

Promoting students' critical reading abilities through Reading Scrapbook project

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Abstract

While technology advances make information more available and much easier to acquire than ever, they also place considerable pressure on users regarding the selection, analysis and evaluation of information. Without critical reading abilities, readers easily fall into the trap of *infobesity*, or information overload (Toffler, 1970), which results in less productive performance. As for the student teachers of English at Faculty of English Language Teacher Education - University of Languages and International Studies (FELTE - ULIS), fostering critical thinking in general and critical reading skills in particular is a must so that they can satisfy the requirements of both language proficiency level (C1 – Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam) and teaching professional competency (English Teacher Competency Framework (Dzuzik, 2008)) as regulated by Ministry of Education and Training – Vietnam.

In an attempt to support students' achievement of critical reading skills, a project called Reading Scrapbook has been introduced to BA Honor programs' sophomores at FELTE – ULIS in their fourth semester Reading program. This article describes how the principles underlying critical reading development are put into practice in the project and analyzes students' perception of the effectiveness of the project in fostering their critical thinking. Data from our survey questionnaires and interview suggest that the project has achieved success since its first application. There are also further recommendations for better practice of this project, among which in-time feedback from teachers and peers is highlighted. The authors hope to contribute insights of an effective technique for developing critical reading skills that teaching practitioners may wish to refer to when designing and implementing similar courses.

Key words: *Critical thinking, critical reading, scrapbooks, feedback*

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

While technology advances make information more available and much easier to acquire than ever, they also place considerable pressure on users regarding the selection, analysis and evaluation of information. Without critical reading abilities, readers easily fall into the trap of *infobesity*, or information overload (Toffler, 1970), which results in less productive performance. According to a 2010 survey by the research firm Basex with knowledge workers, more than 90% of the respondents at some point felt overwhelmed by information to the point of capacity (<http://www.basexblog.com/2010/11/04/our-findings/>). Added to that, the exponential growth of created content also weakens the quality of the information. “Smart readers”, therefore, must inevitably possess critical reading abilities to process received data efficiently.

As for the student teachers of English at Faculty of English Language Teacher Education - University of Languages and International Studies (FELTE - ULIS), fostering critical thinking in general and critical reading skills in particular is a must so that they can satisfy the requirements of both language proficiency level (C1 – English Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam) and teaching professional competency (English Teacher Competency Framework (Dzuzik, 2008)) as regulated by Ministry of Education and Training – Vietnam. However, certain studies have shown that “a large proportion of students at FELTE could demonstrate critical reading at a basic level” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008, cited in Vu, 2015). This situation implies a huge demand for critical reading coaching in the pre-service teacher training curriculum.

In an attempt to support students’ achievement of critical reading skills, a project called Reading Scrapbook has been introduced to BA Honor programs’ sophomores at FELTE – ULIS in their fourth semester Reading program (academic year 2015 – 2016). As it is the first time the Reading Scrapbook project has been implemented, there is a need to measure the level of critical reading demonstrated in students’ works against what has been established in the course objectives. It is also necessary to understand students’ attitudes towards such a new task as well as take into

consideration any suggestions that they propose so that the project can be adjusted if necessary.

This sets the context for our research on “*Promoting students’ critical reading abilities through Reading Scrapbook project*” which functions as a quick measure of how a new assessment component is working. With this study, we hope to see how the project has encouraged critical reading development and to what extent of effectiveness the project has been rated by students. Further recommendations for better practice of the Reading Scrapbook project are also sought. The authors hope to contribute insights of an effective technique for developing critical reading skills that teaching practitioners may wish to refer to when designing and implementing similar courses.

Research questions

The research provides quantitative data as well as qualitative data from the survey responses and interviews of 19 Fast-track sophomores at FELTE. It was conducted with the aim of seeking answers to the following research questions.

RQ1: What principles of critical thinking development are featured in the Reading Scrapbook project?

RQ2: From students’ perspective, to what extent did the project succeed in assisting them to develop their critical reading abilities?

RQ3: From students’ perspective, what else can be done to enhance the effectiveness of this project?

Literature review

Critical thinking and critical reading

Critical thinking is an analytical, evaluative process in which an individual makes judgments on the basis of norms of standards that have been developed through experience (King, 1968). The development of critical thinking, as suggested by Meyers (1986) requires the presence of four elements: (1) stimulating students’ interest, (2) creating meaningful discussion, (3) exposure to thoughts and views of

others, and (4) fostering a trusting and supporting atmosphere. These principles structure the conducive learning environment for any classroom activity aiming at fostering students' critical thinking skills, may it be in listening, reading, speaking or writing lessons.

