



Critical Thinking, Reading and Listening Skills

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Abstract: *The cumulative works of critical scholars' date back to centuries ago. Scholars have either added to the body of knowledge or modified the existing theories, concepts or constructs. Contrary to their willingness to contribute, they cannot ignore the existing body of knowledge, but rather they should be able to expand the area of scholarship and free inquiry. This study has investigated the critical scholar from the point of view of critical thinking, in which the man's clear and rational thinking about actions and beliefs is taken into account. Also, critical reading where language is analysed against its textual value, and critical listening in which through suspending judgement in audience, an important obstacle in human communication diminishes, have been taken into consideration.*

Keywords: *Critical thinking, Critical reading, Critical listening, Criticalism*

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking gained prominence after Socrates questioned Greek myths that people could not rationalize, he noticed that early human communication was laced in ambiguous meanings, insufficient proof and self-contradictions that are often enveloped by 'sugar' and empty rhetoric (Egan, 2016). Socrates thereafter established that it is not enough to assimilate information from people in authority; even so, man must exercise his capacity to apply criticalism (reasoning, assumptions and the analysis of common concepts) in his thoughts and actions for human communication to become effective.

Human communication is an evocative expression of information, feelings and thoughts between two people, and critical thinking rests at the core of this expression. Human communication goes through the process of thought, mood and sentiment; and it is in this process that the human mind coherently seeks clarity and logicalness of an idea; it questions our reasoning and helps us to develop intelligible arguments by eliminating vagueness in human communication (Vora, 2014).

However, human communication is much about listening as it is about thinking (Nichols & Stevens, 1957); it involves the cautious interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication, and deciphers open and hidden meanings. Listening is not only this, but also the agglomeration of even pre-existing schema (Demiral, 2013). Listening helps us to suspend our judgments in audience by plotting the thought process of the rhetorician, we respond effectively in context rather than by reaction. In this regard therefore, we safely conclude that the critical scholar requires a systematic process that embodies clarity, accuracy, fairness, relevance, depth, breadth, and logicalness of thoughts, words and action (Irandoost & Boury-Brisset, 2005; Paul & Elder, 2009), which will question and focus on the importance of reasoning as the requisite foundations of critical scholarship.

A brief history of critical scholarship

The intellectual origin of critical scholarship is traced to the teachings and practice of Socrates in critical thinking. Socrates amplified the assumption that early human communication is based on conjectures and

unjustifiable claims, which produce confusing meanings and are often self-contradictory (Oyler & Romanelli, 2014). He laid the foundation for critical thinking by amplifying the importance of academic evidence, examination of reason, consideration and scrutiny of common assumptions and the systematic monitoring of implications of words and action. Through 'Socratic Questioning', scholars can now emphasize the need for clarity and logical consistency in any argument.

To preserve this line of inquiry, Plato documented the teachings and practices of Socrates, which was later amplified by Aristotle and other Greek scholars who agreed that assumptions and conjectures have no room in scholarship, unless they pass through the rigour of critical thought (Paul & Elder, 2009). The Greeks therefore, concretized the teachings and practice of critical thinking by fostering the understanding of deeper truths; they established a systematic process of thought that traces the implications of our words and actions broadly and deeply, where only objectivity and common reasoning are accepted beyond their face value.

It was with this foundation that the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*) in the middle ages found its intellectual pedigree. He subjected his work to the rigour of critical thought, by testing and considering possible criticisms at every stage of its (*Summa Theologica*) development. His work, amplified our consciousness not only to the supremacy of reasoning but also to the systematic refinement of reasoning and cross-questioning (Spinale, 2015).

