

Developing Skills of Textual Analysis With English Learners.

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## **Abstract**

This research study aims to explore the impact of guided practice of textual analysis with English learners. This research study will focus on a sample of convenience taken from American Canyon Middle School. This sample will consist of one group of 22 students. This sample will include both female and male, English language Learners, of mixed ethnicities aged 11 to 13. This sample will also include students with I.E.P's. Students will participate in a pre- and post-writing assessment as well as self-evaluations. There is no potential risk to human subjects because the research will be conducted in a normal educational setting using normal practices. Benefits are unknown. Data will be collected (stored in a locked cabinet in my classroom) and recorded and saved in an excel spreadsheet on my personal computer with password protection. The research study will be conducted at American Canyon Middle School over a two week period in Spring 2017.

## **Introduction**

### **Background and Need**

The ability to think critically is a major intellectual and practical skill. The point of critical thinking is to maximize the ability to think rationally. This type of critical reflection is essential to improving one's cognitive skills. In turn, it can lead to increased overall intelligence and performance. However, if students are expected to successfully engage with the world around them, then they must first improve their critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking is a product of well developed higher order thinking skills. VanTassel-Baska, Bracken, Feng, and Brown (2009) reported findings of an increase in reading comprehension and reading assessment scores for students who had previously participated in extensive critical thinking exercises. Despite these promising findings, it would appear that students, in general, are not progressing at a sufficient rate. According to NAEP data, across all groups, only slightly more than 50% of students are meeting standards. Clearly, more must be

done if we are to improve our national scores, and more importantly, produce intellectual and analytical citizens.

A review of recent CAASPP data further confirms a need for reevaluating our approach to developing higher order thinking, especially for our growing number of English language learners. According to the 2015 California Language Census, English learners make up roughly 20 percent of the total number of enrollment in CA public schools. According to CASSPP data, 43% of English language learners scored below standard in the area of Research and Inquiry in 2015. In general, English learner students are scoring lower than their native English speaking peers. According to data collected by “National Report Card” only 30% of English learner students were reading at or above grade level.

Despite the growing numbers of English Learners in our country, not much has changed in the way they are taught, and therefore, there haven’t been significant improvements in test scores. There are many possible reasons why critical thinking isn’t receiving appropriate attention in schools, and the need to improve other assessment scores is but one. In any case, it is vital that students receive appropriate support in developing their higher order thinking skills. That is why this study aims to explore the impact of strategic guided practice with textual analysis on English learners. The knowledge to be gained from this study is whether guided practices can affect an English learner’s success at analyzing a piece of text, forming a claim, and provide relevant evidence.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The question driving this study was: What is the impact of guided practice of textual analysis with English learners? English Learners, like all students, are required to participate in a

range of assessments such as CAASPP and Reading Inventories, which require students to demonstrate not only critical readings skills, but critical thinking as well. Research shows that English Learners have consistently struggled in this area specifically.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of critical thinking from the perspective of English learners, specifically, examining how students distinguish important aspects of information, make connections and draw conclusions as well as how might they use that information to support their claims. The hypothesis was that with the aid of guided practice, students may improve their ability to think critically.

### **Research Questions**

While reviewing the research, this researcher considered these questions:

1. How does the development of critical thinking skills affect mastery and application?
2. What role might close reading play in developing analytical skills?
3. What are the effects of collaboration on student writing?
4. What are the effects of Visual Thinking Strategies?

### **Literature Review**

In order to examine the issues related to this study the researcher reviewed literature from various studies of instructional interventions that focused on language and literacy skills needed for English learners to succeed in school.

### **Critical Thinking:**

Higher order thinking occurs when a person takes new information and information stored in memory and interrelates and/or rearranges and extends this information to achieve a purpose or find possible answers in perplexing situations (Lewis & Smith, 1993).

One informative study examined the literature on critical thinking skills and aimed define them. Roger D. Jensen (2015) explored one specific teaching strategy known as the Socratic Method. In his five-week research study, Jensen used the Socratic Method for developing critical thinking skills in English Language Learners. At the end of the five weeks, the English learners had indeed developed their critical thinking skills, therefore proving that the Socratic Method is an effective strategy for developing critical thinking skills in English Language Learners . These findings are significant to my research as I aim to improve the same critical thinking skills in my own ELL students.

