

CASE STUDY



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Exploring the Role of English Syllabus of B.Sc. (Agriculture) in the Development of Critical Reading Skills of Agricultural Graduates

Chiranjeevi Jakkani

Research Scholar, School of ELE, EFL-University

Assistant Professor of English, PJTS Agricultural University

Hyderabad, Telangana State, India



Article Received: 18/07/2021

Article Accepted: 25/08/2021

Published online:3/09/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.162](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.162)

Abstract

The V Deans' committee (2017) set up by ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) states in its report that the agricultural graduates should inculcate critical reading and problem solving skills in their graduation. In this context, the present study attempts to investigate whether the English syllabus of B.Sc. (Agriculture) helps in the development of critical reading skills of agricultural graduates. Two English teachers and four agricultural working professionals formed the sample of the study. This study was conducted at the Professor Jayashankar Telangana State Agricultural University, Hyderabad. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews and was analysed qualitatively. The findings of the study revealed that the English syllabus of the B.Sc. (Agriculture) was focused on developing basic factual reading skills of the students but not on critical reading skills.

Keywords: Agricultural English syllabus, English coursebook, factual reading, critical reading

1. Introduction:

Reading is an important practice in our modern society. We can't imagine a single day that can be spent without reading any piece of text either consciously or unconsciously and it is surprising that most of the population in the world can read and "a little more than 80% of the world's population can read to some extent. (Elley, 2001; Tucker, 2007; Grabe, 2009). This population can use basic reading skills in their formal or informal settings when it is needed.

Reading has been defined in different ways by many researchers. Carell (1998) says that "reading is one of the most important language skills." Grabe

(2009) defined reading as the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret the information appropriately.

Generally, we read for different purposes especially in non-academic settings we read for general comprehension either for information or for pleasure. Here, our main idea/aim is not remembering the details but to understand them, where as in academic settings we have six different purposes. They are as following: (Grabe, 2002, 2009, p.7).

- 1) Reading is to search for information. (Skimming and Scanning)
- 2) Reading to learn from texts.

- 3) Reading to integrate information.
- 4) Reading for general comprehension.
- 5) Reading to write or searching for information that is needed for writing.
- 6) Reading to evaluate critique and use information.

1. Importance of Reading in agricultural education:

Reading plays an important role in agricultural education. As agriculture is scientific discipline, agricultural graduates are required to be aware of the latest scientific and technological developments in the field of agriculture. And reading equips them with this knowledge. Further, most of these graduates are engaged in different kinds of reading material during their under graduation. They usually read books, scientific articles, newspapers, books, fiction and non-fiction. In addition, most of them are aware of factual reading i.e. looking for factual information in the text.

However, merely reading for facts is not enough at the professional level. Therefore, the V Deans' committee (2017) and National Education Policy (2020) highlight the importance of inculcation of critical reading skills in place of factual reading skills in agricultural graduates during their graduation. In this context, the present study attempts to explore the role of English syllabus of B.Sc. (agriculture) in developing the critical reading skills of agricultural graduates.

The study has chosen four agricultural working professionals and two English teachers as part of the sample. Agricultural working professionals were chosen as they were aware of target reading requirements.

2. Review of literature:

It can be said that critical reading is the very heart of reading comprehension. It's a platform where readers truly think for themselves and become truly active and literate. Critical reading provides the ability to the learners to resist propaganda and verbal manipulation. And it gives the opportunity to make judgments, to define standards and so on. By reading critically, learners can be motivated and they can make use of other active processes that lead to effective reading

comprehension. It is quite obvious that critical reading skills are receiving little attention at the primary and secondary levels. Here, the most frequent types of reading comprehension exercises consist of (a) multiple choice items (b) true-false statements (c) vocabulary work of the type that require students to supply a synonym or antonym for the words given (Rosane Correia 2006). These tasks have their own merits that they help teachers check whether their students understand the text at some superficial value. Tomitch (2000) (As cited in Rosane Correia, 2006.) argues that these tasks do not create an opportunity for the students to read between and beyond lines i.e. questioning the reliability and soundness of the information contained in the text.

Many researchers at these levels believe that children develop critical reading abilities automatically as they grow older or when they go to senior classes, keeping this assumption in their minds they encourage passive reading behaviour which includes "silent reading to respond multiple choice exercises, superficial comprehension questions, true false statements and vocabulary and dictionary work" (Davies 1995, as cited in Rosane Correia, 2006, p.16). This view was challenged by many people in the field and they argue that critical reading and critical thinking can be taught to students and they also remind us the responsibility of the school to develop students who will have the ability to read and think critically (Stauffer 1977, Cioffi 1989).

