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Teaching through Appraisal: Developing Critical Reading in Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Enhanced critical reading comprehension skill has recently been called for in a variety of contexts including educational (Huijie, 2010), academic (Liu, 2010), advertising (Pirozzi, 2003; Goatly, 2000), media (Millan, 1995), among others. Presently regarded as the fourth literacy in addition to the conventional “3R” literacies (i.e. reading, writing, and arithmetic) (Huijie, 2010: 41), teaching critical reading is finding its way into the curriculum of English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) pedagogy. A number of attempts have been made to promote teaching critical reading through a variety of strategies, among them adaptations of CDA techniques (Koupaee Dar, Rahimi, & Shams, 2010), language awareness techniques (Akbari, 2008), , and critical thinking techniques (Neilsen, 1989); however, none seems to be based theoretically on such modern approaches to language and linguistics as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Despite the underlying assumption in SFL that language operates at three simultaneous meaning-making levels, little research has addressed the issue of developing critical reading proficiency by taking the advantage of a variety of theories which are given birth by SFL. The present study aims to fill this gap. Through instructing 60 BA junior students of English studying at Institute for Higher Education ACECR- Khuzestan Branch who were passing a 2-credit press reading course to know about Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), their critical reading proficiency prior to and after the study was scrutinized. The independent samples t-test proved the positive effect of familiarity with Appraisal resources on students’ level of critical reading proficiency. The study carries implications for EFL teachers and teacher education centres.

Keywords: Appraisal theory; critical reading; critical reading proficiency

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1. Introduction

With language being employed manipulatively as a tool for conveying information, ideologies and emotions, text is increasingly regarded as a multi-dimensional structure, layered as a “sheet of plywood”. Consequently, thorough comprehension of such texts requires the ability to read critically between the lines in an attempt to find out about the writer’s stance, the strategic organization of the text, the nature of the writer’s argument, etc. In other words, text comprehension lies not in the text itself but in the complex interaction between the author’s intent and the reader’s ability to decode the author’s intent (Koupaee Dar, Rahimi, & Shams, 2010: 458).

Enhanced critical reading comprehension skill has recently been called for in a variety of contexts including educational (Huijie, 2010), academic (Heinz, 2004), advertising (Pirozzi, 2003; Goatly, 2000), media (Millan, 1995), among others. Presently regarded as the fourth literacy in addition to the conventional “3R” literacies (i.e. reading, writing, and arithmetic) (Huijie, 2010: 41), teaching critical reading is finding its way into the curriculum of English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) pedagogy.

A number of attempts have been made to teach critical reading skill through a variety of strategies, among them adaptations of CDA techniques (Koupaee Dar, Rahimi, & Shams, 2010), language awareness techniques (Akbari, 2008), critical thinking techniques (Neilson, 1989), direct instruction versus feedback presentation (Patching, et. al., 1983). While contributing their share to the literature, none seems to be based theoretically on such modern approaches to language and linguistics as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Despite the underlying assumption in SFL that language operates at three simultaneous meaning-making levels, little research has addressed the issue of developing critical reading proficiency by taking the advantage of a variety of theories which are given birth by SFL. The present study aims to fill this gap. Adaptations of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) build up the window through which EFL learners are given an awareness of the multiple functions of language. In fact, the study seeks to make one basic inquiry: whether such enlightenment through Appraisal Theory can make any difference in EFL learners’ critical reading proficiency?

2. Review of literature

2.1 Critical reading

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines the adjective “critical” as “characterized by careful, exact evaluation and judgment”. Despite the prevalent negative connotation of finding faults, the idea of being critical is equated within the literature with “a higher order thinking which brings in more rigorous analysis to problem solving of textual understanding and a way of developing more critical distance from the writer” (Pennycook: 2001: 4). Pirozzi (2003) best captures the significance of critical reading in regarding it as a necessity on the part of learners “to uncover motivations and assess arguments, to consider options, products, advertisements and commercials, and to judge policies and programs offered by the various levels of government”.

