

## CRITICAL AWARENESS AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES IN ESP CLASSES

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**Abstract:** ESP books are usually treated with regard in the classroom. These learning and teaching materials are viewed as unbiased concerning the view of the teachers and institutions. Therefore, teachers and students usually accept the ESP books by challenging the content and assumptions expressed within the text. Since professional education should focus on enhancing students' ability for thinking, doing and making, it is important for the students to be able to view and question the topics critically. There are several classroom strategies that can be used in the classroom where students can develop their critical awareness about the topic/content. Regarding reading, the paper describes strategies at pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading ESP topics, with a focus on language accuracy and fluency, as well as in content. It focuses on reading/understanding, thinking/analyzing, writing/exercises, and speaking abilities. The assumption is that critical awareness and critical thinking ability is bound to further their ESP language in every learning skill. As such, this paper will try to give advice to all ESP teachers how to make the student think, actually, not *what* to think, but *how* to think; and this will help the students groom and become independent learners not in the specific field only. There are always different indicators of critical thinking in ESP text reading (at different stages) and these indicators deal with reasoning skills, judgement, evaluation, or skills of solutions. However, it is of importance to add that critical reading in ESP classes is not simple, but it can somehow and sometimes be more challenging. It is teachers' responsibility to provide thoughtful and purposeful teaching/learning material. The conclusion indicates that critical reading (and its three-stages) can make a significant difference in student learning. This reading/learning enhancement advocates active learning that can cause both: 1). students to think critically and, 2). also can make the text more enjoyable. Likewise, the ESP teachers give thoughtful consideration to current ESP teaching methods and to critical reading, which is related with their personal beliefs that critical thinking and various student statements drive them to commitment to be actively involved in the learning process. Naturally, other specific strategies that encourage critical thinking may also be construed within the reading activities. Nevertheless, there can also occur limitations that encourage critical thinking: time constraints such as frequency of techniques applied in classes and/or duration of those techniques, as well as class size.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, Reading, Strategies, Collaboration.

### 1. STUDENT ATTITUDES TO ESP BOOKS AND DEFINITION OF CRITICAL THINKING

“Text knows best” is the students' attitude to all texts and that includes ESP texts, as well. This saying just proves that students tend to passively accept the text as obvious (Wallace, 1990). In addition, teachers use texts to impart English language, including grammar, vocabulary and fluency. Wallace (1990) points out that these students are more concerned with the texts' “obvious” and “taken for granted”, than real critical approach moving beyond the texts' statements. At this stage, it is teachers' responsibility to challenge and guide students to critically examine the information in the text, including both angles: the content and the English language. Critical thinking can be defined as the process of making judgements, evaluations. According to Paul (1992:9) critical thinking is the “perfections of thought”, while Bailin (2002) defines critical thinking as thinking that meets specified criteria or standards. That is, this criterion includes ‘thinking about thinking’, clarity, relevance, accuracy, importance, logic, reasoning; not memorization, but surely content learning and understanding. The concept of critical reading, has been widely researched and advocated throughout the professional literature (Wallace, C. (1990), Paul, R. W. (1992), Bailin, S. (2002), Mihara, K. (2012)).

Thus, all ESP teachers, regardless of professional orientation should be aware of the potential impact that critical thinking may have on learning. Of course, ESP teachers should also be aware of student differences and adopt methods, strategies, and teaching activities that address the needs, wishes, lacks and concerns of all students. In addition, two questions are addressed:

- What are the classroom strategies that the students will learn to critically examine the text?
- How can the students convey the meaning(s) of the text(s)?

With regards to the questions posed, three reading steps that are often indiscriminately homogenized are presented in the paper: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages.

### 1. Pre-reading stage

As previously mentioned, the pre-reading, the while-reading and the post-reading stage are the stages that can help the students develop their critical thinking.

As the initial stage, in the pre-reading stage the students are asked to provide answers to questions that are based around the text. Of course, such questions can be modeled by the teachers, moving then to students' own questions in groups. Since the students start generating their own questions, the students are bound to take more responsibility for their learning. That is, by generating their own questions about the topic they move from problem solving to critical thinking. Some suggestions about the pre-reading stage include the following questions:

- Why the topic is presented?
- How much does the student know about this topic?
- Who can read and understand the text?
- Is the text catchy for the student?

One point that ESP teachers need to bear in mind is that ESP book topics are usually self-contained (that is social cultural contexts do not matter), and that questions generated by the students can be from a narrow perspective. However, these kinds of questions (generated by the students) can help the students think about a wider perspective of the topic within the specific field. Like so, the students will be able to notice why the particular topic is presented, proceeding with the interpretation of the text and problem-solving. Therefore, the pre-reading stage helps the students to generate questions about the topic and later these questions will enable the ESP students to observe the text critically. The students are not just passive readers/passive recipients in critical thinking activities. They connect what they already know and what they are about to learn.

### 2. THE WHILE-READING STAGE

At this stage the students read the text for comprehension. As it is a higher level of critical thinking, the analysis of the text should be in that way that triggers the students' curiosity: through true-false statements, multiple choice questions, or specific ones. The while – reading stage (or during-reading stage) develops students' reading, that is, their critical reading. This critical reading can be conducted by underlying, questioning and outlining the text.

