



## ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING COMPETENCE

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the role of critical thinking in developing reading and some difficulties of understanding some texts. The article pays special attention to the reading strategies to deal with the text and approach it critically.

**Key words:** reading, skill, text, authentic schemata

Reading is one of the most important skills in learning a second language. As a matter of fact, learners must feel the need of reading only then they can read on their own. Reading stands as bedrock for learners' success in learning a second language, therefore it is language teachers' responsibility to cultivate reading culture in students. But the fact is; there are so many challenges in teaching reading in EFL classroom. Teaching a reading text is taken as the easiest task among all the activities that teachers do in a language classroom. Generally, teachers come in the class without any preparation and they deliver a long lecture on the content. They do not care whether the text is appropriate to the learners or not. Moreover, they hardly give any importance to language teaching and language learners and their interest. There is nearly no any task for students except memorizing word meaning and question answers. In most cases, teacher explains the words for the students and later they remember them for test. Now let's look through the role of critical thinking in the development of reading skills. Developing critical literacy, critical thinking, and critical reading comprehension are among the many goals of English development at different levels of learning. With the flood of information that students encounter on various online platforms, developing their ability to critically examine and evaluate the texts they read has become a central concern. Let's take a look at some key terms and strategies for helping students become critical thinkers and readers. Unfortunately, critical thinking is often seen as a blurred area and students are often confused about exactly what is expected of them. However, both critical thinking and reading comprehension can be modeled, taught and developed in the classroom. As teachers, we need to consider what our audience values as critical thinking skills. Students are easier to prepare for critical thinking challenges when they have a clear picture of their own expectations. First and foremost, it is important that students have the language and reading strategies to deal with the text and approach it critically. By definition the word 'critical' comes from the Greek word 'krinein', meaning 'to separate' or 'to decide'. It implies an analytical and inquiry-based approach in our thinking.

When we read critically, we think and reflect on what we have read. It involves a conscious approach to reading that anticipates what we read, seeks out information, and has expectations. It also means analyzing and evaluating the reading process and material for the purpose of assessing its value. While we can define the universal characteristics of critical

thinkers, it is important to note that different subjects and disciplines approach texts differently. We can expect following from critical readers.

'Probably most students and instructors would agree that, as critical readers, students should be able to:

- Summarize accurately an argument they have read;
- Locate the thesis of an argument;
- Locate the assumptions, stated and unstated;
- Analyze and evaluate the strength and the evidence and the soundness of the reasoning offered in support of the thesis;
- Analyze, evaluate, and account for discrepancies among various readings on a topic [3;3].

What else do critical thinking and reading involve?

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 for this reason, critical thinking and reading comprehension are trained and manifested differently in different areas. It is important to make students aware of the specific needs of different subjects and solicit feedback from teachers on valuable critical thinking expressions.

Why are critical thinking and reading so important?

The proliferation of terms like «fake news» and «misinformation» shows how easily readers can be misled by various information portals. Another major problem of modern literacy is the ability to distinguish opinion from fact. Teaching students how to read critically can help them learn to read and think in an informed and confident way.

These simple and great questions also work well in the classroom:

Why do you say that?

What have you read/seen/heard that make you say that?

What evidence can you find in the text/picture?

What else can you find/see?

Some connections and strategies which help students to become critical thinkers and readers. Reading comprehension and critical thinking research has received a lot of attention in recent years, and it has become a popular area in cognitive psychology. By utilizing a set of related concepts, modern cognitivists have developed new trends and theories that provide theoretical models for explaining and conceptualizing reading comprehension, such as critical thinking, prior knowledge, inference-making, and metacognitive skills [5;1-9]. Among these trends is schema theory, which is considered to be a theory about knowledge: how knowledge is represented and organized, and how that representation and organization facilitates the use of a reader's prior knowledge to improve reading comprehension.

Below, we will try to identify what is critical thinking itself and its definitions. One scholar who has provided a broad definition for critical thinking is Facione who developed a definition of critical thinking that incorporates evaluation and problem solving. Facione indicates that it is possible to evaluate critical thinking by evaluating the adequacy of the

arguments that express that thinking. He stated that “critical thinking is the development and evaluation of arguments” [4;259].

Lewis and Smith point out that what is new in Facione’s definition is that he views critical thinking as an active process which involves constructing arguments, not just evaluating them [6;131-137].

In this study, critical thinking refers to the process by which the reader thinks reasonably and reflectively for the purpose of meaning construction. Based on this definitions, let’s analyze how connected reading with critical thinking. The connection between critical thinking and reading is well documented in the literature. For example, Norris and Phillips point out that reading is more than just saying what is on the page; it is thinking. Utilizing and combining schema theory with principles of critical thinking are one of the effective ways of enhancing the concept of reading comprehension [7;281-306]. Critical thinking provides a means of explaining the ability to work out ambiguous text by generating alternative interpretations, considering them in light of experience and world knowledge, suspending decision until further information is available, and accepting alternative explanations. They conclude that critical thinking is the process which the reader uses to comprehend. Schema theory provides powerful rationales for making links between students’ individual backgrounds, specific subject area knowledge, and critical thinking [1;77-146].

According to Anderson [2;469-482] there are six ways in which schemata function in thinking and in remembering text information. These six ways are:

1. Most new knowledge is gained by assimilating new information into existing structure; therefore, subject matter learning should build on prior knowledge whenever possible.
2. The students’ existing schemata help to allocate attention by focusing on what is pertinent and important in newly presented materials.
3. Schemata allow and direct the inferential elaboration of incoming information and experience.
4. Schemata allow orderly searches of memory by providing learners with a guide to the types of information that should be recalled.
5. Schemata facilitate the thinking skills of summarizing and editing.
6. Schemata permit inferential reconstruction when there are gaps in memory, which means that they help the learner generate hypotheses about missing information.

Based on the previous six schemata functions, it is clear that prior knowledge plays a significant role in establishing connections between critical thinking and text information processing. As a result of this connection, the readers reach the critical comprehension level. There are so many issues and challenges in teaching reading text in EFL classroom like vocabulary, difficulty level of text, lack of motivation to read, no reading habit, excessive use of bottom up approach, no sufficient preparation in teaching etcetera. In order to minimize the issue of reading text selection, teachers are suggested to use modified text for less proficient learners and authentic text to proficient learners. Similarly, teachers should implement more texts which leads to develop students critical thinking. In this way lessons in different stages and providing students suitable activities in each stage can be helpful not only expand their knowledge but also improve understanding the text.

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