Earlier literature on critical reading casts an eye on various workings of critical reading. In fact, a number of definitions have been proposed each of which sheds light on one aspect of critical reading. As “a thinking process improved as a result of individuals learning to use language more constructively through skilful questioning” (Hafner, 1974: 40), critical reading is conceived of as active reading, requiring an activity on the part of the learner (Schwegler, 2004). To read critically implies maintaining objectivity so as not to allow exceptions, biases or personal prejudices to interfere with understanding (Milan, 1995). As a matter of fact, critical reading suggests more than the ability to understand the explicit meaning of the passage. In addition, it involves application, analysis, evaluation and imagination (Philips & Sotiriou, 1992). Through keeping an open mind and retaining a conditional willingness to be convinced (Poulson & Wallace, 2004), a critical reader is able to distinguish fact from opinion, recognize intent, attitude and tone, and draw inferences and conclusions (Adams, 1989). The reader’s stance is
highly emphasized in critical reading. They question, compare and evaluate to detect faulty logic and information, and then choose whether or not to accept it (Hancock, 1987), hence the ability in sizing up the writer’s arguments to see how well s/he supports the proposed argument (Pirozzi, 2004).

Scholars devoted to developing critical reading have widely recognized critical reading as a high-level reading common in academic context. Philips and Sotiriou (1992) distinguish between critical and literal reading comprehension. While sharing some common grounds, the two kinds vary along the lines of purposes, process and above all, reader stance. Literal meaning is mainly carried out for the purpose of grasping the literal meaning (i.e. to locate the main idea and supporting details). The reading material of such kind is basically one-dimensional; whereas in critical reading, the purpose goes beyond surface content. One may have to read the multi-dimensional material a number of times before one can effectively discuss and write about it (p. 268). On the same line, Adams (1989) categorizes reading with three levels of literal comprehension, critical comprehension and affective comprehension, where critical reading holds the first position. In all, the existing literature suggests that sufficient comprehension of authentic written material is required to comprehend underlying structure and discourse patterns and relate inferences in the text to real-world knowledge in a critical fashion.

2.1.1 Critical reading proficiency

Multiple checklists have been published to describe the various components of critical reading proficiency (Milan, 1995; Pirozzi, 2003; Poulson & Wallace, 2004; Hancock, 1987, among others). The Critical Thinking Community focuses on reading and listening skills as the building blocks of communication. In its website (2013), critical thinking in reading is described as the ability to:

- create an accurate interpretation,
- assess the author’s purpose,
- accurately identify the question-at-issue or the problem being discussed,
- accurately identify basic concepts at the heart of what is written,
- see significant implications of the advanced position,
- identify, understand and evaluate the assumptions underlying someone’s position,
- recognize evidence, argument, inference (or their lack) in written presentation,
- reasonably assess the credibility of an author,
- accurately grasp the point of view of the author,
- empathetically reason within the point of view of the author.

Likewise, critical reading proficiency in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) contexts are described by Carrigus (2002: xvi) at two levels of basic critical reading skills and high-level critical reading skills. The former focuses on paragraph analysing while the latter on making inference and evaluating. Basic reading skills entail the ability to find the main idea of paragraphs, multi-paragraph units and articles, identify idea patterns of organization, distinguish topical organization from organization by idea, and recognize transitions that signal relationships among pattern elements and supporting details. High-level critical reading skills require students to draw inference and state implied main idea, synthesize two or more sentences to formulate divided main ideas, distinguish fact and opinion, evaluate evidence, explain figurative language (e.g. analogy), identify basic logical fallacies and emotional appeals.

Other descriptions are provided in phrases or words rather than explicit categories or levels. Wassman and Paye (1988: 323) depict some key components for questions on critical reading proficiency. The questions must ask for author’s reliability and point of view, facts and opinion, language, author’s tone, purpose, thesis and attitude, inference and critical judgment. These criteria, together with those mentioned before, inform the learners’
assessment of the level of critical reading in the present study.

2.1.2 Studies on critical reading

Patching, et. al. (1983) compared a control and two experimental treatments, i.e. a direct-instruction approach and a workbook-with-corrective-feedback approach, in training three critical reading skills. The skills were the ability to detect instances of faulty generalization, false causality, and invalid testimonial. Thirty-nine fifth-grade students were randomly assigned to one of three groups. When a 3-day instructional intervention was completed, students were given specially designed tests: one main measure, a domain-referenced test geared to the material taught, and two supplementary measures. Significant differences were found on performance on the main post-test between the direct-instruction sample and both the workbook-with-corrective-feedback and no-intervention samples. Results from the two supplementary tests were either non-significant or favoured direct instruction.

