

Process of Implementing Critical Reading Strategies in an Iranian EFL Classroom: An Action Research

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Abstract

Action research designs are systematic procedures used by teachers to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting, their teaching, and the learning of their students. Action research enables teachers to keep track and take account of the many aspects of their work with students through a systematic routine. This study aims to investigate the critical reading strategies employed by Iranian EFL students. To achieve the aim of the study, the Stringer's Action Research Model that is a cyclical and repetitive process of inquiry i.e. Look, Think, and Act was utilized. This study used Bloom's taxonomy as useful reference tool to describe the ability of thinking simply for high school EFL students.

Keywords: Stringer's action research model, action research cycle, Iranian EFL students, critical reading strategies, Bloom's taxonomy

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, high school students are capable of critical reading development however there has been little progress in developing critical reading in EFL classrooms. There is some concern regarding their poor thinking skills. This may be due to the neglect of critical reading and thinking in the school curriculum. Helping EFL students develop critical reading can be a challenging undertaking. A search of the literatures related to critical reading provides guidelines for a definition, or include studies by others who have observed in classrooms to learn about critical reading. (Combs, 1992) who used classics of children's literature to teach critical reading skills, defines critical reading as reasonable, reflective thinking focus on deciding what to believe or do. In his view, critical reading is an interactive process that uses several levels of thought simultaneously and critical readers are constantly asking questions about the text they are reading. Hence, individual students increased their critical thinking skills in varying degrees and became problem solvers. Using activities and instructions based on Bloom's taxonomy, the students developed a strong foundation in critical reading and their progress in the critical reading should continue in future reading instruction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

The taxonomy of educational objectives created by (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) has been used to explore concepts related to higher-order thinking and the relationship between language and cognition in today classrooms (P. Himmele & W. Himmele, 2009). Potentially, the taxonomy is applicable in all contexts of teaching and learning, including non-verbal as well as verbal areas. In other words Bloom's Taxonomy assist feelings, movements and what is seen can be remembered, comprehended, applied, analyzed, synthesized and evaluated just as much as ideas expressed in language. Both covert and overt 'behaviors' can be classified using Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Therefore, this study used Bloom's taxonomy to describe the ability of thinking simply for high school EFL students (Clark, 2004). Blooms et al. (1956) elaborates three domains of educational objectives: i) Cognitive: mental skills (Knowledge), ii) Affective: growth in feelings or emotional areas (Attitude) and iii) psychomotor: manual or physical skills (Skills).

2.2 Critical Reading Strategies

According to Axelrod and Cooper (2002), Annotate, Preview, Contextualize, Outline, Analyze Opposition,

Summarize, Paraphrase, Synthesize, Question, and Reflect are the most important applicable strategies for reading critically. Along the same view, Hall (2004) adds, “being an effective reader means being able to evaluate your own practices, working to develop your critical reading skills”. Thus, critical reading strategies are best taught by using “real” assignments. Programmes to improve these skills should involve changes in the structure, not necessarily the content, of assignments (Barton-Arwood et al., 2005). They can be taught in one-to-one sessions with consultants, in classroom settings by teachers, or at home by parents, siblings, or friends (Harvey & Chickie-Wolfe, 2007).

In the literature, the most common type of critical reading strategies requires posing and answering questions about the text. According to Axelrod, Cooper, and Warriner (1999), Peirce (2006) and Linkon (2008) the basic critical reading strategies include annotating which means circling key words and writing comments or questions about the material in the margins and contextualizing requires putting a text within its original historical or cultural context. Tovani (2000) goes on to discuss that critical reader need to analyze and then interrogate a text. However, before analyzing, it is necessary to understand the text. For this reason, the reader should develop a personal reading strategy for better comprehension and remembering the information. Based on all these facts, the following critical reading strategies are suggested by Tovani (2000) to help the reading process: Set a purpose for reading (Before reading a text), preview the text before reading, pay attention to print features and text structures, mark the text while you read, make connections between the text and reader personal experience and knowledge, monitor your comprehension of the text, summarize the key points when you’re finished reading.

