

An Investigation of Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the Use of Critical Awareness Techniques in Reading English Academic Texts

Pasha Mohtadi

English Language Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran

Davud Kuhi

English Language Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran

Abstract—The main purpose of this study was to investigate the Iranian EFL students' attitudes towards the use of critical awareness techniques in academic reading. To this end, 30 Iranian students who were studying English for several years were selected as the subjects of the study. The selected participants were given an introduction to the course. The participants went through a course in which ten reading comprehension passages were covered. In teaching reading comprehension passages to the language learners, a critical-based framework was selected and adopted based on the tenets of critical reading as well as Van Dijk's (2000) socio cognitive model. In effect, in teaching the reading passages the students' consciousness and awareness were raised to encourage the students to get a deeper understanding of the texts. The subjects discussed their experiences from going through a critical-based approach. In effect, the subjects argued about the advantages and disadvantages of the worked model in terms of the learning and retention of the materials. The results of the study indicated that the students had a positive perspective towards the critical awareness techniques utilized in the academic reading passages. The subjects emphasized that English language learners need to learn diverse strategies to improve their reading comprehension rate. Effectively, the results of the study indicated that the students prefer to be taught utilizing a critical-based approach to be able to improve their critical thinking towards the perspectives and ideologies behind the texts. They added that consciousness raising equips them to be able to get access to the profound meanings of the texts.

Index Terms—critical reading, perspectives, ideologies, reading comprehension, consciousness raising

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main purposes follow by curriculum designers as well as course designers is preparing students to use English for studies, travelling and for social and professional international contacts. Reading comprehension, as one of the main skills is emphasized by different courses, which has caused severe difficulties for learners or instructors .

In effect, acquiring the reading abilities demands efforts on the part of both language instructors and learners. Apparently, discourse analysis (DA) suggests highly influential answers to the needs of the language learners. Contrary to the fact that DA is developed during 1950s; not much research has been conducted into the ways DA could pave the way for language courses or syllabuses. Guy Cook's (1989) Discourse was an initiator into the application of discourse analysis into language teaching, such as McCarthy (1991), McCarthy and Ronald (1994), Celce-Murcia as well as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, (2000).

In spite of the broadness of discourse analysis, language teaching seems to adopt five areas, i.e. cohesion, coherence, information structure, turn-taking and critical discourse analysis (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 7).

Norman Fairclough (2003) distinguishes "textually-oriented discourse analysis" from "discourse analysis that is not concerned with the linguistic features of the text" (p. 3). Despite a vast variety of research on the domain of discourse analysis, DA was not considered as an instrument used by language teacher or language learners.

One of the striking areas which seem to be beneficial for language teaching is the awareness rising which CDA may provide in reading comprehension. Apparently, no investigation has tried to study the attitudes of the EFL learners regarding learning reading skill by resorting to the principles of critical discourse analysis. One of the chief techniques which may be utilized to investigate the attitude of learners regarding using of critical awareness techniques in academic reading is focused-group interview .

Considering the aforementioned issue, the present study resorting to focus group interview tries to investigate the attitudes of the Iranian EFL learners toward using critical awareness techniques in teaching academic reading passages.

Significance of the Study

Hence, by taking into attention the issue that teaching reading comprehension passages are so challenging; it is conceivable that the traditional approaches which are emphasizing on passive reading-based activities cannot be

responsive. Effectively, by considering the potentials critical discourse analysis present to improve reading comprehension skill of the student; conducting the present study seems to be crucial in order to pave the way for implementing these critical-based approaches into pedagogy.

In effect, the present study has binary purposes; first, it aims to investigate the efficiency of teaching academic reading using critical approaches and second investigating the attitudes of learners toward using critical awareness techniques in academic reading.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are different definitions of “discourse” based on the context in which it may be applied. Van Dijk (1997) considering discourse as a form of spoken language (e.g. what is presented in lectures, the ideas of certain schools of thoughts like contemporary philosophies), argues that “discourse” is, in fact, a particular way of language using and of social interaction in communication that is a dimension of discourse analysis (e.g. interviews, conversations, meetings, letters, diaries, propaganda, discussions, laws, contracts, political discourses, songs, poetry, and news).