According to King (1968, p.5), “*reading is one most effective vehicle for influencing critical thinking abilities*”. Through reading, one can not only foster the general growth in language but also benefit from *semantic understandings*. Apart from that, they can develop the ability to judge the *logical reasoning* in communication. As readers can revisit different parts in the reading materials as many times as they want, they are exposed to a greater chance to determine the reasonableness of an argument or the reliability of the major statements. Extensive practice with reading brings about *insights into literary forms*, something that cannot be learnt through theory only. Being a critical reader, one should be able to distinguish among various types of materials they are reading and hold specialized expectations for each literary form.

Therefore, reading should “*not be simply importing the meaning of the text slavishly into a blank document*” (Vu, 2015, p.2). Rather, it should be a process of analyzing, interpreting and, sometimes, evaluating. To be a critical reader, one must examine, contest and struggle over the meaning presented by the text before finalizing their reactions to the text –to what extent and at which specific point(s) they consent, refuse or appreciate the text or part of the text. In other words, when one reads critically, they use their critical thinking skills to question both the text and their own reading of it.

The difference between reading and critical reading can be summarized in the table below.

	READING	CRITICAL READING
Purpose	To get a basic grasp of the text.	To form judgments about <i>HOW</i> a text works.
Activity	Absorbing/Understanding	Analyzing/Interpreting/Evaluating
Focus	What a text SAYS	What a text DOES and MEANS
Questions	What is the text saying? What information can I get out of it?	How does the text work? How is it argued? What are the choices made? The patterns that result? What kinds of reasoning and evidence are used? What are the underlying assumptions? What does the text mean?
Direction	WITH the text (taking for granted it is right)	AGAINST the text (questioning its assumptions and argument, interpreting meaning in context)
Response	Restatement, Summary	Description, Interpretation, Evaluation

(The Writing Centre, University of Toronto Scarborough)

Vu (2015, p.16) lists a sum of reading skills that characterize critical reading. These include “*analyzing the data source, understanding the writer’s purposes, distinguishing facts from opinions, reasoning, forming judgments, and detecting propaganda devices*”. For a clear illustration, he quotes Kirszner & Mandell (2000, p. 485) for 15 questions that a critical reader needs to answer in reading any text:

- 1) *What is the writer saying?*
- 2) *What do you think the writer is suggesting or implying? What makes you think so?*
- 3) *What is the writer’s purpose?*
- 4) *What audience is the writer suggesting?*
- 5) *Is the writer responding to another writer’s ideas?*
- 6) *What is the writer’s main point?*
- 7) *How does the writer support his or her points?*
- 8) *Does the writer use facts, opinions or a combination of the two?*
- 9) *Does the writer include enough supporting details and examples?*
- 10) *What pattern of development does the writer use to arrange his or her ideas? Is this pattern the best choice?*
- 11) *Does the writer seem well informed? Reasonable? Fair?*
- 12) *Do you understand the writer’s vocabulary?*
- 13) *Do you understand the writer’s ideas?*
- 14) *Do you agree with the points the writer is making?*
- 15) *How the ideas presented in this section like/ unlike those presented in other sections you’ve read?*

(Kirszner & Mandell, 2000, p. 485, cited in Vu, 2015, p. 16)

These 15 questions also shape the critical reading instruction in the Reading Scrapbook Project.

Critical Reading competence at C1 level of CEFR

As specified in the common reference levels of CEFR, at C1 level, the language users can “*understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style.*” They can also “*understand specialized articles and longer technical instructions*”, even when they do not relate to their fields. (CEFR, p. 45). Looking in more details into reading for information and argument, readers at C1 level (and C2 as well) should be able to “*understand in detail a wide range of lengthy, complex texts likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life, identifying finer points of detail including attitudes and implied as well as stated opinions*” (CEFR, p.70).

It is obvious that descriptors of C1 reading competence are in great harmony with what King (1968, p.5) reasons as how critical thinking can be fostered through reading.

Critical reading development as an indicator of English Language Teacher Competences

The Vietnam Competency Framework for English Language Teachers, hereafter addressed as ETCF, introduced by Dudzik and colleagues (2008) was officially approved and disseminated by Vietnam’s National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL2020 Project) in 2012. The framework is believed to function as tools to address the quality of English Teaching in Vietnam as well as frame the quality of language teacher training curriculums in different pedagogy institutions.

