they can't read well. In this paper, the author tries to dig into the problems and difficulties in English reading, and work out effective approaches to improve reading: the application of the critical reading strategies to reading will help a lot.

**Index Terms**—college English reading, critical reading, critical reading strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Many people suggest that never accept things as they're portrayed. In English reading teaching, this idea is really a brilliant one as many readers have little idea whether they should read critically or not. When Chinese college students are busy reading piles of material to prepare for all kinds of tests, they read very fast only to get information to deal with the questions, with no further understanding at all. To non-critical readers, the reading materials only offer the truth, and the readers are satisfied when they think that they can answer the questions following (Dan Kurland's [www.criticalreading.com](http://www.criticalreading.com)). Automatically they read and answer, with little trace left when they finish doing. However, to critical readers, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "angle" to the subject, a unique angle to a certain question. When they read, they think and analyze at the same time. Such thinking leads to further understanding naturally. From this point we can see that critical reading is surely a better way to deal with reading, because "... a story has as many versions as it has readers. Everyone takes what he wants or can from it and thus changes it to his measure. Some pick out parts and reject the rest, some strain the story through their mesh of prejudice, some paint it with their own delight." (John Steinback, 1963, p.70)

To non-critical readers reading does not only means recognizing what a text says about the topic. The goal of reading is to comprehend the information in the reading text, and to understand the information, ideas, and opinions from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. It is a linear activity: the readers go directly from the beginning to the end, with no further understanding of the text (Dan Kurland's [www.criticalreading.com](http://www.criticalreading.com)). They do a lot of reading and they classify the information, but they don't do much thinking. Critical reading is an analytic activity. The reader rereads a text to identify information to try to obtain good understanding. More importantly, the critical readers do a lot of thinking and analyzing.

Critical thinking involves bringing outside knowledge and values to combine with the reading material to come to a new idea. To critical readers, what a text says, does, and means all leads to a deeper interpretation of the text. On the contrary, non-critical readers are usually satisfied with recognizing what a text says and restating the key remarks. Critical reading and non-critical reading are doing very differently in this sense.

From another point, compared with non-critical reading, critical reading goes altogether three steps in reading: first, it will recognize what a text "says", and then it reflects on what the text "does" by making such remarks. The critical readers will ask themselves such questions as: is it offering examples? Is it arguing? Is it appealing for sympathy? Or is it making a contrast to clarify a point? Finally, critical readers then infer what the text, as a whole, means, based on the earlier analysis (Dan Kurland's [www.criticalreading.com](http://www.criticalreading.com)).

All in all, in College English Reading class, teachers and students should be clear about how to do reading, especially critical reading, to fulfill and accomplish their goals in reading.

## II. CRITICAL READING

Critical reading is not simply careful and detailed reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze information he reads on the text.

Textbooks on critical reading commonly ask students to accomplish certain goals in reading:

- to understand why the author writes this.
- to understand the important information in the text.
- To analyze and summarize.

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Clearly that all these goals actually refers to something that does not exist in the text he reads. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text: the readers need to read between the lines.

- In reading, recognizing the purpose of the author involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language: what will the author say and why does the author choose to say so?
- If the reader wants to understand the reading material he needs to read deeply.
- To analyze and summary the reading material needs to express the reader's own idea based on his understanding of the reading material.

Then what do we do in our normal reading?

Based on Chinese tradition, we teach students to do a lot of reading mainly to meet two purposes: one is to practice and improve their language competence as reading is the most convenient way to help them improve their ability of using the foreign language; the other is to prepare for all kinds of tests. In this process, the teachers provide reading materials, explain reading methods, and ask the students to finish reading within certain amount of time; mostly the students start their reading passively just as they are finishing a task; they read and find useful information and finish answering all the questions. The question is: without thinking while reading, they have no access to a deeper understanding of the reading material, not to mention the pleasure of reading.

