

Chinese Students Self-Perceived Reading Ability and Its Implication to the Teaching of Critical Reading

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Abstract

Reading skill is one of the basic skills a learner should develop to function as a competent learner. This enables a student to feel successful, as s/he can access information and be oriented on what is going on in this fast-changing world. For foreign students, like Chinese, an ability to read and comprehend a text is crucial for success but how much comprehension they know seems to be a big question that needs to be answered especially if the focus is about reading critically (Waring & Nation, 2004). This paper emphasizes on the importance of students' perceived reading ability and its implication to teaching critical reading because often we read depending on our purpose. As well, there are different types of readers, competent readers who normally know what information they are looking for and those who need more time for understanding the information. To teach critical reading, therefore, students should be competent readers as they are likely to be equipped with understanding implicit messages when they interact with the text.

Keywords: Chinese students, Critical reading, critical reading ability, perceived reading ability, reading

Introduction

Essentially, reading is one of the most important parts of learning as learners develop their other learning skills. In addition, reading develops readers' intellectual and affective processes which deal with reasoning, inferences, empathy, and critical thinking.

The aim of critical reading is to help students improve their understanding through different texts exposure. To comprehend a text, students are required not only to synthesize the relationship of the spelling pattern to the sound pattern of the written language but also to acquire the vocabulary needed for higher text comprehension level (Waring & Nation, 2004). As Makau (1990) argued, a student with good comprehension level should possess the following abilities: to understand information being read, know the spirit of the message, and have an ability to analyze and evaluate the meaning beyond the text. In other words, students need to be able to think critically not only on what they hear but what they read. Reading critically is important as this allows learners to critique the text and understand the disposition or orientations of information based on its factuality or biases (Freebody & Luke, 1990;

Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019), the skill that the 21st century learners need to possess especially when it is in English.

Literature Review

Reading and reading comprehension revisited

Reading is an interactive process consisting of inferring, knowing correct sounds and comprehension (Catts & Kamhi, 2005). Being able to use these skills in a certain reading environment facilitates a reader's good comprehension of what s/he reads. To be a successful reader can be determined by these different elements, reading attitude, reading purpose, prior knowledge about the text, textual structure and vocabulary knowledge in which comprehension is determined by the interaction of the reader with the text (Yildiz et. al, 2010).

Reading can be divided into three levels (Dale, 1965, p. 105)

- 1) The simple, uncritical reproduction and duplication on what has been said. This level of reading is called 'reading the lines' or literal comprehension.
2. A higher level, drawing inferences from what is read or 'reading between the lines' this requires critical thinking.
3. A third level involves evaluation and application which requires vigorous and critical judgment, this reading is called 'reading beyond the line'.

The second and third level of reading is needed for students' higher comprehension classified into three types (Makau, 1990, cited in Critical Reading for Graduate Students, 2019, p. 6).

1. Content reading this illustrates a student's understanding of the information being read.
2. Empathic reading this shows a student's understanding of the spirit or the real essence of the message
3. Critical reading is the combination of the number one and two (Critical Reading for Graduate Students, 2019, p. 6)

According to different scholars, a reader's accurate perception, sound recognition, word recognition, word discrimination, semantics, syntax, and linguistic processes and comprehension are foundations for attaining effective reading and healthy reading skills (Schreiber, 2003). Different researchers (Cain & Oakhill, 2006; Catts & Kamhi, 2005; Kintsch & Kintsch, 1998; Kintsch & Rawson, 2005; Shaywitz et al., 2003) argue that working with different texts and textual structures, making predictions and inferences, setting goals and using strategies to enhance the reading environment and reading comprehension are prior to the transfer of information in the reading environment during the reading process. Understanding text, learning from it, and enjoying reading are the ultimate goals of learning to read as readers tend to assimilate and immerse themselves in what they read (Yildiz & Çetinkaya, 2017).