The needs for critical reading development is indirectly integrated in performance indicators of Domains 3, 4 and 5 of ETCF. For example, in order to “reflect on learners’ values & prior learning” and “develop learner’s creativity & critical thinking” (Competency 3.3 & 3.4, Domain 3), teachers need to be a critical thinker themselves first. Similarly, for strong and sustainable professional growth, teachers need to perform several reflective practices (Competency 4.3 – Domain 4 & 5.2 – Domain 5) which surely require much critical reading of literature and research.

As teacher's beliefs and practices are greatly influenced by their past learning experience (Farrell, 2006), student teachers are supposed to benefit significantly from extensive practice in critical thinking and critical reading during their learning courses.

Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) refers to “*any programmatic or instructional approach that utilizes multifaceted projects as a central organizing strategy for educating students*” (<http://edglossary.org/project-based-learning/>). A project often takes several weeks or months, or it may even unfold over the course of a semester or year. Common products of a project are in the form of performance, presentations or portfolios. In a scrapbook project, for example, the scrapbook is the final product.

Project-based learning have been seen to yield a number of benefits for students, ranging from deeper learning of academic content to stronger motivation to learn (Buck Institute for Education - BIE, 2013). One notable common research finding is that PBL students also show improvement in their critical thinking (Beckett & Miller, 2006; Horan, Lavaroni, & Beldon, 1996; Mergendoller, Maxwell, & Bellisimo, 2006, all cited in BIE, 2013). When engaged in a project or series of projects, students practice and sharpen diverse skills, for example researching, collaborating, decision making, and working autonomously to produce realistic work products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michealson, 1999; all cited in Thomas, 2000). Different stages in a project encourage students to identify the actual problem and to view it as a whole, ask probing questions to practice with explaining and reasoning skills. In the problem-solving process encountered during PBL, students learn to consider viewpoints from different perspectives, challenge assumptions, and evaluate different points. Accumulating these skills strengthen critical thinking in general and critical reading in particular.

For the abovementioned features, PBL is a real fit for the assignments in the BA Honors Reading Program.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology

The strategy of inquiry applied in this study is Mixed Methods in which the researcher can expand the findings of one method with another (Creswell, 2009). Mixed Methods research is also defined as “research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007b, p. 4). The Mixed Method strategies are not as popular as the qualitative and quantitative approaches but they can neutralize or cancel the biases of single methods (Creswell, 2009). In this study, the authors would like to find out whether the project succeeded in assisting students to develop their critical reading abilities and what would be done to improve its effectiveness. Using a quantitative survey questionnaire with rating-scale items only helps collect the data based on limited prescribed questions. A qualitative method such as interviews could bring out more profound understanding of the scrapbook project. Thus, the most relevant design for this study is Mixed Methods research.

As the data were supposed to be collected chronologically in phases, the research applied two-phase Sequential Mixed Methods (Creswell, 2009) as follows:

Phase 1: The Survey Questionnaire given to second-years students of BA Honor Program at the end of second semester.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews with randomly selected students.

This type of design answers exploratory and confirmatory questions in a prespecified order and is less complicated to conduct by the solo investigator than are the parallel mixed designs (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). As can be seen from the design, the authors of this study collected and analyzed the quantitative data in the first phase and then did the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the second phase based on the results of the first phase to provide more explanation for their findings. The final inferences are based on the results of both phases of the study. In this case, weighting is given to the quantitative data and the mixing of data takes place when the results of the questionnaire inform the participants of the secondary qualitative data collection.

Research validity

To ensure the construct validity of this study, “multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 34) namely questionnaire and interview are applied. The methods of data collection probably help develop a correct operational set of measures to investigate the research problems. In terms of external validity that deals with the extent to which the data/ findings can be generalized (Yin, 2003), the results from survey questionnaire provided statistical generalization. Thus, the external validity in the study can be achieved.

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted at ULIS in Hanoi, Vietnam. This university provides training courses of different foreign languages such as English, French, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and so on. The Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE) offers English programs to English majors, who wish to work as English teachers, translators and interpreters after graduation. Students at FELTE have to study four language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, for two school years besides other career-orienting subjects.

The Reading Scrapbook project is implemented in the fourth semester of BA Honor Program – a special program for fast-track students of FELTE. Each student is required to collect two texts synthesized with the guiding questions from authentic English source. The themes are among those covered in that semester. Students would decorate the text on a piece of paper and accompany their responses in the form of marginal or footnote comments using the list of guided questions. They were also asked to give feedback on peers’ notes. The questionnaire was carried out at the end of the second semester for the reason that all the participants have completed and submitted two reading scrapbooks in week 6 and 13.

