
DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL READING SKILLS THROUGH RAISING THEIR AWARENESS OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS THEORY

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Abstract

This is a report of the mini-project research carried out on a group of 3rd - year students at Hue University of Foreign Languages to explore the impact of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory on students' critical reading ability. During 6 weeks of the study, the control group was guided in reading socio-political texts following the traditional approach while the experimental group was introduced to the Critical Discourse Analysis theory as they pursued the same reading assignment. At the end of the study, questionnaires to investigate students' awareness towards critical reading skills were administered and mutual discussions were held for both groups to exchange their stories of experience. The results reveal positive signals to support the hypothesis that students' critical reading skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) can be enhanced through the intensive introduction of CDA - a theory that examines the uses of language in social context and the ideology hidden behind language.

Keywords : Critical reading; EFL; Critical Discourse Analysis

บทคัดย่อ

รายงานนี้เป็นการวิจัยย่อยโดยทำการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับกลุ่มนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 3 ของมหาวิทยาลัยภาษาต่างประเทศเว้ ประเทศเวียดนาม เพื่อศึกษาผลกระทบของทฤษฎีการวิเคราะห์วาทกรรมอย่างมีวิจารณญาณ (CDA) ต่อความสามารถทางการอ่านเชิงวิเคราะห์ของนักศึกษา ในช่วง 6 สัปดาห์ของการวิจัย กลุ่มควบคุมได้อ่านตำราทางสังคมและการเมืองซึ่งเป็นวิธีการแบบดั้งเดิม ในขณะที่กลุ่มทดลองใช้ทฤษฎีการวิเคราะห์วาทกรรมอย่างมีวิจารณญาณขณะที่ได้รับมอบหมายงานเกี่ยวกับการอ่านเหมือนกัน ในตอนท้ายของการวิจัย มีการตอบแบบสอบถามเพื่อสำรวจความตระหนักต่อทักษะการอ่านอย่างมีวิจารณญาณของนักศึกษาและทั้งสองกลุ่มมีการอภิปรายกลุ่มเพื่อแลกเปลี่ยนประสบการณ์ร่วมกัน ผลการวิจัยเผยให้เห็นถึงสัญญาณบวกที่จะสนับสนุนสมมติฐานที่ว่าสามารถเพิ่มทักษะการอ่านอย่างมีวิจารณญาณของการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ขึ้นได้ด้วยการใช้ CDA อย่างเข้มข้น ซึ่งเป็นทฤษฎีหนึ่งที่ศึกษาการใช้ภาษาในบริบททางสังคมและอุดมการณ์ที่ซ่อนอยู่ภายใต้ภาษา

คำสำคัญ : การอ่านเชิงวิเคราะห์; การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ; การวิเคราะห์วาทกรรมอย่างมีวิจารณญาณ

1. Critical reading skills of EFL students

Reading in university contexts is obviously fundamental to the formation of both a language skill and a professional command for students. Students reading ability will, to some extent, have considerable impacts on their performance in other language skills (e.g., college writing) and their own discipline's practices (e.g., research skills, presentation skills or internalization of specific subjects). Critical reading is the process of reading that goes beyond just understanding a text. It involves careful consideration and evaluation of the texts in terms of the interpretation of its hidden notions and the writer's beliefs or attitude. Therefore, it requires that a reader apply certain processes, models and theories that result in enhanced clarity and comprehension. Critical reading refers to an assumption that all texts are crafted objects, written by persons with particular dispositions or orientations to the information, regardless of how factual or neutral the products may attempt to be (Freebody and Luke, 1990). McKinney (1995) (as cited in Wallace, 1999) and Correia (2006), Fredricks (2007), Zingraf (2003) (as cited in Dar et al., 2010) have argued that reading comprehension should not be seen as the mere reading activity in the language classroom. They discussed the importance and necessity of enabling students to relate their reading tasks with analytical thinking

and thus become critically aware of the social and political conditions in which the texts were caught and to use this awareness to affect on these conditions. In addition, critical reading, according to Wallace (1992), is one of many strategies available to the readers; however, it may become very useful when learners encounter texts that contain ideological assumptions and whose interpretation depends largely on sociocultural contexts. That is why the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis outlined in the next part is useful for practical application in the EFL reading classroom.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Since the 1970s when the discourse analysis approach was divided into various sub-categories, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was initiated and developed on the theoretical basis of Critical Linguistics (CL) and the practical application of Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG) by M.A.K Halliday (1985). The fundamental roles of CDA are seeking understanding of the social issues represented within discourse and analyzing the interrelations among thoughts, attitudes, ideology and their manifestation in language, which were claimed by typical linguists namely Kress & Hodge (1979), Fowler et al. (1979), van Dijk (1985), Fairclough (1989) and Wodak (1989). Fairclough's CDA (1985), which originally viewed language as a social practice and also the reflection of that practice, employs Systemic Functional Grammar Theory to unveil the ideological representation in language use through breaking language structures at vocabulary, grammar and discourse levels with specific reference to three meta-functions of language: the ideational or experiential, the interpersonal and the textual functions. The distinctive feature of CDA, as proposed by many effective theorists and practitioners in its development (Van Dijk-2001; Fairclough-1985, 1992), is social justice - CDA describes how language is used and abused in the exercise of power and the suppression of human rights (Widdowson, 1998:96). Fairclough (1992) also points out that the critical issues in CDA lie in the assumption that language is related to the power and the domination in a society. For Fairclough, CDA is an examination of language, which associates linguistic text analysis with a social theory of the functioning of language in political and ideological processes. With a thorough look into the term "critical", van Dijk (2001:96) defines CDA as "discourse analysis with an attitude". This derivationally reflects CDA's nature which is an interdisciplinary approach since it uses the theoretical backgrounds and practices of other disciplines like sociology, philosophy, and cultur-

al study. Basing on these concepts and with reference to research results by other language theorists and practitioners namely Rahimi et al. (2007), Ghazali (2007) and Martinez (2012), which seek to give students additional skills in identifying discursive strategies expressing social values of the texts we have thought of the application of CDA in the language classroom, especially in the EFL reading class, to find out if the awareness of CDA will possibly result in enhancement of critical reading skills which then assist college students to perform well in working with professional texts, more specifically with socio-political texts.