Further research showed that creative and critical thinking skills are the abilities, which can sometimes be used interchangeably in definition. In fact, according to work done by Bengia Birgili, these skills have consist of different constructs because they differentiate in outcome of human behaviors. Birgili determined that today's students should approach everyday problems by using both critical thinking as well as creativity. One helpful tool identified for this task of developenting creativity and critical thinking skills is problem-based learning environments in classrooms. In Birgili's study, problem based approach including philosophy; general characteristics of it, role of teachers and students in problem-based learning environment, and its uniqueness over other learning approaches is explained by considering advantages and limitations. Then, problem-based learning is discussed with regard to instructional design perspective in a scientific manner. Finally, his study concluded by explaining that when PBL is

grounded in development of instructional strategy as an approach; instructional strategies, methods and techniques are differentiated in creativity and critical thinking skills.

### **Teaching Critical Thinking**

An article by on teaching critical thinking by Tim van Gelder (2005) discussed six key lessons from cognitive science for teachers of critical thinking. The lessons were: acquiring expertise in critical thinking is hard; practice in critical-thinking skills themselves enhances skills; the transfer of skills must be practiced; some theoretical knowledge is required; diagramming arguments ("argument mapping") promotes skill; and that students are prone to belief preservation. The article also provided guidelines for teaching with respect to each practice.

After reading through various articles, it is becoming clear that critical thinking can be viewed as a unifying goal for modern education. While past research has primarily examined the efficacy of a single instructional approach to teaching critical thinking, recent literature has begun discussing mixed teaching approaches. Specifically, a study done by Ku, Ho, Hau and Lai (2013) examined three modes of instruction, featuring the direct instruction approach and the inquiry-based approach in different sequences and proportions, in enhancing Chinese secondary student's critical thinking performance.

A total of 651 Grade 12 students participated in an 18-hour intervention with pre- and post-intervention measures on critical thinking performance and critical thinking dispositions. Specifically, critical thinking assessments utilizing different response format were used. Those who received training showed greater improvement on at least one of the critical thinking assessments compared to those who received no training. Participants' performances with regards

to different critical thinking assessments were examined further. Ku, et al, elucidated on the many benefits of adopting more than one instructional approach to teaching critical thinking. It is not enough however, to merely define critical thinking and determine how best to teach it. One must also consider how to ultimately assess another's ability to think critically.

### **Assessing Critical Thinking**

One paper by Burke & Williams (2012) examined the issue of assessment and was directly linked to their previous research outlining an evaluation of a thinking skills intervention. Their recent work presented the development and potential uses of two thinking skills assessment tools. The aim of the paper was to make these measures available for other researchers to use, adapt and extend them in future research. The Assessment of Pupils Thinking Skills (APTS) measure is a 14-item measure of a range of thinking skills and metacognition. The assessment can be used to provide a comparative measure across thinking skills or to provide a sum score of thinking skills and raise metacognitive awareness of thinking skills. It can be used to assess thinking skills interventions and to monitor change in thinking skills over time among 9 to 12-year-olds. The Individual Thinking Skills Assessments (ITSA) are six more in-depth measures of specific thinking skills that can be used before, during or after interventions to provide more detailed information on children's individual thinking skills. The APTS and the ITSA can be used separately or in conjunction to assess thinking skills and change in thinking skills among older children .

### **English Learners:**

It was also necessary to research about the unique nature of ELL students. Christopher J. Jenks, (2002)discussed the importance of teaching English language learners (ELLs) three

reading strategies to help facilitate a productive literacy environment, suggesting that students must be taught specific reading strategies in which purpose, comprehension, and memorization are facilitated.

The first section Jenks presented was on a pre-reading strategy, focusing on a K-W-L (know-want to know-learned) worksheet, which graphically assists ELLs in understanding specific information in a variety of content areas. The second section offered a during-reading strategy that utilizes word clusters (graphic organizers in which categorizations are used to promote vocabulary building). The third section describes a post-reading strategy involving Venn diagrams (two interconnected circles for comparing or contrasting two words or concepts). Each section introduced the concept and described the procedure and purpose. These strategies can be adjusted to varying degrees of reading proficiency and are appropriate for the work I intend to conduct.

### **Research Methods**

This study was a mixed methods design with a pre-experimental component for quantitative data as well as a student self-evaluation for qualitative data. The sample was taken from a middle school and consisted of one group of 22 students. The sample included both female and male, English language Learners, of mixed ethnicities aged 11 to 13. This sample will also include students with I.E.P's. Students participated in a pre- and post-writing assessment as well as pre and post self-evaluations.

Students began by taking a short writing assessment as a pretest. Pretest required students to first independently read and analyze an informative article with a lexile of 850.