Applying the mentioned strategies not only empowers students in critical reading skills such as judgment and evaluation, but also leads them to reach real understanding of texts and how to think about texts. Peirce (2006) states that it is clear reading is a thinking process. Hence, using good strategies allows a better understanding more than obtaining the core elements of text. In addition, using sound questioning strategies and asking the right kind of questions are important. For the purpose of this study a careful survey was made of the literature to identify the critical reading strategies that are considered most important by researchers in the field of critical reading. Several lists of critical reading strategies were compiled, many of them overlapping. Finally, ten critical reading strategies were sorted out which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Critical reading strategies

Critical Reading Strategies	A Brief Summary of the Strategies
Annotating	Reading reactions to and questions about a text directly on the page.
Previewing	Getting an overview of text structure, text cues, pictures, and personal experiences prior to reading a text.
Scan&Skimming	Finding out the key features of the reading and reading to get only the gist of the text
Facts vs. Opinions	Facts can be proved, undisputed, have concrete evidence and opinion refers to a belief, a value, can be argued.
Drawing Conclusions	Looking for clues in the text, thinking about what those clues trigger in prior knowledge, and making a prediction.
Monitoring	Monitoring for understanding by checking to see if the text makes sense.
Summarizing	Briefly present the main ideas of the text. Write a paragraph or more that presents the main ideas in your own words.

Paraphrasing	Restate and clarify the meaning of a few sentences from the text. Reread the passage to be paraphrased and look up unknown words. Translate information into your own words.
Synthesizing	Combine ideas and information selected from different texts. Look for patterns among your sources, possibly supporting or refuting your ideas or those of other sources.
Questioning	Write questions while you read a text for the first time, you will understand the material better and remember it longer if you write a question for every paragraph or brief section.

Source: Kuta (2008), Tovani (2000).

2.3 Action Research

The different conceptions of action research can be revealed in some typical definitions of action research, for example, Elliott (1991), whose work has been influential in action research ‘movement’, gives the shortest and most straightforward definition of action research: action research is ‘the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it’. This simple definition directs attention to one of the most essential motives for doing action research. It lies in the will to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and students work in schools.

McNiff (2002) who regards action research as a form of “self-reflective practice” that involves thinking and reflecting process takes a more philosophical stance on action research, which echoes the work of Elliott. McNiff (2002) also elaborates action research as open ended. Stringer (2007) suggests that action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. The rigour of action research is attested by another i.e. Mills (2003) regards action research as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process, for the purpose of gathering data about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. Phillips (2010) argues action researches a “practitioner-based” form of research. In other words, it is done by teachers in their own classrooms with the goal of improving pedagogy and student learning. Mills (2007) positions action research as a fundamental component of teaching, alongside curriculum development, assessment, and classroom management.

2.4 Stringer’s Model of Action Research (1999-2010)

The approach to action research was presented by Stringer (1999, 2004, 2007) and Stringer, Christensen, and Baldwin (2010) which was derived from interpretive research processes suggested by Denzin (1997). In Stringer’s (2007) view, action research therefore seeks to give voice to people who have previously been silent research subjects. He makes the point that like other forms of interpretive research, action research seeks to reveal and represent people’s experience, providing accounts that enable others to interpret issues and events in their daily lives (Stringer, 2007). Stringer’s model of action research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems. Stringer (2007) argues that action research is not a panacea for all ills and does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to “get a handle” on their situations and formulate effective solutions to problems they face in their public and professional lives. Stringer provides a basic action research routine that provides a simple powerful framework–Look, Think, Act–that enables people to commence their inquiries in a straightforward manner and build detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases.

Stringer’s model of action research is cyclical in nature, since research participants continuously cycle through processes of investigation as they work towards effective solutions to their research problem. The sequence is more commonly presented as a cycle, on a simple Look > Think > Act, as shown in Fig.1. This simple process is repeated in an ongoing fashion, providing a constant guide to ongoing processes of teaching and learning (Figure 1)

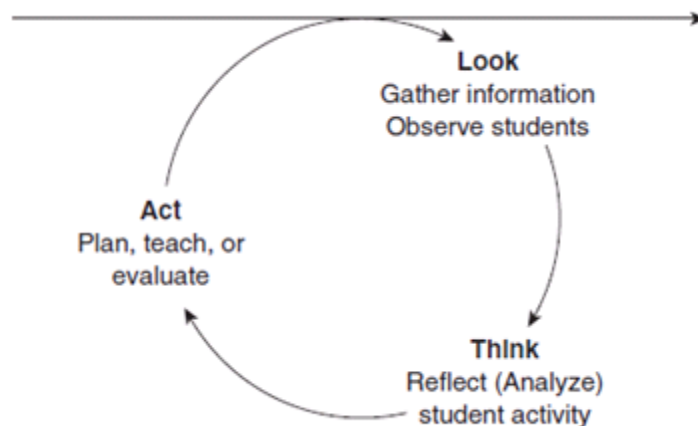


Figure 1. Action research cycle. Source: Stringer et al. (2010)

Stringer (2007) argues that as participants work through each of the major stages, they will explore the details of their activities through a constant process of observation, reflection, and action. At the completion of each set of activities, they will review (look again), reflect (reanalyze), and re-act (modify their actions).

