

The effects of employing haiku reading tasks on improving critical reading skills

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effect of employing poetry reading tasks on improving Iranian EFL intermediate learners' critical reading skills. The study was conducted with 60 female students learning English at Sefarat Language Institute in Qazvin (Iran). The participants attended 16 sessions of 45 minutes during a semester. Learners of English were divided into two groups: a traditional poetry reading (TPR) group and a critical poetry reading (CPR) group. The two groups were determined randomly and then taught separately. Haiku poetry was employed and taught to both groups. While the traditional poetry reading group was taught how to employ traditional reading skills such as skimming and scanning and more, the other group was instructed how to apply critical reading skills to decode meaning and symbols in haiku poetry. At the end of the term, a post-test was applied to measure progress in the students' critical reading skills and to compare the performance of the two groups. Analysis indicated that the CPR students did significantly better than the TPR students.

Key words: critical reading, literary text, poetry, haiku

One of the essential skills that help English learners to succeed in their studies is critical reading skills. "Teaching students to think while reading is referred to in professional literature as critical reading" (Collins, 1993, p.1). Critical reading differs from traditional reading in that the former allows a range of interpretations while the latter lays emphasis on definite meanings of words and sentences (Wallace, 2001). In other word, learners who employ "traditional reading skills" cannot pierce below the surface of literary works and poetry because they are not aware of

multiple layers of information in poetry. Critical reading would raise their awareness and aid their comprehension. They would learn to search for other unseen but written themes.

We must acknowledge that critical poetry reading is more complicated, although the interpretive process is the same as for any text, and requires learners to go beyond the surface layers of meanings to achieve comprehension. In essence, critical reading skills help learners to delineate implicit relationships between concepts and meanings in a poem to create a meaningful discourse (Siderstein, 1994). Accordingly, “various interpretations of a poem are always possible, so they can be good stimuli for meaningful classroom communication.”(Nakagawa, 2012, p.17).

However, some researchers (see, for example, Atkinson, 1997) believe that critical thinking/reading is more based on concealed social practice than on a set of teachable principles. So educators should be cautious when employing critical thinking methodology in The EFL classrooms. By contrast, Davidson (1997) argues that “critical thinking appears to be something more universally relevant than just a social practice”(Davidson, 1997, p.122). In short, it might be true that critical thinking/reading is a social practice but the results of the current study and many other studies prove that it can be learnt through implicit instruction and constant practice.

The Extensive Reading Movement (see, for example, Day & Bamford, 1998) believes that critical reading skills are maximized through extensive exposure to information, but through a long period of time. In the same way, performing critical poetry reading tasks can serve the same purpose, however, in a shorter time, and the reason is that the learners’ awareness is raised on critical reading skills by explicit instructions and analysis of literary texts.

Critical poetry reading can also be regarded as a part of CBI Content Based Instruction (Brinton et al, 1989) or CLIL Content and Language Integrated Learning (Marsh, Maljers and Hartlia, 2001) because through the integration of studying poetry and critical reading skills (in the present study, poetry as subject and CR as a language skill taught and learnt), the language ability of learners can be enhanced.

Poetry stimulates critical reading because poetry is derived by complicated emotions and life experiences on the part of poets, so it is critical reading that can mediate in access to original poets’ messages. It aids the learner to read the hidden relationships between the meanings of words created by figurative language in a poem, which in turn represents particular emotional states.

Bear in mind critical reading welcomes different interpretations. It is almost impossible to use only traditional reading techniques to assess a poem because the essence of poetry is different from ordinary everyday language. Poetry contains fantasy, imagination, metaphor, symbols, personification, allegory and allusions, which takes the reader to higher language. As a result, one should be equipped with critical reading techniques to decode and to comprehend it.

