EFL Reading Comprehension Questions in Iranian High School Books: A Critical Thinking Perspective

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Abstract

In line with the studies in EFL/ESL contexts confirming the positive relationship between critical thinking ability and reading comprehension, this study intended to investigate how frequently critical thinking was used in the questions of EFL reading comprehension in Iranian high school books. To this end, Critical Reading Questions (CRQs), Vocabulary in Context (VIC), Literal Comprehension (LC), and Extended Reasoning (ER) were identified. The focus of the study was on ER questions, which lead to critical thinking. The reason was that the crucial problem of the students lies in textually implicit information in the texts. To classify the questions for CRQs, Peterson's (2008) model was employed, and to specify critical thinking question types, a framework proposed by Academic Skills Unit (2008) was used as reference. To collect the data, the researchers identified the total percentages and frequencies of questions related to the passages in English Books I, II, III, and Pre-University. The findings revealed very little attention to critical thinking within the objectives of the questions of Books I, II, and III. Fortunately, the Pre-University book could be helpful to provide the students with fruitful exercises which fostered the application of ER questions. This study highlights the need for raising researchers' and teachers' awareness of ER-based reading comprehension questions.

Keywords: Critical thinking; EFL textbooks; Iranian high school; Reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Critical thinking seems to be one of the noticeable issues in education during the recent decades. Critical thinking skills figure prominently among the goals for education, whether one asks developers of curricula,

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educational researchers, parents, or employers (Beyer, 1985). Critical thinking has been viewed as a useful strategy. It can provide a good opportunity to share whatever all of the students and their teachers know not only in math, physics and other sciences but also in language learning. Today, making students more conscious of and responsible for their own knowledge and thought is highly emphasized.

Given that learning a new language demands flexibility and higher-order thinking skills (Liaw, 2007), critical thinking can contribute to their academic success. Nowadays, EFL/ESL researchers have paid attention to critical thinking as a process in developing reading skill. For the students to make sense out of the written text, their interaction with the text is required. The textbook plays an important role in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom where it provides the primary form of linguistic input (Kim & Hall, 2002).

2. Research Background

In this respect, a number of investigations have been conducted on the relationship between critical thinking and the reading ability. These studies aim at having better language learning or more success in EFL contexts. Generally speaking, critical thinking in reading turns to an issue which pertains to the present study: an investigation of the questions of EFL reading comprehension at high school level from a critical thinking perspective.

The reading skill plays a significant role in language learning classes. Language learners read the texts to understand not only unknown words but also the meaning of the whole sentence. But this is not the only aim of reading the passages. It is expected especially from the higher-level students to go beyond the sentences, that is, get the intended meanings of the writers. However, each passage has certainly hidden ideas and messages which should not be ignored. To consider this matter, Schooten and Glopper (2003) state that the focus of many studies has changed from the writer of the text to the reader or the interaction between reader and text. To improve students' ability to reason demands "finding information that is not directly stated in the passage" (Peterson, 2008, p. 124). Clearly, the more emphasis is on learners and learning the more attention need to be paid to the processes through which learning takes place (Oxford, 2001). The suggestion is that better thinking should be taught explicitly for transfer across academic domains (Lochhead & Whimby, 1987; Rubinstein & Firstenberg, 1987; Wood, 1987).

Recent trends within the domain of reading comprehension have led to an increasing emphasis on the role of problem-solving techniques that

supposedly enable students to identify, clarify, evaluate and solve preplexities that arise in reading (Waters, 2006). In this respect, various definitions of critical thinking and its significance in educational system, and language learning especially reading skill which is the focus of this study have been proposed.

In the 1980s, there was an outburst of interest in critical thinking (Dam, Vloman, & Wardekker, 2004). Many researchers have attempted to offer satisfactory definitions of critical thinking. Regarding diverse definitions of critical thinking, Beyer (1985) states that nearly all emphasizes the ability and tendency together, evaluate and use information effectively. The emergence of these different definitions is due to its cognitive nature in which critical thinking is seen as an ''ongoing activity'' (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 101).

Critical thinking is defined as a cognitive ability compounded with multiple skills such as identifying, understanding, and analyzing an issue by deploying inferences using top-down and bottom-up strategies to validate the reliability of claims and arguments. (Pithers & Soden, 2000). Gabennesch (2006) puts it in this way: ''Critical thinking is the use of rational skills, worldviews, and values to get as close as possible to the truth'' (pp. 36).

