

The Exploitation of Case Studies in Developing Critical Reading Skills

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Abstract: Despite the significance of critical reading in the new information age in general and English language teaching in particular, the demonstration of critical reading skills among the English language teacher trainees at the University of Languages and International Studies leaves much to be desired. As among the first attempts to enhance these vital skills, this article hypothesizes that the use of case studies would be beneficial for the development of critical reading skills in the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education. Adopting the action research design, the article reports the ratings and feedback of 80 participants on these early initiatives. The findings suggest that case studies could foster critical awareness, critical reading skills as well as the authenticity of classroom texts and tasks. However, test washback, a lack of recency and coherence across the curriculum stood out as the major obstacles to improving the efficiency of this activity.

Keywords: Critical reading, case studies, reading skills, authenticity.

1. Introduction

The increasing availability of information together with the easy access to information sources today have been both a blessing and a curse to the new generation, as put by American Ex-President Bill Clinton [cited in [1]] that “The thing I worry most is that people will have all the information in the world, but they won’t have any way of evaluating whether it is true or false, A or B, even if it’s true, how to put it in a proper perspective”. While separating the wheat from the chaff in reading requires appropriate critical reading skills, certain small-scale

studies have suggested that only a low proportion of the students at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies (Vietnam National University) (thereafter referred to as FELTE) could demonstrate critical reading at a basic level [see [2] for instance]. This conclusion is alarming because many of these students are being trained to become English language teachers in Vietnam, whose critical thinking is mandated to be part and parcel of their professional competency in the 21st century [3, 4]. Hence the failure to demonstrate appropriate critical reading skills clearly indicates a gap to be bridged in their pre-service teacher training curriculum.

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In this context, this article hypothesizes that the use of case studies in teaching English language reading skills in the current curriculum might have positive impacts on their critical reading skills. Beginning with a brief review of the literature and the research methods, the article provides the feedback of the students on this type of activity before putting forward certain suggestions for its improved efficiency in the future. It is noteworthy that although the participants in this study are limited to a group of FELTE students, critical reading and case study as classroom activities are not limited to a particular educational context. Therefore, the employment of case studies in developing critical reading skills could provide useful implications for not only the teacher trainees at FELTE, but also other university students who often rely on the immense and diverse sources of information today for their study and research purposes.

2. A brief literature review

2.1. Critical reading

Reading is traditionally perceived as a one-way process. That is, the author communicates his or her ideas to the readers through a text in a “banking” manner [5]. In this sense, successful reading occurs when the message intended by the author is deposited or duplicated in the reader’s mind. More recently, reading has been perceived as the mediating process of social and cultural factors [6], in which readers and writers are interacting as members of communities in a specific social context. As the author is communicating his ideas through the text, the text is not neutral but more or less represents the writer’s sets of beliefs and attitudes, which are significantly shaped by different political,

economic and social ideologies and communities. Besides, writers always have a targeted group of readers in mind, which means some people would become their expected audience, while a whole lot of others are excluded. Instead of being participants, they become “overhearers” [6] with certain disadvantages in accessing, reading, comprehending and reflecting on the text.

However, readers are not “blank pages” or “empty vessels” for authors to fill in with their texts. The Schemata Theory in reading comprehension elaborates that readers always match up incoming data from the text with existing mental representations of situations, events or phenomena [6]. In other words, readers can bring their previous experiences, cultures, beliefs and ideologies to their reading of a current text. This will make reading not simply “importing” the meaning of the text slavishly into a blank document. Instead, it is to examine, to contest and to struggle over the meaning presented and represented by the text to finally decide what to accept, to reject or to appropriate. By doing so, the readers could be said to read a text critically.

To provide a specific guideline for this critical reading process, Spache [1964, cited in [7]] conceives of critical reading as a sum of skills that altogether demonstrate comprehension and analysis at a high level. These reading skills include analyzing the data source, understanding the writer’s purposes, distinguishing facts from opinions, reasoning, forming judgments, and detecting propaganda devices. Kirsznner, L.G. & Mandell, S.R. (2000, p. 485) listed 15 questions that a critical reader needs to answer in reading any text:

- What is the writer saying?