Critical reading is based on reader response theory with emphasis placed on the role of reader as an active participant. In this theory the readers' task is "to recreate the meaning while reading the literary text" (Hirvela, 1996, p.128). Reader- response theory also lays great emphasis on the interaction between the reader and the text. It is aimed to elicit responses in readers while reading (Carlisle, 2000). The suggestive nature of poetry like haiku often naturally engenders critical reactions, giving the unsuspecting skimmer a sudden psychological shift in perception.

Critical Reading of Haiku

Haiku is a short form of poetry that originated in 17th century in Japan. This type of poetry is written in three lines of five, seven and five syllables. Two of the characteristics of haiku are its brevity and precious images that capture insight into our spirit (Abrams, 2005). Haiku, in comparison with long prose, seems to be more appealing to learners. To understand haiku, learners are required to "see with different eyes, which fosters more flexible reading, writing, and thinking" (Oster, 1989, p. 85).

One of the most unique qualities of haiku lies in its unfinished, somewhat open form, which means readers have to actively engage in drawing out meaning. In fact, the poet has created spacious spaces between lines which requires imaginative interpretation, thereby creating critical readers (Myers, 2009). A haiku usually includes natural imagery and a juxtaposition between two things that create a surprising moment. Take into account the following haiku by Basho:

An old pond!
A frog jumps in—
the sound of water.

If we only analyze the surface meanings of poem, we only have a picture with a pond, a frog and the sound of water. To comprehend what the poet intended to get across, the reader has

to depart from the primary meanings of the words and sentences. There is a juxtaposition between stillness and movement in the poem which might symbolize death and life. Without critical reading one cannot determine such things.

Critical reading tasks of haikus are accompanied by joy and happiness in the classroom too because when learners manage to decode the codes (the code can be the natural imagery that can symbolize an event or a feeling in life) in a haiku poem, it feels like solving a puzzle. Consequently, the learners' curiosity is satisfied with such class activities.

Cotterall (2003, pp.187-190) believes that critical reading involves the following steps (these were considered when designing poetry reading activities hereafter):

1. Identifying the line of reasoning in the text.
2. Critically evaluating the line of reasoning.
3. Questioning surface appearances and checking for hidden assumptions or agendas.
4. Identifying evidence in the text.
5. Evaluating the evidence according to valid criteria.
6. Identifying the writer's conclusions.
7. Deciding whether the given evidence supports these conclusions.

Note that the critical haiku reading task is different from the traditional reading task in that you teach metaphor/simile/symbolism/personification, etc. when instructing the CR group but not the traditional group, and this is a crucial factor in CR.

Since there is very little systematic empirical data on literature and even less on poetry (Hanauer, 2001), the current study reports on an experiment carried out to show how critical reading skills of learners can be promoted through some simple and effective haiku poetry reading tasks. The study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question: Is there a significant difference between the effect of a critical poetry reading task and a traditional poetry reading task on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' critical reading skills? And in response to the research question, the following null hypothesis will be tested: There is no significant difference between the effect of a critical poetry reading task and a traditional poetry reading task on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' critical reading skills.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted with 60 female students learning English at Sefarat Language Institute in Qazvin (Iran). The students, all of whom were at the intermediate level, were divided into two groups. This level was focused on because of the presupposition on the part of the researcher that upper-intermediate and advanced students might have already acquired and be familiar with critical thinking skills. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 30 and their educational levels varied from having a high school diploma to having a bachelor's degree.

Instructor

The instructor of the two classes was this researcher, a non-native English teacher whose mother tongue is Persian, with a major in English Language Teaching and approximately ten years of EFL teaching experience.

Material and Instruments

First, the Michigan test was employed to identify students' language proficiency. Then, the Ennis-Weir critical thinking test was administered before the treatment to make sure that students had not already been equipped with critical thinking skills. The procedure of the test and learners' responses revealed that the majority of learners were not much familiar with critical thinking skills. While the traditional poetry reading group was taught how to employ traditional reading skills such as skimming, scanning and identifying main ideas, the other group was instructed in how to apply critical reading skills to decode meaning and symbols in haiku poetry. Haiku by Basho was chosen because it resonates with specific themes universal to the human conditions which can be tapped into by students across cultures. His haiku merely are more easily understandable in English and more familiar to students than other writers' verses. At the end of term a post-test was applied to measure progress in the students' critical reading skills.

