

Improvement of EFL Learners' Critical Reading Competence with Lexical Strategies

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Abstract

Critical reading has been considered more practical and significant in the process of reading for EFL learners nowadays. It is an act of reading in which a critical attitude, logical analysis and inference are used to judge the worth of what is read according to an established standard. Morphology pedagogy of morphological analysis, identification of the logical markers of lexis and the analysis of grammaticalized lexis is discussed in this paper to make some contributions to the improvement of critical reading competence for EFL learners.

Key words: Critical reading competence; Lexical strategies; Lexis; EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

Reading process is realized by more and more learners as more than a memorizing process in present academic field. It is considered as a psychological process of absorbing and transforming information in a more sophisticated way. However, with limited reading ability some EFL learners cannot comprehend the inference meaning of certain words or identify the internal logical connection between

them, thus fail in comprehend the inference meaning of the whole passage as well as understand the coherence of a certain written piece. More importantly, with the basis of critical thinking, critical reading is applied to the academic field for the EFL learners to enlarge the encyclopedia knowledge of their mind, facilitate their logical reference ability and abstract synopsis competence. As a matter of fact, cohesion of the text is the product of lexical relations but not grammatical ones. The improvement of critical ability of EFL students can be realized with proper lexical strategies as the following three: identification of the logical markers of lexis; morphological analysis method and the recognition of grammaticalized lexis.

1. CRITICAL READING

Since the late 20th century, critical reading has been believed much more important both home and abroad, but there is still not a consensus regarding the definition of critical thinking. Different outstanding scholars define it with different study aims; one of them comes the definition of critical reading by The College of St. Catherine as "a type of reading which actively engages students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they read. They read with a questioning attitude, using logical and inference to construct meaning from the texts." (July 2002b, D. Churchill). Halvorson (1992) defines that "critical reading as a goal includes the ability to evaluate ideas socially or politically. Critical reading skills are the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize what one reads." Consider most of the definitions of critical reading, the essentials of critical reading are mostly the same: reading critically means to read with a skeptical attitude and thinking of more than one angle on the issue. There are four divisions within it, that is, comprehension, interpretation, analysis and evaluation.

2. FRESH UNDERSTANDING OF LEXIS

Traditionally speaking, people regard lexis and vocabulary as the same thing. However, they contain different connotations actually. Vocabulary refers to the sum of words used by, understood by, or at the command of a particular person or group. Lexis not only includes mostly all the words categorized for effective cognition within a language, but also includes the mental collocations stored in people's brain. Therefore, Lexis contains more content than vocabulary. The long-established believed idea that grammar is the core of language is substituted by the new understanding of lexis that the basis of language is lexis and people understand language through lexical phrases as a whole. More importantly, language consists of grammatical lexis as the main part of it, but not lexicalized grammar. Different from the isolated words, lexis refers to the group of words stored in human mind cognitively for effective communication. Lewis (1997) put forward the taxonomy of lexis as follows:

Lexis (chunks)

- a. Words: girl; bottle; pen; book
- b. Poly-words: peace lover; emergency room; assembly line
- c. Collocations: a pair of shoes; a covey of quail; a bottle of water
- d. Institutionalized utterances: If I were you...
- e. Sentence frames and heads: It is necessary for... to...

Just as Lewis (1997) suggests: "instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways." The lexis plays a critical part in contributing to the coherence of the passage by repetition or other links.

3. LEXICAL STRATEGIES IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF EFL CRITICAL READING

By clarifying the importance of critical reading and new understanding of Lexis, it is necessary for the EFL learners to get some morphological instructions, such as the application of morphemes in guessing the meaning of some new words or the unknown ones, familiar lexical logical markers as well as identifying grammaticalized lexis as the lexical strategies which make great contribution to the facilitation of the critical reading competence for EFL learners.

3.1 The Application of Morphological Analysis

3.1.1 Explanation of Morphology

The term morphology derives from classical Greek (morph), which refers to the scientific study of "shape"

or "form". It aims to investigate the structures of words by analyzing the smaller word components, how they combine to each other to create new words and the relationship between them. Furthermore, morphology is often mixed up with the notion of Lexicology in the study field of Linguistics. It is believed by the linguists that many words can be furtherer divided into even smaller parts, and each of them contains some certain meanings, termed as affix and stem. Prefix and suffix are two terms that can be included in affix. For example, in the word "incompletely", "complete" is the stem, which carries the fundamental meaning, "in-" is a prefix, which attached to the stem at the beginning and "-ly" is suffix which comes at the end of stem. By analyzing word in this way, as long as EFL students grasp the meaning of the stem of certain word, it is easy for them to guess the connotation of any word with some prefixes and suffixes. As a result, it will probably smooth the way in the process of understanding a written text.

