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Unlocking Reading – Developing Reading and Critical Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

Critical reading goes beyond surface understanding of a text. It involves readers' interpreting, analyzing, questioning, and evaluating texts while recognizing assumptions, assessing evidence, and linking ideas to broader academic, cultural, and social contexts. Within various frameworks of critical thinking development, such engagement is vital for constructing meaning and developing analytical, cognitive, and reflective skills necessary for independent interpretation of a narrative. These skills are best cultivated through well-organized reading strategies.

This paper reviews the textbook *Unlocking Reading – Developing Reading and Critical Thinking Skills*, which aims to improve university students' critical and analytical reading skills. The textbook is currently being piloted in the Department of English Philology at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU).

It analyses the organization, content, and teaching implications of the textbook. Additionally, it presents and analyses findings from an electronic survey conducted at TSU among students and teachers using the book during the current academic term, evaluating its effectiveness concerning developing and enhancing critical reading skills and strategies.

Keywords: *critical thinking, reading strategies, EFL, reading skills*

Introduction

Critical reading skills involve active, reflective, and evaluative engagement with a text. Moreover, it requires readers to infer, interpret, analyze, and assess meaning while questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence, and transferring ideas within broader academic, cultural, and social contexts. Theoretical work on reading, literacy, and critical thinking highlights that cognitively engaged reading enables the construction of meaning and fosters independent, analytical thought.

This paper describes and analyses the textbook *Unlocking Reading – Developing Reading and Critical Thinking Skills*, designed to develop and enhance analytical and critical reading skills among university students. Currently piloted at the Department of English Philology, TSU, this textbook integrates teaching reading strategies through authentic reading materials. Based on feedback survey from students and teachers collected via an electronic questionnaire during the current academic term, this paper also evaluates the textbook's pedagogical effectiveness and identifies opportunities for further improvement.

Literature Review

Developing Critical Thinking: Theorizing a Tradition

Critical reading is rooted in two main traditions, each with different philosophical orientations but connected by shared concerns about knowledge, literacy, and the reading process.

The first tradition, mainly associated with academic contexts, concentrates on comprehension, analysis, and evaluation. In this framework, critical reading involves identifying main ideas in a text, recognizing structural features, evaluating textual credibility, and evaluating arguments (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1991; Harris, 1993; Behrens & Rosen, 2013). Knowledge is seen as relatively stable and accessible through systematic inquiry (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Research in applied linguistics demonstrates that academic literacy concerning critical reading skills depends on understanding argumentation, analyzing evidence, and mastering disciplinary conventions (McWhorter, 2010).

The second tradition situates critical reading within broader sociocultural and pedagogical frameworks. Freire (1970) conceptualizes critical literacy as a way of questioning assumptions, challenging dominant ideologies, and promoting social change (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2000). Meaning is thus shaped through the interaction of reader, text, and context. Critical literacy theory emphasizes agency, ethical participation, and reflection, encouraging readers to interrogate social power relations and imagine alternative possibilities (Stevens & Bean, 2007).

Although these traditions differ in aims—academic mastery versus social change—they share core cognitive processes, including inference, interpretation, and contextualization. Together, they portray reading as both cognitive and sociopolitical.

The importance of developing critical reading skills is evident across academic disciplines. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional model views reading as a dynamic process where meaning is co-constructed. Research by Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) indicates that active engagement improves comprehension and memory. Critical reading also enhances analytical judgment by helping readers evaluate arguments and recognize assumptions (Paul & Elder, 2006; Bailin et al., 1999). Beyond academia, critical reading supports informed participation in a complex information environment (Kuhn, 1999; Luke, 1996). Freire (1970) and Bizzell (1992) further argue that readers become active creators of meaning through such engagement.

Reading Strategies in L2 Acquisition:

Reading involves activating prior background knowledge and applying cognitive and metacognitive processes to construct meaning. Research on second language acquisition in applied linguistics and

cognitive psychology emphasizes the importance of explicit strategy instruction to support comprehension and learner autonomy. Schema Theory (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980; Anderson, 1984) suggests that comprehension occurs when readers connect new information to existing knowledge structures. In L2 contexts, where unfamiliar vocabulary and cultural references often present challenges, activating prior knowledge is particularly essential (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

Strategy-based practices such as previewing, predicting, and anticipating content strengthen engagement and comprehension. Cognitive strategies include summarizing, inferring, and note-taking (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Anderson, 1991). Summarizing enables the identification of main ideas (Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995), while inference skills allow readers to deduce meaning using contextual clues (Carrell, 1989). Classroom instruction often reinforces these strategies through activities involving context clues, paraphrasing, and guided synthesis (Pauk & Owens, 2013).

Interactive models of reading (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980) highlight the interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes, which is particularly relevant for L2 learners and involves balancing decoding skills and background knowledge. Strategies such as skimming and scanning operationalize these models. Metacognitive skills, for instance, planning, monitoring, and evaluating comprehension, are vital for L2 readers (Flavell, 1979; Pressley, 2000). Strategies like self-monitoring and self-questioning enhance understanding and awareness (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Collaborative approaches such as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) support L2 readers through prediction, questioning, clarification, and summarization. Transactional and reader-response theories (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982) emphasize that meaning is co-constructed through interaction with the text. Instructional practices like response journals, reflective tasks, and personal connections facilitate deeper engagement.