- What do you think the writer is suggesting or implying? What makes you think so?
- What is the writer's purpose?
- What audience is the writer addressing?
- Is the writer responding to another writer's ideas?
- What is the writer's main point?
- How does the writer support his or her points?
- Does the writer use facts, opinions or a combination of the two?
- Does the writer include enough supporting details and examples?
- What pattern of development does the writer use to arrange his or her ideas? Is this pattern the best choice?
- Does the writer seem well informed? Reasonable? Fair?
- Do you understand the writer's vocabulary?
- Do you understand the writer's ideas?
- Do you agree with the points the writer is making?
- How are the ideas presented in this section like/unlike those presented in other sections you've read?

This article draws on these questions to characterize and evaluate critical reading skills in subsequent discussions.

2.2. Case-study as a classroom activity

Pioneered at the Harvard Business School, case studies as a classroom activity has attracted attention from a number of scholars and writers such as Christensen and Hansen [8], Boehrer and Linsky [9] to name just a few. Two key features are commonly underlined by these authors to define a case study: first, it

constitutes real or realistic events; second, it offers issues or conflicts to be resolved. A good case study, as characterized by Boehrer and Linsky [9] "presents an interest-provoking issue and promotes empathy with the central characters" (p.45). For this to happen, a case does not only involve an issue but also facilitates the learners through its multi-layeredness. Each time a layer is taken off, another appears until the learners reach to the "core", figuratively the core of the issue.

It is noteworthy that case studies are neither of the same level of complicatedness nor always approached in the same way. Among various types of cases, some of which could be as long as hundreds of pages and require the whole semester to dissect into, this study only focuses on one of them: the mini case study. This is often a short story, presented in one or two paragraphs and thus succinct in its content. It can be used by instructors to lead in the lesson, help learners translate theories into practice or serve as a follow-up activity. The "green" house below is an example of a mini-case for a class on marketing [10]. Despite its brevity, this story is a case study by definition: first, it is based on a realistic situation consisting of an authentic setting and specific facts and figures; second, it offers a problem related to the area of marketing (i.e., promoting and advertising a new type of house on the market).

The "green" house

In Denmark environmentally friendly houses are commonplace but in the UK they are the exception. The vision of two builders in northern England, however, led to the building of a rare "green" house. The task of building it was daunting but so too was the challenge of advertising it to potential buyers.

Scientists have shown that conventional houses play a major part in global warming, depleting the ozone layer and destroying tropical rain forests. Consequently, the builders believed that a new type of consumer was emerging: one who is prepared to make choices based on what is best for the planet, but who demands that the product does not cost too much.

The “green” house emits only three tons of carbon dioxide a year, just half that of a traditional house. There is also twice the regulatory amount of loft insulation and the walls and floors are three times better insulated than a standard new home. The cavity walls have 15 cm (rather than the standard 5 cm) filled with rock wool. The loft has 30 cm of non-irritant brown cellulose, made from recycled newsprint. Under the floor there is a 10 cm layer of CFC-free polystyrene. The house also features a high-efficiency gas condensing boiler which extracts more of the heat from the flue gases and uses 15 per cent less gas for the amount of heat generated than the standard boiler, so only half the heating energy should be used. The home is built on a south-facing slope and most of its windows are on the south side to take maximum advantage of the sun. They are all double-glazed with Pilkington “K” glass which has an extra copper film to reflect heat back into the room reducing heat loss by 40-50 per cent.

The efficiency of the house is reflected in the award by the National Home Energy Foundation, which awarded the house almost its maximum rating (9.3 out of 10).

The price of the home is £105000, which is £5000 more expensive than if it did not have all of these extras. But the builders believe that

buyers will make big savings on heating and lighting besides playing their part in making the world a healthier place.

Questions

1. Who is the type of buyer likely to be interested in buying a ‘green’ house?
2. Develop an advertising platform to appeal to them.
3. Bearing in mind that funds restrict the advertisement to a maximum of 8 cm 10 cm wide, design an advertisement for the house. Note that space precludes the use of a photograph.

Due to such flexibility, authenticity and empowerment to the learners in solving the issues, case studies are expected to provide a powerful impetus for the learners in developing their critical reading skills. However, in what way and how far case studies could promote critical reading skills are the two questions this article turns to in the following discussions.

3. Research methods and procedure

3.1. Research design and methods

The study employs the action research model of seven steps proposed by Nunan [11]:

- Steps 1 & 2: Initiation Step and Preliminary Investigation: Baseline data is collected via questionnaires and interviews with the participants to study their perceptions and problems with critical reading.