3.1.2 Morphological Analysis in Critical Reading

Word is the basic component of a passage; therefore, the improvement of comprehension ability is closely related with the grasp of lexis. Early in the last century, some linguists realized that the amelioration of reading ability depends on the increasingly improvement of one's lexical knowledge. So, some western linguists greatly devoted themselves to the study of the so-called core vocabulary which they believed as much of importance to the comprehension of written texts. While it was proved not as successfully as it was expected as before because there are different proposition on the number of these core vocabulary. It is believed to be true that language is stemmed from a certain culture and the existing vocabulary will inevitably be enriched with the increasing development and improvement of society, as a result of which, a large amount of new words are added to the vocabulary list. Thus, the guessing and inference ability are definitely required for the English learners in the process of understanding any written piece. Guessing the appropriate meaning of a certain new word can be realized not only by considering the context in which the word appears but also lying in its morphological analysis. Only by combining these two, can the connotation of the new word be inferred and the comprehension of a certain paragraph, even the whole text becomes as smoothly as possible. The following sentence is a good example to illustrate that.

Example 1

Glass is a remarkable substance made from the simplest raw material. It can be colored or colorless *monochrome or polychrome, transparent, translucent, or opaque*.

In the above example, the substance of "glass" is introduced and described with its definition and attribute. For the EFL learners, it is not so easy for them to

understand the meaning of some words in the second sentence, such as “monochrome”, “polychrome”, “transparent”, “translucent” and so on. In order to understand the sentence, it is normal for English learners to motivate the encyclopedia knowledge concerning glass in their mind. However, there is more than one piece of related information about glass in their brain, so it is not so easy for them to figure out the most appropriate one immediately. As a result, the single sentence or even the whole passage will not be comprehended easily or properly due to the failure in identification of the words mentioned above.

Thus, to facilitate the critical reading, morphological analysis is encouraged to apply in the reading process to define and understand some unfamiliar and strange words. First of all, by analyzing the grammatical feature of the above example sentence, it is obvious that the part of speech of these words should be adjectives. Then, by observing the morphological feature of the words, nearly all of them consist of two or three sections, for example, “monochrome” is composed of “mono-” and “chrome”; the word “polychrome” is made up of “poly-” and “chrome”; “transparent” consists of “trans-”, “par” and “-ent” and the last word “translucent” is formed in the same way as “transparent”. EFL learners can distinguish and identify the words with morphological analysis. “mono-” and “poly-” are prefixes to refer to a certain number. The prefix “mono-” refers to single, while the prefix “poly-” means more than one. For example, the meaning of “monoatomic” is “consisting of single atoms”, and the Chinese meaning of “polysemy” is “several meanings in a single word”. The same stem contained not only in the word of “monochrome” but also in “polychrome”, which the common meaning of it is “color”, so “monochrome” is finally defined as “be with one color”, and “polychrome” refers to “be with many different colors”. The meanings of the next two words of “transparent” and “translucent” can be identified in the same way as people interpret “monochrome” and “polychrome”. “trans-” and “par-” are two Latin prefixes meaning “to cross” and “to present”. Therefore, the combination of these two parts can be comprehended as “be presented clearly while crossing”. The word “translucent” contains “trans-” and “luc-”, which means “to shine”. With the explanation of all of the morphemes mentioned in the above sentence, the meaning of the example will be clarified easily as the description of the light and color of glass. As the EFL learners can see, the connotation of some strange and unfamiliar words will be dug out with morphological analysis and lexical inference strategy. It is proved that the morphological analysis of lexis should be an effective way for EFL learners in the practical critical reading process.

As what has been discussed above, in the process of critical reading, it is advisable for the EFL learners apply morphological analysis to get the information

that an author intends to convey, however, the effective advantage of it lies in the grasp of the basic knowledge of etymology. In other words, it is difficult for learners to get the rough meaning of some strange words if they are unfamiliar with the exact meaning of a certain stem. Whereas, just as Nagy and Anderson (1984) suggest, it is not a serious problem and will not stand in the way for the EFL learners to apply the lexical inference strategy, because just 20% of affixed words are unanalysable with morphological knowledge, which only makes up a small number in English written texts.