The news article had been adapted to meet their target lexile. After reading the text,



students were asked to respond to a writing prompt. The writing prompt required students to form an opinion based on the article. This was a text dependent question which required that students to go back into the text to identify supporting evidence. Students answered the prompt by writing a paragraph in which they made a claim, provided relevant evidence and explained how in fact their evidence supports their claim. Student's initial attempts were graded with a four point rubric.

Then, over the course of less than two weeks during the Spring of 2017, students received a treatment aimed to improve their skills of critical thinking. Said treatment was within the normal educational practices for the middle school. Treatment included guided practice through various activities such as close reading, where teacher modelled strategies such as highlighting important information and circling unknown vocabulary words. It also included collaborative think-alouds, to help students make meaning out of the text using their verbal skills. Finally, the treatment involved visual thinking strategies, where students examined various images, made observations, and defended their ideas with evidence,

After the treatment, participants took a post-assessment. The post-assessment was identical to the pre-assessment. Students read the same informative article and were asked to answer the same text dependent question.

## **Materials**

The only materials necessary for the pre assessment was 22 hard copies of the informative article as well as 22 hard copies of the graphic organizer on which students will write their paragraphs. The treatment required other various pieces of texts which students

worked with while exploring closing reading strategies and standard supplies such as highlighters and pens.

### **Results and Analysis**

The goal of this study was to determine the impact of specific strategies with regard to developing students' ability to think critically. Specifically, the study investigated the relation between guided practice of Close Reading as well as Visual Thinking Strategies and students' ability to support specific claims with relevant, textual evidence. The data from the post assessments indicated that every student improved their scores, except for two. It is worth mentioning that one of those two students initially scored a perfect and therefore had no room for improvement. The mean increased from 8.14 to 10.45, showing a positive gain. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be extremely statistically significant between the two means. These results indicated that the improvement in posttest scores was directly impacted by the treatment. Therefore, the outcome of this study supported the hypothesis that guided practice of Close Reading, coupled with Visual Thinking Strategies would lead to higher mastery and application of critical thinking skills. This implies that explicitly teaching students Close Reading strategies is vital to developing students' critical thinking writing skills.

<b>Data:</b>	<b>Pre Treatment</b>	<b>Post Treatment</b>
<b>Mean</b>	8.14	10.45
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	1.83	1.47
<b>SEM</b>	0.39	0.31

<b>Number of students</b>	22	22
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## **Implications**

Based on the results of this study, the implications for teaching is that there is inherent value to certain instructional strategies for developing critical thinking skills: Guided practice of Close reading, Scaffolding, Visual Thinking Strategies and Socratic Seminars. The findings of this study align with the findings of other related research. Clearly, Critical Thinking skills should be explicitly taught, and through a variety of examples and contexts in order to improve student ability. Effective strategies for improving student critical thinking include basic Close reading strategies. This consists of students previewing their texts before reading. Reading a text multiple times for fluency. Paying close attention to specific vocabulary words that students may not be familiar with. Students should also be encouraged to question their own claims and opinions. Especially in a variety of contexts, such as different content areas and even outside of their academic settings. An important component to critical thinking is imbuing students with a natural curiosity and a cautious apprehension to assume information as a given. Visual Thinking Strategies are another highly effective routine that should play a role in developing students critical thinking skills. Providing students with visual images to process, instead of text, can open help develop their metacognitive skills. Students, like all humans, are intrinsically visual learners. Tapping into this evolutionary advantage can benefit students by increasing their ability to articulate their own thought process regarding cause and effect relations.

## **Limitations**

There were two primary limitations during this study. First, the number of participants. As I only teach one course of English Language Learners, I had limited access to participants that suited the needs of the study. The class itself is admittedly rather small, consisting of only 22 students. The second limitation of this study was the time period in which it was conducted. After taking their initial assessment, students were only exposed to a two week treatment. During this time, some students were tardy and or absent. Additionally, I did not have the advantage of seeing these particular students every day, but rather every-other day. Thus, I had relatively few opportunities to meet with my participants and implement the various strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Today's world is constantly changing due to the many technological innovations that help make our world a better place. However, these changes also bring about new problems. Thus, we have put our students in a crucial situation. Today's students have countless advantages to aid in their search for education, and yet, they are faced with solving problems that none before them could have predicted. The ability to think critically, and to problem solve, is an unparalleled skill that is essential to becoming career and college ready. It must be the goal of every teacher to properly prepare each student with the ability to approach a problem, analyze it thoroughly, gather evidence, and determine a course of action to solve that problem. The students of today will become the workers of tomorrow. It can be difficult to prepare students for careers that may not even exist presently. However, if we dedicate ourselves to explicitly instructing techniques and strategies that develop critical thinking skills, our students will be prepared for whatever the future may have in store.

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