In a descriptive study, Akbari (2008) highlighted the applications of critical pedagogy for L2 classrooms and provides hints as to how FL teaching can result in the improvement of the lives of those who are normally not considered in ELT discussions. Stressing on certain requirements for implementing critical pedagogy such as decentralization of decision-making (as of content, teaching methodology and testing), he calls for the application of the potentials of critical pedagogy by reviving the required attitude and encouraging the significance of learners’ experiences as legitimate departure points in any meaningful learning enterprise.

In an attempt to detect the effect of raising students’ critical reading ability through explicit teaching of some techniques of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Koupaee Dar, et. al. (2010) conducted a research on 60 junior BA English students. Three paired news articles were selected from online editions of BBC, Press TV and New York Times, each pair being on the same subject. Prior to the study, the participants were asked to analyse the articles critically. Once the teaching was carried out, they were asked to analyse the same articles for a second time. Moreover, they responded to a questionnaire to reveal any change in their attitudes towards or motivation to English critical reading comprehension. Overall, the study recorded a significantly positive effect of explicit teaching of CDA techniques on developing critical reading ability among EFL learners.

In another recent study, Liu (2010) investigates the application of Appraisal Theory as a new theoretical framework to the teaching of college English reading in search of new insights. He studies the effect of teaching appraising strategies to 100 sophomore Chinese students of English Language and Literature in a period of 18 weeks (2 hours per week). His study recorded higher grades for the students in the experimental group as compared with those of the control group in their post-tests.

2.2 Appraisal theory

Appraisal Theory, as an extension within SFL, operates as one of the three major discourse semantic resources constructing interpersonal meaning (alongside involvement and negotiation) (Martin & White, 2005: 33). It is recognized at three interacting domains including ‘attitude’, ‘engagement’ and ‘graduation’. Attitude is concerned with our feelings, e.g. emotional reactions, judgments of behaviour and evaluation of things. Engagement deals with sourcing attitudes and the play of various voices around opinions in discourse. Graduation attends to grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred. An overview of appraisal resources is provided in Fig 1.
Within engagement system, every text is perceived to function in a dialogic context. To use Bakhtin’s words, “every text exists against a backdrop of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments … pregnant with responses and objections” (Bakhtin, 1981:281). This dialogistic perspective renders the nature of the relationship between the writer and the reader of every single text. Within this heteroglossic context, various utterances may act either to make an allowance for (i.e. expand) or challenge the scope of (i.e. contract) alternative positions. This general dichotomy lies at the heart of the engagement system. Various resources are at writers’ hands to realize such expansive or contractive effects which are summarized in Fig 2.

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**Fig 1** An overview of Appraisal resources (Martin & Rose, 2003)

**Fig 2** The engagement system (Martin & Rose, 2003)
3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

60 junior BA students of English Language and Literature studying in Institute for Higher Education ACECR Khuzestan were selected as the participants of the study. The students, studying in two different sections, were homogenized through a general proficiency test to make sure they enjoy the required command of vocabulary and grammatical structure of English to handle press comprehension at a literal level. The proficiency test recorded the students as holding the intermediate level of proficiency.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Editorial articles

From among the different sub-sections of press, the editorial section was selected for a number of reasons. First, editorials are the explicit sites of portraying the ideological stance of the news agency, in a way that no other part of the news is (Lihua, 2009). This makes editorial a rich resource of controversial ideologies and interpretations. Moreover, since the editorial is attributed to the news agency as a whole rather than the individual author, it is the only section where the pure stance of the media can be found (van Dijk, 1996: 13). Therefore, the most persuasive and argumentative language is supposed to be found in this section. Two sets of three editorial articles were selected from two internationally known news agencies, i.e. Press TV and BBC, with each of the articles written on a different issue. The topics of the editorials were selected in a way to fulfil the requirements for critical reading, i.e. they were written on controversial issues, hence ideologically loaded. Moreover, the topics were chosen among the most recent ones so that the students have some background knowledge of them. Each article was in average 800-word-long. The articles were all accessed through the agencies’ official websites.

3.2.2 Comprehension tests

A comprehension test was designed by the researcher for every one of the editorial articles to test the students’ level of critical reading proficiency. Critical Reading Proficiency (CRP) Test Focus Inventory (Huijie, 2010: 51) was used as the guide to devise critical comprehension questions. Moreover, in order for the students not to find out about the research purpose and, hence, not be affected by it in their replies, an equal number of ordinary reading comprehension tests (measuring literal reading comprehension) were included within the overall test.