- Step 3: Hypothesis: Basing on the initial collected data, specific difficulties are identified and hypotheses are formed, justifying the choice of case studies to deal with the research problem.

- Step 4: Intervention: Case studies are designed basing on the baseline data to help students address specific problems and develop their critical reading skills. Then the teachers are trained to aptly apply case studies over two semesters with the researcher.

- Step 5: Evaluation: A questionnaire will also be issued to the students to evaluate the effects of case studies on their critical reading skills.

- Step 6: Dissemination: The researcher runs a workshop for colleagues to present the study results. Through the workshops, comments on the students' performance and assessments of the study results are collected through questionnaires.

- Step 7: Follow-up: Putting all collected data, comments and feedback together, the researcher revise the research paper and bring up possible techniques to enhance the effects of case studies on critical reading skills.

The participants in the study were 80 third-year Fast-track students in FELTE. Although Cervetti, Pardales and Damico [7] assert that language competence is as a prerequisite to developing critical reading skills, these third-year Fast-track students were selected on convenient grounds. That is, as their teacher (or a colleague of their teachers), I could ensure that critical reading was developed and the

action research design was employed in these classes throughout the academic year of 2013-2014.

3.2. Designing case studies

As indicated in the research design above, writing good cases plays a pivotal role in the success of the critical reading program. As they were employed as classroom tasks in the language course, these cases were examined and designed according to different components of a communicative classroom task (Figure 1).

- *Goals*: To identify the objective of the case in particular and that of the course in general, the writer referred to the guiding questions for critical reading presented above. Due to time constraints, the questions which have been addressed in the previous language courses (such as identifying the main ideas, i.e. "What is the writer saying?"; or reading for inferences, i.e. "What do you think the writer is suggesting or implying?") were not identified as the course focuses. That would leave nine other questions, which could be categorized into five main groups as Table 1 indicates.

In the illustrative case in Figure 2, its primary objective is to help students reflect on the lexical choice and detecting biases. By Table 1, it could be studied in Session 4 to illustrate the session focus as well as to review the preceding Session 3.

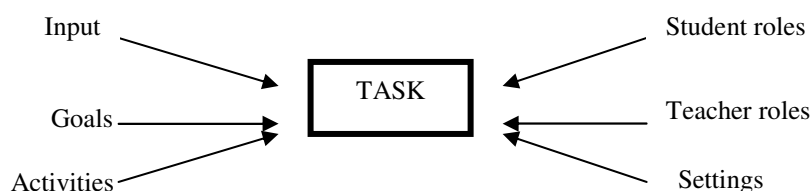


Figure 1. Communicative task framework [12].

Table 1. Objectives of the critical reading program

Session	Session focus	Corresponding critical reading questions
1	Identifying the author's purposes and targeted audience	- What is the writer's purpose? - What audience is the writer addressing? - What is the writer's main point?
2	Reflecting on the organization and development of ideas;	- How does the writer support his or her points? - Does the writer include enough supporting details and examples?
3	Reflecting on the accuracy of information and detecting biases	- Does the writer seem well informed? Reasonable? Fair? - Does the writer use facts, opinions or a combination of the two?
4	Reflecting on lexical choice and rhetorical devices	- Do you understand the writer's vocabulary?
5	Reflecting on the author's arguments	- Do you agree with the points the writer is making?

- *Settings*: Certain parameters which impact the successful employment of case studies, particularly time, facilities and the number of learners should also be taken into consideration.

To begin with, the time allocated for the critical reading program is 20 hours in total, or 04 hours in class for each session above. As this could be too short to introduce, practice and revise these skills properly, case studies were introduced and reviewed by the teacher in class, but investigated by the students at home. These self-study activities were supervised via written reports and oral feedback on a regular basis.

Regarding classroom facilities, the students were encouraged to use the Internet and other resources to get access to the texts in these cases (see Figure 2 for an example). This aimed to increase the authenticity of the text as well as the reading process. Nevertheless, as most classrooms in FELTE were not connected to the Internet, students were instructed to work at home and in groups to provide mutual technical support when needs be.

Finally, as the class size was rather large (22-25 students per class), each group was divided into smaller groups of 3-5 students to

allow for more time and space for each individual to voice and argue for their opinions.