In fact, discourse is influencing and influenced by the complex social events in which language is used for communication and expressing feelings, ideas, or beliefs to others (Van Dijk, 1998). Hence, Van Dijk (1998) identifies three dimensions of language use, the communication of beliefs (cognition), and interaction in social situation for discourse (p. 2). In other words, Van Dijk (2006) taking a multidisciplinary orientation in discourse studies deals with socio-cognitive approach in which mental representations, and the processes language users go through are manifested through the relationships between the structures of discourse and interaction in communicative events in a social structure. Hence, discourse is recognizable by manifesting the connections among language use, beliefs, and social interactions (Van Dijk, 1998).

Widdowson (2000), as another famous researcher considers “discourse” as “the pragmatic process of meaning negotiation” (p.8). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) emphasize that discourse involves language use, meaning-making in the social process, and social action which are “socially constitutive” and “socially shaped” (p. 276). Fairclough (2001) preferring semiosis tries to deal with “discourse” in a different way. In fact, Fairclough (2001) observes semiosis as a distinguishing element in manipulating world action, interaction and identity construction resorting to “perspectives of different groups of social actors” (p. 164). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that discourses “are partly realized in ways of using language, but partly in other ways”, for example visual semiosis (p. 261). Considering the fact that Van Dijk’s (2000) model is selected to be molded based on the principles of critical reading; it seems to be crucial to present a precise argument of the concept of discourse and the related issues.

A. *Discourse and Cognition*

One of the issues attended by Van Dijk in dealing with discourse is related to the way through which discourse and cognition are related. Van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that discourse and cognition are related through the cognitive representation people construct in their minds—using codes, features or meaning.

Hence, brain goes through a complex bundle of processes Van Dijk, (1998) through which personal experiences and knowledge are formed. Van Dijk (1998) exemplifies “long-term memory, searching for information, comparing structures that are available in working memory, and building structures by adding, deleting, rearranging, or connecting information” as a few among others (p. 293). Van Dijk emphasizes that these complex bundles of processes are executed in mili-seconds, mechanically, unconsciously.

In other words, Van Dijk (1998) stresses that discourse cannot be analyzed comprehensively without considering the cognitive framework. To this end, Van Dijk (1998) argues that general information along with the context-related issues need to be analyzed and interpreted, stored in memory, and classified in relation to both previous and new models of situations.

So, there is no doubt that the fragments of situation models and relevant information of communicative situations be fundamental for Van Dijk (1998). Furthermore, Van Dijk (1998) underlines socially shared knowledge and beliefs as influential issues for successful and efficient communication. In addition, Van Dijk has not ignored the role of culture and argues that the supposed meanings for an extract of discourse should be interpreted through what is possible in a particular culture. Hence, for Van Dijk (1998), cognitive processes mean social dimensions which are acquired, employed, or changed through verbal or non-verbal interaction.

B. *Discourse and Society*

Van Dijk (1998), in effect, stresses on the connections between language and society as a demanding features of any discourse. Van Dijk (1998) clarifies the point that language plays a significant role in society through which the identities, cultural group, or community through using language as a communicative medium are expressed.

In fact, discourse is crucial in representing and constructing the characteristics of the socio-cultural context. Van Dijk (1998) argues that discourse may shed light on the way through which language is used by a particular group, organization, culture or society. Hence, discourse may demystify the complicated arrangements and categorizations of interaction formed in a specific context, society and culture. Van Dijk (1998) attends to discourses a way to determine the ideological perspectives.

Considering the fact that any ideology demands shared knowledge, communal interests and individual practices; attending to discourse analysis means dealing with the perspective and ideologies of the members of any group or society involved in a discourse in terms of what they do and why they do in that way, their norms for goodness and badness as well as their social positions, etc. (Van Dijk, 1998).

For Van Dijk (1998), discourse means ideologies and social groups as a cycle, in which discourse is understood, shared, abstracted and generalized. Van Dijk (1998) points out that any social group having their own specific way in interpreting understanding, and categorizing different phenomena; argued that the culture—not independent from this issue—shares common senses, procedures, strategies, structures and processes.