Recent research emphasizes integrating critical reading with analytical thinking, metacognition, and sociocultural awareness. Hà and Huertas-Abril (2024) argue that critical reading instruction should follow a two-stage model: identifying the author's purpose and responding through evaluation. Archila et al. (2025) highlight the value of active engagement with scientific texts. Strategy-based interventions (Olifant, 2024) have demonstrated measurable improvements in critical reading comprehension. Large-scale studies emphasize the predictive value of metacognitive reading strategies for comprehension and academic performance (Ghimire & Mokhtari, 2025).

Further scholarship highlights teacher preparation and equity, emphasizing culturally sustaining critical reading practices (Walker, Yoon, & Pankowski, 2024). Across these studies, contemporary trends favour explicit, structured instruction that integrates analytical, metacognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of reading.

The Need for a Skills Development Textbook at TSU

Unlocking Reading – Developing Reading and Critical Thinking is one of several textbooks produced within the Department of English Philology at TSU to support the integrated development of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. Authored by the writers of this paper, the textbook is currently in its piloting phase. Other textbooks in the series include *Speak Out the Box* (2003, two parts) and *Think, Write, Rewrite*, also in pilot. Final versions of these materials will incorporate feedback from teachers and students.

The need for this reading-focused textbook arises from several considerations, namely, alignment with the specific needs of Georgian learners, explicit attention to reading strategies, expansion of vocabulary knowledge, improvement of comprehension at multiple levels and development of critical thinking, cultural awareness, and textual evaluation skills.

The textbook incorporates theoretical foundations from schema theory, cognitive and metacognitive strategy research, interactive models of reading, sociocultural theory, and transactional theory.

These frameworks support practical, evidence-based strategies enabling L2 learners to integrate cognitive, metacognitive, and socially mediated approaches to reading.

Using authentic texts, including newspaper articles, reference materials, and literary excerpts, the book provides structured pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading tasks, guiding questions, multi-level exercises designed to activate background cultural knowledge and engage students cognitively.

Methodology of the research and findings of the survey

To assess student engagement with the textbook, an anonymous 43-item online questionnaire was administered in November 2025. Twenty-five undergraduate students with B1+ English proficiency participated in the survey, providing both quantitative and qualitative data on developing reading skills, the employment of strategies, challenges faced, and perceptions of the textbook's design and effectiveness.

Overall, students viewed the textbook as effective, engaging, and pedagogically sound. They reported consistent use of embedded strategies, especially skimming, scanning, rereading, and summarizing, that supported comprehension and confidence. The challenges identified were generally related to the variations in language proficiency and text complexity. Feedback focused not on fundamental revisions but on optimization of the textbook through more precise instructions, additional guided practice, and greater variety.

Engagement and reading habits

Students generally completed assigned readings and felt that the materials were well-balanced in length and difficulty. Shorter or vivid passages, especially those linked to real-world issues or contemporary themes, were highly engaging. Longer texts were sometimes demanding but recognized as essential for developing higher-level analytical skills. Overall, the textbook balances accessibility with appropriately challenging content.

Strategy use

Skimming and scanning were commonly used to identify key information efficiently. Rereading supported accuracy and understanding. Other beneficial strategies, as indicated, included inferencing, contextual analysis, previewing, summarizing, note-taking, and highlighting. Learners appreciated breaking texts into manageable sections and valued guided practice and examples. According to the survey, the textbook effectively supports diverse reading preferences and cognitive styles.

Perceptions of textbook design

Students praised the textbook's conceptual and linguistic clarity, noting that strategy instruction boosted both confidence and independence. Suggestions aimed at refinement rather than a complete redesign of the textbook, including more precise instructions, reduced redundancy, and improved scaffolding.

Challenges and support needs

Identified challenges included inferencing with unfamiliar vocabulary, scanning when questions used different vocabulary from the text, interpreting figurative language, and managing longer passages alongside multi-step tasks. Additionally, students stressed the importance of scaffolded guidance and targeted practice.

Practice priorities

Learners expressed a desire for more practice in inferencing, skimming, scanning, and time management. They valued gap-filling, sequencing tasks, and real-world application activities, as well as vocabulary development and summarizing.

Suggestions for exercise improvements

Students recommended incorporating more contemporary, culturally rich, and engaging content. They also suggested adding interactive elements, clearer formatting, a wider variety of question types, self-check quizzes, sample answers, and more visual aids. Although some exercises appeared to address similar needs, students understood their pedagogical purpose as reinforcement

Conclusion

Students consistently reported that *Unlocking Reading – Developing Reading and Critical Thinking Skills* is an engaging, effective, and helpful resource. The textbook fosters active and independent learning, supports diverse reading strategies, and encourages critical thinking. While learners proposed refinements of the textbook, such as more precise instructions, increased scaffolding, additional activity types, and shorter or more varied texts, these suggestions reflect a constructive aim to enhance the already strong foundation on which the book is based.

The survey demonstrated that the textbook has a positive impact on learners' reading skills development, supports the acquisition of essential strategies, and promotes confidence and independence in academic reading. Incorporating the suggested improvements will further strengthen student engagement and support the continued development of critical reading skills through methodically taught reading strategies.

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