8   Developing critical reading skills

What is critical reading?

'Critical' can be used to mean many things in educational contexts (Goatly and Hiradhar, 2016) and in some uses it is concerned with no more than evaluating the evidence and arguments put forward for any given point of view. This is the sense that is often associated with 'critical thinking'. However, 'critical' is also used to describe the process of uncovering the ideological beliefs that underpin social practices, and in particular the ways in which relations of power are enacted. For example, in the context of journalism, we may critique the portrayals of minority groups in the media.

Critical reading starts with the assumption that many texts – and all texts that try to persuade us in some way – are not neutral but instead are influenced by the writer's beliefs and attitudes. The writer attempts to 'position' their readers – to make them see the world from a particular point of view. It is important, therefore that readers are aware of how they are being positioned and that they are able to 'read' the subtext – to see any hidden agenda – as well as more explicitly stated messages. Is the reader pushed towards accepting a particular view of the world, for example? Does the writer make assumptions about norms and behaviours that, given time to reflect, we would want to question?

A writer may use their position in quite subtle ways to promote their own judgements. For example, if we read *Jay gushed about being in love* we are positioned by the verb *gush* to see this emotion as something trivial, even infantile. But the verb was chosen by the writer. In the sentence *Jay talked about being in love* there is no negative assessment. Therefore, critical reading requires constant questioning, not just of comprehension (*Do I understand the text?*) but of the judgements and views that underpin the text. This can be a difficult task because often those views are only implied, rather than being explicitly stated.

When we start to think carefully about text types, it is clear that very many are persuasive in some form or other. Obviously, advertisements try to persuade us that a particular product or service is worth paying for. But there are many less obvious examples too. Media texts (from news organizations and the like) will aim to persuade us that a story is both true and has importance. Literary texts persuade us that fictional characters and places are believable and reflect, or shed light on, our own world experiences. Even academic texts are persuasive in nature in that they aim to persuade us that the arguments put forward have relevance and explanatory power.

Critical readers are sensitive to the implicit as well as explicit messages of a text, and test the text against alternative explanations and views. As such, critical readers are constantly making judgements as to how plausible and trustworthy a text is.

Why is critical reading important?

Texts depict the world we live in and so contribute to us constructing views of what we find normal and acceptable as a society (Stubbs, 1996). This is equally true in specific domains and so the texts we read about language teaching, for example, help to shape what we consider to be 'standard practice'

and normal learner and teacher behaviour. As the texts we read have such power, it would seem self-evidently important that we can differentiate reliable from unreliable information.

There is also a strong case to suggest that in the 21st century critical reading is more important than ever. Katharine Viner, the editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers, points out that the need for news organizations to attract advertisers to their websites can lead them to pursue clicks at the expense of all else:

> The most extreme manifestation of this phenomenon [the pursuit of clicks] has been the creation of fake news farms, which attract traffic with false reports that are designed to look like real news, and are therefore widely shared on social networks. But the same principle applies to news that is misleading or sensationally dishonest, even if it wasn't created to deceive: the new measure of value for too many news organizations is virality rather than truth or quality (Viner, 2016).

Holmes (2014) quotes Neetzan Zimmerman, a specialist in high-traffic, or 'viral' internet stories, as saying: 'Nowadays it's not important if a story's real. The only thing that really matters is whether people click on it.'

In a world where 'fake news' is just another product that competes with other news, it is essential that readers are critical when they read. Moreover, traditional filters of information are disappearing. People are now able to publish very quickly and cheaply online, without even submitting copy to an editor. This lack of pre-publication screening increases the need for readers to question what they read. This is not only true of news stories but academic publishing too. While many academic and quasi-academic blog posts may be inspiring, readers still need to critically assess which are evidence based (not to mention the quality of that evidence) and which rely solely on a writer's personal theory and opinion. Of course, that personal theory may still be appealing but a reader needs to scrutinize and question it before accepting the argument – and that requires an ability to read critically.

What are the most common techniques used to persuade us?