Pilot study

To finalize the materials and revise them, a pilot test was carried out to see whether the intended instruments could work as planned. The tools were tried out on ten EFL learners in two groups of five learners. One group was treated as the critical poetry reading CPR group and the

second group as the traditional poetry reading TPR group. The critical reading test was piloted and tested before the beginning of the study. The pilot study suggested that certain items of the critical poetry reading test need to be modified. For instance, there were some choices in questions that seemed to be ambiguous. Some poems also turned out to be too complicated for learners. Accordingly, some inconsistencies among the items were removed and the ambiguous questions were corrected. Some haiku which seemed to be beyond learners' language proficiency levels were omitted from materials for the post-test.

Validity of the test

To increase the content validity, 40 haiku poems were randomly divided into two groups—one group to be taught during the term and the other one to be used for the post-test.

Reliability

To determine the internal consistency reliability in measurements and establish the reliability of the test, the Cronbach alpha (α) test was applied in the post-test; as a result, the reliability coefficient of .71 was obtained which is regarded as significant for this test.

Procedure

In the first session for the CPR group, the researcher as a teacher introduced the essence of critical thinking and described the benefits of employing critical thinking skills to solve problems in life and academic settings. The teacher explained how critical thinking skills help people to analyze all obvious and hidden aspects of, for example, making a decision in their life. Students also shared their experiences concerning the process of decision-making they had gone through and why they fail or succeed. In addition, the teacher showed how creative reading skills could be applied first to reveal hidden meanings of a poem and then explained how using critical reading skills help to find the most logical interpretations for the poems. However, to avoid confusion, the researcher briefly gave critical reading instruction with emphasis placed on critical reading tasks. To validate the interpretations provided, the researcher consulted different books and websites on haiku criticism to ascertain the most logical and frequent interpretations of the haiku written by Basho (1672-1698) whose poems were frequently used for treatment and the post-test, and considered them as criteria and answers for the critical reading test. In the next

sessions, while using newly-learned critical reading skills, the learners were asked to read some poems in order to make sense of signs and symbols in them. The procedure was planned to be repeated for several sessions for the teacher to confirm that all learners were equipped with critical reading skills.

During the treatment sessions, some guiding questions were asked to trigger learners to adopt critical reading skills to identify the themes or meanings of the poems (Appendix A). Each question was designed to target one or more critical reading characteristics (Appendix B). The following descriptions show the application of critical reading skills and the process of interpreting haiku poetry.

*Along my journey
through this transitory world,
new year's housecleaning*

To begin one of the treatment sessions, I asked my students, "What is the subject of the poem?" A student said, "Life." Another one specified, "The passing of time." So I asked her, "What is your evidence? How did you come up with this?" Through this kind of direct questioning, I tried to encourage learners to substantiate their opinions. One of my students pointed out that it referred to the New Year season and house cleaning. Some students tried to compare it to Nourooz holidays in Iran when people do some housecleaning, and welcome the New Year (learners' schemata seems to have been activated in this stage).

The next step was to ask learners to synthesize and combine relevant parts into a coherent whole, which is one important characteristic of critical reading. At the same time, the meaning of *transitory world* was provided to avoid any ambiguity and confusion. One student stated that, "It seems there is a sort of relationship between journey, transitory world and New Year." Another student in the study said, "The whole poem implies to whole life, New Year has come and people are busy doing some household chores!" A voice from the back of the class said, "So life is a journey." From these excerpts, it seems that in this stage of analysis, a thoughtful discourse was created, which, it may be argued, is another characteristic brought about critical reading skills.