Text comprehension is assumed to be involved readers constructing in three levels of mental representations: surface code, text base, and situation models (Kintsch & Kintsch, 1998). Surface code is a verbatim memory of words or phrases and is less relevant to discourse processes (Mulder & Sanders, 2012). Text base is a representation of meanings of a text, comprised of textual propositions and their interconnections. This is relevant to discourse processes because it includes readers' recollection for relations between information in the text (Kintsch & Kintsch, 1998; McNamara et.al, 1996). While situation models refer to a representation of what text is about, amounting to the combination of information explicitly present in text and inferences made by readers (Kintsch & Kintsch, 1998; McNamara et al., 1996). As learning from text is construed as the construction of situation models, readers go beyond the text to understand implicit relations or principles by making inferences based on what was discussed as prior knowledge (Kintsch & Kintsch, 1998; Millis et al., 2011). According to Beck et al., (1998), reading comprehension is the "sine qua non of reading" (p. 40). Knowing how to read words, therefore, has little value if the student is unable to construct meaning from text. As reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning through complex processes, thus, this does not only include word reading, word and world knowledge but also understanding the hidden meaning beyond the text (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 2013; McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). Reading comprehension involves remembering and understanding the main ideas, whereas critical reading begins the process of taking action. This means absorbing the information while interpreting, categorizing, questioning, and weighing the value of that information.

When it comes to developing this skill, English language teachers have a responsibility to help their students develop a language of critique which enables their students to focus on transforming their mindset towards reading (Waring & Nation, 2004). Once this skill is developed, students might be able to improve other skills too (for example, writing). According to Wallace (2005), reading critically is essentially a social act therefore, language learners with critical thinking ability have the ability to think creatively to solve problems and make decisions, as thinking skills enable them to learn continuously (Mahyuddin, et al., 2004, Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015). In other words, critical thinking would likely to foster learners' lifelong ability to think outside the box. Furthermore, learners' who think critically would be able to implicitly evaluate and understand the arguments beyond the text, a reading skill which go beyond the surface of the text to deeper text comprehension (Uysal & Bilge, 2018).

Critical Reading

Critical reading is a more active way of reading in which readers engage in a deeper and more complex engagement with the text while reading (Sarig, 1987; Robbins, 1977; Pennycook, 2001). It is an independent and self-directed type of reading where students do not necessarily need a teacher to guide them in their reading. Critical readers normally use different processes in reading, such as analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the texts being read. Students are likely to read to remember and not to forget (Sarig, 1987; Robbins, 1977; Pennycook, 2001). The critical reader recognizes not only what a text says, but also how that

text portrays the subject matter as s/he identifies the uniqueness of every text based on its writer or author (Kurland, 2010). Thus, in terms of text interpretation it comes this way; in terms of recognizing what a text says, it reflecting on what the text does in making such remarks, because reading critically enables readers to understand the essence of what was written (Crystal, 2007).

These three simple modes are reflecting on the three types of reading and discussion:

1. What a text says- [restatement] talks about the same topic discusses as the original text
2. What a text does- [description] discusses about aspects of the discussion.
3. What a text means – [interpretations] analyzes about the meaning of the text through inferences (Husein & Pulungan, 2017 cited in Yanwar, 2020).

Recognizing the purpose of reading, therefore, needs recognition of the text purpose by looking at the 'choices of content and language', tone, persuasive elements involve in classifying the nature of the language choices and biases involved in classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content language to understand the overall picture of the text and its meaning (Kurland, 2010). Reflecting on the three simple modes mentioned above can be understood that critical reading leads to critical thinking which involves a complex combination of skills and characteristics.

