Making the Most of Authentic Media Texts

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Reading resources for EFL media courses can be sourced from a wide range of authentic texts which students can use to hone their critical thinking and reading skills. Students can encounter a wide range of perspectives by reading online newspaper articles, editorials, and opinion pieces, but may not have the ability to differentiate between factual reporting and opinionative passages. By teaching critical reading strategies, students can understand differences in reporting styles and journalistic discourse, and read the news with a more critical perspective and deepened understanding. This paper introduces ideas for how to use online newspaper articles to improve students' critical reading skills. Practical tasks that raise learners' attention to subtle differences in media reports will be discussed. By analyzing the specialized discourse and stylistic differences of articles with activities that compare facts, identify opinion, and contrast discourse features, students can develop critical thinking and reading skills vital for the media studies field. With these reading activities, students can gain a better understanding of online newspapers' motivations and bias, and journalists' research and reporting methods, which will allow them to read the news with a more informed and critical perspective.

Utilizing ungraded authentic texts from online media sources can be a challenging task for EFL teachers, but can provide up-to-date real world content that is engaging for students. The motivation for this paper came from the needs of my students in an advanced EFL course who fall within the B2 band of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This course uses authentic media texts as reading material to prepare the students for debates on topical and controversial issues. Although grading authentic texts is an effective way to help with comprehension, I wanted to help my students understand such texts in their original form, so they could not only comprehend online news,

but also critique its quality in terms of institutional or author bias, efficacy of argumentation, and relevance to the issue or field. Explicit instruction and modeling of reading strategies by the teacher has been shown to increase learner production and retention of those strategies (Patching, Kameenui, Carnine, Gersten, & Colvin, 1983). With this in mind, I developed a template, a process of introducing key critical reading strategies in the classroom, which students could then autonomously apply to any online media texts. This article reviews the reading strategy template that sequentially transitions from previewing, to comprehending, to critically evaluating its argument. Some practical tasks and activities that can be used in the classroom to complement these critical reading strategies are also included.

What is Critical Reading?

Reading critically requires the reader to examine and assess the validity of an author's arguments (Walz, 2001). It is a form of active reading whereby the reader must question an author's claims rather than just comprehend the text's meaning. A text may contain several layers of meaning which can influence the reader. For example, texts can include bias views which may not be overtly apparent but still sway a reader's opinion. A critical reader must look deeper than the surface meaning of a text to comprehensively understand a text's meaning and the author's real intentions.

For college students critical reading has two main purposes; reading for academic success and reading for social engagement. Reading for academic success includes skills such as evaluating an author's arguments, assessing a text's credibility, making inferences, and analyzing textual elements (Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, & Ryland, 2015). Critical reading for social engagement refers to how texts can be used for specific social purposes and goals. To truly be a critical reader, students must gain an awareness of how and why authors write to achieve a particular outcome, and also read with their own sense of social agency. In this way, critical reading is "social in the sense that readers and writers enact their roles as members of communities" (Wallace, 2003, p. 9). Critical reading for social engagement consists of reading strategies such as questioning assumptions,

analyzing rhetorical devices, identifying power relations, and connecting the text to relevant social trends and topical events (Manarin, et al., 2015).

Whether a student is reading for academic success or social engagement they must approach a text with a set of strategies that will allow them to assess its overall quality and validity by analyzing textual elements and contextual clues. Students not only need to uncover the arguments that an author is making but also be aware of their own inferences and assumptions about a text as well. In an EFL context, such depth of analysis in reading requires explicit instruction and modelling on how to read, interpret, and evaluate a text with a critical eye.

A Critical Reading Strategy Template

To ensure teachers are attending to the core skills necessary for critical reading, a set of reading strategies specific to the target text type are necessary. The following list shows a sequential template for introducing reading strategies relevant for authentic online media texts.

1. Select media text
2. Identify values and views
3. Analyze formal elements
4. Choose a specific discussion theme
5. Contextualize the text
6. Identify and evaluate the source
7. Industry contextualization
8. Question the assumptions
9. Negotiate a consensus of interpretation
10. Be the editor
11. Reflection

The first strategy is to select an appropriate text. I often let my students choose their own text related to a specific issue to increase autonomy and engagement. Another option is to have each student choose two texts to compare against each other to highlight reporting methods and differences. Choosing texts from media outlets that have different political leanings will help students identify differences in language devices and author or institutional bias. Once a

text is selected, students can then identify their own values and views that they individually, or as a group, hold in relation to the article and issue. They should reflect on their emotional affinities to the issue and identify what parts of the text they agree or disagree with. The class can then analyze the formal elements of the text. This step may just focus on basic comprehension but could be extended to structure, style, and rhetorical devices. After this step, students should hold a discussion about the article. To keep the discussions focused, students should be restricted to a specific theme. One particular point raised in the article could be discussed, or students could reach consensus as to the thesis of the article.