- *Input*: Since there was not a particular coursebook or referential material in Vietnam that used case studies to teach English or critical reading skills, all the cases were written by the researcher from scratch. To improve the quality of this writing, references to a wide range of related materials as well as the collection of feedback from the teachers and students were conducted on a regular basis. A case in point is the article in the Figure 2, which is quoted from Epstein [13]. In fact, every single case in the whole critical reading program was piloted for two semesters and revised remarkably to ensure an authentic setting, specific facts and figures, and a problem in the conclusion - three main criteria of good cases as reviewed above.

Specifically, to provide an authentic setting, materials from the Internet were handpicked and the readers were encouraged to surf to relevant websites to do their own research. In the illustrative case in Figure 2, the reader must go to the given link and the article included in the case also comes from a documented source. Besides, the characters, contexts and the language of the case should also reflect real-life

interactions. In Figure 2 for instance, the case revolves around a discussion between a Vietnamese student and a foreigner on cultural stereotypes, a common topic in social exchanges.

As the texts were located in its authentic and original settings, it facilitated the collection of specific facts and figures. In the illustrative case (Figure 2), the lead-in introduction from Wikipedia and the link to popular jokes about blonde girls could help to inform the readers of relevant background information related to the case study.

Finally, a problem is placed at the center a case. For this to be helpful for the development of critical reading skills, the question must be clear, alluring and open for various perspectives. In the illustrative case, the question of “As a friend, what would you say to Chris and Van?” is open-ended enough to invite learners to express their opinions in the manner they prefer (i.e., agreement, disagreement, or neutrality).

- Classroom activities and roles of learners and teacher: To foster learner-centeredness, the cases were provided before the session for the students to study at home. Within two weeks, they were asked to investigate the case individually before working in groups to share their opinions. Then they were expected to come up with a group conclusion, even though it could be “agree to differ”. It was through this process of discussion that cooperative learning, reflective practices and reasoning skills could be enhanced for the common purpose of critical reading skills development.

Before the session, the teacher read the minutes or records of these discussions to provide feedback as well as took notes of interesting or questionable arguments and ideas. In the lesson, the teacher brought up these arguments and ideas for a whole-class

discussion before presenting the theoretical grounds of these cases. This approach to experiential learning [14-16], where students are asked to have hands-on experience before formal learning, was the key principle underlying the implementation of this activity.

After a semester teaching and learning with case studies, the students’ feedback was collected. Table 1 summarizes the survey responses of 80 participants on five main criteria. As could be seen, the ultimate goal of the program (a) was not only rated the highest (Mean=5.7, equivalent to “Agree-Strongly Agree”), but also had the smallest standard deviation (0.93). It was followed closely by the authenticity of the texts and tasks (Mean=5.6, SD=0.96) and thinking and verbal skills (Mean=5.32, SD=0.95). These positive evaluations could be elaborated further by the qualitative data provided by these respondents:

I find the cases really varied in terms of skills and topics ... The texts are those we could find in daily reading but used to overlook the fallacies in them.

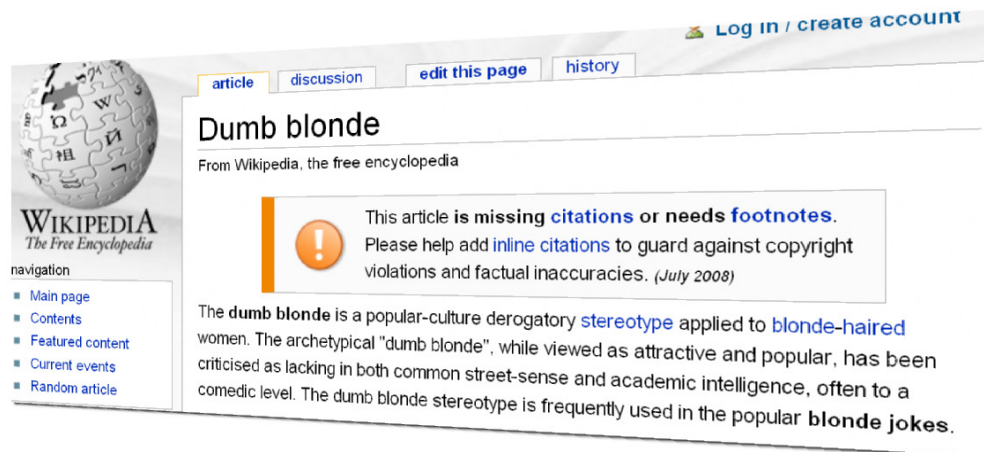
After studying critical reading with these cases, I’ve started to read selectively. I realize that I used to be really silly because I often fell into the traps set up by these authors ... or I knew something was problematic but could not explicate or name that problem (but now I can).