Kurland (2010) summarizes these characteristics as:

1. Rationality involves these different domains:
 - a. Rely on reason rather than emotion
 - b. Require evidence, ignore no known evidence and follow the evidence where it leads
 - c. Concerned more with finding the best explanation than being right, analyzing apparent confusion and asking questions
2. Self-awareness entails this way of thinking:
 - a. Weigh the influences of motives and bias
 - b. Recognize own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or point of view.
3. Honesty engages on personal recognition of emotional impulses, selfish motives, nefarious purposes or other modes of self-deception.
4. Open-mindedness includes knowing to:
 - a. Evaluate all reasonable inferences
 - b. Consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives
 - c. Remain open to alternative interpretations
 - d. Accept a new explanation, model, or paradigm because it explains the evidence better, is simpler
 - e. Accept new priorities in response to a reevaluation of the evidence or reassessment of real interests

- f. Do not reject unpopular views out of hand
- 5. Discipline encompasses:
 - a. Precise, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive
 - b. Resist manipulation and irrational appeals
 - c. Avoid snap judgments

This means a critical thinker knows how to critique the text as readers are likely active in questioning the text they are interacting with; thus they tend to know how to connect the dots in different angles and come up with sensible answer or point of view (Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019). At the same time, critical thinking depends on critical reading as these normally integrate the reading based on their understanding of the world. This leads to critical literacy.

In this study, the focus is to understand Chinese students' perceived reading ability as the first step to develop Chinese students' critical reading. The argument is that, although teachers may teach Chinese students reading skills and comprehension can be acquired, there are areas which are underrated or neglected in discussions of literacy development (Comber et al. 2002) especially the undergraduate students in China context. Hence, letting them understand the text they read in English alone would not guarantee the development of their critical reading dispositions, therefore understanding their self-perceived reading ability is viewed to be necessary because to read critically, these Chinese students should be competent English readers.

There are three questions used as underpinnings of this article.

1. What are the Chinese undergraduate students' self-perceived reading ability?
2. What are the implications of the findings to teaching of critical reading?

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using descriptive analysis. Purposive sampling was used and selected 250 Chinese first year undergraduate students from one of the international universities in China. These students have enrolled in the AY2021. The instrument used in this study was a self-perceived reading assessment questionnaire. This questionnaire is divided five components: *reading speed, comprehension, number of reading material, concentration, and retention*. The self-perceived reading questionnaire has 15 items to be answered in which 8, 14, 15 represent effective reading strategies and the rest of the items would be viewed as problematic areas. There were three categories that the participants would choose: 0= describes me almost never; 1= describes me sometimes; 2= describes me often or to a large degree.

Although the consent form was distributed to different participants before the actual survey and they agreed to participate in the study, at the end only 79.6% have returned the

survey questionnaire. Meaning out of 250 students, 199 have returned the questionnaire. The returned questionnaire would be the basis for the analysis of the data.

The descriptive analysis, percentage and frequency, was used to analyze Chinese students' self-perceived reading ability.

Findings

Using the three categories, the findings illustrate the participants' self-perceived reading ability.

Table 1

Reading speed

1	I would describe myself as a slow reader compared to other students.	37 18.5%	141 71%	21 10.5%
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As illustrated on the table, out of 199 Chinese students who participated in the survey, 10.5% described their reading ability as *slow readers*, for those who chose 'describes me almost never', or perceived themselves as *fast readers* garnered 18.5% in the survey. While 71% indicated that the statement 'describes me sometimes', this means that their speed can be varied depending on the text they read.

Table 2

Reading Comprehension

2	I have difficulty finding the main idea when I read.	43 21.5%	141 71%	15 7.5%
3	I often need to read materials several times before I understand it.	27 13.6%	133 66.8%	39 19.8%
4	I have difficulty interpreting the meaning of words I read.	44 22%	139 70%	16 8%
5	I have trouble 'reading between the lines' for implied meaning.	45 22.6%	134 67.3%	20 10.1%

When it comes to the reading comprehension, 21.5% of the students indicated that they have 'no difficulty in finding the main idea' of the text, 13.6% do not need to read the materials several times, 22% have problem interpreting the meaning of words and 22.6% have no problem 'reading between the lines.' While the rest of the 70% found that sometimes they have difficulty in reading comprehension, for example, 71% found it difficult to find the main idea in the text sometimes, 66.8% sometimes 'need to read materials several times', 70% still have 'difficulty interpreting the meaning of words sometimes' and 67.3% have trouble 'reading between the lines' sometimes'. Furthermore, almost 10% of the students have faced problems

with regards to reading comprehension. As indicated in the survey, 7.5% of the participants ‘have difficulty finding the main idea’ in the text, 19.8% have difficulty in understanding what they have read that was the reason why they have to read the materials or text many times, 8% still encountered difficulty in interpreting the meaning of words in reading materials while 10.1% have problems reading between the lines.