In the same vein, Liaw (2007) defines critical thinking as something which ''involves the use of information, experience, and world knowledge in ways which allow [EFL students] to seek alternatives, make inferences, pose questions, and solve problems, thereby signaling understanding in a variety of complex ways'' (p.51).

Finally, Rubenfeld and Scheffer (2010) consider critical thinking the metaphorical bridge between information and action. They mention three reasons that ''this bridge is invisible from one perception into something visible from a new perspective'' (p. 26). These authors think that critical thinking is tangible, very individual, and requires effort today not tomorrow.

Critical thinking has attracted the attention of educators over the past decades. The significance of critical thinking in education and particularly higher education is now acknowledged by a large number of educators. Schafersman (1991) asserts that all education must involve not only ''what to think'', but also ''how to think''. Students should be assisted in engaging in a type of thinking that is reflective, reasonable and directed on what to believe or do (Ennis, 1962, as cited in Simpson, 2002).

Academically successful learners possess problem-solving, analytical, and critical thinking skills (De Boo, 1999; Gardner & Jewler, 2000). In the

same domain, Constructivists, like cognitive psychologist, look at learning as a perception process, resulted from experience, and believe that executives of lesson plans should provide a situation that students, via reasoning debates which facilitate and accelerate interaction and analysis action, do critical thinking (Zahorik, 1995). Hence, critical thinking is a necessary skill in promoting the students' thoughts.

Finally, Moon (2008) asserts that critical thinking and its relationship to the educational process has become a central issue and it is time to explore the term. She adds since critical thinking is a process which is involved in any research activity; it can be considered as a principal concept to education, especially at higher levels. In fact, it is a fundamental goal of learning.

Clearly, language and thought are closely related. Language permits thoughts to be represented in our minds, helping us reason, plan, remember, and communicate. It is communication that gets all the press when we talk about language, but there are also questions to be asked about whether the language we use causes us to think in a certain way (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). It is strongly believed that higher-order thinking skills especially critical thinking should be an integral part of L2 curriculum to foster language proficiency of the EFL/ESL learners (Davidson, 1998; Chamot, 1995, as cited in Liaw, 2007).

The aim for critical language awareness in an educational context is what Van Lier and Corson (1997) state: "to achieve some critical distance on familiar strange and the strange familiar in ethnographic terms" (p. 245). Learning to think critically can produce enthusiastic language learners. Marshall and Rowland (1998) describe how critical thinking produce "joy, release, relief, and exhilaration as we break through to new ways of looking at our personal, work, and political worlds" (p. 34). Alan and Stoller (2005) stress that, to best facilitate learning of language, content and real-life skills, projects "require a combination of teacher guidance, teacher feedback, students' engagements, and elaborated tasks with some degree of challenge" (p.11).

The primary goal of the reading tasks in many studies is to further develop and clarify interpretation of the text, and to help students remember what they have individually created in their minds from the text (Phan, 2006; Willingham, 2006). "Regarding is not merely a receptive process of picking up information from the page in a word-by-word manner" (Grabe, 1991, p. 1). Rather, it is a selective process and characterized as an active process of comprehending. The degree by which a passage or text is understood is called reading comprehension (Pakhare, 2007; Phan, 2006).

In this respect, McNamara (2007) also contends that Reading Thinking "(RT) is a well-validated approach to improving students' comprehension and self-monitoring skills through an apprenticeship model of learning" (p. 425). He asserts that "The teacher and students engage in an instructional dialogue about the text, constructing their understanding of the texts as they apply several strategies: predicting, questioning, summarizing, and clarifying" (p.425).

Further, with active reading tasks, readers encourage to voice their own opinions about the text and discuss those opinions with other students and the teacher. Another advantage of such tasks is that they contextualize reading, that is, they allow the readers to see the text as part of a broader social context that includes the writer and the readers (Tomitch, 2000). In addition, "students who have effective reading strategies can engage in higher thinking skills about texts and their relations to those texts" (National Reading Panel, 2000 cited in Hernàndez-Laboy, 2009, p. 4).

From Paul and Elder's (2006) viewpoint, to read well requires one to develop one's thinking about reading and, as a result, to learn how to engage in the process of what we call close reading. Their viewpoint deals with the active use of intellectual skills. They recommend that students not only need to learn how to determine whether a text is worth reading, but also how to take ownership of a text's important ideas (when it contains them).