There are many techniques that creators of text can use to persuade readers, including the use of carefully selected images that accompany the text. One of the principal linguistic devices is in word choice, exploiting the connotations the words bring with them. There may also be a conflation of one thing with another, making one seem better (or worse) by association. For example, a fizzy drink manufacturer may have a big advertising campaign around a holiday festival, suggesting that their product is part of the happy feelings we associate with the festival. Another key persuasive device is to omit parts of the story, or parts of the information, to make a case seem stronger. For example, in order to portray someone as an essentially bad person, the acts of kindness they are responsible for may be missed out from the story. In academic contexts, poor academic writing may simply omit reference to contradictory studies, thus portraying the claims made as being stronger. Above all, it is important that the reader remembers that texts will have both explicitly stated messages and those that are implied and they may covertly persuade us towards the values and viewpoints of the writer.

In this chapter we will introduce activities that are designed to promote critical reading in an L2.

References

Goatly, A. and Hiradhar, P. (2016) *Critical Reading in a Digital Age* (2nd ed.), Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

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Stubbs, M. (1996) *Text and Corpus Analysis: Computer-assisted Studies of Language and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.

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8.1 Investigate

Outline	Learners analyze a text to find the persuasive devices used.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Studying persuasive devices in texts
Preparation	Have a comprehension task ready for stage 1.

Procedure

1　Lead in to a persuasive reading text in the usual way and set a standard comprehension task.

2　After checking the comprehension task, set learners a series of questions (see *Example*) to encourage them to investigate the views, values and stance inherent in the text.

3　Give learners time to compare their responses in small groups before reporting back.

Example

1　*Who wrote this text?*

2　*Why did they write it? What do they want me to think / believe / buy / do?*

3　*Are there hidden values/messages implicit in the text?*

4　*Is any contradictory evidence available from an internet search? Is there anything that is not said in the text that could have been said?*

5　*What techniques are used to attract my attention?*

6　*Could other people understand this text differently to me? In what ways?*

Notes

The activity will work with any news media or persuasive text. Question 4 in the example above focuses on the information that is missing from the text. For example, manufacturers of big cars will promote the luxury of the brand but rarely comment on the environmental impact of their products.

Rationale

The activity prompts learners to actively engage with the text and to find the means by which the writer positions them to accept certain arguments.

8.2 **Investigate (EAP)**

Outline	Learners analyze a research report to determine the strength of the evidence and argument put forward.
Level	Upper intermediate and above (B2+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Analyzing the strength of an argument
Preparation	Select a research report, or a summary of a report, and have a comprehension task ready for stage 1.

Procedure

1 Lead in to the reading text in the usual way and set a standard comprehension task.

2 Set learners a series of questions, such as those below, to encourage them to analyze the strength of the arguments put forward.

3 Give learners time to compare their responses in small groups before reporting back.

4 Encourage learners to get into the habit of asking themselves these questions every time they read an academic text.

Example

1 *Is the methodology used in the research described clearly? Does the author acknowledge any weaknesses in the methodology? Can you see any weaknesses?*

2 *How strong is the evidence? Is there any obvious influence or bias?*

3 *Are the interpretations made reasonable? Do they clearly link to the evidence presented?*

4 *How does the study fit in with other research on the subject? Does this study support other research or does it contradict it?*

5 *Am I prepared to support the author's claims?*

Notes

The questions above will work with any academic text that presents primary research findings.

Rationale

Learners are sometimes so busy decoding the argument of a text that they fail to scrutinize the strength of that argument and are therefore likely to take what they read at face value. The aim of this activity is to push learners to explicitly question the strength of the argument.
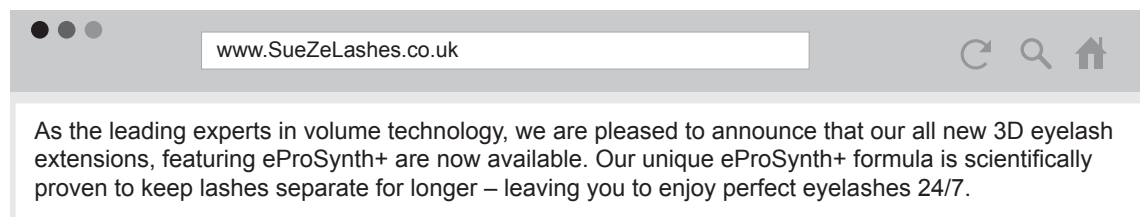
8.3 Cross examination

Outline	Learners prepare detailed questions that challenge the views put forward in a text.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Analyzing the strength of an argument
Preparation	Have a comprehension task ready for stage 1.