The participants in this research were 19 second-year students of BA Honor program. They were selected on convenient grounds. Those students were invited to fill out the questionnaire in the first stage of the study. Then, the authors started to have face-to-face interviews with 7 randomly selected participants in the second phase to get a more in-depth understanding of their rating in the survey as well as their further comments/ feedback on the project.

Data gathering methods

a. Survey questionnaire

The questionnaire was the main data-gathering tool for this research. This tool provides “a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2009, p. 145). Both researchers have been lecturers at FELTE for more than 10 years, the questionnaire was supposed to help reduce their bias in the research as they could not have any influence on the respondents’ answers to the questions. The survey was administered to 19 second-year students of Honor program at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education. The questionnaire consists of five statements for which students had to give feedback on five main criteria. This tool helped to classify the participants’ attitude toward the Reading scrapbook project as presented in the literature review.

Before administrating the questionnaire, the students had been informed of the objectives and significance of the research. They were also required to state their real responses and were acknowledged for the time of filling in the questionnaire. After that, the questionnaire was distributed to the subjects. Once they finished answering the questionnaire, they were requested to check their responses for incompleteness or missing answers. All the students completed and returned their questionnaires within one hour.

b. Interview

The reason for choosing interview in this study is that it is “a powerful data collection strategy which uses one-to-one interaction between researchers and interviewees” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 229). Using this tool provides the researcher with more insight into the participants, which cannot be obtained from the questionnaire.

The outline of interviews followed general interview guide approach (Patton, 2002) in which the topic and issues are prespecified in outline form but the sequence and wording of questions were decided in the course of the interviews. The aims of employing interviews was to have an in-depth understanding of how students master critical reading skills through the Scrapbook project and whether they had any comments, feedback and recommendation to make the assignment more practical and effective.

Data analysis methods

The data analysis in Mixed Methods integrates statistical and thematic data analytic techniques (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). As this research is a Sequential Mixed Methods designs with a quantitative phase occurs first, followed by a qualitative phase, the analyses from the two phases are related to one another.

When analyzing the questionnaire results of the first stage, the researchers first keyed in the responses of each subject. The analysis of quantitative data in the first phase can help yield extreme or outlier cases (Creswell, 2009) for the data analysis of the second stage. The replies and answers of the participants were analyzed based on the prespecified points.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What principles of critical thinking development are featured in the Reading Scrapbook project?

A closer look at the Reading Scrapbook Project will assist deeper understanding of the connection between the project instructions and the principles of critical thinking development.

Regarding principles of learning environment (Meyers, 2008), the project is conducted over the semester and covers the themes indicated in the Reading Program. Students are free to take texts of their interest from any sources, provided that the texts are authentic. This answers the first principle, which is “*stimulating students’ interest*”. Meanwhile, there are several opportunities of “meaningful discussions” on the theme(s) being created between the teacher and students as well as among students themselves, either during reading lessons in class or outside classroom. Since students are required to note down their responses towards the text and give feedback to their peers’ notes, and they also receive feedback from their teacher in week 7 and week 14, they are exposed to *thoughts and views of others*. It is notable that comments and feedback are provided in an open atmosphere where all stakeholders can give their opinions, reason their viewpoints as well as offer commentaries to each others. Also, students work with reference to a list of guiding questions, so they know exactly what they need to do in the project. The list of questions can also serve as a

checklist for ease of peer feedback. These strengthen the *trusting and supporting learning environment* for students to autonomously build up their critical thinking skills.

The guiding questions to the project clearly correlate to how critical thinking can be developed through reading activities. Table 1 below maps the elements in fostering critical thinking skills with the list of questions that students follow to explore and respond to the texts they select for their Scrapbook.

<p>Critical thinking development (King, 1968)</p>	<p>Guiding questions (Kirszner & Mandell, 2000, p. 485, cited in Vu, 2015, p. 16)</p>
<p>Semantics understanding</p>	<p>5) Is the writer responding to another writer's ideas? 12) Do you understand the writer's vocabulary? 13) Do you understand the writer's ideas?</p>
<p>Logical reasoning (Critical reading abilities in this category includes understanding the writer's purposes, distinguishing facts from opinions, reasoning, and forming judgments)</p>	<p>1) What is the writer saying? 2) What do you think the writer is suggesting or implying? What makes you think so? 6) What is the writer's main point? 9) Does the writer include enough supporting details and examples? 11) Does the writer seem well informed? Reasonable? Fair? 14) Do you agree with the points the writer is making? 15) How the ideas presented in this section like/ unlike those presented in other sections you've read?</p>
<p>Insights into literary forms Critical reading abilities in this category includes analyzing the data source, and detecting propaganda devices)</p>	<p>3) What is the writer's purpose? 4) What audience is the writer suggesting? 7) How does the writer support his or her points? 8) Does the writer use facts, opinions or a combination of the two? 10) What pattern of development does the writer use to arrange his or her ideas? Is this pattern the best choice?</p>

Table 1: Critical thinking development and corresponding critical reading questions

RQ2: From students' perspective, to what extent did the project succeed in assisting them to develop their critical reading abilities?