The sessions for the TPR group were different: mostly students read the poems and used their dictionaries to grasp the meanings of unknown words. Since haiku are short, scanning and skimming seems to be alike, yet line by line discussion along with discovery of the gist of poems were encouraged. Sometimes, quite a few students went beyond the surface meanings and tried to decode symbols and metaphors in poems. Despite this, the instructor did not explicitly explain how to use critical reading skills. The steps that students went through were similar to what happens in conventional reading classes, except that instead of scientific or educational texts, poetry was chosen as the reading material.

Data analysis

After the data were collected, a t-test procedure was applied to determine the effect of poetry reading tasks on critical reading skills of students at the intermediate level. Data collected through the post-test were compared and the results indicated the positive impact of employing poetry reading tasks on critical reading. As it was mentioned, the critical reading process welcomes different interpretations of poetry and someone might argue whether what seem to be multiple choice comprehension questions with single correct answers (decided by the teacher) are critical reading. The answer is that during the course and before administering the post-test, the teacher asserted that there is no right or wrong answer for each of the questions regarding the meanings of haiku poetry, but that learners need to find evidence to substantiate their findings. What the teacher decided as “right” answers were determined by consulting with many literature teachers and literary reviews. The test was designed to encourage learners to see with different eyes, to look for evidence, to discover denotations and connotations suggested by words, and it was stressed that other interpretations might be true.

Results

The following table shows the t-test results.

Table 1

Group statistics: Means and standard deviations of two groups

Factor	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score Control	30	2.684	2.684	.490
Experimental	30	2.398	2.398	.438

A simple comparison of the means indicates that the two groups have performed differently, since the mean score of the CPR is greater than that of the TPR. The graphic representation of the results in Figure 1 more conspicuously represents the difference between the means of the two groups.

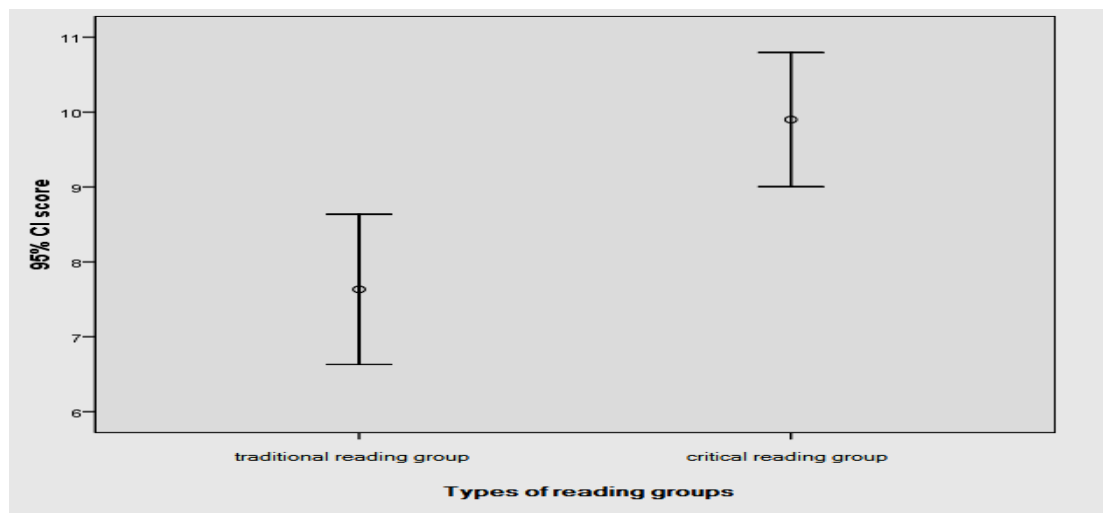


Figure 1. Learners' performance on the critical reading tasks

Table 2
Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Score				T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
	Equal variances assumed	1.145	.289	-3.449	58	.001	-2.267	.657	-3.582	-.951
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.449	57.275	.001	-2.267	.657	-3.582	-.951