Other notable works in critical scholarship continued in the renaissance period (15-16th Century Europe) with scholars like John Colet, Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas Moore who questioned the foundations of religion, human culture, law and freedom among other issues (Yoran, 2010). They concluded with the assumption that human nature is devoid of criticalism and as such failed to address 'clear and present needs'. Francis Bacon in his book 'The Advancement of learning' also collaborated the positions of the trio, he argued for the importance of empirical studies and the dangers of leaving the human mind to its natural propensities (McClinton, 2010). René Descartes immediately followed the contributions of these scholars with his book 'Rules for the direction of the mind' where he amplified and supported the need for clarity and precision in human communication (Joachin, 1957). This does not exclude the works of Niccolo Machiavelli especially in his epistle to the prince of France (*The Prince*), therein he disparaged the common assumptions on the functions of the state by laying the foundations for political thought (Harrison, 2011). Within the same era in England, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke adopted the critical reasoning approach where the worldview is expressed by evidence. One of the major contributions of Locke is the development of critical scholarship by encouraging accountable governments to surrender to the logical criticism of thoughtful citizens (Paul & Elder, 2009).

Following the successes of these scholars, people like Robert Boyle, Sir Isaac Newton, Pierre Bayle, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu commonly known as Montesquieu advocated the critical thinking. Others including François-Marie Arouet, known by his nom de plume Voltaire and Denis Diderot all reflected critically on the conceited worldviews and advocated for their replacement with views that are based on evidence and critical reasoning (Deligiorgi, 2005; Paul & Elder, 2009; Bhanderi, 2015).

Afterwards, the contributions of scholars like Adam Smith (*Wealth of Nations*), Immanuel Kant (*Critique of pure Reason*), the economic critique of Karl Max, the 'Descent of Man' by Charles Darwin, and in the understanding of human cognition in the works of Sigmund Freud contributed largely in the understanding of human communication (Melton, 2011). Critical scholarship also paved the way for its application in cultural studies, anthropology and linguistics.

In the last two centuries, scholars like William Graham also published his study on the foundations for anthropology and sociology in 1906. He noted the significance of critical thought against our social indoctrination (uncritical); this was collaborated by the works of Charles Sumner with emphasis on critical learning and a pragmatic approach to human communication supported by John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein also raised the significance of theories in human communication (Deligiorgi, 2005). From these contributions,

the vulnerability of the human mind and how it reconciles typecasts and stooges in human communication have been understood.

Critical thinking

The etymology of critical thinking has its origins in the word 'critical' which was derived from two Greek words- 'kriticos' which means perceptive judgment, and 'kriterion' which means standard. Therefore, etymologically, the word 'critical' infers the growth of 'perceptive judgement based on empirical standard' (Paul, Elder, & Bartell, 1997). In its simplest definition, critical thinking refers to a mode of thinking that improves our thought processes through a skilful analysis, assessment and reconstruction. Critical thinking is a self-examined, self-corrective and self-disciplined process of inquiry. It presumes a concurrence to rigorous standards and excellence, it embodies all the constructs that make human communication effective with a strong obligation to overcome our innate ability to pamper 'self' to the detriment of 'all' (Nadel, Majewski, & Sullivan-Cosseti, 2007).

Therefore, we safely conclude that critical thinking in an exceptional pursuit that is practical, hinged on the Greek philosophy of living an 'examined life', it is imbedded in skills, insights and values that constitute the thought process from beginning to the end. As a learning tool, it entrusts the practicability in our words and action. Critical thinking is transformative and formative; it promulgates logical standards and helps us to negotiate the relationships between our thoughts, and reading and listening capacities.

Critical thinking: The thought process

For the purpose of this study, we have examined the thought process using the Paul-Elder critical thinking framework which is divided into three modules namely:

1. The elements that constitute the thought process (reasoning)
2. The intellectual standards applicable in the thought process
3. The intellectual personas concomitant with a cultured critical thinker, which will be the results of the consistency, discipline and application of intellectual standards to the rudiments of thought.