Procedure

1   Lead in to the reading text in the usual way and set a standard comprehension task.

2   Explain what *cross examination* means, perhaps using a video to make the point (see *Notes*).

3   Explain to the class that they need to prepare detailed questions on specific short sections of text. Use one short section as an example, creating questions as a whole class (see *Example*).

4   Divide the class into groups, giving each group a short section of the text to work on.

5   After an appropriate time, invite learners to report back their questions.

Example

The following questions were written after reading this short extract from the web page *SueZe Lashes* on page 277.

As the leading experts in volume technology, we are pleased to announce that our all new 3D eyelash extensions, featuring eProSynth+ are now available. Our unique eProSynth+ formula is scientifically proven to keep lashes separate for longer – leaving you to enjoy perfect eyelashes 24/7.

1   *What makes you 'experts'? What qualifications do you have?*

2   *Who are the other experts in the field? What evidence is there that you are better than them and are indeed 'leading experts'?*

3   *In what way are these 3D eyelash extensions different to former versions?*

4   *What exactly is unique about the formula? Can we be sure that no one else uses it?*

5   *What exactly is the evidence that these extensions last longer? How was it gathered? Can it be trusted?*

6   *How much longer do these extensions last?*

Notes

The questions asked will not have obvious answers in most cases and indeed, the questions will probably be unanswerable because the writers of the text will not be present to provide the necessary

information. Instead, the questions act as a mechanism through which the learners can articulate their scepticism over particular claims in the text.

As an optional lead-in, find a short film clip that will set up the idea of courtroom drama and cross examination, e.g. *Witness for the Prosecution* (directed by Billy Wilder), *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger) or *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet).

Rationale

By asking learners to prepare 'cross examination' type questions, they are pushed to look for what information is either contradictory in the text or is missing altogether.

8.4 Facts / opinions / reactions

Outline	Learners divide a text into facts, the writer's opinions, and their own reactions and judgments of the text.
Level	Upper intermediate and above (B2+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Separating facts and opinions
Preparation	Select an appropriate text. This could be one that the learners have previously read.

Procedure

1 Focus on the text and check general comprehension.

2 Ask the learners to copy the table below into their notebooks.

Facts	The writer's opinions	My reactions

3 Explain to the class that they should divide the text into the facts and the writer's opinions. They should also record their own reaction to the text.

4 Remind them that opinions may not be explicitly stated but may be implied.

5 Learners work in small groups to complete the table.

6 After an appropriate time, the learners report back their findings.

Example
The following is based on the web page *SueZe Lashes* on page 277.

Facts	The writer's opinions	My reactions
There is a new product.	The writer thinks this is good news.	It isn't important news.
Eyelashes are made longer.	This makes people feel more confident.	Women should not be made to feel that they have a problem that needs solving, however they look.
	Women should spend money and effort on making themselves more attractive to others.	This is rubbish. And it is a dangerous message, particularly for young girls.
Appointments can be booked through the website.		

Notes

In some cases, facts may be included that are not linked to any particular opinion, or opinions may be given that are not based on facts. In these cases, there will be boxes left blank in the table.

If the text is long, each group could be given a separate section of text.

It may be a good idea to go through an example section of the text with the class first.

Rationale

This activity focuses on being able to separate facts from the opinions of the writer, which is a key aspect of critical reading.

8.5 Replacing words

Outline	Learners consider the significance of word choices in creating an argument.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	20 minutes
Focus	Studying how vocabulary choices can position the reader
Preparation	Choose an appropriate text. Select some words from the text that have strong connotations or position the reader in some other way. Write alternatives that could replace the words selected (see *Example*). Have a comprehension task ready for stage 1.

Procedure

1   Lead in to the reading text in the usual way and set a standard comprehension task.

2   When they have read the text, ask learners to focus on both the original words and the alternatives.

3   Divide the class into small groups to consider the effects of the choices the writer made, by considering how each alternative would affect meaning.