C. Discourse and Power

The third dimension which is considered by Van Dijk in dealing with discourse analysis is related to the concept of Power which has influenced the social cognition. Power as a fundamental dimension of discourse affects the way through which language is used to represent the individual identities, social identities, classes, institutions and the relationships between the dominant and the less powerful members of any society (Van Dijk, 1998). For Van Dijk (1997, 1998, 2000, 2004), power means social power which highlights the relations which exist between and among groups. Van Dijk (1998) argues that power needs to be considered since it may reveal some fundamental dimensions of hegemony which in its turn uncovers the socio-economic, legal or political power, ascribed to the elites.

To this end, Van Dijk (1998) recognizes six ways through which the elites have grabbed the power, i.e. forced, persuasive, alleged hegemony, controlling the context, the access people have to certain discourse, and the characteristics of the structures used. Accordingly, discourse, for Van Dijk (1998), refers to an instrument for getting benefits through manipulating language to influence the intended people.

D. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) a version of discourse analysis is especially utilized in dealing with social issues (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) to manifest "the relations between discourse and power" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 363). Widdowson (2000) argues that CDA is a framework for revealing the implicit ideologies covered in the texts. Gee (2004) considers CDA

an approach to language analysis that considers texts as parts of specific social practices that have political implications about issues of status, solidarity, and of distribution of social goods and power (pp. 32-33).

Heros (2009), on the other hand, argues that

CDA examines how texts represent and construct reality within a specific ideological system through implicit messages based on what is said and left unsaid (p. 173).

Generally speaking, CDA is a perspective of discourse analysis in which the ideological performances are manifested through revealing the manipulations imposed on the discourse. Hence, CDA fights against the naturalized inequalities in which a side has privileges, power and access to goods and services in society and the other side is deprived of. In other words, CDA is a discipline which argues that the way language has direct association with why an ideological interpretation is considered as reality and convincing one and not the other way around.

Effectively, CDA has taken two directions of linguistic and texture (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and Garro Joseph, 2005). Rogers, et al. (2005) argue that Halliday's (1960) *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) is the foundation of CDA. Rogers, et al. (2005) add that any discourse is analyzed using CDA and resorting to the fundamentals of functional grammar in terms of three functions of ideational, textual and interpersonal.

E. Van Dijk's Model

Van Dijk's (1998) Socio-Cognitive model is similar to Fairclough's three-dimensional model in terms of a triangulation perspective; however, in Van Dijk's model, it is the cognition instead of member resources that mediates between discourse and society. Using Van Dijk's model, the linguistic features which exist in the texts (spoken or written) may provide some traces of the elements entangled in psychological model of memory as well as in the *frame* taken from cognitive science. Van Dijk's model especially is crucial in analyzing discourse in terms of stereotypes, ethnic prejudice, and power abuse by elites as well as resistance by dominated groups in the media.

Hence, Van Dijk (1995, 1998, 2000, and 2006) has presented a theoretical framework for analyzing discourse on the basis that ideology and discourse cannot be adequately studied unless considering cognition and society. Van Dijk (1998) argues that a socio-cognitive approach "is able to explain how ideologies monitor practices of social actors in the society" (p. 23). Van Dijk's (2001) considers cognition as a central element which relates discourse structures and social structures. He stresses that discourse and society are mediated through cognition.

In other words, social dimension tries to answer the question about "why people develop and use ideologies in the first place" (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 24). Finally, the last part of Van Dijk's triangular model is discourse which refers a communicative event, composes of

conversational interactions, written text, as well as associated gestures, face work, typographical layout, images and any other 'semiotic' or multimedia dimension of signification (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 98).

There are different versions of Van Dijk's Model (e.g. 1998, 2000, 2004. etc.) among which Van Dijk's (2000) model is composed of forty-two discursive strategies for analyzing discourse to demystify the ideology.