These modules form the foundations of critical thinking according to Paul and Elder (1997). The execution of these modules is however dependent upon the mastery of the following elements:

1. The elements that constitute the thought process (reasoning):

- a. That there must be tenacity in all reasoning (purpose)
- b. That reasoning is not done in abstraction but rather to question or solve a problem
- c. That assumptions must form the primary basis for reasoning
- d. That reasoning is subjective and cannot be disentangled from a given point of view
- e. That reasoning must be drawn by empiricism (information and evidence)
- f. That concepts and ideas must shape the expression of the thought process
- g. That conclusions must accept inferences and extant interpretations to make sense
- h. That reasoning must be determinate with possible implications and consequences

2. The intellectual standards applicable in the thought process:

Intellectual standards refer to the elements applied to verify the quality of the thought process (Paul, Elder, & Bartell, 1997); they are applied to foster uniformity and acceptability of the thought process by ensuring the following elements which are adhered to:

- a. Clarity- which will include elaboration, illustration and applicable examples,
- b. Accuracy- which stipulates the verification process and also guarantees the authenticity of the claim,
- c. Precision- stresses the need for details, correctness and specificity,
- d. Relevance- implies the relationship of the problem, its tolerability and its significance to the body of knowledge,
- e. Depth- examines the difficulties, complexities and the challenges inherent in the thought process,

- f. Breadth- the sturdiness to accommodate different perspectives and the flexibility to be examined from different ‘intellectual lenses,’
- g. Logic- is simply defined as the common sense appeal, it embodies the consistency in the argument and the use of evidence or information to provide necessary support,
- h. Significance- stresses the importance of the thought process by elevating it for intellectual consideration and the elucidation of facts drawn in the thought process,
- i. Fairness- puts the thought process in context by re-examining the thought intent and keeping faith to educated guesses,

It is in this regard that the critical thinker becomes intellectually humble, which is the mean between intellectual haughtiness and intellectual timidity (Church, 2015). The critical thinker becomes intellectually courageous, begins to exhume intellectual empathy, exercises intellectual autonomy, earns intellectual integrity, demonstrates intellectual perseverance, becomes intellectually confident and exhibits fair-mindedness in critical scholarship.

These personas produce a cultured critical scholar who has the capacity to raise pertinent questions, by clearly formulating them with utmost precision, has the ability to access and assess relevant information for effective interpretation, arrives at informed conclusions that can be tested against intellectual standards, and is open to alternative thought processes by evaluating common assumptions and practical concerns. Finally, a cultured critical thinker is able to converse successfully with others to design and find answers to complex problems (Wagner, 2008).

Reading

Reading is a deliberate process undertaken in human communication to reduce ambiguity about connotations a given text expresses, it also includes the conciliation of open and hidden meanings between the text and its reader, and is a mental process for interpreting symbols (Chang, 1983).

Whereas, reading comprehension refers to the understanding of our conclusions after the negotiations of meaning between a text and the reader, reading comprehension involves the assimilation and interpretation of both existing and external schema (Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001). It also shows that reading comprehension is an ‘art’ that relies on the mastery of phonology, arrangement, semantics and pragmatics (Tompkins, 2010).

Reading dates back to the invention of writing in 400 BC (Coulson, 2008). There is a consensus among scholars who assume that reading aloud (*clare legere*) was more common in the distant past contrary to reading silently (*legere tacite* or *legere sibi*) (Jajdelska, 2007). However, the deep-thinking movement, which controlled the world of ‘accepted wisdom’ mostly in 18th century Europe, consists of a range of ideas that spun around critical thinking as its major foundation of authority and legitimacy, it also promoted submissive reading instead of inventive interpretation (De Certeau, 1984). During this era, writing ranked superior to reading as the art of writing ranked equally with the production of cultural heritages, in this regard; the society relegated readers and considered them as passive citizens.

After the gloomy days, reading became renowned as a panacea to societal predicaments, during the renaissance and until the 20th century, self-discovery was illuminated by the art of reading. A reader was then celebrated as the arbiter of rationality and progress. Egalitarians and anarchists all see reading as an ethical and cerebral resource for conducting a pulsating public life, and to the middle class reading is a necessary tool for social change.

In the 21st century however, there is a growing propensity to cheapen the reader (Herrema, 2005), despite our technological advancements and the growing influence of the new media, and we have lost our intellectual autonomy to define what the ‘culture ideal’ is really. This argument therefore, is concerned that the damaging influence of digital technology and the internet on reading comprehension is actually a conjecture.

Reading typologies

There has been attempts by different scholar to categorize reading typologies, while some categories featured independently; many of them are only a sub-set of the other (Solak, 2014). In this regard therefore, reading should be broadly categorized by its orality or its silence.