In order to see whether or not the differences are statistically significant, a t-test was used. Figures in Table 2 show that $t_{\text{observed}}=3.449$ and $p < .05$. Since the value of $t_{\text{observed}}=3.449$, which is a positive value revealing the effectiveness of treatment, is greater than the value of $t_{\text{critical}}=2.02$ and whereas, $p\text{-value}=.001$ is less than $.005$, we can claim that the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis of the study ($H: X_e > X_c$) is accepted. In short, as the comparison between the means of two groups reveals, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the CPR group and the TPR group. It can be concluded that the use of introducing poetry-reading tasks has played a significant role in increasing the scores of the critical poetry reading group. Consequently, we can claim that in this study the use of poetry reading tasks had a positive impact on the experimental group (CPR) learners' performance and improved their critical reading skills.

Conclusion

The results lend strong support to arguments for employing poetry reading tasks in the EFL/ESL classroom and specify that if literary texts and tasks are carefully selected they can facilitate critical reading skills. Students learn not only not to accept the surface meanings of words blindly, but they also learn to look for connotations and denotations of words to unravel the message the poet has intended to communicate to the reader.

Furthermore, the mysterious scenes, which are an indispensable aspect of haiku poetry, make readers curious to want to decode the figurative language and facilitates reading comprehension. On the other hand, the results of the present study underline the crucial role that teaching methods play in discovering poems' meanings as well. While traditional reading skills spur learners to find out only surface meanings, critical reading tasks get learners involved in the discovery of hidden and interwoven relationships between the meanings of words and sentences in poetry.

The findings of the present study can benefit learners, teachers and textbooks writers in a number of different ways: In the first place, syllabus designers can employ pedagogically useful and aesthetically stylish literary texts such as haiku to add color and vividness to text books. In the second place, teachers can instruct learners how to employ critical poetry reading tasks to better evaluate the themes in poetry. Readers learn to read with different eyes.

It is true that the results of the current study confirm the positive effect of critical reading tasks, but we must acknowledge that critical reading of haiku is different from critical reading of other genres. Hence generalizations should be made with due caution.

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Appendix A

A Sample Critical Reading task

Read the following haiku carefully and employ critical reading skills which we have already discussed about in the class in order to answer the questions beneath each poem.

1) *Along my journey*

through this transitory world,

new year's housecleaning

- 1) Who is speaking in the poem?
- 2) What is the subject of the poem?
- 3) How does the poem make use of setting?
- 4) How does the poem use imagery?
- 5) To what extent does the poet rely on connotation or associations that words have?
- 6) What qualities- sorts of learning, feeling, taste and interest or value- does the poem evoke in the reader?
- 7) What is your historical and cultural distance from the poem?
- 8) How much evidence do you find while reading the poem? And what evidence helps you comprehend the poem?
- 9) What are implicit relationships between words in the poem?
- 10) What is hidden meaning or main idea in the poem?
- 11) What emotion does this poet try to express in the haiku?
- 12) What is the story behind this haiku?

Appendix B

A Sample Critical Reading Test

Read the following haiku critically and answer questions by choosing the most critical option provided beneath each one.

*1) Seen in plain daylight
the firefly's nothing but
an insect*

According to the poem, why is the firefly nothing?

- a) Because it is only an insect
- b) Because the daylight is its enemy
- c) Because it is seen in plain daylight
- d) Because the identity of this insect relies on night

*2) All along this road
not a single soul – only
autumn evening comes*

The poem contains the elements of:

- a) Loneliness
- b) Love
- c) Travel
- d) Mystery

*3) Buddha's birthday
a spotted fawn is born_
just like that*

Why does the poet make a comparison between the fawn and Buddha?

- a) Because both of them are God's creatures
- b) Because both of them like loneliness
- c) Because both of them like caresses
- d) Because both of them are symbols of innocence and purity

Answers: 1. d / 2.a / 3.d