Frequently the students complain that they spend quite long time reading, but they could not understand what it is about; other problems are also happening: they forget what they just finish reading; the material is not hard but they cannot find the answers to the questions.

We see clearly the necessity of introducing the critical reading strategies to our university reading to help the students read better.

### III. CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

Critical reading strategies that are frequently used in university classroom teaching are clearly stated as the following:

**Step1.** Pre-reading: Learning about a text before really reading it. This method is the first step in a reading class. Mostly the teacher asks the students to prepare for the class by giving them the printed material to read a few minutes before the class. Previewing enables the students to get some idea of what the material is about and how it is organized before reading it more carefully. This simple strategy includes scanning the text to try to find specific information to help understand the text, and skimming to get a general idea of the content and organization of the text, and identifying the purpose of the writing. This usually takes a very short period of time and both the students and the teacher get a brief understanding of what they are going to deal with in the following class.

**Step2.** Reading in context: When we read, it is wise to place a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural contexts. Why is this necessary? In critical reading, the readers' goals are not only to get the basic understanding of the reading material, and they are not interested in facts only; the readers are also not satisfied with the fact that they read and comprehend only by memorizing the statements within a text. Critical readers get much more. They read just as they talk with the author. In this process, they obtain not only the basic meaning of the text they read, but also the idea that the author harbor deeply in his mind. The critical readers get more than he expects in this kind of reading.

Therefore, a profound comprehension of the reading material requires not only the readers' participation, but also the background knowledge of the material.

Understandably, non-critical readers mainly read to learn the facts of a certain situation to obtain basic understanding of this situation, while critical readers read more deeply and carefully to try to work out how this situation exists and the possible reasons hidden.

When the students read in classroom, the most effective way is that they use their own experience to discover unique perspectives in understanding. They employ different techniques to try to get better comprehension of the reading material. Pre-reading here will help them gain a general idea first, and then they will dig into the text to have detailed reading. From another point, wide background knowledge will also help the students achieve a better understanding of the material they read.

In classroom teaching, when the students are asked to finish reading a text within limited time, they need to use all effective methods to achieve their reading goals. With pre-reading and contextualization, they surely will achieve more.

**Step3.** Further the understanding by asking questions and answering them: Asking questions about the content.

This is a normal way in reading teaching and mostly, the students make themselves ready to answer the questions about the text they read.

As students, they are accustomed to teachers asking them questions about what they read. Usually these questions are designed to help them understand the material and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works.

In critical reading, when the students finish reading, the teacher asks them to design questions themselves to help achieve further comprehension. Each designs his own questions and they ask each other to try to understand the text deeper.

With this strategy, the teacher lets the students write questions when they finish reading; and especially in difficult academic readings, the students will understand the material better and remember it longer if they write questions after

they finish reading. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in their own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph. (WWW. Readwritecritically.com)

**Step 4.** Further thinking and reflections after reading.

The reading material that the students read might challenge their attitudes, their unconsciously held beliefs, or their positions on current issues. That's why a lot of students would feel puzzled or even anxious while reading. They need more time to consider and reorganize the ideas they get from the reading material; then it is possible for them to obtain further understanding of the text after reading.

**Step 5.** Outlining and summarizing: Identifying the main ideas and restating them in their own words.

Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Most English teachers like using these methods to help their students understand the text. When the teachers ask their students to practice outlining and summarizing in reading, they teach them to recognize the basic structure of the text they read first; the students are required to write down the structure on a piece of paper, and try to recognize the main ideas and the supporting ideas and also the examples the author uses, because the main ideas form the backbone of a text.

Summarizing has slight difference from outlining. Outlining a text basically means listing all the important facts and examples together, while summarizing a text is to develop a new text based on the original structure of the reading material. Outlining depends on a close analysis of the material, and summarizing also requires creative synthesis. The readers are required to put ideas together in their own words and in a much more condensed form, which shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text.

In this practice, the students learn to think while reading, and thinking while reading is the primary purpose of critical reading.