3. Utilizing Stringer's Action Research Model

In recent years, action research has become increasingly popular in second and foreign language teaching classrooms (Nunan, 1993; Wallace, 2000; Haley, 2005; Burns, 2009; Latief, 2010; Stringer, 2007; Stringer et al., 2010). Over the last two decades, language teachers are committed to their own professional development and attracted to the idea of doing action research in their classrooms. In the present action research study the teacher-researcher employed the Stringer's model of action research as a map for a systematic process of teaching and inquiry (Figure 2).

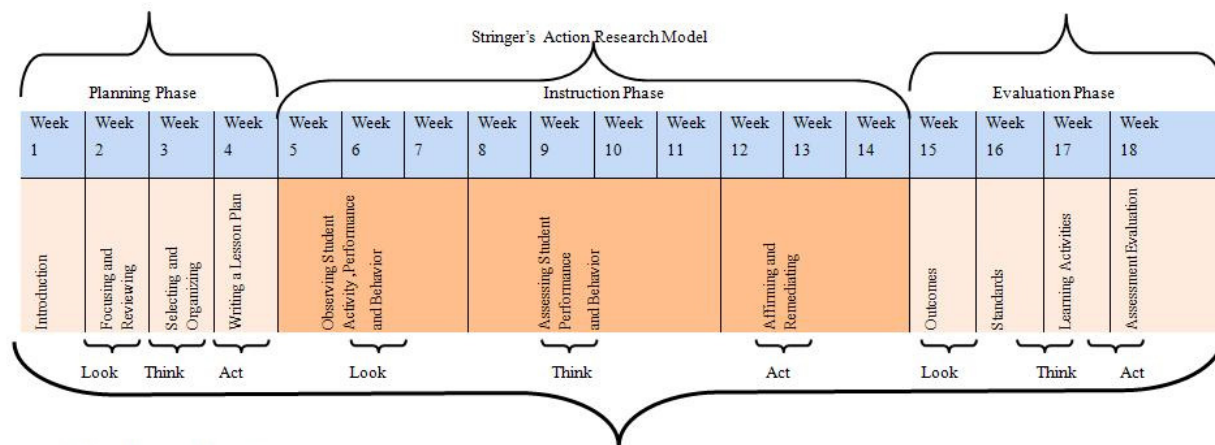


Figure 2. Research procedure

3.1 Lesson Planning and Preparation (Phase 1)

This phase lasts for four weeks where each week included two sessions. In Phase (1), Lesson planning and preparation, the teacher-researcher follows the usual syllabus of teaching reading in an Iranian EFL reading classrooms. During this teaching process, the data collection procedure is done based on the current research design. Throughout phase 1 (Look), to identify the critical reading strategies employed by Iranian EFL students, the principal researcher identified the most common reading strategies that the Iranian students used naturally

and also to understand the frequency and types of critical reading strategies used habitually not systematically before, during and after reading.

By selecting, sorting, and organizing information (Think) through this phase, the researcher formulates a lesson plan (Act). The final product of phase (1), the lesson plan, will embrace the cognitive domain of bloom's taxonomy, and is supported with critical-thinking strategies to foster students' learning and growth. In addition, through the triangulation of the observation checklist, the semi-structure interview, and teacher's journal the researcher will be able to assess the students' knowledge and understanding of reading and students' usage of critical reading strategies.

3.1.1 Introduction (First Week)

The researcher dedicates the first week to introducing the concepts of different critical reading skills and strategies, different levels of domain of knowledge, different kinds of questions in higher order thinking, the influence and the role of these variables in the process of critical reading practice. In the first session, the researcher tries to simplify the concept of the main research key words and encourages the students to collaborate in changing their reading habits for better understanding of hidden dimensions of reading passages. In the second session, the researcher discusses with the students about their reading habits, skills, and strategies. The discussion focuses on "how to improve the critical reading skills," "how to be empowering through using critical reading strategies," and "what critical reading strategies the students knew before. The researcher describes a skill as something you-why you??-change to reader or student do automatically without thinking about it as your natural routine daily habits and a strategy, in contrast, is a plan; it needs a reason to do it, and you often have adjusted the plan as you went along. Finally, the researcher asks the students what they expected from a reading lesson and emphasized that their views would be important for the development of the lesson plan and for the outcomes of the research.