F. Focus Group: Theoretical Definition

Focus group which was originally called focused interview or group depth interview was developed after World War II for examining the responses of the audiences to the radio programs (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In effect, focus group may be considered as a useful instrument for understanding howness or whyness of people's beliefs regarding a topic or program. It is worth mentioning that focus group comprises a group of individuals with common interest or characteristics who are interacting with each other focusing on an issue (Webb & Kevern, 2001). Furthermore, Nyamathi and Schuler (1990, p.1283) clarifies that focus group is, in effect, "a qualitative method which bears similarities to ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and participant observation".

Hence, a focus group is recommended to be composed of 6-12 people (Asbury, 1995). In effect, the selected participants for a focus group should be selected based on the common characteristics relating to the aimed topic or issue. Furthermore, the researcher's duty is to create a context that encourages different perceptions to share their points of view, without any pressure on the participants to vote, plan or reach consensus (Krueger, 1988). It is worth mentioning that the focus group is needed to be conducted several times with similar types of participants in order to identify the attitudes and perceptions of the participants regarding the raised issues. In other words, the discussions need to be analyzed systematically by the researcher to have an accurate presentation of clues and insights regarding the points of view presented by the participants.

Hence, focus group, according to Barbour and Kitzinger (1999), may provide some information regarding the way the participants think or feel about a particular topic; the reasons for which are evaluating; planning and improving the old programs; and finally, developing strategies for outreach. However, focus group enjoys some certain advantages mentioned above, the focus group may suffer from validity of the information provided by the participants or the result of a focus group may not be generalizable to other groups of people (Goss, 1998). Hence, focus group method is not considered a valid way to find out how much progress an individual participant has made toward his or her own goals (Goss, 1998).

The main weakness of the focus group is related to the fact that a very small number of people are involved in any focus group; accordingly, the results regarding views and perceptions presented by the participants may not be generalizable since, the group is not a random sample (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999).

Generally, focus group has its own advantages and disadvantages. One of the main advantages of any focus group is related to the natural interaction which happens among the participants which highlights the face validity along the flexibility it may provide for the researcher. However, less control over group; the information provided by the participants as well as the uncertainty regarding the provided information by the participants may be considered as the main disadvantages of a focus group.

Krueger (1988) argues about three phases for conducting a focus group, i.e. conceptualization, interview as well as analysis and reporting. In the conceptualization phase, the purpose, participants in terms of the characteristics, as well as plan and resources are determined. In the interview phase, the questions are developed (5-6 questions), logically arranged and systematically piloted. Analyzing and reporting phase, on the other hand, composed of analysis and reporting of the results.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participant Selection

The participants were 30 intermediate language learners from two language institutes in Khoy (Roshd-e-Bartar & Rezvan), with 15 students in each gender (15 females and 15 males). It is worth mentioning that the present study is conducted based on an empirical study and the attitudes of the learners regarding the used approach resorting to focus group and this issue highlights the unique feature of this study.

Hence, all the selected subjects were between 18-23 years old with the same native language, i.e. Turkish. All of them were similar in terms of the credit hours they have passed. Effectively, all the subjects were considered to be intermediate since all of them were the language learners of the same institute who were studying in the same level and whose score on the semester's exam showed that they are intermediate.

In effect, the classes were held for two two-hour session per week for a total of 20 hours over 5 weeks. The class schedule for the four groups was started at 10-12 am, the first group (males) on Mondays and Thursdays, and the second group (females) on Sundays and Thursdays.

B. Materials

The following presents the list of the covered reading passages in the course:

- ▶ Preventing Illness
- ▶ Marriage and Family
- ▶ The Study of Twins
- ▶ Gestural Communication
- ▶ The Nonverbal and Verbal: First Encounter
- ▶ Friendship Functions

C. The Model of Study

Figure 3.1 shows Van Dijk's (2000) socio-cognitive model utilized in the present study. In effect, the selected reading comprehension passages were taught to two groups of females and males using a critical-based approach selected and adopted based on Van Dijk's (2000) Socio-cognitive model. It is worth mentioning that the two groups went through a critical approach selected and adopted from the Van Dijk's (2000) model to meet the needs of the study in which the students' awareness and consciousness were raised—for example, they pay attention to the micro-strategies applied in presenting the texts (strategies like hyperbole, explanation, etc.). The following diagram illustrates the adopted method in conducting the present study:

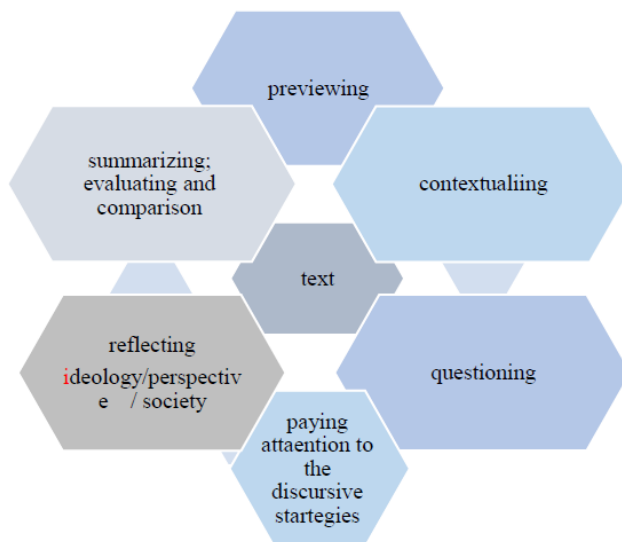


Figure 3.1: The Model of Analysis designed based on Van Dijk's (2000) Socio-cognitive model

D. Procedures (Data Collection)

In conducting the present study, in every two sessions, one reading comprehension passage was covered. In teaching reading comprehension passages to the language learners, a critical discourse analysis framework was selected and adopted. In effect, in teaching the reading passages, using Van Dijk's (2000) socio-cognitive model, the students' consciousness and awareness were raised to encourage the students to get a deeper understanding of the texts. At the end of the course, the groups went through a focus group to discuss their experiences from going through a critical-based approach. In effect, the subjects discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the worked model in terms of the learning and retention of the materials. The following sheds light on the questions which were posed to the participants in the focus group:

Q1: Did you get satisfaction from the utilized methodology in teaching reading comprehension? If so, why and how?

Q2: Did you get more understanding from the reading passage utilizing the critical-based model? If so, why and how?

Q3: Did you receive more interaction with the passages which were instructed? Support your responses?

Q4: Did you prefer a critical-based approach for learning? Why yes? Why not?

Effectively, 30 female and male students (15 males and 15 females) were instructed in terms of reading comprehension passages. In effect, they received instructions on reading comprehension of 6 selected passages from the *Academic Encounters*. Hence, the both groups of females and males went under instruction on ten reading comprehension passages selected randomly from the textbook. The participants' background knowledge was raised based on the topics of the selected reading comprehension passages. Furthermore, the participants were expected to access to deeper meaning of the passages, i.e. hidden perspective and ideology behind the texts. Finally, the participants took a test at the end of the course followed by a focus group to share their ideas regarding the course.

The first questions were asked from the participants was *whether the participants got satisfaction from the utilized methodology in teaching reading comprehension*. The next question which was posed to the subjects was *whether they got more understanding from the reading passage utilizing the critical-based model*. The third question which was posed was *whether they received more interaction with the passages instructed to them*. And finally *whether they prefer a critical-based approach for learning*. The mentioned four questions were stimulus-raising questions to elicit the attitudes of the learners regarding the course in which the learners had to provide some bases for saying yes or no.

The students took part in the focus group to share their ideas and attitudes regarding the course. It is worth mentioning that the participants attended in two focus groups—one for females and one for males. The students had to answer the questions firstly in a yes-no fashion. After that they had to support their ideas using their reasons and rationales.

IV. RESULTS

The subjects were firstly asked *whether the participants got satisfaction from the utilized methodology in teaching reading comprehension*.

The following table shows that perspectives of the learners ranging the first question. As the table shows 30% of the participants did not get satisfaction from the course; whereas, 70% had positive attitudes regarding the course. It is worth mentioning that the researcher coded, tabulated and numerated the provided the data based on which he determined the percentages.