One strategy that can benefit language learning is taking a thoughtful approach to material development. This is especially true for the EFL context, where the classroom is often the only source of English, and materials "play a crucial role in exposing learners to the language" (Dudley-Evens & St. John, 1998, p. 171). "Many sources have an ideological bias, especially the "think tanks." You need to read their statements about their philosophy and also check other sources to make sure you are not getting a one-sided point of view." (Burke, 1988).

To accomplish certain goals of textbooks on critical reading, Kurland (2000) elaborates that these texts commonly ask students to:

- Recognize an author's purpose.
- Understand tone and persuasive elements.
- Recognize bias.

Regarding the critical thinking basis for test use in subject matter, Yeh (2001) believes:

> A valid test item might present source material containing data, evidence or examples, perhaps with conflicting views about how to interpret, synthesize, analyze, or evaluate the material, and ask

respondents to construct a strong argument or select the strongest argument that also addresses important counterarguments (p.14).

Such a test would aim encouraging behaviors on the part of administrators, teachers, and students that encourage the learning of desirable critical thinking skills (Frederiksen & Collins, 1989). In the same vein, Messick (1989) argues that a systematically valid test leads to good educational practices and worthwhile learning; a systematically invalid test leads to ineffective or corrupt educational practices.

Of a broad critical literacy education for twenty-first century, Wallace (2003) has proposed that in making practical choices relating to syllabus content, cultural and ideological factors are implicated as well as linguistic difficulty and it is teacher's role to decide on the use of these books and put them into text sets.

"Even the addition of a sort "critical thinking exercise" to be completed at the end of each class enhances critical thinking development and allows the students to practice analysis of ideas presented, values and attitudes revealed, and self-reflection" (Masters, 2005, p. 88). In this case, she has paid particular attention to dividing the class into groups and points out small group analysis instead of individualized critical thinking can be developed to increase team consensus with more emphasis on critical thinking.

The main reason for the present research stems from the fact that the notion of critical thinking and reading comprehension as well as their relationship with second language learning is considered to be important and a recent matter in Iran. The researchers attempt to the feasibility of helping Iranian academic EFL students to become more critical readers through inferring the intended results can help material developers and teachers augment their views towards higher levels of learning and modify their program in such a way as to achieve higher order levels of learning objectives.

This study investigated the different questions and exercises related to each reading passage in all four English books of Iranian high schools. To meet this objective, the following research question was formulated.

- To what extent do the reading comprehension question of the English books in Iranian high schools follow the professed objectives of the books in terms of critical thinking?

3. Method

3.1. *Materials*

This study is mainly a content analysis. In this type of research method, written or visual materials are analyzed for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Serensen, 2006). Using a coding scheme, all reading comprehension questions of the books were chosen from each English textbook of the high school. It is worth noting that all four textbooks follow somehow a similar pattern; however, each textbook was evaluated in order to see to what extent the questions following reading passage advocate critical thinking.

All of the reading sections in the books were analyzed to distinguish critical thinking questions. There were 9 reading comprehension sections in *Book 1*, 7 reading comprehension sections in *Book 2*, 6 reading comprehension sections, in *Book 3*, and 8 lessons in *Book 4*. *Book 4* was used as a pre-university book before (by 2010), but now the system of education has changed and the pre-university cycle is called the 4th Grade.

3.2. Scheme of Analysis

Descriptive statistics were carried out for reading comprehension questions involved in this study. In order to analyze the critical thinking questions, some criteria were used (listed below). Carefully studying the definitions of Peterson's 2008 model and the guidelines laid down by Academic Skills Unit (2008), the researcher adopted the above-mentioned expanded definition in counting the frequency of critical reading questions in the present study to analyze the reading comprehension questions in the books. To determine the number of critical thinking questions in the books, the frequencies of CRQs used after each reading passage were identified and they were presented in tables. Four tables were prepared to show the critical thinking questions. Vocabulary-In-Context (VIC) questions test the learners' ability to define difficult and unfamiliar words and Literal Comprehension (LC) questions usually address information which can be found directly in the passage. In Extended Reasoning (ER) questions,

learners have the opportunity to react, for example, by simply making an influence and combining story or context clues with what they already know to find unstated information. Hence, the last type of questions permits students to foster the application of critical thinking.

- Clarity: Could you elaborate further on the point? Could you express that point in another way? Could you give an illustration?
- Accuracy: Is that really true? How could we check that? How could we find out if that is true?
- Precision: Could you give more details? Could you be more specific?
- Relevance: How is that connected to the question? How does that bear on the issue?
- Depth: How does your answer address the complexities in the question? How are you taking into account the problems in the question?
- Breadth: Do you need to consider another point of view? Is there another way to look at this question? What would this look like from a conservative standpoint?
- Logic: Does this really make sense? Does that follow from what you said? (Academic Skills Unit, 2008, pp. 112-113).