3. The study

This study was inspired by Cots' framework (2006) and aimed to investigate the effectiveness of teaching critical reading and the enhancement of overall comprehension of college readers through CDA awareness-raising activities. Two groups of forty 3rd-year students of EFL were involved in the study. They were given socio-political texts for reading comprehension with a content focus on contemporary discourse (i.e. politics and the media). The control group's reading assignment was guided through the traditional approach while the experimental group engaged with a more subtle process where they were made aware of the CDA theory assumptions with insights into the analysis of language in terms of its 3 metafunctions. They were then given the same texts and assignments as the control group. The experimental group were guided to conduct text analysis at the lexical, grammatical and textual levels and in terms of decoding the experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning of texts. The students' text analysis results and their answering of comprehension questions were recorded to serve the later comparison with those from the control group. At the final point of the study, questionnaires with concept-checking questions towards critical thinking skills were administered to students of both groups. Follow-up discussions were held among all students to share their learning experiences related to their text analysis and the comprehension of the texts in terms of clarifying the notional, ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning of the presented language. Finally, reading performance results of the two groups were compared within the discussions to work out the implied impacts of the CDA awareness-raising approach on improving students' critical reading skills.

4. How does CDA help develop students' critical reading skills?

Three socio-political texts (a news article, a university graduation ceremony speech and a pack of socio-political slogans) with reading comprehension questions and exercises were assigned over the six weeks. Students worked individually and then in groups to answer the questions and do the tasks that followed. The control group's answers perfectly matched the original requirement, which means providing full answers to all the questions of Multiple Choice items or True/False items, but leaving blank almost all the open-ended questions like "Others, please specify..." or "Please provide comment...", "What do you think...?" Meanwhile, these questions were answered more often among CDA group members. In addition, the task of writing a reflection journal on the assigned texts after reading was carried out differently in the two groups. In the control group, points are made based more on the superficial representation of language in the texts, that is to say "something they can see from the language signals". In the experimental group, in contrast, the reflection journals proved students' deep understanding of the language structures in terms of lexical, grammatical and textual choice to reflect the experience of the world, the relationships between communicators and the choice of discourse structure for communication purposes. Students in the latter group also wrote about their recognition of the hidden attitude and ideology behind language use in each of the texts and they realized that the communication of the texts to readers may, to some extent, help narrow or even close the gaps of the unbalanced delivery of power and domination in a society. For example, when analyzing the ideational or experiential meaning of the political slogan "Sunflower dies in November" in the U.S Presidential Campaign, the control group explained the literal meaning vaguely or failed to explain the experiential meaning of this slogan while the experimental group posed rhetorical questions of whether any kind of metaphor has been used in this slogan and if the issue of the natural law that "flowers usually die in winter" relates to any political practice of the parties. Their concerns matched the original meaning of this slogan. In fact, the cognitive metaphor within the slogan is to signify the opposing view of people from one party towards another in the campaign of the U.S Presidential Election (and Sunflowers are the symbolic flower of Kansas). Or in the case of Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust speech in the commencement ceremony of 2014, her call for tribute and actions were interpreted more profoundly among the latter group. The question of the university

leader's vision revealed in her use of vocabulary, repeated passive or active sentences, metaphor, and nominalization were raised in the discussions that followed the text analysis.

Through the discussions, students who approached text analysis through CDA theory revealed that they realize a different way of text interpretation and that texts can have more than one meaning depending on Fairclough's notions of discursive and social practice (1992). Reading activities have subconsciously become interesting and purposeful for them. The representation of meaning has not been limited only to the words themselves. They also realized that the choice of vocabulary and grammatical structures or the theme/rheme patterns of the writers have helped them connect their "thoughts products" with the social practice and reveal attitudes as well as ideology through the use of language. Moreover, the students treasured the value of contexts where language is involved and said it is also the tool to assist discourse interpretation. Students reached a crucial conclusion that CDA techniques really make them aware of the functions of language and help them form a critical mind. Their discourse analysis skills were also enhanced thanks to frequent critical looks at language at all levels. Dar et al. (2010) said having a critical mind helps every man avoid being a follower of every thought. I agree with him and even see more in the notion of having critical minds as "being original" or "having one's own voice". Finally, through the study, it is clear that the experimental students have become more independent in their language performance. They not only have a linguistic theory and practice to rely on, but they also they possess a more professional analysis of language in connection with the social contexts as well. These precious experiences are believed to be of utmost importance to EFL college students whose critical language awareness may serve as the foundation for the acquisition of other skills, of all later professional development capacity and of self's behavior formation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, identifying the processes of text analysis in relation to social contexts, with roots in CDA theory, does not only help to identify the internal building of discourse but also to identify the connotations it implies in language education settings. With reference to CDA application into EFL reading classrooms through this study, the awareness-raising of CDA among students has been once again proved

supportive to shifting learners' perspectives towards text analysis with awareness of power, dominance, inequality and bias as well as the interrelations of discourse and social practice. These all help students become more mature in dealing with socio-political texts while developing their critical reading skills which are essential to their language competence performance. This study also accelerates our more insights into the application of CDA in language classrooms in the near future.

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