CLOSE READING: THE HISTORICAL TRENDS AND APPLICATION TO ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Teaser: This article illustrates the features and historical trends of close reading. Since the beginning of the last century, close reading as an important reading skill, has been extended from a literature analysis method in college classes to the elementary and secondary schools. The article also suggests practical cases of applying close reading in English or history classes in order to meet Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Keywords: Close reading, CCSS

Reading is one of the most important ways for human beings to process information. Reading and literacy education is always a critical part in different levels of education. In recent years, close reading of text has been set as core to College and Career Readiness (CCR) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The ability of close reading becomes an essential skill in learning and in career development.

What Is Close Reading?

Close reading is different from extensive reading or light reading. It requires the readers to get beyond impressionist reading and engaged in the text (Paul & Elder, 2008). In the broadest sense, close reading means a focused rereading of a text in which readers go beyond a basic understanding of the text. Close reading is a kind of reading with purposes and questions, and the readers would be engaged in seeking the answers during the reading process, such as trying to analyze how the author uses language to evoke an emotional response (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Essentially, close reading means to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) provides a clarified explanation of the standard of close reading:

“Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole.” (PARCC, 2011, p. 7)

The standard stresses the ability to synthesize and understand the text as a whole and organize the information of ideas and details.

Teaching close reading in class is more than teaching advanced reading. Brown and Kappes (2012) pointed out that “it is a mechanism for teaching about logical arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others, for gleaning evidence from text and applying critical thinking skills”(p. 2). For students, they should acquire the ability of deep analysis and appreciation guided by teachers through text-based questions and discussion. They may also need to pay attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices, and the significance of word choice and syntax. The reading responsibility would be gradually released to students, and the ultimate goal is to help students read independently and critically using the strategies learned from the teachers.

New Criticism and Literature in Higher Education

The concept of close reading was first introduced into literature criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century. New Criticism proposed close reading of texts as a new way to interpret literature, which was different from two prevailing forms of literary criticism at that
time: Impressionism and Marxism. Impressionism places its primary emphasis on the subjective experiences of the reader while Marxism emphasizes the material conditions of a work’s creation and ideological construct (Butler, 2006). However, New Criticism mainly applied close reading techniques to explore the significance of literature just within its texts. The representatives of this critic trends were I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot. They argued that the most appropriate way to read literature is to read everything within the text itself, rather than treat it as a social statement (Butler, 2006).

Since the initial concept of close reading was within literature criticism, early research on close reading pedagogy was also focused on teaching literature, especially poetry and mainly in higher education. Most of the research was published in College English and usually addressed to both text analysis and teaching strategy. Basically, it was still the application of New Criticism theory in class.

This kind of close reading needed professional literature knowledge and training, therefore it is seldom discussed in elementary and secondary English class. Peter Parisi (1979) pointed out that close reading is a style of thinking that underlies a literary criticism of specific works. It engages a special perspective on language, “through virtually every aspect of the language in which the object is presented—not only the denotations and connotations of the words, but their rhythm, sound, kinesis, and their ability to form logical and even visual patterns” (p. 58). Such perspective on language would be quite foreign to most of our beginning students, and their cognitive development, including the adolescents’ attainment of the ability to reason in the abstract, may not be prepared enough.

**Extended Sense of Close Reading**

With the rise in popularity of works by Roland Barthes, a new idea about reading began to take hold among younger college faculty and graduate students. Basically, the idea indicated that the readers could rewrite the text, and this re-writing occurs with the reading of the text and involves the reader into interpreting process. The focus was still on text itself, but readers were more actively involved in their own interpretation rather than just digging out what the author expressed. Therefore, since the late 1980s, the content of close reading and the practice of teaching close reading altered in college and high school. Close reading became more basic pedagogical practice, and the spectrum of texts was also expanded, even pictures could be included into close reading classes.

Richard Paul and Linda Elder wrote a series of articles on the art of close reading, and in 2008, these articles were published in the title *How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading*. As the title indicated, it was basically a “how to” book, offering tips and guidance of close reading skills and strategies. In this book, the strategies of close reading were not limited to working out an author’s ideas and denotation, but also related to the ability of summarization, connection to one’s own experience, the process of structural reading to detailed reading, evaluating or assessing the logic of reading, etc. Moreover, close reading goes beyond literature critical method; it more emphasizes the practical skills that one could apply to read sentences, paragraphs, textbooks, newspapers, editorials, historical documents, etc.

In this sense, teaching close reading turned out to be more general and technical, depending on the skills that students had already acquired. Close reading skills were also combined with literacy education and applied in elementary and secondary schools, helping students with reading difficulties to become close readers. In this sense, close reading became possible to apply to students with limited language skills, which includes English learners (ELs) and the students in special education. For example, Lauren A. Katz and Joanne F. Carlisle (2009) set a close reading program in elementary schools focusing on building vocabulary for students with reading difficulties. The program used instruction in morphological-analysis and context-analysis strategies, with experienced guides applying these strategies during reading. Being provided with
strategies for decoding unfamiliar words in texts and linking these decoding strategies to word meanings, students learned how to derive meanings from unfamiliar words as they were reading, which reinforced their independent reading skills. Improving strategies for deriving word meaning from context also helped the students facilitate word recognition and get deeper understanding of the texts. Furthermore, as students became aware of the power they exercise through language, they would learn to appreciate the ever-evocative nature of language itself. For these reasons, she suggested that detective stories provided an excellent model for the close reading process.