**Underlying:** Although the ESP is introduced to intermediate level of English language, the students may have difficulties with phrases or words. For this reason, at this stage the students are asked to read the text and underline the words and phrases that they find difficult. "Learn to learn" is encouraged. That is, the students should focus on those underlined words and phrases and try to find the meaning from the text itself. If not, then they should look up at dictionaries. Bransford (2004) suggests that the chosen vocabulary helps them develop or activate their schemata. Schema(sg.) or Schemata (pl.) is "prior knowledge which is organized and stored in the reader's mind". (Mihara, 2011:51).

**Questioning:** Questions should be imposed in that way that challenge and trigger students' curiosity. Each question posed should contain initiation for the students' creativity. Students' lacks and learning needs are identified at this stage. However, the students can overcome all that confusion or doubt about the text if the text is critically examined till the end. Questioning refers to ways in which the students want to become interested of things, or ideas.

**Outlining:** At the while-reading stage the students are encouraged to outline the most important ideas of the topic. The students can be asked to outline the significant parts of the text and then, it can be compared with the other students outlining, as pair work or group work. Finally, the students will double outline what they consider as the most significant part of the text. At this stage, the students outline the problematic parts, that they find challenging. It is a kind of 'investigation' within the text.

**Analyzing:** The next step that the students should take is analysis of the text. Argument(s) in ESP topics are usually statements. However, sometimes those statements trigger the students' curiosity – thinking if the arguments are true, and why they are true. The scope of the analysis is to manage knowledge, time, and resources needed to understand the content. The evaluation of the reason(s), the evidence(s), is conducted through questions by which the students will become aware of the facts presented within the topic/content. Every student statement orchestrates some forms of new learning, however, divergence of statements and their acceptance provides a construct of individual propensities toward the content and English language.

### 3. THE POST-READING STAGE

The most traditional way of the post-reading stage is the summary of the text. Summarizing helps the students to learn from reading, that is what is read. However, the critical understanding of the text does not include summarizing alone. It also includes a higher level of thinking by evaluating, synthesizing, and reflection. It is known nowadays that group discussion produces significantly more learning. Accordingly, students' different and sometimes opposing views regarding the content influence the direction of learning and of course these differences influence composition of new statements by using new vocabulary. As seen, this paper has introduced the effectiveness of critical reading and English learning through three stages of reading, moreover, the enhancement of critical thinking skills.

### 4. ESP PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The way how to adopt and adapt these strategies in ESP classes deal with methodology and materials used in ESP classes.

**Methodology:** The best teaching methodology includes collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity. The large number of students in classes nowadays, of course that dictate the way how to teach and to learn. Although there is growing advocacy for teaching frameworks and the improvement of teaching in different size class, group work is more wanted in large classes. The students can generate their questions, then open discussions and cooperate with each other rather than with the teacher. TTT (Teacher Talking Time) should be replaced with STT (Student Talking Time). However, except methodology, materials used in ESP classes are important in the adopting and adaption of reading strategies. At this point, as in others, the teacher's role is crucial in the choice of the teaching/learning material that includes availability, price, level /language, and relevance of the topics presented. Certainly, the 21<sup>st</sup> century except books, magazines, and newspapers, offers also various online journals, videos, that can stimulate reading and listening simultaneously. Thus, the teacher guides the students to discussions and guides them to focus on what is being said, allowing the students more varied analysis and more varied language output. The topic introduced and questioning provide the first clues that activate appropriate schemata. In this way the students are actively involved and try to appropriately reconstruct the content always bearing in mind the appropriate English language.

In spite of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading advantages, there is always need for noncompetitive, collaborative groups evidencing in its three-stage-effectiveness (at pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages). However, the need for critical thinking is palpable and it is believed that this study can shed some light on ESP teaching classes.

Since the content of the ESP books is geared toward learning cognitive processes than it is evident that students tend to concentrate on problem-solving and analyzing, evaluation-that is, skill development. However, a question that is not addressed in the present paper is whether preferences of the students in the pre-reading, during-reading or post-reading activities are similar or dissimilar to the teachers' preferences. It is needed to determine whether students are attracted to all three ways of readings (pre, during and post-reading) because of their personality preference or if the teachers gradually influence their learning preferences.

### 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to describe critical thinking through reading, that is, critical reading. It entails strategies used in ESP classes that can develop critical thinking among higher education students. These strategies were presented in three stages of reading: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. In addition, the focus was on questioning, analysis and evaluation. The purpose of the paper is to get the students involved in class by analyzing the text critically. Of course, critical approach cannot be used at once, if not used previously. Critical approach should be introduced to every person at every age. The emphasis on students' critical thinking decreases TTT and necessitates students' engagement in meaningful interactions, focusing on both what they say and how they say it. Student's critical reading, that is critical thinking, is further maximized by involving more pair work or group work activities in which students exchange ideas about the content. All this offers us an unlimited realm of options and ideas to successfully integrate critical thinking that encourage and enhance STT. As such, critical thinking framework is surely not simply practice-based in the sense of practicing general English teaching and learning skills. Instead it can be utilized in the context of ESP lessons, as well. It helps the students (and teachers) to develop inquiry habits and it

also strengthens and helps in learning productive ways of collaborating with other students while evaluating the content of the text and refinement of their English.

To conclude, critical reading can be boosted if English language teachers within the field (ESP teachers included) make a concerted effort to choose the appropriate applicable book/material. That is, with regard to the students' groups, students' background knowledge, the ESP teaching goals and objectives should provide expansion of language development. Additionally, critical reading in ESP classes is bidirectional: it will attract the students in greater numbers to problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity and English usage.

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