

TEACHING CRITICAL READING TO THIRD YEAR ENGLISH STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study concerns the teaching of Critical Reading in an Academic Reading class for third year students in the Department of English Education at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. A purposive sampling technique was used to choose the sample. The subjects of this study were the lecturer and 25 students who were in the Academic Reading class. The instruments used to collect the data were observation sheets, an interview guide, and field notes. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted through qualitative procedures, by using data reduction, data presentation, verification and drawing of conclusions. The first finding of this research was that the lecturer implemented the teaching of Critical Reading by implementing four activities during the teaching-learning process. The lecturer further assessed the process of students' Critical Reading learning achievement by asking them each to answer Open-Response Questions during the learning process in the classroom and also he assessed the results of the students' Critical Reading learning by asking them each to write a reflective essay as a response towards the text after the class session finished. Each student's writings were collected together as their own portfolio. Therefore, it is recommended that teaching Critical Reading as observed in this study can be done at other higher education institutes. Critical thinking can be taught separately or infused with the teaching of reading even in the teaching of writing and speaking.

Key words: *Reading Comprehension, Critical Reading.*

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INTRODUCTION

Critical Reading is the ability to analyze issues, to make good decisions and to solve problems that arise in reading. It is essential for people to be able to make good decisions about current issues which are well thought out so that people can live life in a more meaningful way. This is in line with Paul (1993: 90) who mentions Critical Reading as the ability to analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems found in reading. These are some of the crucial components which should be learnt by university students. When students read critically they can identify with some parts of the author's intended message and defend or oppose other parts. Thus, a critical reader is conscious of the author's point of view which may be dissimilar from their own. In this case, Critical Reading takes students further than merely basic literacy skills such as decoding, predicting, and summarizing and requires them to become critical consumers of the information they receive.

Consequently, Critical Reading is important to be taught in formal education institutions, especially for university students. Critical Reading ability becomes important because the presented information offered by newspapers, magazines or internet-based materials are not necessarily accurate. Thus, by practicing Critical Reading, students should be able to get meaning from many sources of information.

Based on a preliminary study conducted at the Department of English Education at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, it was found that the lecturer from the English department at UIN Ar-Raniry got the students to practice Critical Reading in the Academic Reading class. The students were taught how to understand issues from texts, how to get meaning from texts and how texts are trying to influence and change them as members of society. At this point, the students were encouraged to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and social practices. All the lecturer intended was to sharpen the students' Critical Reading skills.

In response to the issues elaborated above, this study attempts to examine the applicability of a study program which incorporates teaching critical thinking abilities through teaching Critical Reading. It also investigates the ways of teaching Critical Reading starting from how the lecturer prepares a lesson plan, what kinds of strategies and what materials should be chosen and used in teaching Critical Reading,

and to figuring out how to measure the skill of students in practicing Critical Reading including the progress of students at the end of the teaching-learning process. In this case, the opinions of the students toward various kinds of texts in written form were explored to see their point of view in dealing with various problems and diversities of opinion offered by authors of various texts. This study attempts to provide detailed information about the implementation of Critical Reading in the classroom and was conducted at the Department of English Education at UIN Ar-Raniry.

Problems of this Research

Based on the key issues presented above, the main questions for this study were formulated as follows:

1. How is Teaching Critical Reading implemented by the lecturer to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry?
2. What kinds of strategies are used by the lecturer in implementing Critical Reading to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry?
3. What teaching materials and resources are used by the lecturer in teaching Critical Reading to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry?
4. How are the achievements of the students learning Critical Reading assessed by the lecturer?

Objectives of this Research

The main objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To describe how the lecturer prepared the lessons for teaching Critical Reading to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry.
2. To investigate the strategies used by the lecturer in teaching Critical Reading to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry.
3. To find out what teaching materials and resources were used by the lecturer in teaching Critical Reading to the third year English students at UIN Ar-Raniry.
4. To find out how the achievements of the students studying Critical Reading were assessed by the lecturer.

Scope of this Study

This study attempts to describe the teaching of Critical Reading applied by the lecturer in an Academic Reading class to the fifth semester Department of English Education students at UIN Ar-Raniry.