1. Reading aloud (oral)
2. Reading silently
 - a) Intensive reading
 - i. Reading linguistically
 - ii. Content reading
 - b) Extensive reading
 - i. Reading by skimming
 - ii. Reading by scanning
 - iii. Global reading

Oral reading- oral reading or oral reading fluency is described as the capacity to express texts quickly and accurately, it is a reading typology that allows the reader to decode the wordings of a page (Rasplica & Cummings, 2013). There is evidence that proves reading fluency is connected to oral reading, this makes it an important element required in reading comprehension (Neuman, 1996).

Silent reading- this type of reading also encounters other sub-types such as intensive reading where the reader is concerned about specificity on one hand and extensive reading, which deals with fluency and comprehension of large amount of materials directly (Renandya, 2007). Extensive reading may include reading for pleasure or technical reading. Although technical text may be more academically appealing, it often involves two specific types of reading which are- 'scanning' for important details or 'skimming' for indispensable connotations. In addition, a third sub-type is the 'global reading,' which is a rapid and proficient read gives the reader a general meaning of the text.

Reading methodologies

Reading is a process that is perfected by an unceasing practice, improvement, and fine-tuning. Reading is creative and at the same time critical. We create meanings by innately deviating from its literal texts. Unlike other processes, reading cannot be controlled or restricted to ordinary interpretations; it is individualistic and allows the reader to make meaning introspectively (De Certeau, 1984). By adopting certain reading methodologies, the capacity to explore texts during interpretation has been enhanced.

- Sub-vocalization- sometimes is referred to as eye reading, it is combined with internal vocalization to the mimic of the spoken word (Moidel, 1998); although scholars have condemned it for slowing reading comprehension, sub-vocalization remains a method of reading.
- Speed reading- is a reading method that is hinged on the speed of the reader that does not affect reading comprehension. It is perfected by breaking apart words in a body of text, which will improve the reading rate.
- Proofreading- is the reading method charged with identifying and correcting textual errors (grammar, punctuation and formatting errors). During proofreading, reading comprehension is suspended in favour of textual accuracy, as such a proof-reader may miss the incoherency of an article in favour of its textual correctness.
- Re-reading- simply means rereading an already read text. It is useful for a reflective responsive connection and self-reflection, and it allows the reader to situate his thoughts around the textual plots or events (Spacks, 2011).

For the purposes of teaching, the following reading methods are also important-

- a. Structure-proposition-evaluation (SPE)- where reading is done in three phases (structure, logic and evaluation),
- b. Survey-question-read-recite-review (SQ3R)- used in public schools by instructors to be able to teach what is read.

- c. Multiple intelligence- as a linguistic activity it allows the reader to infer to several intelligences (sight, hearing and feel) while reading
- Rapid-serial-visual presentation (RSVP) – used to measure speed-reading, it refers to the method of presenting one word at a time using specified eccentricity. It helps to reduce inter-word and intra-word saccades.

Critical reading

On the other hand, critical reading refers to the capacity to engage a text actively in a process that seeks to analyse, interpret and evaluate it (Reza, 2011). It employs the critical thinking skills by subjecting the text to Socratic questioning. Critical reading is interested in the coherency of the argument; to achieve this it applies the following considerations-

- a. Readers' background
- b. Purpose and strength of claim
- c. Evidence applied in the reading process
- d. The logic between the claim and the evidence
- e. Balance in judgment
- f. Reading limitations and
- g. Interest in research methodology for academic papers.

Reading disabilities

Scholars have catalogued three different disabilities in reading, although they sometime overlap, they remain distinct in their characteristics (Catts, Adlof, Hogan, & Weismer, 2005). The three reading disabilities are-

1. Deficit in phonology- which implicates a major problem in orality when it comes to processing phonology,
2. Deficit in processing orthography- is also referred to as a problem in reading fluency, and
3. Deficit in reading comprehension- which sometimes overlaps with the first two, but distinctive as a social learning disability. This should not be confused with weak impulse control, distractibility and problems with comprehending spoken language (Moats & Tolman, 2009).