3.1.2 Focusing and Reviewing (Second Week)

The researcher reviews the instructional elements (Look). The researcher concentrates to gather information about students' prior knowledge, experiences, and perspective. Therefore, the researcher focuses to identify the teaching strategies based on reading strategies, reviewed the procedure and standard. In Session one, the researcher teaches the first lesson of the textbook namely "Washow and The Puzzles" based on syllabus (Table 2) and proposes the lesson plan with the specific objectives and the appropriate activities that had already been proposed by the English Department in Ministry of Education (Iran).

Table 2. Syllabus of Teaching Reading in Iranian EFL Classrooms

A Sample Teaching-Model

I. Specific objective

II. Activities

A. Pre-reading (directions & activities)

B. During reading (Instruction stage)

1. Recognition (directions & activities)

2. Manipulation (directions & activities)

3. Production (directions & activities)

C. Post-reading or Reinforcement Stage (directions & activities)

Further, the researcher breaks down the reading skills into three specific objectives and teaches each one separately with special emphasis of its own. These three objectives are (1) Loud reading, which would deal with verbalization of lines and correct pronunciation of sounds, clusters, stress patterns; intonation contours as well as speed reading and fluency without taking the meanings of words or the concepts of the sentences into consideration. (2) New Vocabulary, which consists of the pronunciations and the meanings of the new words, which would be learnt in a memorable way to establish a stable association between the form and the meaning of each word. (3) Comprehension, which copes with the concepts of the sentences and the general idea/ideas of the passage and the content of the text as a whole. In the second session of week two, the researcher continues to teach the lesson based on the proposed lesson plans. Moreover, the whole instruction procedures are recorded

through observation checklists. Actually, for serving diverse and overriding purpose of the research “Formative” and “Summative” assessment are done.

3.1.3 Selecting and Organizing (Third Week)

The researcher tries to select the lesson components (Think). Hence, the researcher identifies learning strategies, learning activities, and specified assessment processes. In the first session, the researcher starts to teach the lessons two based on the proposed lesson plans. The whole instruction procedures are also recorded through observation checklists. Moreover, for serving diverse and overriding purpose of the research “Formative” and “Summative” assessment are done. The researcher considers “to identify the outcomes of the lesson, to adjust the standard the students need to achieve, to add the extra topics relevant to students learning needs, to modify the strategies facilitate the students’ learning, and to prepare the suitable activities that enable students to extend their knowledge”. In the second session, the researcher tries to identify the unit of study and reviewed the instructional elements. The sample lesson-plan comprises the true objectives of the reading section of the Iranian EFL textbook, and the crucial activities employed for the attainment of these objectives. In addition, for extra underpinning of textbook reading passages, 20 reading passages from the national countrywide exams are selected to use during the instruction. The researcher also provides 10 worksheets for teaching critical reading strategies that to enable students to use the strategies systematically in their textbook and supplementary passages.

3.1.4 Writing the Lesson Plan (Fourth Week)

In the fourth week, the researcher organizes and prepares the lesson plan (Act): objective/outcomes, topics, procedures, materials, and assessments. In the first session, the researcher organizes the selected elements into a coherent lesson plan that demonstrates the sequences of activities required to accomplished students learning outcomes. Since the researcher prepares the lesson plan through Bloom’s taxonomy, after developing the lesson objectives, various teaching and learning strategies are selected to help accomplish each objective in Bloom’s cognitive domain.

3.2 Instruction (Phase 2)

This phase lasts for 10 weeks and each week includes two sessions. Throughout the phase of instruction, the researcher conducts the study based on the lesson plan that is prepared in phase (1) Stringers et al. (2010) emphasises “as the students engage in learning, the teachers need to keep track of the multiple activities in which the class is engaged and the progress of each student.” Therefore, the action research is continued in phase (2), instruction, by applying the proposed selected critical reading strategies through the prepared worksheets in the Iranian EFL reading classroom.