TABLE 1:
THE ATTITUDES OF THE PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THE FIRST QUESTION

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
no	9	30.0	30.0	30.0
yes	21	70.0	70.0	100.0
total	30	100.0	100.0	

The participants who had a negative attitude regarding the course argued that course was not administered based on their expectation. They mentioned that the course was much demanding and challenging for them since, they had to understand the reading text thoroughly. They added that they were accustomed to the reading courses in which they were supposed to answer the raised questions correctly; whereas, in this course, they had to analyze the utilized vocabularies and structures in order to elucidate the perspective and ideology covered in the text. Furthermore, they criticized the course based on the fact that they had to allocate so much time for preparing the lesson for the next session.

The participants who had a positive attitude regarding the course argued, on the other hand, that course was so interesting and challenging that they enjoy from learning. They mentioned that the course, however, was demanding and challenging; it gave them more understanding from the reading passage. They added that they understood the reasons for utilizing some particular vocabularies and structures in the academic texts and not in other types of genres.

In effect, the participants who had a positive attitude regarding the course mentioned that the analysis of vocabularies and structures to elucidate the perspective and ideology covered in the text was the most interesting parts of the course. Furthermore, they suggested that some similar courses should be administered for other skills to help them to improve their English proficiency.

The next question which was discussed between the participants was whether they got more understanding from the reading passage utilizing the critical-based model. However, in posing the first question some learners expressed understanding as a positive characteristic of the course; the students discussed their understating with reasons for this question.

As the table shows about 33% of the participants observed no difference between the course and the traditional one in terms of improving the understanding of the learners. Furthermore, about 66.7% had another view. They considered understanding as a positive characteristic of the course.

TABLE 2:
THE ATTITUDES OF THE PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THE SECOND QUESTION

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
no	10	33.3	33.3	33.3
yes	20	66.7	66.7	100.0
total	30	100.0	100.0	

The participants who had a negative attitude regarding the course argued that course was time-consuming in which they had to pay attention to many items. They mentioned that the course, however, claimed to improve the understanding of the reading passages; it was not successful; since, they did not use their understanding in an authentic situation merging with other skills. They added that they expected that they read to find some particular information or to get a broad understanding of the reading passage; however, the reading courses demanded them to analyze the linguistic features of the texts for uncovering the perspective and ideology covered in the text which they could not understand the relation between linguistic items and ideology of the writer. Furthermore, they criticized the course that had focused on text analysis which is far from reading comprehension.

The participants who had positive attitudes regarding the course argued, on the other hand, that course was successful in raising consciousness which had a direct relation with reading comprehension. They emphasized that the course elucidated the connotative meaning of the words and the structures which innovatively attempted to teach the students the play of words and language manipulation through which a single phenomenon may be represented differently based on the attitudes of a writer. Furthermore, they pointed out that they learned that any genre demands a particular set of terminologies and structures as well as collocations.

The next question which was discussed between the participants was *whether they received more interaction with the passages instructed to them*. The students in the same vein had to answer in a yes-no fashion.

As the table shows about 33% of the participants considered no difference between the course and the traditional one in terms of improving the interactions of the learners with the texts. Furthermore, about 66.7% had another view. They

considered more interaction with the text as a positive characteristic of the course.

TABLE 3:
THE ATTITUDES OF THE PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THE THIRD QUESTION

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
no	9	33.3	33.3	33.3
yes	21	66.7	66.7	100.0
total	30	100.0	100.0	

The participants who had a negative attitude regarding the more interaction with the texts using the course argued that the only things they had to do were analyzing the linguistic features of the texts. They mentioned that the course was demanding in such a way that they just did mechanical analysis without any situations to use the strategies in reading texts. They added that since they were accustomed to read for locating some particular information or getting a broad understanding of the reading passage; they became puzzled.

The participants who had positive attitudes regarding the more interaction of the course with the texts argued that the course was successful in which the learners had reasons for utilizing diverse micro- and macro-strategies. Hence, they mentioned that the course focusing on the perspectives and ideologies behind the texts try to elucidate the connotative meaning of the words and the structures.