Example

The following is taken from the web page *SueZe Lashes* on page 277. An example answer is given for *gift* as one of the possible alternatives for *treat*.

The perfect **treat**

gift: *A treat is something that is out of the ordinary and gives pleasure. It suggests indulgence. Gifts are often linked to particular events, such as birthdays. Gifts are generally bought for other people, whereas treats can be bought for oneself.*

surprise: _____

extravagance: _____

… we are pleased to **announce** *…*

say: _____

report: _____

disclose: _____

Our **unique** *eProSynth+ formula*

luxury: _____

special: _____

expensive: _____

Notes

Learners could also research and provide alternatives for other lexical choices as a homework task.

Rationale

Readers are often positioned to form particular judgements based on the lexical choices a writer makes. This activity aims to push learners to question those choices and their effects.

8.6 Two views

Outline	Learners consider a news story from two perspectives.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Analyzing texts for bias
Preparation	Choose two texts that report the same event from two different perspectives. Have a comprehension task ready, if required, for stage 2.

Procedure

1   Lead in to the texts by discussing the topic briefly. Ask learners whether they think that different groups of people may have different views on the topic.

2   Give the learners the first text. If necessary, set a short comprehension task in order to ensure that they have a reasonable understanding of the story.

3   Give the learners the second text. Tell the learners the origins of the two texts and ask them to decide which source is which and how they know (see *Notes*). This is likely to require rereading the texts. Learners can compare ideas before reporting back.

4   Ask the class to identify specific differences between the two stories. These may include 'facts' included in one but not the other, or different evaluations of the same events. Again, learners can compare before reporting back.

Notes

The texts could come from a variety of sources. One option would be to use coverage of a political event from two different perspectives. Alternatively, a big sports event could be used, such as an important football match, with a comparison of how the local media of each side report the occasion. Football clubs generally put their own reports of matches on their websites and so these are both easy to access and not unbiased!

Rationale

A key critical reading skill is the ability to identify bias in a text and this activity gives specific practice in that skill.

8.7 The tourist trap

Outline	Learners compare a tourist brochure for a particular town or region, with an encyclopaedia entry.
Level	Upper intermediate and above (B2+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Studying features of persuasive writing
Preparation	Select a text, or section of text, from a tourist brochure for a specific tourist destination. Look up the same place in an encyclopaedia and print out the result.

Procedure

1 Lead in to the texts by presenting some factual information about the place chosen (but withhold the name) and asking learners if they would like to visit it (see *Example*).

2 Ask learners how this information could be made more persuasive.

3 Tell the learners the name of the place and distribute the encylopaedia text and ask learners to briefly identify any additional information not already given.

4 Distribute the tourist brochure text.

5 Learners work in small groups to identify the differences between the content and style of the two texts and particularly the evaluative language in the tourist brochure.

6 As a follow-up activity, learners could write a text trying to persuade people not to visit the chosen place, or they could write a persuasive text for a different destination.

Example
This example describes Barcelona.

Fact sheet

Would you like to visit a place …

- with a population of 1.6 million (although 3 million live in the surrounding area)?

- an area of approximately 101 km^2?

- which has around 16,000 inhabitants per km^2?

- which has around 8 million visitors a year?

- which has approximately 35,000 stores?

- which has approximately 4 km of beach?

Notes

If time is short, just a fact sheet (such as in the example) and the tourist brochure could be used.

The activity is likely to work best if the learners can identify with the place chosen, and where possible, have visited it.

Rationale

Tourist brochures are a source of particularly clear examples of persuasive language and are generally easy to find. By comparing the factual and the persuasive texts, learners will become familiar with some of the features of persuasive writing.

8.8 What's changed?

Outline	Learners analyze a short section of text and consider the impact of particular linguistic choices.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	30 minutes
Focus	Analyzing the impact of grammatical and lexical choices
Preparation	Prepare two texts that are similar in content but differ on a particular linguistic point. Fruitful areas for analysis include the use of active and passive voice, modality, and transitivity. Try to ensure that there are at least two or three examples of the key point for learners to comment on. Occasional lexical choices could also be altered (see *Example*). Have a gist comprehension task ready, if required, for stage 2.