This study also attempts to evaluate and investigate the way that the lecturer teaching Critical Reading started to prepare the lesson plans, chose the materials, and assessed the learning achievements of the students studying Critical Reading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Reading is critical thinking that is applied in the process of reading. Fairlough (1992: 50) has said that Critical Reading “involves an evaluation by the reader of the authenticity or other values of what is read. It entails awareness by the reader of the author’s purpose, propaganda devices used, the discernment of fact from opinion, and other high comprehension skills”. It refers to critical reasoning or critical thinking and the application of critical thinking abilities in responding to issues. In addition, the implementation of Critical Reading means to evaluate all reasonable inferences, consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives, and accept new explanations, models, or paradigms because they can explain the evidence better, are simpler, or have fewer inconsistencies or cover more data.

It is important to teach students strategies that can be used to comprehend texts successfully. Since reading comprehension occurs in one’s head, teachers need to know which strategies are more effective and which less effective when used by successful readers.

Furthermore, there are commonly three phases or strategies used in processing texts viz: pre-reading, while reading and post reading strategies (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997: 98). In this case, pre-reading includes previewing the text that enables the students to get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before reading it closely. Meanwhile, during reading the students are asked to make predictions about what they think might occur in the story. The strategy of making predictions actively engages students and connects them to the text, (Flynn, 1989: 80). The last strategy is post-reading questioning. This helps students to identify what information the students have learned or understand (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). In post-reading questioning the students can recall previously learned information that can bring deeper understanding to the text as well as helping in comparing and contrasting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research which is used to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and to dive deeper into problems. Basically, this is a descriptive study which constitutes a form of qualitative research. This qualitative study, therefore, is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon of how teaching Critical Reading was conducted by the lecturer. This study investigated and described the way that the lecturer taught Critical Reading in the Department of English Education at UIN Ar-Raniry. In this case, the study looked at the lecturer's preparations, the strategies used by the lecturer in teaching Critical Reading, and the teaching materials used.

Research Location and Participants

This research was done at the English Education Department at UIN Ar-Raniry known as Tadris English (TEN). The researcher observed the Academic Reading Class. There were three units of Academic Reading Classes, namely unit I, unit II and unit III. The observations were only made in the Unit III Academic Reading class which had only one lecturer teaching Critical Reading and 25 students who became the subjects of this research.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this research were classroom observation sheets, an interview guide and student worksheets.

Classroom Observation Sheet

The observation sheet had 45 evaluation points in 7 categories of evaluation: lesson plan, preparation, presentation, execution of methods and techniques, personal characteristics, lecturer/students interaction and assessment. At the end of the sheet were also included field notes to complete the observations in the class.

Interview Guide

This instrument involved a set of questions that covered all aspects of the lecturer's behaviour, experiences, beliefs related to Critical Reading instruction, especially on how he prepared or selected the teaching materials, how he taught Critical Reading, what techniques he used in teaching Critical Reading and how he assessed the students' critical reading abilities.

Field Notes

The researcher took notes during the interviews and made recordings of the classroom interactions. These sources of evidence were used to support the analysis from the other data. During the interactions, any unexpected situations in the classroom were noted in the field notes. The notes also recorded the date and time the lessons were conducted, the topic of each lesson, the classroom capacity, the classroom activities, the seating arrangements and any other information to support the data.

Technique of Data Analysis

The data which was transcribed and analyzed include the data obtained from the classroom observations, interviews and field notes. The researcher analyzed the pre-designed observation sheets by referring to the theories related to the teaching of Critical Reading. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed descriptively by using coding techniques. The analysis of the data collected followed three processes, namely describing, clarifying and interpreting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The discussion below is to answer the research problems set out above by presenting the analysis of the results of the study from the observations, interviews and field note.

Implementation of Teaching Critical Reading as Conducted by the Lecturer

Four activities were highlighted from the teaching-learning processes followed by the Lecturer in teaching Critical Reading. They were deciding the topics for reading, pre-reading discussions, tasks while reading and post-reading exercises. During the teaching, the lecturer and students used both English and Bahasa Indonesia in order to build a good communicative atmosphere, since not all the students were able to communicate easily in an academic discussion using fluent English. Most materials in this teaching program were also in both English and Bahasa to give the students a chance not only to learn the content but also the language of the texts.

Deciding the Topics for Reading

The topics offered were presented only in written format. This was done to enable the students to be engaged in the learning process and the discussions, which is one way to enhance the students' critical reading skills. The topics chosen included Women's Roles, Golput Ideas, Plastic Surgery, Chain E-mails, Gays, Facebook Yes or No, Slim is Beautiful, Smoking, Bush's Statement 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists', an article about Hijab 'Gender jihad, the burqa, bikini and religious conservatism, "Mensana in Corporesano" quotation, *Manja dan Malas Sudah Menjadi Budaya Bangsa Indonesia yang Mendarah daging*, and *Selangkah Lagi Jokowi Membuat Indonesia Kafir*.