3.3. Procedure

To answer the research question put forward earlier, all questions related to comprehension sections of the English books were analyzed regarding the use of the CRQs.

The questions were divided into three types: Vocabulary In Context (VIC), Literal Comprehension (LC) and Extended Reasoning (ER). Below are examples of each type of question taken from data.

Vocabulary-In-Context question

Farmers raise plants and vegetables.

"Raise" means……

a. need   b. keep   c. grow   d. watch

Literal Comprehension question

What must the farmers do to pick coconuts?

Extended Reasoning question (Clarity)

Is it difficult to learn a foreign language?

4. Results

The overall number of different types of CRQs indicated that in Book 1 there were 2 (1%) ER questions, 171 (95.5%) LC and 6 (3.5%) VIC. LC questions were more frequently than ER and VIC questions in this course book.

Table 1. Types of Critical Reading Questions and Exercises in Book 1

	VIC		LC		ER	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Answer the questions orally			59	33%	2	1%
True or False?			53	30%		
Complete the sentences. Use a, b, c, or d	6	3.5%	34	19%		
Write complete answers			6	3.5%		
Read the paragraphs and complete the sentences. The number of the paragraphs given.			19	11%		
Total		3.5%		95%		1%

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of CRQs in Book 2. The data in the table show that there were 2 (1.5%) ER questions, 120(98.5%) LC and no VIC. The highest percentage belongs to LC questions.

Table 2. Types of Critical Reading Questions and Exercises in the Book 2

	VIC		LC		ER	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Answer the questions orally			46	38%		
True or False?			44	36%		
Complete the sentences. Use a, b, c, or d			30	24%	2	1.5%
Total			120	98.5%	2	1.5%

Table 3 illustrates the frequencies and percentages of different types of CRQs in Book 3. As depicted in Table 3, there were no questions of VIC. 95.5% LC and 4.5% ER questions were identified.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of CRQs in Book 3

	VIC		LC		ER	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Answer the questions orally			48	45.3%	1	1%
True or False?			32	30.2%		
Complete the sentences. Use a, b, c, or d			21	20%	4	3.5%
Total			101	95.5%	5	4.5%

Table 4. Frequencies and Percentages of CRQs in Pre-University Book

	VIC		LC		ER	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Discussion			28	8.4%	29	8.7%
Warm-up			21	6.3%	13	3.6%
True/false			45	13.6%		
Choose the best summary			2	0.6%		
Complete the following sentences			42	12.7%		
Find the reason from the text			17	5.1%		
Write the number of paragraphs			21	6.3%		
Vocabulary review	95	28.7%				
Ranking the following forms			14	4.2%		
Match the word with the picture	4	1.2%				
Total	99	30%	190	57.5%	42	12.5%

The number of CRQ's in Books 1, 2, and 3 represented a substantial discrepancy in the frequency of CRQs. With regard to the proportion of different types of CRQs in the above-mentioned course books, the frequencies of ER in Pre-University Book were to some extent higher than those of VIC and LC Questions. Results in Reading comprehension I, II, and III revealed a statistically equal number of frequencies of LC questions. The format of the questions in all units of Books 1, 2, and 3 were to a large extent the same. A Discussion of the results is presented in the following section.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

To address the research question, all the reading comprehension questions of the afore-mentioned books were considered. As the results indicate, the number of LC questions was very high in contrast to other types of CRQs in the books. The Pre-University provides students with

proper and fruitful exercises which foster the application of ER questions. The LC questions and the ER questions actually help students to communicate and interact with their teacher and other students at a higher level. Clearly, literal comprehension influences reading comprehension. In this connection, Adams and Patterson (2007) explain that it is the most basic level of understanding, providing the foundation for the development of the higher level, namely, critical comprehension.

Seemingly, students especially those at higher levels are very much in need of invoking critical thinking in the ever-changing world. Concerning reading skills, the students should be helped to improve their skills in understanding details and specific information. Critical thinking activities at different levels of language proficiency in English language classrooms can increase learners' current level of thinking and simultaneously grasp the main meaning of the text (Waters, 2006).

Finally, it is hoped that the findings related to critical thinking and language learning will encourage the well-planned instruction of critical thinking and problem solving in EFL contexts.

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