

## CRITICAL READING – A FUNDAMENTAL SKILL FOR BUILDING 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY LITERACY

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**Abstract:** *Academic expectations are a game changer when it comes to students' learning experiences. As part of their university studies, learners are asked to read research, articles, textbooks, lecture notes, etc., and critically engage with the content in order to analyze it, evaluate it, make connections, draw conclusions, or find new ways to reorganize, reinterpret, and recycle information. Learning to read critically helps students navigate the deep waters of academic requirements, and will ultimately empower them to function more effectively in the educational environment and beyond. This article presents critical reading as an essential skill whose mastery will enable students to deepen their understanding and awareness of both language and content. By discussing critical reading skills from the perspective of traditional and modern approaches and by deconstructing this receptive ability from the point of view of the various strategies and techniques it entails, the present paper aims to address useful aspects related to both the theoretical fundamentals and the practical construction of critical reading competence, and to highlight the importance of critical thinking skills as essential prerequisites for building 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy.*

**Keywords:** critical reading, skills, strategies, techniques, 21st century literacy

### 1. Introduction

21st century literacy skills refer to the abilities and competencies that individuals need to effectively navigate and thrive in today's rapidly changing digital landscape. These skills are essential for success in both personal and professional contexts. In an academic environment, especially, developing and improving literacy skills is a recipe for success that allows higher education institutions focus on equipping students with the necessary abilities to deepen their understanding and awareness of the targeted content related to the disciplines they study, empowering them to create and recreate meaning and engaging with the accumulated knowledge in situations that go beyond classroom setting, into real-life interactions.

Some of the key 21st century literacy skills

that HEIs have incorporated in their curricula, as part of a modern, student-oriented and longer-lasting educational approach include:

- ✓ *Creativity*: the ability to think creatively and generate new ideas, as well as the ability to express oneself in various media formats.
- ✓ *Collaboration*: the ability to work effectively with others, both in person and remotely, and to communicate and share ideas using digital tools.
- ✓ *Adaptability*: the ability to adapt to new technologies, changing circumstances, and new roles and responsibilities.
- ✓ *Information literacy*: the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically, including the ability to cite sources and avoid plagiarism.

DOI: 10.2478/kbo-2023-0060

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- ✓ *Digital literacy*: the ability to use digital tools and technologies effectively and responsibly, including online communication, research, and information management.
- ✓ *Media literacy*: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, including digital media, print media, and social media.
- ✓ *Global and cultural awareness*: the ability to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives and cultures, as well as the ability to communicate and collaborate with people from different backgrounds.
- ✓ *Critical thinking*: the ability to analyze and evaluate information, make informed decisions, and solve complex problems.

Against this background, we argue that critical thinking is an ability that positions itself at the core of any endeavor aimed at harnessing the efficiency and effectiveness of educational strategies, methods, and techniques focused on developing creativity, collaboration, adaptability, cultural sensitivity and awareness, problem-solving, etc. Although critical thinking skills include a plethora of cognitive abilities that are required in order to help students navigate the deep waters of academic requirements, the present paper focuses on the importance of critical reading as a valuable skill in academic contexts. The discussion will subsequently focus on useful aspects related to both the theoretical fundamentals and the practical construction of critical reading competence, and will highlight the importance of critical reading skills as essential prerequisites for building 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy.

## **2. Critical reading – definition**

Critical reading is the process of analyzing and evaluating a text by carefully considering its content, structure, and context [1]. It involves active and thoughtful engagement with the material,

rather than simply accepting it at face value. Critical readers ask questions, make connections, and evaluate the evidence presented in a text. To engage in critical reading, students need to be taught to adopt a skeptical mindset that allows them to challenge assumptions, question evidence, and consider alternative perspectives. This requires a combination of analytical skills and intellectual curiosity.

By analyzing and evaluating texts, articles, or other written materials they interact with as part of their academic education, in order to understand their meaning, evaluate their credibility, and assess their relevance to a particular topic or subject, students need to activate specific critical reading skills and sub-skills, such as: careful and deliberate reading, questioning, evaluating the credibility of sources, analyzing the structure and organization of the text, considering the historical and cultural context, and interpreting the content in order to identify the author's purpose, main arguments, evidence, and assumptions, as well as any potential biases or logical fallacies. Critical reading helps individuals to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills, and enables them to form informed opinions and make sound decisions based on the information presented in the text.

## **3. Critical reading between tradition and transgression**

The need to develop critical reading skills is not a novel academic objective. However, in recent times, new approaches are located at the intersection between established customs and breaking the norms or boundaries of those customs.

A reinterpretation of how to teach critical reading requires a careful analysis of how tradition and transgression intersect and shape each other. Just like any other teaching methodology, reading theories, methods and techniques have experienced a variety of reallocations and transitions.

The traditional view focused on the printed form of a text; the cognitive view enhances the role of background knowledge in addition to what exists on the printed page. At the intersection of these two views, we can identify the metacognitive view which, according to Vaezi, “is based on the control and manipulation that a reader can have on the act of comprehending a text” [2]. Merging traditional and more recent approaches to developing and improving critical reading skills requires a successful combination of cognitive processes that readers can activate in order to decode the meaning of the material they need to actively interact with.

### **3.1. Top-down and bottom-up processing**

In the context of critical reading, top-down processing and bottom-up processing refer to two different approaches the brain uses to comprehend written text.

Top-down processing is a cognitive approach that relies on the reader’s prior knowledge, experience, and expectations to understand written text. In other words, the reader uses their knowledge of the world and their own personal experiences to interpret the text. For example, when reading a newsarticle, the reader may rely on their prior knowledge of current events and politics to understand the article’s content.