#### IV. PROBLEMS IN PRESENT COLLEGE ENGLISH READING

I frequently hear students complain that they spend a lot of time reading many texts, but they still have many difficulties in reading, not only when they do English tests, but also when they read in normal life. Mostly, they say they have little interest in reading English material; they have to prepare for all kinds of tests. Some say they have certain interest in reading English books, such as novels or something, but it is hard for them to read along, not to mention a good understanding!

All in all, I collect several factors that result in the possible difficulties in college English reading.

1. Lack of cultural and background knowledge.

As foreign language learners, Chinese students need to work very hard to overcome the problem: they cannot understand the reading material because they are lack of cultural and background knowledge. See the following example:

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—that brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi. (Henry, O, 1997, P. 7-8)

As we know, one of the leading characteristics of Henry, O's novels is that he is always trying to capture the feel of telling a story orally, so the style of the novel "The Gift of the Magi" is oral, simple, and informal. However, it doesn't mean that it is all easy to understand. The above paragraph is the last of the novel, and the phrase "the Magi" appears twice in this paragraph. The readers need to know its meaning to achieve a good understanding of the whole novel. According to Matthew 马太福音, the Magi were the first religious figures to worship Jesus. It states that they came from the east to worship the Christ, born King of the Jews. They are regular figures in traditional accounts of the nativity (the birth of Jesus) celebrations of Christmas and are an important part of Christian tradition. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi)).

According to the story, the magi were wise people. They chose the best gifts for Jesus. Just as the narrator of "The Gift of the Magi" suggests at the end of the story, these gifts both husband and wife gave to each other must have been the smartest, best gifts in the world: the young couple sacrificed everything they had of value to give each other the best Christmas gift. The narrator compares the two characters in this story – Jim and Della – with the magi: they gave each other the best gifts of all, for they showed each other the best gifts between lovers: true love.

The students really need to read widely to learn more about the western culture and religion to help understand well the reading material.

2. Difficulties in grammar and words

Grammar is the study of words and how they can be used to form sentences. Grammar is the backbone of the language, without which the language itself cannot exist. Many foreign language teachers and learners complain that they spend too much time practicing grammar but it is not very helpful in improving their language competence. The point is the technique that people use to practice grammar. Mechanical Practice makes people tired, but practicing grammar in wide reading will be greatly helpful.

**Word order and Sentence order**—Word order and sentence order are both important in language. The basic pattern for English statements is: subject-verb-object-place-time. Of course sentences do not have to have all of these parts, but if all of the parts do occur, they most likely will occur in this order. If a sentence has both a place and a time, one of these is frequently moved to the front of the sentence (C. Ray Graham & Mark M. Walsh, 1996, P. 120).

Sometimes our students fail to use correct word order to express their own ideas in thinking, thus they have unexpected difficulties in reading. They cannot understand the sentences in certain texts they read. Clearly the overlook of word order in texts bring them a lot of difficulties.

Word order is also important in English with phrases smaller than a sentence. Let's see the following example:

. . . those first two big yellow climbing roses of yours that you planted . . .

. . . big those two first climbing yellow roses that you planted of yours . . .

Very clearly the first phrase is natural but the second is hard to understand because of a minor change of its word order (C. Ray Graham & Mark M. Walsh, 1996, p. 120).

**Verbs**—The learners have many problems with verbs: They don't know how to use them correctly in English, and of course they don't know how to understand them clearly. Here are some of the problems the students have:

(1) Present tense—In English, people use present tense to refer to actions that are habitual, repeated, or always true, and use present progressive tense to express actions that are taking place in the present. See the following examples:

Present tense:

The sun rises in the East.

I get up every day at 6:00 a.m.

We celebrate Thanksgiving in November.

Present progressive tense:

The teacher is coming into the classroom now.

We are doing our homework in the classroom now.