The next question which was discussed among the participants was *whether they preferred a critical-based approach for learning*. They students in the same vein had to answer in a yes-no fashion.

As the table shows about 30% of the participants didn't prefer a critical-based course for learning reading skill. Furthermore, about 70% had another view. They preferred a critical-based approach.

TABLE 4:
THE ATTITUDES OF THE PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THE FOURTH QUESTION

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
no	9	30.0	30.0	30.0
yes	21	70.0	70.0	100.0
total	30	100.0	100.0	

The participants who had a negative attitude towards using critical-based approaches argued that they were accustomed to accept anything they read as garbated and it is challenging for them to question anything they encountered in the reading passages. Furthermore, they emphasized that mechanical analysis of the linguistic features is not a guarantee for a better understanding of the reading passage. They also pointed out that the information regarding the perspectives or ideologies of the texts was not directly included to the texts and it is so demanding to locate it.

The participants who preferred a critical-based approach argued that a critical-based approach teaches the learners that using any type of vocabularies or structures has a specific reason. Furthermore, they emphasized that English language learners need to learn diverse strategies to use in their reading tasks. Moreover, they stated that the critical-based courses focusing on the perspectives and ideologies behind the texts equipped the learners to get access to the profound meanings of the texts.

To measure the participants' attitudes towards the use of critical awareness techniques in academic reading, students were asked several direct questions. Whether the course was a successful and whether they preferred this course instead of the traditional ones which they were supposed to answer in a *yes* or *no* format. The ones who answered *yes* were asked to numerate the positive features of the course they went through and the ones who said *no* were asked to numerate the negative features of the course comparing the traditional ones. As the table shows most of the participants about 70% had positive attitudes regarding the course.

Four 90-minute focus groups and 10 two-hour instructional course were conducted with Iranian English language learners in 2014. A total of 30 Iranian intermediate English Learners participated in the study. The sample included both females and males with the age range between 18-23 from two English language Institutes in Khoy.

The subjects who were 15 females and 15 males underwent a twenty-hour instructional course in which ten reading passages which selected randomly from the *Academic Encounters* series were covered during five weeks. It is worth mentioning that the course was separately held for female and male participants because of the cultural constraints of our society. Following the instruction, the two groups of females and males took part in two 90-minute focus groups in which they discussed their attitudes regarding the course they went through in terms of the way they were instructed.

The responses of the participants were coded and descriptively were analyzed which showed that nearly 70 percent of the responses were of a positive opinion with respect to the critical-based instruction for reading comprehension. Effectively, nearly 70 percent of the participants argued about the critical-based method as being interesting, challenging, and successful in consciousness rising as well as improving understanding and finally being interactive-based.

V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of the study was to investigate the attitudes of the subjects towards the use of critical awareness techniques in the academic texts. Hence, the study utilizing awareness techniques in teaching reading comprehension

tried to investigate the attitudes of the learners. The participants who had positive attitudes regarding the critical awareness techniques argued that a better understanding and getting access to the deepest meaning of the text was the positive characteristics of the methodology used in teaching reading comprehension. Critical language awareness (CLA) rooted in language awareness (LA) refers to a mental and internal capacity emerged as a movement in the UK in the 1980s.

The study tried to teach reading comprehension utilizing innovative models based on the tenets of critical reading and critical discourse analysis. In effect, the study was conducted based on the principles of language awareness—a field of study which refers to the motivation and conscious attention to the language by individuals, especially the learners (Koupaei, Rahimi, & Shams, 2010).

It is worth mentioning that language awareness was developed as a reaction to mainstream trends of research in which Krashen's direct method was dominant. However, Krashen and his fellows considered language learning as unconscious processes; language awareness in general and critical language awareness paradigms view language learning as conscious processes. One of the main tenets which followed in the present study and considered by the learners as a positive characteristic of the course was the challenges the students went through to get access to the deeper meaning of the text. Hawkins (1984) argues that the main purpose of the language awareness is to challenge the students regarding the issues they have taken for granted.