3.2 Analysis of Grammaticalized Lexis

Traditionally, grammar is considered as the center of a passage. English learners intend to comprehend a passage through analyzing the grammatical feature of it. While recently, more and more linguists consider the relationship between grammar and lexis in a new way. English texts are viewed as lexis-based passages, and language is made up of grammaticalized lexis but not lexicalized grammar. It is the lexis not grammar which makes the written pieces meaningful and colorful. Thus, the proper comprehending of grammaticalized lexis can be applied in the improvement of EFL learners' critical reading competence.

In the practical reading process, it is not necessary for the readers to analyze and understand every grammatical structure. Through identifying the ready lexical phrases and then applying decoding technique, EFL readers will also understand passages effectively.

Example 2

She did *not* get up *until* his mother woke her up several times.

In the above cited sentence, EFL reader will paraphrase it as “She got up after his mother woke her up several times” easily because the phrase “not...until” is a phrase that already stored in English reader's mind and the reference of this phrase has been grasped also. “not...until” can be looked as the grammaticalized lexis to facilitate reading process. As to any competent EFL learners, decoding such grammaticalized lexis could greatly increase their reading speed and efficiency, therefore, improve their critical reading competence eventually. More examples are illustrated to present this lexical strategy clearly and effectively.

Example 3

Maybe *no* single phenomenon brought *more* lasting change to China *than* the open policy.

In the above sentence, once the grammaticalized lexis “not...more...than” is identified as “being the most...”, the whole sentence will be comprehended as “The open policy brought most lasting change to China.” It is not necessary to read every word one by one. It is proved to be true that this strategy of reading would be of great help for the EFL readers to overcome the difficulties in memorizing complicated grammar structures in the process of learning English.

3.3 Identification of the Logical Markers of Lexis

Just as what has been mentioned in the second section of this paper, the new understanding of lexis has put lexical phrases at the main position within English writing texts. Instead of merely referring to the isolated words or word collations, they are the mental word groups stored in people's minds as a whole. When put the English language into use, English learners just pick out the stored units saved and perceived as a whole in their brain. For instance, "under no circumstance", "rather than", "on the contrary" are considered as lexical phrase stored in readers' mind and comprehended as a whole in reading. It has already been realized by most readers that the cohesion of any written passage is mainly the product of lexical relations not grammatical ones, thus, identification and understanding of lexical phrases would be of great help in the interpreting the central meaning of the passage, which of course makes significant contribution to the improvement of EFL learners' critical reading ability.

In the midst of lexical phrases, some of them function as logical makers which clarify the different sense relations between words. They are applied not only for the purpose of strengthening the coherence of a passage, but also facilitate the readers to comprehend and interpret the passage more quickly and exactly. The common lexical logical makers can be divided into three kinds to function in a sentence as showing different sense relations in the language of English. Normally, there are three type of English sense relations, that is , synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy. Synonymy shows the relationship of sameness or similarity; antonymy indicates the relationship of oppositeness and Hyponymy reveals the relationship of semantic inclusion. The lexical markers can be categorized into the above three English sense relations as following:

Synonymy: not only...but also...; the same as; that is to say; as well as...

Antonymy: in contrast; opposite to; on the contrary...

hyponymy: for instance; such as...

The following example will give a detailed explanation in illustrating how the logical makers facilitate critical reading.

Example 4

Technology includes techniques, or ways to do things, *as well as* the machines that may or may not be necessary to apply them, *for instance* the ways to make chemical reactions occur, ways to breed fish, plant forests, light theaters, count votes or teach history (Dong, 2011).

The above italicized phrases of "as well as" and "for instance" are two lexical phrases function as logical markers to show the sense relation of synonymy and hyponymy respectively. It can be seen clearly that lexical

logical markers are very effective in distinguish sense relations and clarify the meaning of the sentence as a result. To improve the EFL learners' critical reading competence, the identification of logical markers in a certain written texts is required reasonably.

CONCLUSION

Critical reading which contains guessing unknown words, logical inference, and examination of evidences and consideration of alternatives has been attached great importance on the contemporary Information Age. With the fresh idea of lexis, English texture is regarded as the combination of lexical phrases, and the coherence of any English passage is nearly the product of lexical relations instead of grammatical structure as what has been perceived traditionally. Critical reading ability can be improved by introduction of morphological instructions and identification the sense relations between English words and so on. Morphology pedagogy of morphological analysis, identification of the logical markers of lexis and the analysis of grammaticalized lexis are believed to be the effective strategies to make some contributions to the improvement of critical reading competence for EFL learners. In the future study process, more practical experiments and tests are required to be made to give more proof and evidence of the mentioned lexical strategies in the practical reading process for EFL Learners.

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