Language texts at these levels focused more on comprehension (literal comprehension) leaving interpretation and critical reflection to later stages and students at these levels are trained in such a way that they consume and reproduce texts but they have less scope to make an attempt to question the author's position and they are made to believe that the author is the ultimate authority and his truth-words must be followed (Rastogi, R.K. 1995). Because of these practices at the primary and secondary levels students who even after entered into college fail to challenge a textbook or to verify a fact in supplementary sources or who know how to locate and organize material from a variety of sources are relatively rare and for them the text

book has become a crutch that they cannot walk without (John.S Debor 1946).

1. Critical reading definitions:

It is quite obvious that every author writes a text with a particular purpose in his mind and when he or she writes it, they carry particular kind of assumptions, beliefs and ideas that influenced them and these assumptions, ideas and beliefs may be facts or opinions or political or personal therefore it is the reader's duty to analyse, evaluate and judge them carefully in other words analysing and evaluating the ideas expressed in the text can be called as critical reading. It is a higher reading ability which involves careful, exact evaluation and judgment of written material.

The definitions of critical reading given by different researchers/ scholars present a wide range of reading abilities which include the skills of questioning, making inferences and drawing conclusions, identifying emotional appeals, biases and personal prejudices, distinguishing fact from opinion, predicting outcomes, comparing and contrasting information, recognizing intent, attitude and tone, detecting faulty logic and determining to accept or reject the information. The following are the some of the definitions of critical reading skills.

The dictionary of reading and related terms (Harris & Hodges, 1981) offers these definitions of critical reading: (1) "it is the process of making judgments in reading"(2)an act of reading in which a questioning attitude , logical analysis and inferences are used to judge the worth of what is read according to an established standard"; and (3)"the judgment of validity or worth of what is read based on sound criteria of standards developed through previous experience"(P.74 as cited in Patrick P.Mccabe 1984).

"The aim of critical reading is to present the view of reading as social, critical and interpretive process rather than a skill" (Wallace, 2003).

Critical reading involves an interactive process using several levels of thought simultaneously (Flynn, 1989), as for example; analysis: getting the clarity of information by carefully examining the component parts; synthesis-

combining the relevant parts to make a coherent whole; and evaluation: establishing standards and judging ideas, beliefs and assumptions against the standards to verify their reliability (Loni Kreis Tagliber, 2003).

By observing the above mentioned definitions we can conclude that critical reading is a continuous process in life and it demands reader's active role while reading the text. It also can be concluded that critical reading skills can be inculcated in the mature students who are capable of reading a text analytically.

2. Critical Reading in SLA:

It is usually believed that critical reading was given enough importance in western education from the mid- 20th century as teachers wanted their students to become shrewder readers of the increasing amounts of information available (Altick, 1951, as cited in Cynthia Jean Macknish, 2011) yet there were different opinions of the incorporation of critical reading skills in the ESL reading classes.

If we look at the literature about critical reading and English language learners (ELLs), we will find some important assumptions which inform that English language learners have limited capacity for criticality. As in the words of Richards and Skelton (1991) "overseas students evaluate, and evaluate less critically (P.40)", similarly Meldrum (2000) also utters that "one common reason for international/ non-native student's problems with criticality is a different educational background and culture ... a second connected reason is a lack of confidence in using the language (P.70)". here it can be understood that , in order to acquire critical reading ability, one should be well acquainted with one's own background knowledge and culture and it is also inferred that teaching critical reading cannot be taught to "non-native " thinkers(Atkinson, 1997), but Jin and Cortazzi,(2006)(as cited in Cynthia Jean Macknish, 2011) who conducted a study with the Chinese students argued that Chinese students failed to give expected critical responses because these kinds of practices receive less attention in Chinese education, adding to what Jin and Cortazi explained , Sengupta (2002) suggests that if the students are exposed to critical reading skills or

critical reading discourse, then there is a possibility to get more critical responses from them, regardless of acquaintance with the foreign culture.

Wallace (2003) argues that many English language learners do not have the opportunity to participate in critical reading discussion because of limited time, large classes, and lack of attention being paid to critical reading in ESL curriculum or scared of questioning an authority publicly.

But what Sengupta (2002) observed in her study with the hongkong learners, is that if teachers value critical reading in their courses or if they encourage/offer enough freedom in their courses, then students will automatically demonstrate critical reading ability but this is not taking place in ESL reading classroom where more focus was on decoding surface features of texts and teaching discrete skills to get mastery over linguistic structures (Wallace, 2003) and she does not disagree the fact that students should work on decoding at the semantic level if they are not familiar with the English texts but this does not do with going away from critical engagement with the text, moreover she argues that “the notion of criticality cannot be linked innate linguistic competence but is socially and educationally learned”(P.4), therefore it can be deduced that language users whether native or non-native can be initiated into critical reading disposition irrespective of their fluency and accuracy of language.

In her study of English language learners (ELLs) in a critical reading course in the United Kingdom Wallace identified that “language awareness and language development can occur in tandem in that both analytic reading of texts and critical talk around texts constitute learning opportunities” (P.193). Therefore, teacher can help students develop both language proficiency and critical reading simultaneously.