Many students can't understand the real meaning of present tense; of course they can't use it correctly. They make mistakes in expression, and they are quite confused about the meaning of the sentences they read.

(2) Verb phrases—Some actions in English are expressed by phrases that consist of a verb and a preposition or adverb. The meaning of the verb phrases is different from that of the verb. For example, "pick" can mean "to choose or to break from trees", while "pick up" means "lift up" or "get someone from a place". The students find it really hard to understand the different meanings of these verb phrases, and they are greatly confused in reading when they meet such phrases. The students need to learn carefully and read widely to know more about these verb phrases to help them understand better in reading. Basically they need to do more reading and read critically to enhance their language competence.

**Prepositions**—English prepositions are a problem because different languages use different prepositions to express the same ideas. Both the teachers and the students need to learn to put the prepositions in situations where they can be used naturally. It can be very confusing to choose prepositions to use in expressions.

**Nouns**—In English, as in many other languages, nouns are classified as two kinds: countable nouns and uncountable nouns. If something is countable, it can have a plural form. If it is uncountable, the singular form of the noun is used to refer to any quantity. For example, in English, "homework" and "housework" are generally uncountable. Students have to learn which nouns are which in English because it affects other grammar principles as well.

There are other problems with English grammar but as long as the students work hard to read widely and lay a comparatively solid foundation in English grammar, they can cope with these problems and read well.

### 3. Reading habits and skills

Many students have bad habits in reading. Some have difficulty in concentrating on the reading, and their reading speed is very slow, and unfortunately these problems lead to poor comprehension. Some move their lips and even mimic speech with their tongues while reading. Some others even have the habit of using their fingers or a pen to point the lines. All the bad habits influence the students' reading range and the effect of reading.

Apart from eliminating these bad habits in reading, the students also need to improve their reading skills to read well. Improving reading skills will help them shorten their reading time and read more effectively and fruitfully, and increase their levels of understanding and concentration. The critical reading skills can enable them to read more effectively and fruitfully.

## V. APPLICATION OF CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES TO COLLEGE READING TEACHING

To apply the critical reading skills to reading:

In pre-reading, ask the students to have clear reading goals, and choose the right reading skills, such as note-taking techniques, or engage their lips, tongues and vocal cords to read actively, and more fruitfully. Clear reading goals can significantly increase their reading efficiency. As some parts are not of use to them. Use reading goals to choose and prioritize information according to the task in hand.

Then the readers skim and scan the text.

Skimming is the process of speedy reading for general meaning. The students are taught to let their eyes skip over sentences or phrases which contain detail. Concentrate on identifying the central or main points.

Scanning the text may help the readers find the wanted information in a very short time. In this kind of exercise, the students are asked to finish reading a long passage within a very short period of time. They scan to try to find the specific information they need to answer the questions, and at the same time they think very quickly to draw understanding of the text.

Skimming and scanning can be done very quickly, and this kind of pre-viewing of the text will do a very good preparation for detailed reading later.

In detailed reading, note taking is very useful. Once they have selected useful information, they can begin to read in detail. When they read in detail, they underline and highlight to pick out what seem to be the most central or important words and phrases; in this way they get a deeper understanding of the material. Then the readers raise questions to encourage themselves to take an active approach to their reading. Ask the students to ask each other questions and give answers to them. Questions and answers will make the students think deeper and harder in reading, and also help them recognize the missing information in their own reading.

When they finish reading, ask them to write summaries to check whether they have understood what they have read. Skim over the text to check whether they have record all the important information.

## VI. CONCLUSION

These strategies encourage the readers to have an active engagement with the text as well as providing the readers with a useful record of their reading. Let them have a clear focus for reading, and set their reading goals clearly. Once they read critically, they obtain a deeper and better understanding of the reading material.

As we all become clear about the difference between critical reading and non-critical reading, and we see the effectiveness of critical reading because of the application of the critical reading strategies, we should try to do reading in this way to obtain a better and more fruitful comprehension in college English reading.

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