Table 3

Number of Materials

6	I cannot read all the required readings (not enough time).	54 27.1%	124 62.3%	21 10.6%
7	I cannot keep up with supplementary readings.	42 21.1%	136 68.3%	21 10.6%
8	I skim before reading for detail.	35 17.6%	97 48.7%	67 33.7%

Number of reading materials implied the amount of materials that the students can read as suggested by a teacher. As shown in the table, more than 20% of the participants have no difficulty of reading the required readings as indicated in Item 6, 27.1% has no difficulty of reading all the required readings and Item 7, 21.7% can keep up with supplementary readings and 33.7% has a good reading strategy as illustrated in Item 8. In addition, those who have difficulty of catching up the required reading and could not keep up reading the supplementary materials are higher as they represent 62.3% and 68.3% respectively. Also, 48.7% indicated that they only used a good reading strategy such as skimming the contents of the text before reading for detail sometimes. Although the survey indicated that about 10% of the participants could not read the required reading materials and may lagged behind with the supplementary readings, as shown in Item 6 and 7, those who have good reading strategies tend to be higher when compared with who do not used the skimming strategy before they read in detail.

Table 4

Concentration

9	I often can't keep focused, unless I'm very interested in the material.	71 35.7%	104 52.2%	24 12.1%
10	My eyes often see the words, but my mind is somewhere else.	78 39.2%	108 51.3%	13 6.5%
11	I am easily distracted by my own thoughts while reading.	66 33.2%	108 54.3%	25 12.5%
12	I am easily distracted by things going on around me.	57 28.6%	125 62.8%	17 8.6%

With regards to the participants reading concentration, 35.7%, focused on materials they read, 39.2 % can concentrate well why reading as they are not easily disturbed with their

thoughts and 28.6% are not distracted with what was going on around them. Meaning, more than 30% of the participants are good in concentration. While, out of 199 students almost 10% have difficulty with concentration. While 55.15% indicated that sometimes they have difficulty.

Table 5
Retention

13	I forget much of what I read soon afterwards	67 33.7%	117 58.8%	15 7.5%
14	I make notes while reading.	19 9.5%	99 49.7%	81 40.8%
15	I highlight or underline while reading.	10 5%	84 42.2%	105 52.8%

Retention is the last component of the questionnaire survey. Based on the findings, only 33.7% perceived that they have no problem retaining the information after they read, while 7.5% have implied that they forget the information after they read and 58.8% have indicated that sometimes they have forgotten what they have read afterwards. As for the Item 14 and 15 almost 50% of the students indicated that they have effective reading strategies as they made notes while reading, such as highlighting or underlining words while reading. Interestingly, only 7.25% of the students implied that strategies indicated that might help them retain information were not used. Then again, more than 50% of the participants indicated that they only used the strategies (Item 14 and 15) occasionally.

Discussion of the Findings

This paper discussed the implications of students self-perceived reading ability and its' implication to teaching critical reading. Reading is an act of interaction between texts and readers; this is the reason why this is perceived as an 'active skill' because comprehending what we read meant extracting the right information from the text (Tasnimi, 2017). A reader therefore needs to be aware what ability they possess so that they would be able to do the next level of comprehension which is critical reading. The questionnaire which has five components was used to let Chinese students assessed their self-perceived reading ability. As the findings illustrated, the first component, 'reading speed'; indicated that, students reading speed varies as this was dominated by 'describing them sometimes. Good readers tend to read fast as they know how to skim and look for specific information better; hence, this might help them not to lose their concentration easily. Reading speed also tends to project how much information a reader can acquire. Nevertheless, this does not mean a fast reader acquires more information than slow reader. A good reader's speed normally varies as they know where to focus and what information needs to be internalized. Also, no matter how fast reader a student can be, there is still a tendency that a reader can experience difficulty to retain all information he/she reads. This is the reason why; competent readers know when to speed up and when to slow down when they read.