Pre-reading Discussions

The lecturer warmed up the students with a conversation and a short discussion about the topic that they were going to study by asking questions and encouraging comments from each student. Questions regarding critical reading, were included in the pre- and while-reading phases. Because it was the first time for students to answer questions related to critical reading, they were guided in answering the questions. The discussion revealed answers to all the questions. One of the examples was on the subject of the writer's contention. Students' opinions were divided into two, as can be seen in the passage below:

Lecturer: "What questions could you have about this topic?" and "What does the information of this topic concern?"

Student 1: "What is the meaning of beautiful? I find the information that the writer try to campaign that hmm being a slim is dominant criteria for being attractive. Whoever is slim is beautiful. (Mentioning what the writer says in the text)."

Lecturer: "Do you think the writer have problem with the fat people?"

Student 2: "Sir.... Perhaps, the writer doesn't like the fat people. Being overweight, fat, or obese is unnecessary and it means they are eating too much and not exercising enough."

Lecturer: "Ok thank you, any other opinion?"

Student 3: "Sir...I think when it is about happiness and weight, it's all relative. Some overweight women claim that they are happy with their size. Being overweight is not automatically going to make you miserable or feeling ugly, just as losing weight is not guaranteed you to happiness. So the real question is should beautiful only own by the slim people?"

While Reading Tasks

The lecturer continued the lesson by grouping the students. The way of grouping the students was always different for each meeting, sometimes he asked the students to group by numbers, while at other times he grouped the students by asking their birth month, their preferences, and so on. So that the students always felt new nuances when they came to the class. The lecturer treated the students fairly. After every student joined his new group, the lecturer gave them a new task to do with clear instructions and the students were allowed to ask questions when they did not fully understand what to do. While the students were engaged in discussions, the lecturer walked around the class. He passed by each group to monitor whether every student was engaged in the discussions and to give them help if they had a problem with the text. He wrote the time left for discussions in the small groups on the white board, for example, 10 minutes left, or 5 minutes left so that the students knew how much time was left for the group discussions. After that, he asked one student voluntarily to be the representative of each group, to stand up and give his group's answer to the question or report the result from his group.

Lecturer: "What is the text about?"

Student (Gr. 2): "The text is about a disgusting reason from a gay that want to be considered normal by the people in his country. We can found many statements and reasons to support his idea in almost all paragraphs in the text. Especially the part when he wants to make the gay marriage become legal."

Lecturer: "How do we know?"

Student (Gr. 2): "The point is about the aspiration of gay who want to be accepted in the community. The writer express his feeling and also show his idea by showing the weaknesses of argument which against gay marriage."

Both students were able to put forward their views towards the text which contained the writer's opinions about gay marriage. The responses above show their promotion in critical reading capacity, in line with Lohrey (1998) who mentions that the critical reader is someone who can not only decode and make sense of printed words, but also is someone who is aware of underlying assumptions in the text.

Post-reading Exercises

After the discussions in pairs finished the representative of each pair reported the results of their point of view about the topic of the

material. The lecturer then asked the students to identify several phenomena discussed within each text. This was not an easy process; but with the lecturer's guidance the students then were able to identify several phenomena described in the text, namely:

- a. The moment when Hajar was left by her husband, Ibrahim, in the desert with their child, Ismail.
- b. Special clothing for muslimah such as abaya, burqa, and hijab.
- c. Aceh regulations for muslimah.
- d. Recognition of the ability of muslimah by the Islamic world.

The entire phenomenon was certainly discussed from the writers' point of view that was the main concern in this step. Students then were asked to analyze those phenomena based on their background knowledge. This strategy seemed to succeed in assisting the students to analyze the text in a discussion, which was shown from their responses:

Student 1: "This article is very provocative, for example in viewing Hajar's action. Her action was to prove of her love to Allah. Not her love to Husband."

Student 2: "The writer uses extreme words in explaining her idea. I don't agree to her idea related to a woman's position in Islam. Islam treats woman equal to man."

Student 3: "Because the text is not neutral, I think the writer of the article wants to spread her feminist ideas."

Here, students were able to demonstrate what Fitzgerald (1989) says: to compare the text to their own goals and beliefs, and "to what they think the writers' goals are".