Listening

Listening is described as a deliberate interpretative action of a listener to understand and draw meaning from a spoken or uttered wave (sound); the spoken word is processed by alerting, deciphering and comprehending the production and the effect of such sounds. Listening comprehension is gradually becoming an active and interpretive language procedure where listeners are animatedly tangled in the construction of meaning (Murphy, 1989).

Listening can be any of the following-

- a. Discriminative listening- occurs when distinct sounds are identified, it is through the amplification of these differences that we make sense of the expression, discriminative listening can be an advantage at early stages of development as it aids in the understanding of language phonemes. It is also a disaster at later stages of human development as it becomes a barrier mostly in the understanding of a second language.
- b. Listening for comprehension- if we plot it in sequence, then it will come immediately after discriminative reading. It is the capacity to comprehend the meaning of words by understanding the rules of grammar, lexicon and syntax. As an important aspect of human communication, it benefits from the extraction of key facts and meaning from a long article. It is also referred to as content, informative or full listening.
- c. Critical listening- refers to the act of listening for the purpose of evaluation, judgment and opinion. It entails the assessment of the strength and weaknesses, agreement approval, and disapproval of an argument or claim. The listener requires cognitive dexterity to analyse and relate spoken words to existing knowledge, while concurrently engaging with the speaker.

- d. Biased listening- also known as filter listening is when the listener deliberately guides his comprehension, where they often misinterpreted the speaker based on certain typecasts.
- e. Evaluative listening- is a combination of critical listening and biased listening, it evaluates the authenticity of the argument or claim. It is an important skill when in a persuasive situation; it is strong enough to change our perceptions at the same time and strong enough to deepen it.
- f. Appreciative listening- an appreciative listener skims for cognitive consonants, which enables him to draw pleasure from the spoken words such as good speeches, poetry or music.
- g. Sympathetic listening- it is a type of listening that demonstrates concerns to the speaker; by becoming more attentive we express our happiness at their bliss and sorrow for their troubles.
- h. Empathetic listening- empathy is beyond sympathy, the listener is placed in the speakers' context which includes his emotions and compassion. It thrives on discrimination and a close attention to non-verbal cues. Empathetic listening can be used to exhume all the facts from a speaker, irrespective of whether the empathy is faked; the speaker feels a complete sense of belonging, which unconsciously leads to emotional surrender (self-disclosure).
- i. Therapeutic listening- when empathetic listening is taken a step further we have therapeutic listening, which demonstrates deep connection with the speaker enabled to establish the needed atmosphere for deep understanding or behavioural changes. It is common in social institutions where communication is emphasized in the healing process.
- j. Dialogic listening- this refers to the ability of the listener to derive meaning from the speaker through conversation, this will include a pendulum exchange of ideas and information until the listener is able to comprehend the speaker, and
- k. Relationship listening- another important aspect of listening is the ability to sustain relationships; this can be business relationship or even marital relationships (Beckman, Markakis, Suchman, & Frankel, 1994). The endurance to listen for hours without fatigue is earned by both parties who are both listeners and speakers at the same time.

Conclusion

Human communication cannot be separated from critical thinking, however to think critically we must be able to read and in-between we must learn to listen, to listen to critical voices and sometimes to listen to our own voices. While critical thinking is essential for critical scholarship, it accentuates the importance of reading and listening within the context of criticalism rather than academic specificity. Critical thinking in human communication helps to establish intellectual standards and tools for comprehension analysis that encourages critical scholars to explore and construct; critique and amalgamate complex ideas and sophisticated texts.

Thinking is actually our ability to read and listen which allow us to navigate a nascent path through dialogism. We get well by our mastery of language skills, we build our confidence quickly, comprehend complex texts easily. Our sojourn in criticalism is rooted in clarity and coherence. In this study, it has seen what it means to think, read and listen, and also the refinement in critical thinking, critical reading and critical listening has been presented. The critical scholar is therefore better informed to evaluate, produce and decipher an increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence simply by listening and speaking as well as critical thinking.

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