Before the sessions, I had very little idea about rhetorical devices in English, and their power in conveying the author’s ideas. But now I have a clearer idea of such devices.

The cases are very helpful in developing my knowledge regarding lexical choices as well as rhetorical devices. I am now able to identify the author’s real purpose when using a particular word or rhetorical device to convey a message to readers, which helps me understand the texts, both academic and non-academic, better.

Mini-Case 5.5: Are Blondes Really Dumb?

(Adapted from Critical Thinking (Epstein, 2006))



After reading a series of jokes about blonde girls at <http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/random/articles/53441/title/top-10-dumb-blonde-jokes-no-offense-any-blondes>, Van asked Chris:

Van: Oh dear! These blondes are stupid in these stories! How come people think of blonde girls that way, Chris?

Chris: Not really all of them. Look at the article I clipped from Weekly World News on October 15, 1996 in my scrapbook.

Blondes aren't dumb – they're just slow.

Berlin – Blonde women aren't dumber than brunettes or readheads, a reassuring study shows – they are just slower at processing information, take longer to react to stimuli and tend to retain less information for a shorter period of time than other women.

“This should put an end to an insulting view that blondes are airheads,” said Dr. Adrea Stenner, a blonde sociologist who studied more than 3,000 women for her doctoral research project.

“See? With this piece of scientific evidence, no one can say that blondes are dumb anymore!”

Chris proudly concludes.

As a friend, what would you say to Van and/or Chris?

4. Results

Table 1. Students' ratings of the use of case studies to enhance critical reading skills

	1 (totally disagree)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (totally agree)	Mean	SD
a. The cases in the program have helped me to improve the targeted critical reading skills.	0	0	1	8	20	36	15	5.7	0.93
b. The cases have introduced me to a wide range of reading texts, especially authentic/real-life ones.	0	0	3	9	18	41	9	5.6	0.96
c. Overall, I have improved my thinking and verbal skills to defend, argue and negotiate through a wide range of activities related to these case studies.	0	0	2	16	21	36	5	5.32	0.95
d. I have enhanced my background knowledge about academic and non-academic topics.	1	1	3	18	21	26	10	5.19	1.3
e. I have improved certain reading skills which a C1 language proficiency learner (CEFR) should develop, especially: reading for orientation and reading for information and argument	0	1	2	14	26	32	5	5.26	0.98

Critical reading is worth learning. And the cases for students to practice more on this skill are necessary.

I really improved my wording after learning critical reading. For instance, I paid more attention to such question as: "Does this word, or that word, sound natural enough?", and sometimes I post this to a native speaker to fully understand the case.

As can be seen from these responses, the most prominent themes these participants foregrounded were an enhancement of critical awareness, with which the readers could become more "selective", "clearer" and more attentive when they read; enhanced critical reading skills which helped them to "name", "understand", "explicate" and "identify" the problems; as well as the authenticity of the texts and tasks (e.g. "necessary", "daily", "academic

and non-academic" texts). These responses also echoed the key features of case studies and critical reading, suggesting that the program was successful in terms of its primary focus.

Nonetheless, as the study also aimed to explore the shortcomings of case studies in developing critical reading skills, it is necessary that the other two criteria (d & e) should also be examined. Not only were they rated the lowest (Mean = 5.19 and 5.26 respectively) but the variances were also the highest (SD=1.3 and 0.98) as several students even "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that these criteria had been met (Table 2). Among their explanations, notable were the issues of test washback, the recency of the cases and the transference of critical reading skills:

The critical reading sessions provided us with a lot of knowledge regarding the way to

analyze arguments. However, I find it hard to apply the theory that I have learned to my writing. Therefore, although I know what a good argument is, I still don't know how to make my arguments sound and valid.

The students cannot apply critical reading in the exams.

The critical reading session this week did relate to the writing session, but I did not think it supported the writing session simply because the first one was for surviving in life, the other was for surviving in test. I can still “die” in test ...

