

Critical Reading Instructions for Effective Language Education in Nigerian Higher Institutions

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Abstract

The success of any education programme depends largely on the language used for instruction. In Nigeria, English is used as a language of instruction right from the primary school to higher institutions. Students in higher institutions are expected to learn different skills in English language in order to improve their performance in various courses studied in the school. Thus, critical reading skill in English is one of the skills needed when they read academic materials such as textbooks, journals and research works that could help them analyse, synthesise and evaluate what is read. This paper discusses the role of language in higher institutions, the concept of critical reading and some basic steps in critical reading. It also highlights some basic strategies for instruction in critical reading and the roles of this kind of reading in language education. The paper among others, recommends that critical reading should be incorporated in the curriculum of language education in higher institutions through the use of English and it should be taught alongside some courses to promote students' high order thinking skills.

Keywords: instructions, critical reading, language education, higher institutions.

Introduction

In Nigeria, English is considered the language of education. It is a language of instruction right from the primary school to higher institutions such as the polytechnics, colleges of education and the universities. Basically, there is no education without language (Ebong, 2016). This is in line with the national policy on education (2004) which stated that English shall be the language of instruction in schools from the upper primary to the tertiary level while mother tongue is restricted and confined to lower primary level. Evue (2013) opines that one of the reasons why English is so central to Nigeria's educational growth is because of its significant role as a medium of knowledge delivery in Nigerian schools. However, students in higher institutions of learning need a good grounding and effective mastery of English language in order to have adequate communicative competence in both spoken and written English. A good performance in other subjects is contingent upon students' adequate knowledge of English language (Anyadiegwu, 2012). Thus, the success of any student in higher institution depends largely on higher level of competence in English language.

In order to improve students' competence in English language, they need higher reading skills. Reading is a core skill in teaching learning which helps learners to achieve proficiency level in English language. Thus, students at this level need critical academic reading skills. Students studying various courses in higher institutions are required to read and gather information in order to answer assignment questions or further information on different topics for examinations and other types of assessments. Not only reading to gather information from text, but they need to critically evaluate message, remember its content and apply the new found knowledge flexibly (Alfassi, 2004). Furthermore, students need to fully understand a text where they would analyse, synthesis and evaluate what is read. This suggest that critical reading skills are necessary if students in higher

institutions are to make intelligent decisions based on the materials they read for their academic achievement.

The Role of Language in Higher Institutions

Language is considered as the backbone of education, it has a very important role to play in higher institutions. English language is the official language that is used in most of the higher institutions in the country to carry out all academic activities. Considering its role in higher institutions, the government introduced English as a general study course or use of English in all higher institutions. The main purpose of the course is to make the students linguistically competent to equip them with better reading, writing and speaking skills needed for their academic work (Okere, 2018). Similarly, Adewumi (2012) states that:

The role of English in our educational system cannot be overemphasized. This is because lectures, tutorials and practicals are carried out in English. Examinations are also written in English. Reading comprehension, summarizing, note taking and examination are some of the most difficult task for Nigerian students. Their poor performance in both school and public examination is often attributed to their deficiencies in these skills (P. 295).

The reasons above justify the inclusion of general English or the use of English in the curriculum of higher institutions in Nigeria. In line with the above assertion, Nweke and Nwoye (2016) observe that the use of English as a course was ushered into Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions due to incessant complaints by lecturers and employers of labour that many undergraduates and even graduates lacked the ability to express themselves competently in English language. The course is made compulsory to all students in higher institutions to help learners function effectively. The curriculum of the use of English in these institutions is therefore prepared to cover the different language skill needed by students. Anyadiegwu (2012) points out that the general studies English has the aims and objectives of ensuring the acquisition of communication competence needed by our students both for academic purposes and to function effectively in the country where English is the official language and the lingua franca and as well use the language with international intelligibility. Thus, proficiency in English is required by all students at this level of education to function both in school and outside the school.

The purpose of the general study in English is to empower students to be better learners and to upgrade their standard of English to cope with their academic programmes. As such, competence in English is seen as an index of academic excellence. Adewumi (2012) further reemphasises that:

The purpose of general English (use of English) is to upgrade the students' standard of English. General English is to act as a service course for all students, preparing them for the demands of studying in the language and for using it as a medium of instruction. To this end, the performance skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening form the core of the curriculum while the study skill is an additional area designed to help students get the most out of their formal education (P. 4).

As a compulsory course, the use of English serves as a yardstick for measuring learners' academic performance in higher institutions. According to Njoku (2017), before any student can graduate from tertiary institutions in Nigeria, he or she must pass the course. Due to this, students must be prepared to work hard to become proficient in the language.