	1 (totally disagree)	2	3	4	5 (totally agree)	Mean	SD
a. The project has helped me to improve the targeted critical reading skills.	0	1	1	14	3	3.8	2.0
b. I have chance to get access to a wide range of reading texts, and select really good authentic/real-life ones.	0	2	4	11	2	3.6	1.3
c. I have enhanced my background knowledge about academic and non-academic topics.	0	0	3	14	2	3.7	2.1
d. I have improved my ability to give critical comments on reading texts and give critical feedback to my friends' comments.	0	2	5	11	1	3.52	1.1
e. I have improved certain reading skills which a C1 language proficiency learner (CEFR) should develop, especially: reading for orientation and reading for information and argument	1	3	2	10	4	3.9	0.35

Table 2: Students' rating on the scrapbook project

The table 2 summarizes the responses of 19 participants on the five main criteria. As could be seen, the objective of the subject (e) in which students achieved certain reading skills of a C1 language proficiency learner was not only rated the highest but also had the smallest standard deviation (0.35). It was followed by comments and feedback (Mean=3.52, SD = 1.1) and the authenticity of the materials (Mean = 3.6,

SD = 1.3). These positive responses could be elaborated further but the qualitative data provided by these participants:

- I have started to read selectively, I find out that I used to fall into the traps set up by these authors

- This project is very useful in developing my knowledge regarding lexical choices as well as rhetorical devices. Now I can identify the author's real purpose when using a particular word or device to convey a message to reader, which helps me understand the texts of both academic and non-academic more deeply.

- I have understood the use of rhetorical devices in English and their power in conveying the author's ideas.

- This project has helped me to expand my knowledge on a variety of topics when I read and give feedbacks on my friend's work. It sharpens my critical reading skill.

- My classmates have given me constructive comments on my choice of reading texts, analysis on the author's writing style, lexical choices and idea organization. I think this project proved to be of great benefit for me.

From the above responses, it can be seen that the most prominent themes those students stated were an enhancement of critical awareness, with which the readers could become more selective and more concentrated when reading; enhanced critical reading skills as they could identify, understand and clarify the problems. These findings apparently point out the success of the project in terms of its primary objective.

RQ3: From students' perspective, what else can be done to enhance the effectiveness of this project?

The study also aimed at exploring the shortcomings of using scrapbook to develop reading skills and what remedies were suggested to solve the problems. Even though the participants did not rate the criteria (a) and (c) low, the variances were the highest (SD = 2.0 and 2.5 respectively). The reason for this rating was students' inability to make their argument sound and valid as well as apply critical reading in the exams. They also claimed that there was not transference of critical reading sessions to the writing or speaking ones. One respondent even claimed that this project did not really improve her background knowledge, or with the writing section that week. They did suggest there should be a connection between the reading project and other skills namely writing, or speaking so that students might become more aware of the

importance of critical thinking in language learning. Additionally, most of the interviewees put an emphasis on the necessity of giving in-time feedback from teachers and peers during the implementation of the scrapbook project. The idea of replacing traditional reading test including a great number of multiple-choice questions with more projects such as reading scrapbook would be more practical and useful.

CONCLUSION

The study results above suggest that Reading scrapbook project have brought positive outcomes in both critical awareness and critical reading skills of the students in BA Honor Program. It was appreciated by the students for the authenticity of tasks and relevant reading skills that should be acquired by C1 language learners. These findings also state certain issues that need addressing to improve the effectiveness of this project in the future. Firstly, the initiatives to embed critical reading in the course are meaningful notwithstanding, but the students might not be able to gain much from a program where critical reading is just a separated section of the curriculum. Collaborative efforts must be made not only during the implementation stage but also as early as during the planning and design of a curriculum to situate critical reading across. Moreover, test washback should be taken into consideration so that English courses at FELTE and in BA Honor programs would not be solely emphasizing on training students for the exams, but also preparing them for real life situations. This would help students realize the long-term values of learning and enhance a number of study skills and strategies besides the common language skills. If these issues are properly addressed, they would spread the efficient application of this project in developing critical skills at FELTE, ULIS and other universities.

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