The Strategies Used by the Lecturer in Teaching Critical Reading

The researcher found out that the lecturer used the KWL (Know, Want, and Learn) strategy to brainstorm the students' ideas related to the topics. When the lecturer provided a topic of reading material, he reminded the students to list what do they Know about that topic? What do they Want to know about that topic? And what did they Learn about that topic. These kinds of question were listed and discussed by the students in their groups. They read the given material to answer the questions. The researcher found out that the lecturer encouraged the students to use the 3R (Review, Reflect, React) technique. The lecturer directed the students in pairs to examine and investigate the content of the messages from the texts that they had pre-read from the blog. Next,

the students took time to consider the content and format of the texts. Lastly, the students decided on actions to respond to the texts with consideration of such questions as: “What can I do to support this issue?”

Teaching Materials and Resources Used by the Lecturer

The lecturers at the Department of English Education of UIN Ar-Raniry used printed materials for teaching Critical Reading from text books or from supplemental sources such as newspapers, magazine articles, or pamphlets. The teaching materials chosen were entirely appropriate to promote the critical thinking abilities of the students and to stimulate their awareness for doing Critical Reading. Accordingly, most of the resources for teaching materials were from printed materials.

Assessment of Critical Reading Achievements by the Lecturer

The assessment conducted could be authentic assessment. The lecturer assessed the Critical Reading achievements of the students by asking them to answer Open-Response Questions during the learning process in the classroom and also assessed their Critical Reading achievements by asking them to prepare reflective writings in response to the texts after the class finished. The writings from each student were collected as her portfolio. In the interview the lecturer said:

“I’m dissatisfied with only using traditional testing methods. Hmm...I believe...these methods do not test many skills and abilities of the students. I notice that some students’ lack of braveness to express their ideas..on the other hand, lack of written skills to report or respond to the text. I do not want them to do one sided evaluations.”

The lecturer also used summative evaluations. He evaluated the students’ progress by having the goal of assisting them to improve their Critical Reading skills and gave appropriate feedback. He also conducted quizzes, a mid-term exam, a final exam, and gave the students tasks to do.

DISCUSSION

The teaching of Critical Reading by the lecturer enabled the students to better improve their Critical Reading skills and to reach the

goals of the course since the characteristics of the teaching of Critical Reading were in line with the theories for teaching Critical Reading.

Thus the lecturer made good preparations before going to teach in the classroom. He also prepared the syllabus and lesson plans at the beginning of the semester. The lesson plan was well designed by the lecturer in order to achieve the goals in the syllabus. From the lessons plans, it can be seen that the goal for each lesson was clearly stated. In the teaching process, the materials presented were in line with the theme or the topic stated in the syllabus and the lesson plans. Related to the types of assessment explained above, the lecturer conducted authentic assessments in the teaching of Critical Reading. He often assessed the students by conducting informal assessments in order to evaluate the students' progress in the classroom.

Summative assessments were also done several times in each semester. The students' assessments showed that the students were able to argue about the texts critically by looking at the issues in each text from different view-points which is open-minded. They also used their minds by contributing their previous knowledge and experience in analyzing the texts. They succeeded in participating in Critically Reading the texts and were able to have something to say back to the author. In fact, the students understand that they as readers were not in a position to either simply support any argument or to reject it. What they were doing instead was they were carefully evaluating and analyzing the ideas in the texts to try to understand how and why each text was constructed and presented, and only then developed a response to that text.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Having analyzed the data and interpreted it in the discussion section, there were four conclusions that can be derived from this study.

1. The lecturer divided the teaching of Critical Reading into four activities during the teaching-learning process with the third year English students from the Department of English Education at UIN Ar-Raniry viz: (1) deciding the topics for reading, (2) leading pre-reading discussions, (3) guiding while-reading tasks, (4) setting post-reading exercises.
2. The lecturer applied methods and techniques which are used in Communicative Language Teaching such as pre-reading, using the

- KWL (Know, Want, and Learn) technique, Questioning (pre-questioning, while questioning and post-questioning) techniques, and doing 3R (Review, Reflect, React).
3. Most of the teaching materials used in teaching Critical Reading were printed materials from text books or from supplemental material such as from newspapers, magazine articles and pamphlets.
 4. The lecturer assessed the students' Critical Reading learning by doing authentic assessments.

Suggestions

Lecturers have to make good preparations before teaching Critical Reading in the class. It is suggested that lecturers should make full preparations at the beginning of each new semester. The teaching of Critical Reading should be maintained in teaching Academic Reading that involves learning critical thinking abilities and dispositions so that students become accustomed to reading and thinking critically. Moreover lecturers should get the students to participate in choosing the materials to ensure that the materials will cater to their interests as well as developing their critical thinking.

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