On the other hand, bottom-up processing is a more basic, sensory-driven approach to reading. In this approach, the reader focuses on the individual words and letters in the text, and uses these basic building blocks (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) to construct meaning. For example, when reading an unfamiliar word, the reader might sound out each letter to determine its pronunciation and meaning.

Top-down processing techniques involve activities that offer the reader a comprehensive understanding of the text. These include:

- ✓ Using pictures to predict what the topic will be about;
- ✓ Providing three or four titles and asking the students to read the passage to decide about the most appropriate title for the passage;
- ✓ Providing headings and asking the students to match them with the different sections of the passage;
- ✓ Matching different pictures with the different sections of the text;
- ✓ Arranging a series of pictures or a sequence of events in the right order;
- ✓ Asking the students to infer the type of relationships between the people involved;
- ✓ Providing students with a set of information to be studied, based on which they will identify information presented in the text.

Bottom-up processing incorporates a set of activities that are concerned with discrete language elements (individual words, phrases, and sentences). These activities guide the students to construct a better meaning of the text, while facilitating effective retention of the information as it is being processed. Decoding discourse comes before decoding meaning, and is an essential step in comprehending both language and content. Language analysis focuses on identifying word and clause boundaries, recognizing key transitions, locating referents, understanding grammatical relationships between morphological and syntactic elements in an utterance or sentence, and identifying sentence functions. Examples of such activities include:

- ✓ Identifying the meaning of a word – either in its morphological or its syntactic role;
- ✓ Identifying synonyms or antonyms;
- ✓ Recognizing the parts of speech;
- ✓ Identifying verb tenses or mood;
- ✓ Recognizing linking words and phrases or sequencing speech markers;
- ✓ Identifying the order of a set of words/ sentences in the text.

Both top-down and bottom-up processing are important for effective reading comprehension. Top-down processing helps the reader to make predictions about what they will read next and to understand the overall meaning of a text. Bottom-up processing helps the reader to decode individual words and understand their meaning. Skilled readers are able to balance these two approaches to reading to achieve a deeper level of comprehension.

### 3.2. Interactive model

An interactive model in reading is a framework or approach that emphasizes active engagement between the reader and the text [3]. This model is often used in educational settings to teach reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. In an interactive model, the reader is seen as an active participant in the reading process, rather than a passive recipient of information. This means that the reader is expected to engage with the text, ask questions, make predictions, and draw conclusions based on their own experiences and knowledge.

Some key elements of an interactive model in reading might include:

- ✓ Pre-reading activities: Before reading a text, the reader might be encouraged to activate their prior knowledge, make predictions about the text, and set goals for their reading.
- ✓ During-reading activities: While reading, the reader might be encouraged to pause and reflect on what they have read, ask questions, make connections to their own experiences, and use context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- ✓ Post-reading activities: After reading, the reader might be asked to summarize the text, analyze its structure and content, and make connections to other texts or ideas.

Overall, the interactive model in reading emphasizes the importance of active engagement and critical thinking in the

reading process. By actively engaging with a text, readers can develop a deeper understanding of its meaning and significance, and apply this understanding to their own lives and experiences.

### 4. Critical reading skills and strategies

Skills are defined as the ability to do something well and are acquired through planned, deliberate and systematic effort [4]. Richards and Schmidt define a skill as “an acquired ability to perform an activity well, usually one that is made of a number of coordinated processes” [5].

Strategies refer to the planned and explicit actions that generally help students navigate through the learning process. “Reading strategies are deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text. Reading skills are automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency and usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved” [6]. Teaching reading strategies involves equipping the learners with the necessary tools that help them read any type of text and improve their decoding and reading comprehension skills. Consequently, critical reading skills and strategies refer to the ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret written material in a thoughtful and deliberate way. These skills are essential for comprehending complex texts, identifying key information, and developing a nuanced understanding of the author’s intent.

Some of the most popular critical reading skills and strategies include:

1. *Active reading*: This involves engaging with the text actively, rather than just reading it passively. It means asking questions, making connections, and challenging assumptions while reading.
2. *Analyzing the structure of the text*: This involves breaking the text down into

its component parts, such as paragraphs, sentences, and clauses, and examining how they fit together to create meaning.

3. *Identifying the author's purpose*: This involves considering why the author wrote the text and what message they are trying to convey.

4. *Evaluating the evidence*: This involves assessing the quality and relevance of the evidence presented in the text, and whether it supports the author's argument or not.

5. *Comparing and contrasting viewpoints*: This involves examining the different perspectives presented in the text, as well as those that are not presented, and evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses.

6. *Recognizing bias*: This involves being aware of the author's potential biases and assumptions and evaluating how they might affect the message of the text.

7. *Making connections*: This involves connecting the text to the readers' own knowledge and experience, as well as to other texts they have read, to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the material.

Overall, developing critical reading skills and strategies takes practice and persistence. By actively engaging with texts and applying these skills and strategies, students can become more thoughtful and insightful readers.

## 5. Conclusions

Critical reading is essential because it allows individuals to evaluate the quality and credibility of the information they encounter in various forms of text. In today's world, where there is an abundance of information readily available, it is crucial to be able to identify reliable sources and distinguish fact from opinion or propaganda.

By developing critical reading skills, individuals can better understand the nuances of language, identify logical fallacies and biases, and analyze arguments more effectively. They can also develop their own opinions and perspectives, rather than simply accepting information at face value. Furthermore, critical reading is a valuable skill in various academic and professional contexts. In academic settings, it is necessary for students to evaluate sources and analyze texts to form their arguments and conclusions. In professional contexts, critical reading is crucial for making informed decisions based on the information at hand.

In summary, critical reading is important because it empowers learners to think more critically and make informed decisions based on the information they encounter. It is an essential skill for success in academia, professional life, and everyday life.

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