Hence, in answering the only question of the study which was "what are the attitudes of readers of academic reading passages in using critical awareness techniques in their reading performance?" we should say that the results of the study indicated a positive attitude in which they argued that a critical-based approach teach the learners that using any type of vocabularies or structures has a specific reason. Furthermore, they emphasized that English language learners need to learn diverse strategies to use in their writing or speaking tasks. Moreover, they stated that the critical-based courses focusing on the perspectives and ideologies behind the texts equipped the learners to get access to the profound meanings of the texts.

Effectively, the results of the study supported the suggested hypothesis in which the readers of academic reading passages have a positive perspective in using critical awareness techniques in their reading performance. Hawkins (1984) argues about language across the curriculum as "a concept in this context where LA would strengthen coherence in the child's education by being considered both vertically and horizontally in the school program" (p. 26).

Hence, it is suggested that critical-based approaches should be considered as crucial in improving the reading comprehension of the learners.

Several studies were conducted in which cognitive and metacognitive strategies seemed to be beneficial for reading comprehension purposes (e.g. Gersten, et al. 2001; Pressley, 2000; Swanson, 1999); however so few studies, if any, tried to investigate the attitudes of the learners towards teaching the critical awareness techniques utilized in the academic reading passages. McLaughlin and Allen (2002) argue that the good readers are those who apply comprehension strategies for facilitating the process of reading comprehension, i.e. constructing meaning.

Pedagogical Implications of the study

This study is beneficial for language teachers, language learners as well as curriculum designers as follows.

The findings of this research suggest that a good language teacher needs to adopt a critical outlook towards the role played by the use of critical awareness techniques in academic reading comprehension.

Moreover, the findings of this study insist that teachers develop professional knowledge and expertise using critical-based approaches through which they raise the consciousness of learners in order to capable students to get access to a deeper meaning of the text.

The findings of this study may also be of interest for policy makers since the effects of teaching through a critical-based method on the reading proficiency of learners should be considered.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brooks, M. (1997). Improving Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Development in At-Risk Students. Master's Action Research Project, Saint Xavier University.
- [2] Celce-Murcia, M., & Olshtain, E. (2000). Discourse and context in language teaching: A guide for language teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Fairclough, N. (2001). Language and Power (2nd Ed.). London and New York: London.
- [4] Fairclough, N. (2003). Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research. London: Routledge.
- [5] Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. (Vol. 2, pp. 258-84).
- [6] Heros, S (2009). Linguistic pluralism or prescriptivism? A CDA of language ideologies in Talento, Peru's official textbook for the first-year of high school. *Linguistics and Education*, 20, 172-199.
- [7] Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- [8] McCarthy, M. (1991). Discourse analysis for language teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [9] McCarthy, Michael, Carter & Ronald. (1994). Language as discourse: Perspectives for language teaching. London: Longman.
- [10] Rogers, R., Malancharuvil-Berkes, E., Mosley, M., Hui, D., & O Garro Joseph, G. (2005). Critical Discourse Analysis in Education: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 365-416.
- [11] Slavin, R.E. (1989). What Works for Students At Risk: A Research Synthesis. *Educational Leadership*, pp. 4-13

- [12] Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- [13] Van Dijk, T.A. (ed.) (1997). *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage Publication.
- [14] Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Discourse analysis as ideology analysis. In C. Schaffner & A. Wenden (Eds.), *Language and Pace* (pp.17-33). Dartmouth: Aldershot.
- [15] Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary study*. London. Sage Publications.
- [16] Van Dijk, T. A. (2000). Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary introduction. Retrieved June 23, 2010 from <http://www.discourses.org>.
- [17] Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(2), 115-140.
- [18] Widdowson, H. (2000). Critical Practices: On Representation and the Interpretation of Text. In: S. Sarangi & Malcolm Coulthard (Eds.), *Discourse and social life*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Pasha Mohtadi was born in Iran in 1980. He received B.A and M.A degrees in English Teaching from Islamic Azad University of Marand and Islamic Azad University of Maragheh in 2008 and 2014 respectively. He is the director of Roshdeh-Bartar English Language Institute in Khoy.

Davud Kuhi is an assistant professor of linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis in Islamic Azad University.