**Close reading and Common Core State Standards**

As reading and literacy education became a critical part in Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the requirements of independent and critical reading were stressed in the term “close reading.” The new emphasis was different from New Critic school as professional literature criticism, yet went deeper than learning vocabulary, understanding ideas and structure. Referring to the standards from PARCC, students must be competent in “examining meaning thoroughly and analytically; directing attention to the text, central ideas, and supporting details; reflecting on meanings of individual words and sentences; and developing ideas over the course of the text” (Boyles, 2013, p. 37). For the genres used for reading class, the Common Core Standards suggest different genres of short texts, both literary and informational, that can work at the elementary level. Many kinds of traditional literature are recommended, such as folktales, legends, myths, fables, as well as short stories, poetry, and scenes from plays that could enable and reward close reading (Boyles, 2013). Short texts were mostly applied to guarantee the effect of close reading.

Close reading requirements in CCSS seemed to be a combination of features for previous close reading concepts in teaching literature and reading class. The Common Core State Standards prioritize the close reading skill of extracting evidence and making inferences when reading complex texts. The intervening standards require students to answer specific text dependent questions, which emphasize comprehension of the details, rather than summarizing the central idea or theme. The standards also require the synthesis ability such as building knowledge by comparing two or more texts. The core close reading skill is “citing specific textual evidence” when reading complex texts to “support conclusions.” Therefore, such practical strategies of critical reading could also apply in elementary and secondary writing classes. According to Sheila Brown and Lee Kappes (2012), to implement CCSS in class, most Close Reading lessons should involve several attributes, such as selection of a brief, high-quality, complex text, individual reading of the text, group reading aloud, text-based questions and discussion that focus on discrete elements of the text, discussion among students and writing exercises related to the text.

Close reading of text is not only an English language arts strategy in CCSS. It could be an effective strategy for deepening content knowledge and learning to read like an expert in all academic disciplines. In this sense, close reading could also be related to the effect of disciplinary reading. Barksdale (2013) discussed using close reading to seek answers to text-dependent questions from a historical perspective. Students should be able to zoom into the smallest meaningful pieces of written language and zoom out to a broader meaningful context. The history teachers could guide students into close relation with historical texts by asking them to do specific tasks that help students engage in historical thinking and encourage them to discover the trends and relationships of historical events.

**Close reading is beneficial to ELs**

Close reading seems deep and complex even to native English speaking students. It is true that teaching close reading to ELs will bring more challenges, including choosing texts of appropriate proficiency level, designing text-dependent questions that are suitable for different levels of language learners, and applying appropriate scaffolding instruction. However, with well-prepared teaching materials and techniques, the text-focused reading process is not only workable to the ELs, but also beneficial in their language acquisition.

Since close reading requires students to repeatedly read certain paragraphs, it gives students time to consume the new vocabulary and sentence structures thoroughly. Compared to intensive or extensive reading, which may require the students to finish large amounts of reading in a limited time, close reading has the advantage of being less challenging in the quantity of vocabulary or grammar. Moreover, repeated, text-focused reading will enforce the recognition of new vocabulary and sentences, which is an effective way to acquire a second language. A very important feature of close reading is detailed analysis of vocabulary and phrases, e.g. formal and informal language, innuendo and connotation, etc. Such analysis will not only help ELs to remember the vocabulary or phrases, but also encourage deep understanding in language use.

Background knowledge is always critical in close reading, and building up background knowledge of the
selected texts plays an important role to get the ELs familiar with English language society and culture. Some critics argue that telling the students everything about the text before reading it is likely to take away the purpose of the reading activity (Herrmann, 2015). However, for close reading, taking time for background knowledge is necessary, and this top-bottom reading strategy can be applied through less verbal activities and with sufficient visual assistance, such as pictures, videos, props, models, or roleplays, adapted to the different proficiency levels of ELs. Moreover, connecting the given information and the reading materials is helpful in reviewing the language knowledge through exploring the texts, which is also crucial in second language acquisition.

Critical thinking is another important characteristic of close reading that will be most beneficial to the ELs, especially in developing essay layouts. For upper-intermediate or advanced ELs, it may not be difficult to write an essay with few grammar mistakes, however, it is still far from native-like because of the narration style of the writing. For close reading, the purpose goes beyond getting plot, general information or simple ideas. It will go deeper into the development of characters, or argumentation of ideals. For many ELs, their first languages have totally different approaches about stating an opinion, or providing supporting details. For example, in East Asian culture, the most appreciated way to state an opinion is to express it in a circumbendibus and indirect way. As Elder and Paul (2009) pointed out, “Close reading, substantive writing and critical thinking are three deeply interwoven skills essential to the educated mind” (288). Therefore, by practicing close reading, ELs will broaden their minds and think more like native speakers, as well as develop a more appropriate writing style targeting English readers.

Conclusion

From the research and studies on close reading during the recent fifty years, we can see how the concept of close reading expanded and deepened through different decades and under the influences of different schools. It developed from a special approach toward literature texts to a critical reading ability that would benefit everyone’s study and career. Close reading instruction also developed from college literature class to secondary and elementary reading class. As the Common Core State Standards establish detailed requirements for close reading in class, literacy teachers also face great challenges for designing new close reading lessons, especially modifying the traditional close reading strategies for the ESL readers. Multimedia technology, hypertext and online reading could all contribute to support the 21st Century reading class to meet the Standards.

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