In a sense, reading comprehension involves readers understanding of words or the language they acquired and how they organized them in a meaningful way. In this study, Chinese students' self-perceived reading comprehension tends to be varied. Also, they seemed to have difficulty in determining their self-perceived comprehension ability. As the survey illustrated, these is dominated by describing them 'sometimes'. The reason perhaps depends on the reading materials they read. Poor comprehension tends to be influenced by poor vocabulary knowledge in English or being not able to retain information a reader needs (Brown, 2010). Good comprehension involves selecting and understanding what information you need as well as linking information together (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 2013; McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). This is the reason why the background knowledge of what we read, and the number or level of the vocabulary a reader knows influence comprehension (Yildiz et al., 2014).

As for completing the reading materials, there are a few who seems to have difficulty in completing their assign reading and other supplementary materials. What was illustrated in the survey was that because the majority indicated that very few used some strategies in reading for example, skimming or scanning, somehow this might have an influence on their ability to complete what they read. According to Abdelrahman and Bsharah (2014) and Sutz and Weverka (2009) if you have lots of materials waiting to be read, skimming for information helps readers to expedite their reading time they only focus on important information they need to know. Thus, knowing to use this strategy can influence reading speed because this allows readers to increase their concentration. One of the reasons why students tend to read slowly is because of their lack of speed. Students who read slowly due to their lack of speed in reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 2010 cited in Baştuğ, 2014) that might influence by their comprehension level.

The Implication of the Findings to the Teaching of Critical Reading

The findings suggest a few implications to teaching and learning. The reading ability of the students participated in this study varies. There were a few who tended to have difficulty with regards to reading speed, reading comprehension, completing the need to complete reading materials, concentration, and retention of the information. The teaching of critical reading therefore needs to be planned accordingly.

Teachers. First, teachers need to address the difficulties encountered by their students before teaching the critical reading. For example, those who belong to the group where they perceived their reading ability as problematic may need more time to improve their reading ability first before they can be taught how to read critically. Students who might have reading difficulties tend to have limitations on what activities they can do therefore teachers are recommended to find effective ways or strategies to teach effective reading comprehension. Critical reading is not just about reading words and understands them literally; this needs interpretation and appreciation of the text. Therefore, comprehension skills need to be developed before teachers can teach the students with difficulties in reading, critical reading (Rahimi & Babaei, 2021). Second, activities that can activate students' curiosity in reading

need to be develop because reading comprehension is a manifestation of conscious reading (Razlan, 2015). For this, students might be able to develop the textual awareness on how to find main ideas, important information they want to know and other details for understanding the text being read. All of these can be attained with the help of teachers who can provide good feedback to their students.

Students. Students need to be aware that reading can help them to improve their linguistic knowledge and not just their reading skills. The ability to read comprehensively is an indication of students' reading fluency thus affects their reading speed, word recognition, and concentration progress, as well as retention. Students who love to read have more vocabulary knowledge than those who seldom read, thus influence reading comprehension better. Also, students need to realize that reading is a multidimensional, meaning once reading ability is improved the rest of the skills follow, for example, writing and speaking. Thus, students need to advocate reading as this skill is crucial to students' academic life

Conclusion

This study identified the Chinese students' self-perceived reading ability and discussed the implications of the findings to the teaching of critical reading. The suggestion therefore is that, before teaching critical reading teachers' need to be aware of his/her students' reading ability as critical readers need to be competent readers with higher cognitive processes. Meaning, they should have high comprehension level to be able to understand implicit meaning in the text.

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