The researcher begins each lesson by giving students a short illustration and explanation of proposed critical reading strategy. Primarily, the students would practice the strategy actually as their homework. The next session, the researcher checks their homework and makes notes of the principle points. Then, the researcher asks the students about the strategy they used to work out “what it means and what they did.” The class brainstorm allows the students to share the strategy that they previously practiced as homework. Indeed, each of the 10 worksheets focuses on particular critical reading strategies namely Annotating, Previewing, Scan & Skimming, Facts vs. Opinions, Drawing Conclusions, Monitoring One’s Own Comprehension, Summary, Paraphrase, and questioning each worksheet is adapted to teach particular critical reading strategies systematically. The used worksheets and accompanying strategies helps the Iranian EFL students meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education and grow in the key areas of critical thinking and critical reading. At the beginning of the phase of Instruction, the researcher hold a Pre-Test to focus more on class procedures and students’ performance useful in addressing practical problems in classroom. The researcher also uses interview to assist students in extending their understanding.

3.3 Look: Observing Students Activities, Performances, and Behaviors

This part of action research lasts for three weeks. As the students are engaged in learning activities, the researcher tries to monitor and record the progress of each student, through observation checklists. Based on Stringer’s model of action research the researcher attempts carefully to observe the students’ participation, performance, and behavior during the teaching processes (Look). The researcher uses the observation checklists as the key tools to see “what is happening and what the students are doing”.

3.4 Think: Assessing Students’ Performance and Behavior

This part of action research study lasts for four weeks. In continuity of Stringer’s model of action research, the researcher concentrates on the nature of problems students are experiencing (Think). Based on Stringer’s model,

the researcher first tries to identify problems, issues, gaps, or inadequacies in student work, prove reasons for these problems, for example, lack of understanding, carelessness, and identify key issues needing an instructional process (Analyze). Then the researcher evaluates the quality of each student's work, assesses whether students understand the content of the work and whether students are clear about the activities they need to engage (Assess). Throughout this cycle (Think), the researcher also tries to monitor the students, notice to watch the whole students work and really keep an eye on them, and notice what they are doing through the use of the observation checklist.

3.5 Act: Affirming and Remediating

This part of action research study lasts for three weeks. The phase of instruction is continued in the third cycle called "Affirming and remediating". During the first week, the researcher provided positive feedback to encourage and assist students to improve or extend their performances (Act). The researcher also tried to understand the nature to the problems that the students experienced. Hence, the researcher let the students know "what they are doing right" and ask students "what they think of their work". In some circumstances, the students did not understand clearly the nature or steps in the activity in which they were engaged, Hence the researcher reviewed and repeated the instructions to clarify and show students what to do. Throughout this cycle, the researcher encouraged them to pair group working and sharing their work within the class.

3.6 Assessment and Evaluation (Phase 3)

Phase 3 lasts four Weeks. It includes reviewing lesson outcomes, reviewing student performance (Look); identifying successes and strengths; identifying weaknesses and gaps (Think); planning remedial actions; planning ways of improving instruction and learning. The researcher looks at students 'demonstration/performance (Look), thought about the quality of the students 'work (Think), and tries to provide feedback or demonstrate correct performance (Act). Indeed, the researcher tries to evaluate the students 'performance, and then provide feedback that indicated to the students how to correct or improve their performance. The usage of the Look-Think-Act cycle throughout the phase of "Assessment and Evaluation" provides the researcher with a systematic process through which to evaluate their own teaching success in relation to overall student learning. The researcher provides the opportunities for students to practice and review the critical reading strategies with their peers and independently. Hence, the researcher helps students to evaluate the critical reading strategies in a cooperative group setting in terms of their own learning and understanding of the strategy.

4. Conclusion

There is a great deal of evidence for the importance of critical reading strategies. One source of evidence is that successful readers know when and how to use deliberate strategies to repair comprehension. One implication from the current research findings is that teaching critical reading strategies to struggling readers may be a key toward helping them to improve critical reading, critical thinking and higher order thinking ability. The suggested procedure in this study attempts to increase utilizing critical reading strategies directly as a medium for improving the deep understanding to find the concepts behind the lines. Comprehension will also be facilitated by instructional attention to teaching reading based on cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy. Critical reading in current study supposed to be more systematic reading activity than other reading models. Hence, Iranian EFL students are encouraged to employ critical reading strategies systematically thorough their reading process to engage in critical reading The instruction of the critical reading strategies based on cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy is also explicit and direct so that students are able to ask many organized, and higher order questions. Throughout the study, students are also encouraged to believe that their reading difficulties were due to lack of strategies rather than a lack of their ability and skills.

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