**Critical Reading**

*What is critical reading?*

Critical reading can be defined in a number of ways but it is essentially about asking questions from any text you read. The kind of questions you ask, though, will depend on the kind of text you read. For instance, the questions to be asked from a novel, a piece of journalistic writing or an academic writing are different – each category of writing requires a different critical orientation. To question a novel on its factual accuracy will achieve little. Similarly, with academic writing the questions have to be relevant to the particular text, the context of the study and can sometimes be discipline-specific as well.

*Critical reading in an academic context*

* A skeptical attitude – this does not mean you need to be inherently suspicious of an academic text or that the authors are deliberately attempting to deceive their audience. However, even the best-designed research study can have limitations and gaps. Critical academic reading means learning how to spot these deficiencies – the challenge is to strike a balance between over-acceptance and over-criticism.
* An example of how to offer a balanced critique

Browning (2005) found that children taught to read using phonics did better in a reading test than children taught using the whole word method. However, the study was small, the test rather limited, and the subjects were not tightly matched either for age or gender. An examination of Browning’s test scores reveals that, although the mean score of the phonics group was higher, two of the highest scorers in the test were whole word learners. Since this indicates that the whole word method is effective for some learners at least, Browning is perhaps too quick to propose that ‘the phonics method is a better choice for schools’ (p. 89). (Wallace and Wray 2011: 6)

* Critical reading will also prepare you for good writing – the training received through critical reading will prepare you to identify the structure of a text, how to present an argument logically, evaluate the evidence and make appropriate claims and to identify the limitations of your findings.
* There are two broad elements to critical reading – what you can identify from the text (data, how the data is interpreted, the tone of the text, logical argumentation, etc); what is not directly available in the text but what you can infer from your own knowledge.

*Initial steps in critical reading – pre-reading*

There are some practical steps you can take before and after selecting a text.

* Identifying credible academic sources
  + Google and other search engines are powerful information retrieval tools but always look for the source of the information. If the information is from a university website, a blog maintained by a scholar or an academic journal or academic book it is generally acceptable.

Wikipedia will probably be the first ‘hit’ on your initial search. Wikipedia can be a good start because most Wikipedia entries will have links to other references. ***But Wikipedia itself is not a valid source*** – Wikipedia entries can be created and edited by anyone whereas valid academic sources have a careful and well established quality assurance mechanism called ‘peer review’. All recognized academic journals and books have been peer reviewed – or experts in the respective fields have looked at and assessed the content.

* Deciding whether an article or book is useful
  + When you begin looking for information have a set of keywords – this will help narrow the search

Once you have identified the material, if it is a journal article or book there will be an abstract or a summary at the back of the book. Read this first to decide if the material is relevant to your topic.

If it is a book you can also find academic reviews of the book. These reviews will also be a good source of information on whether the book is relevant for your purposes and they also often provide a good summary of the contents of the book.

Remember that academic reading is *reading for a purpose.* You have limited time and you have to maximize it by making your reading practice efficient.

If it is a book use the index to identify the exact location of the information you need. It is very rarely that you will need to read an entire academic book. Often the information you seek will be in a chapter or two. In some cases you may need to read the introduction if the concepts discussed in the book are unfamiliar.

* Extracting information from an academic article or book
  + - Skimming and scanning – quickly going through the book to identify important information

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Element of critical reading  When I read an academic text | Element of self-critical writing  When I write an academic text |
| 1. try to work out what the authors are aiming to achieve | 1. state clearly what I am trying to achieve |
| 2. try to work out the structure of the argument | 2. create a logical structure for my account, to help me develop my argument and to help the reader to follow it |
| 3. try to identify the main claims made | 3. clearly state my main claims |
| 4. adopt a sceptical stance towards the authors’ claims, checking that they are supported by appropriate evidence | 4. support my claims with appropriate evidence, so that a critical reader will be convinced |
| 5. assess the backing for any generalizations made | 5. avoid making sweeping generalizations |
| 6. check how the authors define their key terms and whether they are consistent in using them | 6 define the key terms employed in my account, and use the terms consistently |
| 7. consider what underlying values may be guiding the authors and influencing their claims | 7. make explicit the values guiding what I write |
| 8. keep an open mind, willing to be convinced | 8 assume that my readers can be convinced, provided I can adequately support my claims; |

**ACTIVITY** **ONE**

Use the table above to analyze the “Research Backs English as Key to Development” article.

**RESEARCH BACKS ENGLISH AS KEY TO DEVELOPMENT**

***Data indicates speakers can earn 25% more but high-value language remains preserve of elites***

Max de Lotbinière, *Guardian Weekly*, Tuesday 5 July 2011

A study into the economic impact of learning English in developing countries has concluded that the language can increase the earning power of individuals by around 25% and that developing economies need access to English if they are to grow and position themselves in the global economy.

The British Council, the UK's education and cultural relations organisation, which commissioned the report from Euromonitor, a leading research organisation, says that it is the first statistical research into the benefits of English in developing countries.

The report, which was published last month, gathers data from five target countries: three with linguistic links to Britain through colonialism, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and two with a stronger French-language colonial legacy, Cameroon and Rwanda.

The data was gathered from existing research and through interviews with businesses and employers in each country.

While English skills levels vary among Bangladesh, Nigeria and Pakistan, the researchers found a link between even a moderate competency and higher levels of investment from countries such as the US and UK. In the three countries, investment from English-speaking countries accounts for between 33% and 41% of total FDI.

"By contrast, largely French speaking Cameroon and Rwanda lose out, with only 2% and 1% of their total FDI coming from English-speaking countries," the report said.

But the report also shows that the benefits of English are seen predominantly by urban elites, who have access to a better standard of teaching – mostly delivered through private education – and higher-paid jobs.

Professor Chris Kennedy, director of the Centre for English Language Studies at the UK's Birmingham University, welcomed the report but said that it stopped short of offering insights into the effectiveness of government policies promoting English language learning, such as using English as the medium of instruction in schools, which is hotly debated.

"The report highlights the benefits, advantages and necessity of English in the modern world, but you also need to look at the complexities of the situation when you try to take the results of the report and implement them in policy," Kennedy said.

Journalist Zubeida Mustafa, whose book about her native Pakistan, Tyranny of Language in Education, was published last month, says the benefits of English in Pakistan are restricted to a tiny minority and have resulted in ineffective education policy.

"English cannot solve our ills. There are not enough teachers who know English and can teach in English. Children cannot comprehend what they are taught," Mustafa said.

"The artificially created demand for English has distorted the language in education strategy. In fact there is no strategy and schools are following a hit-and-miss method mixing English, Urdu and local languages."

Michael Carrier, head of the Council's ELT arm, said the report provided the statistical evidence to back up the organisation's belief that English had economic benefits for developing countries, but it was a first step and further research is needed.

"This helps to confirm my view that we should be investing time and resources in developing countries. We should be doing more to bridge the gap highlighted in the report between urban elites and the rural population," Carrier said.

"One of the ways we want to do this is by exploiting mobile phone usage. Mobile phone penetration in Africa is over 90% and we can use the technology to deliver lessons and teacher training to rural areas."

**Questions**

1. Is there a clear objective to the study? If so, what is it?
2. What are the methods used in this study? Do you think the methods are justified in relation to the objectives?
3. The study attempts to build a correlation between two things, what are they?
4. Is the author biased in anyway?
5. Are there limitations to this study? Are they stated? Can you think of any other limitations that are not stated?
6. If this was an academic paper what other elements should be there?
7. Is the title misleading?
8. How would you go about assessing the validity of the claims made in this article?