The next set of strategies deal with contextualization. A thorough investigation into the context of a text can help illuminate a greater depth of meaning that is not obvious at face value, particularly for EFL readers (Harnadek, 1978). Text contextualization consists of locating the passage in its socio-cultural, spatial, and temporal context. This helps students understand why some views represented in a text were common at a particular time or place but which may not be held now. Looking into the author's background might also clarify why some views are expressed in an article. Students should research about what other articles the author has written and any institutional or stakeholder affiliations they may have. Another form of contextualization is to research about the institution which publishes the material. Investigating the political leanings and financial backings that the institutions that publish texts have may clarify their motivations, bias, and the power relations they purport. By casting a wider net of inquiry, a text can be placed in its social context, furthering students' appraisal of its quality, objectivity, and social worth. This broader contextualization work requires explicit modeling from the teacher to ensure the right research techniques are being used and appropriate connections are being made.

After a thorough analysis of the values expressed, the formal language devices used, and the context of the publication, students are ready to respond with a critical perspective. They should question the assumptions the author is making. Is there anything from their point of view that seems implausible? Are the assumptions substantiated with facts? This phase of the process can be extended

to a group discussion where they negotiate a consensus of interpretation. The students should discuss their thoughts about the quality of the article in terms of its objectivity and argumentation.

The last two steps of this template involve editing and reflection. I task the students to re-read the text and decide how it could be improved or edited. What information could be omitted or added? What evidence is missing that is necessary? Lastly, a reflection of the whole process can take place. This step helps the students to identify what parts of the template helped elucidate greater meaning for them personally. In reflecting on the process, students will be better able to retain and reproduce these strategies autonomously. To complement these strategies, I have included below five practical in-class activities I have successfully used to help my students grapple with media texts with the aim of helping foster critical reading and reflection.

Activities to Foster Critical Reading Skills for Media Texts

Headline Search

The aim of this activity is for students to understand the different language devices newspapers use to capture readers' attention and understand how that may influence their opinions. After explaining the following key language devices, ask the students to find online newspaper articles that have headlines using these devices. In addition to identifying the language device, the students should comment on how each language device may sway readers' opinions even before reading the article. The language devices I introduce are:

- Alliteration: The use of the same letter or sounds, especially consonants, at the beginning of the main words of the headline.
- Cultural reference: Headlines that refer to cultural icons, such as a Shakespearean play.
- Play on words: Words that have more than one meaning.
- Sensationalism: Words used to invoke excitement or shock at the expense of accuracy.

X Marks the Spot

This activity helps students work on the strategy of reflecting on their own beliefs and values they may encounter when reading an opinion piece. As students read a passage, ask them to mark an X in the margin of the passage each time they identify an opinion that challenges their own values, beliefs, or attitudes. Students should also include a note about what their initial response is, or how it made them feel. At the end of the passage, students should review and compare the sections where they marked an X and write a short explanation on why they felt challenged.

Questions

As students read a passage, request them to write a question for each paragraph related to the main idea. This strategy helps them engage with the material from a personal perspective. Questions can be related to the opinions expressed in the passage, the quality of the evidence provided, assumptions the author has made, or simply related to comprehension of the text.

Summarizing

After having students read an article, ask them to write a summary paragraph outlining what they think are the main ideas and arguments in the text. The body of the summary should only report on the author's ideas. This task ensures students take the time to identify and understand the author's arguments clearly. For the concluding sentences the students should give an objective assessment of the quality of the text in terms of its neutrality or bias, its relevance to the issue being reported on, and the quality and quantity of the evidence provided.

Evaluating Sources Critically

This task requires students to read articles from newspapers with differing political leanings in order to compare how facts and opinions are presented. Request students to visit one left-leaning and one right-leaning newspaper website and find two editorials that cover the same issue. After reading the editorials, the students should answer the questions below.

1. Which facts and opinions are presented in each article?
2. Are the facts presented in the same way? If not, what are the differences?

3. Do you think that the authors' agendas (underlying intentions or motives) for writing the articles are different? Can you guess what their agendas are?

4. Do the authors use positive or negative labels to describe people or ideas?

5. What sources do the authors refer to? Are these sources reliable?

6. Do the authors provide enough evidence for the claims they make?

7. Do the authors make use of ellipsis (the exclusion of some words)? If so, why do you think they did this?

8. Do you think that either (or both) of the articles show bias? Would it be appropriate to use them to support claims in a debate or research essay?

Conclusion

EFL reading instruction at the college level not only requires attention to comprehension but also critical reading skills. Educators should encourage their students to read texts with a critical perspective in order to respond with an independent and informed opinion. Reading strategies that are relevant to the text type will enable students to achieve a deeper, more contextualized understanding of reading passages and empower them to engage with authentic texts with confidence. Explicitly introducing and modeling such strategies, coupled with in-class activities that foster such strategy use, will help students to replicate them autonomously. It was a pleasure to share these reading strategies and activities with the CUE community at the 2016 conference and I sincerely hope members can make good use of them with their own students.

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