Procedure

1 Lead in to the text in the usual way.

2 Distribute the first text. If necessary set a short gist task and ensure that the learners have a reasonable understanding of the text.

3 Distribute the second text. Explain that the content is largely the same. Ask learners to identify the differences in language choices. If necessary, work as a whole group to identify the first change as an example, before asking the learners to look for others.

4 Confirm that the learners have identified the changes appropriately.

5 Put learners into pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the effect of the changes.

6 Learners report back their ideas to the group.

Example

The texts opposite are appropriate for a B1 or B2 class. The first uses examples of the passive voice to avoid direct blame for the events (*has been destroyed*, *has been cleared*, *can only be farmed*, *has to be cleared*) and also uses the verb *die out*, which suggests a natural process and avoids apportioning blame, in the last line. Of course, farming is a uniquely human activity and so the agent can be recovered but it is not made explicit.

   On the other hand, the second text identifies the agent of the verbs explicitly, and makes clear that human beings are the cause of the problem. Also *kill* (a transitive verb here) is used in the last line, suggesting a deliberate act.

Notes

The activity works best with relatively short texts so that the learners can analyze the differences and the effects of the changes thoroughly.

A similar activity can be used to analyze reporting verbs, particularly those associated with academic research, e.g. *state*, *claim*, *hypothesize*, *suggest*. Again, learners can be asked to discuss the effect of different linguistic choices.

Rationale

This activity allows learners to focus on key linguistic areas that are used to subtly position readers. The language items are seen in context and so learners can see the effects of the changes more easily.

▶ *What's changed?*

> The Amazon rainforest produces about 20% of the earth's oxygen but more than 10% of the rainforest has been destroyed since the 1960s, with 1.5 acres being lost every second. Much of it has been cleared to make way for farmland, although the land is actually often of poor quality and can only be farmed for a year or two before another patch has to be cleared. Rainforests cover around 6% of the Earth's surface but are home to over 50% of the world's species. However, some estimates suggest that as many as 137 species are dying out every day.

> The Amazon rainforest produces about 20% of the earth's oxygen but human activity has destroyed more than 10% of the rainforest since the 1960s, with 1.5 acres being lost every second. Often people clear areas for farmland although the land is frequently of poor quality and farmers move on after a year or two and clear another patch. Rainforests cover around 6% of the Earth's surface but are home to over 50% of the world's species. However, some estimates suggest that we humans are killing as many as 137 species every day through our activities.

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8.9 Analyze that!

Outline	Learners analyze a section of their coursebook for underlying assumptions and bias.
Level	Intermediate and above (B1+)
Time	25 minutes
Focus	Analyzing some of the values implicit in the learners' coursebook
Preparation	Select a text from the coursebook that the class is using. It could be a text that has already been read. Have a gist comprehension task ready, if required, for stage 1.

Procedure

1   Lead in to the text in the usual way. If the learners have not read it before set a short gist task to ensure they have a reasonable understanding of the text.

2   Divide the class into small groups. Set a task that guides the learners to analyze the text (see *Example*).

3   Ensure the learners understand the questions.

4   Allow learners time to analyze the text before reporting back their ideas.

Example

Learners could analyze the text using the questions below. However, it is likely that some adaptation will be required to suit specific texts.

1   *Can you find any examples of stereotyping (either positively or negatively)?*

2   *How are males and females represented in the text? Do they represent stereotypical roles?*

3   *Do the text, or the images that accompany it, represent people from a range of ethnic origins?*

4   *Are people with disabilities represented in this text, or the images that accompany it?*

5   *Do the activities and life style choices represented in the text require a lot of money?*

6   *What other values are promoted?*

7   *Do the pictures support these messages?*

Notes

Learners could be encouraged to analyze more of the book, perhaps a unit, or even the whole book.
   Different groups of learners could analyze different texts so that a more complete picture emerges.

Rationale

Coursebooks have educational goals and like all educational texts have some underlying assumptions within them. Most obviously these assumptions are about what to teach and how to teach it. However, English teaching textbooks also tend to represent an 'aspirational culture'. This may be a result of assuming that learners will identify with such a culture because learning languages (and particularly English) is associated with improved career prospects. As educational material is so influential, it is appropriate for learners to question the material they use.