3.2.3 Appraisal Teaching Design

In the present study, Martin & White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory was selected to see whether students’ familiarity with such strategies can make them more critical readers. Since Appraisal Theory operates at three main categories of attitude, engagement and graduation each of which with its multiple sub-categories, it was decided in the present study not to bore students with the whole framework. Besides, teaching the techniques in whole would be time-consuming. As a result, an adaptation of the theory was selected for the purpose of the current study, which captured the engagement resources.

Being concerned with the linguistic resources by which speakers/writers adopt a stance towards the value positions being advanced by the text and with respect to those they address, the engagement system seemed to best suit the purposes of the present study. In fact, in line with the idea that the basic component of reading comprehension lies not in the text itself but in the complex interaction between the author’s intent and the reader’s
ability to decode it (Koupaee Dar, Rahimi, & Shams, 2010), attempt was made in the present study to see whether or not familiarity with such linguistic resources as engagement strategies can help students get the writer’s voice right.

3.3 Procedure

Prior to the study, the 60 students were divided to two experimental and control groups of 30. To find out where the students initially stand with respect to their level of critical reading proficiency, a pair of editorial articles (one from BBC and the other from Press TV), were given to them to read during two separate sessions. After each session, they were asked to answer the comprehension questions in class time. Then, using another pair of editorials, the researcher who was also the course instructor, introduced the engagement system to the students in the experimental group in a top-down fashion. That is, various example sentences taken from the editorial articles were written on board and they were asked about the possible functions that such sentences can fulfil in discourse. After that, they were given time to find and search for similar strategies within the articles, which were discussed and checked by the instructor in class. The teaching stage took two sessions. During these two sessions, the researcher taught the same articles to the control group in the usual pattern. After that, the instructor continued with the routine practice of literal reading comprehension for four sessions and for both groups. That is, she used the same practices of brainstorming, introducing vocabulary and complex sentence patterns as she had been using prior to the study. After the interval, all the 60 students were given the third pair of articles together with the reading comprehension questions. The whole activity was again conducted during class time. The tests were rated based on Huijie’s CRP test focus inventory (2010).

4. Results

4.1 Results of the pre-tests

The tests designed to check the comprehension of every editorial article included ten questions five of which (i.e. the ones assigned to even numbers) were aimed at assessing critical reading proficiency. After the first stage was completed, the participants’ initial performance on the pretests was identified. To this aim, each of the five questions was assigned one point with no negative point being assigned to wrong answers. Individual participants’ total score on each test was calculated, and a mean score was identified. Table 1 presents the results of the CP and EP pre-test.

Table 1 Independent samples t-test on the pre-test

| Group | N  | Mean | SD   | Std. Error | t     | df  |
|-------|----|------|------|------------|-------|-----|
|       |    | Mean |      |            |       |     |
| CP    | 30 | 1.8677 | 1.04166 | .19018 | .000 | 58  |
| EP    | 30 | 1.8677 | 0.97320 | .17768 | .000 | 57.734 |

As the above table shows, the difference between the mean scores is subtle. In other words, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups which might be justified by the fact that the participants of both groups did not receive any instruction with regard to critical reading skills.

4.2 Results of the post-tests

Upon completion of the post-tests, means and standard deviations were calculated and consequently, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the participants’ performance to determine the effect of teaching appraisal strategies on the participants’ critical reading proficiency. As the following table displays, the t value obtained was -4.976 at the confidence level of 95, degree of freedom 58 and the significance level of 0.000.
Comparison of the t obtained with the t-critical revealed that the difference was statistically significant. In other words, the appraisal teaching procedure in this study produced a significant difference in the critical reading performance of the experimental group compared with that of the control group. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics and the results of the t-test.

Table 2 Independent samples t-test on the post-test

| Group | N  | Mean  | SD    | Std. Error | Mean | t     | df   |
|-------|----|-------|-------|------------|------|-------|------|
| CP    | 30 | 2.9667| 1.0333| .18866     | -4.976| 58    |
| EP    | 30 | 4.3333| 1.0933| .19962     | -4.976| 57.816|

According to Table 2, the mean scores in the two groups differ significantly. That is to say, the mean score of the experimental group in the post-test exceeded that of the control group. A closer look at the results reveals that the mean scores obtained in the pretest differ from the scores obtained from the post-test, which shows that both types of instruction contributed to learning improvement but the mean score of the experimental group. Moreover, The difference between the means and standard deviations of the two groups shows the effectiveness of teaching appraisal strategies because the mean scores improved from pretest to post-test.