The cases themselves had nothing to do with improving my background knowledge, or with the writing session this week. Maybe it helped but I didn't notice that. But if it was not very noticeable, it must not have helped much.

Again, I suggest that in-class activities should be more diverse and practical. News relating to the current events... should be introduced to students and then they can both apply the theory but also learn about the social and political life. Reading session does not serve much writing one. We prepare for writing exams only, therefore, not much knowledge about critical reading is applied (because we do not have to use other sources to support our ideas in writing). Still, I think preparation for writing exam is extremely necessary.

From these responses, three major shortcomings of the critical reading program could be identified. First, the compulsory English language proficiency test, which employed multiple-choice questions and adopted the traditional approach to reading, left little space and incentive for critical reading. Second, the students also criticized a lack of coherence between the reading and writing courses, of which the latter did not put much of critical reading to use. This is noteworthy

because reading and writing were claimed to be integrated in the syllabus and curriculum, but this lack of transference questioned the effectiveness of this purported integration. Finally, the students expected that the cases should be more recent (e.g. “practical” and “recent” events). While this suggestion is reasonable and legitimate, this poses a challenge for case writers for they would need to keep abreast of the latest events to review and even rewrite the cases on a regular basis.

5. Conclusion

The survey results above suggest that case studies have yielded positive outcomes in developing both critical awareness and critical reading skills of the students at FELTE. It was also appreciated by the students for the authenticity of texts and tasks, which allows their reading practices to carry over beyond the classroom. However, these findings also point out certain problems that need addressing to improve the efficiency of this task type in the future, which include:

- Frequently updating the cases with contemporary issues for better authenticity and recency: As this would entail the adaption, revision and rewriting of cases on a regular basis, collaborative efforts of a team of case writers would be necessary. Therefore, training workshops and team building would play an important role in addressing this current issue.

- Maintaining the coherence between different modules of the same course, and different courses of the English language teacher training program: So far the study results have revealed that these initiatives to teach critical reading are meaningful notwithstanding, the students might not be able to benefit much from a program where critical

reading is just an isolated part of the curriculum. To situate critical reading *across*, as opposed to *within* the curriculum, collaborative efforts must be exerted not only during the implementation stage as suggested above, but also as early as during the planning and design of a curriculum. It is here that the English language teacher competency framework issued by Project 2020 of the Ministry of Education [3, 4] represents an interesting example, as it underlines critical thinking as a competency which needs to be developed throughout the training curriculum of English language teachers in Vietnam.

- Reconsidering test washback so that English language courses would not be solely focusing on coaching students for the exam, but also preparing them for real life scenarios: This is not only to encourage the students to better see the long-term values of learning, but also to echo the current approach to English language learning in the classroom today, where students are encouraged to enhance a number of study skills and strategies apart from the common language skills [17]

If these problems are properly addressed in the future, they would pave the way for not only the improved efficiency of case studies in developing critical reading skills at FELTE, but also a more sustainable development of a key competence of English language teachers in Vietnam in the 21st century.

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Khai thác bài tập tình huống nhằm phát triển kỹ năng đọc phê phán

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Tóm tắt: Mặc dù kỹ năng đọc phê phán đang đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong thời đại thông tin ngày nay nói chung và quá trình đào tạo giáo viên tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam nói riêng, sinh viên Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội còn tỏ ra khá túng túng trong việc thể hiện kỹ năng thiết yếu này. Trong bối cảnh đó, bài báo này đặt ra giả thuyết rằng việc sử dụng các bài tập tình huống có thể có tác dụng tích cực đối với việc phát triển kỹ năng đọc ở Khoa Sư phạm tiếng Anh. Thông qua mô hình nghiên cứu hành động, bài báo trình bày những kết quả phản hồi và đánh giá của 80 sinh viên tham gia vào loại hình hoạt động này. Kết quả cho thấy các bài tập tình huống đã góp phần nâng cao ý thức phê phán, kỹ năng đọc phê phán cũng như tính sát thực của những nội dung và hoạt động đọc trên lớp. Tuy nhiên, tác động của thi cử, sự thiếu tính cập nhật và nhất quán trong chương trình đào tạo có thể sẽ là những rào cản lớn nhất đối với việc phát huy tính hiệu quả của loại hình hoạt động này.

Từ khóa: Đọc phê phán, bài tập tình huống, kỹ năng đọc, tính sát thực.