The Concept of Critical Reading

Critical reading is a high thinking reading ability which goes beyond reading to extract information from texts. It requires rational thinking for making judgments about a text. Pirozzi (2003) opines that critical reading is a very high-level comprehension of written materials that requires readers' interpretation and evaluation to separate, important and unimportant information, opinion and facts and also determine the writer's purpose and tone. Similarly, Wilson (2016) defines critical reading as a reading task that involves comparing, contrasting, arguing for and against, identifying main ideas, summarizing key points, evaluating. Contrasting positions and drawing inference. Since reading entails comprehension, readers should be able to reconstruct the author's main idea, supporting ideas and supporting facts as well as critical evaluation of those materials they read. Cabral and Tavares (2002) suggest that besides understanding the content of textbooks and essays, students

must be able to criticize and evaluate ideas always in a critical and thinking learning attitude. It requires reader's abilities to highlight evidence, examine arguments and supported facts presented in the text, analysing the text according to the author's purpose and attitude to the topic, style and format of writing (Yutsevichutene, 2017). Thus, critical reading goes beyond a typical approach to reading such as information processing but being able to reflect on what a text says, what it describes and what it means by scrutinizing the style and structure of the text as well as the language used and its content.

Critical reading is basically a reading process that involves critical thinking in the process of reading. In this type of reading, higher order skills are used to actively analyse, interpret and evaluate reading materials. Wang and Gierl (2011) assert that the reading involves a higher level of thinking, in which the reader uses a questioning attitude, logical analysis and inference to judge the worth of what is read. In line with this assertion, Chinedu Kamin and Olabiyi (2015) observe that high order thinking skills focuses on developing students' abilities to be able to analyse effectively, evaluate by drawing inference from existing information and creating new solution, idea or something from what is read. Thus, critical thinking has a significant role in critical reading. Kurland (2000) agrees that critical reading and critical thinking can be considered to complement each other in a reading process because a reader uses his critical thinking skill to monitor his understanding of the reading materials. To support this assertion, Muchsonah (2015) states that:

In this monitoring process, when a reader perceives the assertion provided in the text is ridiculous or irresponsible (critical thinking), a reader will read the text more closely and test his understanding about the text (critical reading). However, in terms of time sequence, critical reading takes place before critical thinking. In other words, one can only have critical thinking if he has fully understood a text.

The above statements suggest that anytime a reader reads, there should be an involvement of a certain degree of critical thinking to be able to make judgment with understanding about what is read for effective critical reading.

Steps in Critical Reading

Before readers or learners are guided on some basic steps in critical reading, they need to be aware of some skills involved in critical reading. They also need to know the purpose of their reading. Critical reading demands the reader to make judgments about what they read which requires posing and answering questions about the text and the author (Khabiri and Pakzad, 2012). However, readers or learners are expected to be aware of the skills of critical reading in order to guide them read any text critically. Varaporn and Sitthitikul (2019) presents seven sub skills of critical reading that learners need to know. These are:

- a) Distinguish facts from opinion
- b) Identify an author's purpose
- c) Recognize an author's tone
- d) Recognize author's attitude
- e) Recognize an author's organizational patterns of writing style
- f) Draw inferences or logical conclusions, and
- g) Identify the source of the information (P. 84).

It is expected that when students are aware of these skills, they will be motivated to read a text critically with higher thinking skills. However, students also need to be guided on some basic steps of reading critically. Oyetunde (2000) suggests some basic steps in critical reading, such as:

Step 1: As you read, try to get a general idea of what the author is trying to persuade you to think.

Step 2: Look for writing techniques the author has used that might lead you to question what the author has said (for example, bias, assumptions, propaganda, mixing facts and opinions).

Step 3: Compare the information you are reading with what you already know, or if necessary, check the information in another source.

Step 4: Evaluate what you read as follows: Is it of value to you? Can you accept what the author has told you? Should you wait to make judgment until you have more information? Should you reject what you have read based on your critical thinking? (P. 21).

These steps will guide the learner to be able to respond critically to any reading material beyond its literal level through analysing and evaluating information encountered in the process of reading

Strategies for Critical Reading Instruction in Higher institutions

Educational activities in higher institutions requires students to read academic books, write essays, write assignments, make notes from lectures and write projects at the end of their courses in their various institutions. These activities need constant and active reading. They are required to read different materials to obtain information for their academic work. This also requires reading critically in order to interpret and analyse what they have read. However, this type of reading involves using strategies in approaching such materials. The procedures which are employed to discern the content of text and subsequently analyse and evaluate it are commonly known as critical reading strategies (Sadeghi & Seddigh, 2013). According to Nasrollahi, Krishnasamy and Noor (2015), critical reading strategies refer to strategies that encourage learners to use each of the cognitive processes in the three upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, which is commonly associated with critical thinking skills. Zakaria, Shuraimi and Sarudin (2014) present seven critical reading, strategies that could be used in teaching critical reading in higher institutions. Such as, previewing, contextualizing, questioning, reflecting, outlining, summarizing, evaluating and comparing/contrasting. These are summarized in tabular form showing various activities to be done by students under each critical reading strategy. These are:

Table 1: Critical Reading Strategies

Strategies	Activities
1. Previewing	i. Let the students be aware of the purpose of reading. ii. Let them read the synopsis to get an overview of the text. iii. Let them skim table of contents; chapters and paragraphs when reading new reading materials. iv. Let them make written notes of what they think the text is about. v. Let them make a mental note of what they think the text is about.
2. Contextualizing	i. Let them relate the text through their own experience. ii. Let them recognize the difference between their values and those in the text. iii. Let them visualize what they read. iv. Let them compare and contrast the representation of the text to their knowledge and experience. v. Let them apply the reading context to a scenario.
3. Questioning to understand and remember	i. Let them make inference about the content of the text. ii. Let them develop self-questions to help them comprehend the text. iii. Let them make predictions when they read. iv. Let hem seek answers to their questions when they read. v. Questioning on the main ideas will help them to remember the content of the text.
4. Reflecting on challenges to beliefs	i. Let them identify questions that emerge from the text. ii. Let them mark the parts that show where it challenges their beliefs or values.

	iii.	Let them distinguish how the ideas challenged their beliefs or values.
	iv.	Let them re-read to make sense of the author's idea
	v.	Let them make notes to understand the author's arguments.
5. Outlining and summarizing	i.	Let them re-read the text if they are unclear of the text.
	ii.	Let them identify the main ideas of the text
	iii.	Let them identify the supporting details of the text
	iv.	Let them incorporate ideas in the texts into their own words.
	v.	Let them summarize the text in their own words
6. Evaluating arguments	i.	Let them critically evaluate what the author argues/claims
	ii.	Let them analyse whether the supports of the arguments/claims are appropriate
	iii.	Let them review whether they are convinced with the arguments of the author
	iv.	Let them differentiate whether a statement is fact or opinion
7. Comparing and contrasting related reading	i.	Let them identify the differences of writing styles of different authors
	ii.	Let them differentiate opposing arguments in different texts.

Adapted from (Zakaria, Surmi & Sarudin, 2014, P, 6)

Based on the activities involved in each strategy, students are expected to become active readers and having self-questioning in mind when reading to foster better understanding. Knott (2006) asserts that critical readers should ask themselves questions when they read a given material. By asking themselves questions and seeking answers to those questions, they may be able to understand and remember what they read (Zakaria, Shurami & Sarudini, 2014). In addition to that, they need to engage in series of strategies to give them opportunity to develop a background knowledge of what they read and what they are about to read. However, Boseley (2008) suggests that critical reading strategies must be taught explicitly and reinforced through practice.

Role of Critical Reading Instruction in Language Education

Reading generally has basic linguistics skills that could promote students' academic success. It has a significant position in language education, especially in higher institutions, because most of the academic activities require effective reading skills. Thus, effective reading skills that require students to read critically. Abd-Kadir, Subki, Jamal and Ismail (2014) opine that critical reading skills should be given emphasis when teaching reading in schools especially when it is considered to help students to be more analytical when they engage themselves in any reading activity. With the skills acquired in the critical reading instruction, the students are expected to be judgmental readers (Par, 2018). Students at this level of education need to read and give judgment of the authenticity of the ideas stated by the writer in a given text. They need to view the writers' point of view critically. Thus, in language education programme students need to read critically for their academic success. According to Manarin, Carey, Rathburn and Rayland (2015), reading critically for academic success consist of the following skills:

1. Identifying patterns of textual elements.
2. Distinguishing between main and subordinate ideas
3. Evaluating credibility
4. Making judgments about how a text is argued

5. Making relevant inferences about the text. (P. 4)

It is expected that with the above skills, students in higher institutions could comprehensively read academic and authentic texts and critically respond to them in their academic work.

The purpose of language Education in higher education is not limited to self-improvement in academic performance but also extends to the enhancement of the important skills of communication which spills over to their chosen field of study. It is therefore necessary to teach students critical reading skills that could help them look at reading as a process rather than a product. According to Abd-kadir, Subki, Jamal and Ismail (2014), product view of reading relates only to what the reader got out of the text while a process view investigates how the reader may arrive at a particular interpretation of a text. Thus, students need to go far beyond grasping what is explicitly stated in the text by using their high order thinking skills to tackle and evaluate the content of texts they read.

Recommendations

1. Critical reading should be incorporated in the curriculum of language education in higher institutions through the use of English.
2. Critical reading should be taught alongside some of the courses offered in higher institutions to promote students' high order thinking skills.
3. Teachers should be trained to stimulate students' critical skills by asking high order level questions after reading a text.
4. Students should be given more training on critical reading strategies in order to be able to analyse and evaluate any text.

Conclusion

The ability to read critically is an important skill, especially for students in higher institutions. The general decline in students' performance in their various courses has been attributed to poor reading habit and their inability to read critically. For effective language education in higher institutions, students need proper instructions in critical reading so that they should be able to read academic texts, analyse and evaluate the contents and make intelligent decisions based on what they have read. They are also expected to read a text and discover the author's intention as a path to evaluate ideas and reflect on it for better understanding of any written text.

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