5. Discussion

An in-depth analysis of the students’ performance in both pre- and post-tests revealed a lot about the contribution of teaching appraisal strategies to students’ critical reading comprehension skills. The questions aimed to assess students’ critical reading proficiency were adopted from Huijie, 2010. Basically, they probed to see whether or not the students were able to identify writers’ stance towards the issue at stake, writers’ purpose in writing the editorials, the way writers choose to approach the issue (e.g. argumentation, description, opinion and justification, etc.), students’ personal replies to the articles, and the ability to distinguish fact from opinion. Among the questions, the one which was answered correctly by the majority of the participants in the pre-test was the question concerned with identifying the writers’ stance toward the issue. In other words, 70% of the students proved able to identify the biased nature of the text. However, only a few (16 %) of them could supply their answers with appropriate textual evidence. Even the justifications provided by this few included mainly of quotations inserted in the text, which itself is shadowed by the writers’ bias of selection. Casting a similar look at the post-test results indicates that the instructional component in the present study equipped the students with the necessary skills to eloquently trace bias within the texts together with providing sufficient lexical, grammatical and rhetorical evidence. Regarding the same question in the post-test, a greater number of participants were able to identify the writers’ side with regard to the issue and justify their answers with appropriate textual justification.

Both in pre- and post-tests, students were given the choice to write their answers either in English or in Persian, or they could even leave them unanswered. It is worth noting that compared with the pre-test, more questions were answered in general, and particularly a greater number of correct answers were spotted by the students in the post-test. This can be justified by the fact that the awareness of the appraisal theory provided students with enough confidence to read the texts from a rather different perspective. In other words, as Koupaee Dar, et. al. (2010) suggest, an awareness of the underpinning layers and functions of language in discourse can uncover the “once initial conception of language as an innocent vehicle of communication” in students’ minds. Once students were introduced with the multi-faceted nature of language and discourse through appraisal theory, they no more considered themselves to be impartial and indifferent comprehenders of facts. This effect is what Martin and White (2005: 1) sought for in introducing appraisal resources to the world of discourse when they introduce appraisal as “being concerned with the interpersonal in language”. Having learnt about ‘the play of expansive and contractive voices’ within editorials, students developed the ability to ponder the evaluative stance of the writer, hence taking a first step in being critical (huijie, 2010). Moreover, they could see clearly, among the mist of multiple voices, which
voice the writer wants the readers to hear and recall later, i.e. the writer’s purpose in posing the issue in their own fashion.

The question concerning the writers’ choice of approaching the problem was the one mostly answered wrongly by the students. It seems that students’ familiarity with appraisal resources contributed little to students’ ability to identify the underlying organizational pattern of the texts. The reason might be the students’ unfamiliarity with the existing ways of putting forth an issue. As the participants of the study were all junior students, none of whom had passed the required research and essay writing courses in which they are given brief introductions with various organizational and generic patterns in writing, the relatively weaker performance of students on this question seems justifiable. Overall, comparing the pre-test, still larger numbers of students were able to answer the same question correctly, which suggests an improvement in students’ critical reading comprehension of the respective editorial articles.

6. Conclusion

Language is a multi-faceted, multi-working construction in the hands of language users to fulfill a variety of purposes including social and political. A thorough comprehension of any language piece requires a thorough familiarity with the underlying patterns of that language. Language teachers are, therefore, responsible for opening new windows to students through which they can practice effective language use (Brown, 2004). A language teacher’s agenda should not be limited to superficial aspects of language, sacrificing their real functions. Rather, they should engage themselves in teaching the art of being critical.

The present study attempted to take the initiative in introducing the powerful potential of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), as an extension of Systemic Functional Linguistics, to the world of readers. As a rather new outlook to language, the theory sheds light on the interpersonal aspect of language communication, eradicating inactivity (of any sort and extent) on the part of language consumers. In fact, as Martin and White (2005: 210) point out, getting equipped with the appraisal strategies can serve to inform our interpretation of evaluation in texts of various genres, especially media texts. Taking the advantage of the engagement resources, the participants of the study were given an awareness of the layers of language which was henceforth unknown to them. This way they were able to discover new aspects of language, to go deeper in the discourse semantics and to be critical.

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