3. Methodology:

Sample: Two English teachers working at the Professor Jayashankar Telangana State Agricultural University, and four agricultural working professionals who are the alumni of this university formed the sample of the study.

Research Question: Does English syllabus of B.Sc. (Agriculture) helps in developing critical reading skills of Agricultural graduates?

Data collection tools: Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from agricultural working professionals and English teachers. This interview questionnaire consisted of ten questions. These interviews were conducted over a telephone in view of the Covid-19 restrictions. Responses of the participant were recorded and later transcribed. Permission was obtained from the participants for recording their responses.

Data analysis: The recorded data were transcribed and analysed qualitatively. Descriptive analysis technique was used to analyse the data.

4. Findings and conclusion: Answers to the research question were obtained by the semi-structured interviews conducted to both teachers and working professionals.

1. Findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted to teachers: Teachers have agreed that the coursebook encourages students to read different reading material such as newspapers, magazines and novels. Further, they added that it provided insights into different types of reading such as skimming, scanning, extensive reading and intensive reading, giving an example to each type of reading. They also said that reading passages provided in the coursebook usually deal with true or false or yes or no questions. However, they said that the coursebook did not make any distinction between the factual reading and critical reading skills. Therefore, they said that students were not aware of critical reading skills such as identifying the main idea and tone of the passage.

However, teachers have stated that students were interested to learn critical reading skills as these were tested in competitive exams such as CAT, GRE and G-MAT. Admitting that students had the ability to distinguish a fact and opinion, teachers said that knowledge about the critical reading skills would help students at their workplace.

2. Findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted to Agricultural working professionals:

Agricultural working professionals stated that the English coursebook provided insights into different reading skills and strategies of reading. Further, they said that the coursebook was helpful in enhancing their basic reading skills i.e. factual reading. However, they argued that it was not enough at the graduation level where they were expected to read and analyse the scientific articles and field reports. By contrast, they said that the reading passages provided in the coursebook dealt with yes or no or true false questions but not questions regarding making inferences and drawing conclusions.

Further, these professionals revealed that agricultural graduates usually read a variety of material and had the ability to make a distinction between a fact and opinion. However, they said that the reading passages provided to them were simple and did not challenge their ability to understand the text from different perspectives.

In addition, they said that students were interested in taking national and international competitive exams such as CAT, GRE and G-MAT, to get admission into agri-business schools. And they reminded that these exams test students' critical reading skills. Moreover, they revealed that they were to analyse and evaluate documents, filed reports and other scientific information at the workplace. However, they said that they did not acquire these skills as they had only one English course during their graduation. Therefore, they recommended another English course, which is more advanced, during their third or final year.

Conclusion

It is well-known fact that this is the age of digital technology and social media with so much information available around us. Therefore, students are required to know how to read, analyse and evaluate the information critically. In fact, the V Deans' committee (2017) and NEP (2020) recommends the incorporation of critical reading skills in the agricultural education. And students

were also interested to learn critical reading skills. However, the syllabus prescribed to B.Sc. (Agriculture) tests only factual reading skills of learners. Therefore, as there is 10% leverage in the syllabus provided by the V Deans' committee, teachers can think of the ways to develop critical reading skills of the students. As part of this, they could bring in authentic materials into the classroom and teach students how to analyse these material critically.

Bibliography

- Cioffi, Grant. (1992). Perspective and Experience: Developing critical reading abilities. *Journal of reading*, 36(1), 48-52.
- DeBoer, John J. (1946). Teaching critical reading. *The Elementary English review*. 23 (6), 251-254.
- Elley, W. (2001). Literacy in the present world: realities and possibilities. In. L. Verhoeven & C. Snow (Eds.), *Literacy and motivation*, 225-242.
- Flynn, L. L. (1989). Developing critical reading skills through cooperative problem solving. *The Reading Teacher*, 42, (9), 667-668.
- Grabe, William. (2009). *Reading in a second language: moving from theory to practice*. Newyork: Cambridge.
- Loni Kreis Tagliber. (2003). *Critical reading and critical thinking: The state of the Art*.
- Macknish, Cynthia Jean. (2011). Understanding critical reading in an ESL class in Singapore. *TESOL Journal*, 2(4), 444-472.
- McCabe, P., & Patrick. (1984). Reading critically: a survival skill. *Reading World*, 64-68.
- Rastogi, R.K. (1995). *Interpretive and critical reading: theoretical exploration in text, textuality and textual gradation (Unpublished Thesis) CIEFL, Hyderabad*.
- Rosane Correia.(2006). Encouraging critical reading in the EFL classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 1, 16-19.
- Sengupta, S. (2002). *Developing academic reading at tertiary level: longitudinal study tracing*

conceptual change. Reading Matrix, 2(1), 1-37.

Tucker, G. R. (2000). Concluding thoughts: applied linguistics at the juncture of millennia. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics 20, 241-9.

Wallace, C. (2003). Critical reading in language education. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
