CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS CRITICAL LITERACY: STUDENTS' READING SKILLS AND SOURCE EVALUATION

Elina Kouki and Arja Virta

Introduction

The enormous quantity of information, as well as disinformation, offered by a vast variety of internet sources today creates new demands for critical literacy (cf. Goldman et al. 2012). In this chapter, the concept of critical literacy is approached as the ability to see beyond the text and to look for factors behind the text that might be relevant for its comprehension and interpretation. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between professional texts, opinion pieces, or even satirical writings. It can also be difficult to see the borderline between official and unofficial sources. Therefore, we must increasingly rely on our own judgement when dealing with information that is often biased, contradictory, or even false (Brumfit 2010, 15–16.) Actually, judgement is one of the core skills in what Jenkins et al. (2009, 79–82) call media literacy.

Critical literacy is among the fundamental cognitive competencies of an individual (Francke, Sundin and Limberg 2011; Rouet and Britt 2011; Smith and Lennon 2011) and can be seen as a social capital of a society and as a component of active citizenship (Dam and Volman 2004). As Apple (2000, 42–43) points out, there is a need for "critical literacy, powerful literacy, political literacy which enables the growth of genuine understanding and control of all the spheres of social life in which we participate".

The broad aim of the study presented in this chapter is to find out how capable students are as critical readers. In particular, we investigate how students at two different levels of education, basic and upper secondary, deal with a task that invokes the use of critical reading skills. However, our purpose was not to compare these two target groups, but to observe students' critical reading skills, using source evaluation as our major point of interest. We seek to identify these skills and discover how students make sense of multiple source documents. For this purpose, we provided the students a controversial historical topic involving multifaceted sources. In this research arrangement, we thus integrated the approaches of history and L1 (first language) with critical reading as an educational objective and as the key competence of the 21st century (Jenkins et al. 2009).

Critical reading skills: Making sense of multiple source documents

A common trend in recent curriculum development is the question of teaching critical reading skills (Jenkins et al. 2009; Jonassen and Kim 2010; Rapanta, Garcia-Mila and Gilabert 2013). The concept of critical reading skills subsumes several sub-skills, such as seeing the difference between verifiable facts and opinions or value claims, recognizing logical inconsistencies or fallacies in reasoning, detecting biases in information, as well as assessing the strength of argumentation and the relevance and quality of sources (Macedo-Rouet et al. 2014, 204–226). Indeed, it is important that students learn to assess the quality and relevance of information, especially because of the digital turn (Britt and Rouet 2012; Leino 2014; Leu, Kiili and Forzani 2014; Macedo-Rouet et al. 2014, 204, 205).

The ability to evaluate the credibility and reliability of multiple texts and documents is an essential aspect in learning situations in which the students have to use information from multiple texts (see also Literat 2014; Martin and Rose 2012). This requires a deep comprehension of texts which promotes critical reading skills. Possessing such skills is raised as the main aim of both L1 and history studies in Finland, according to the aims and assessment criteria of the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* in 2004, and is further elaborated in the latest curriculum (2014). Similar aims are included in the *National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary School* (2003; 2015). Additionally, history curricula in particular tend to emphasize skills-based approaches and teaching methodologies that train students in adequate use of historical evidence (e.g. Monte-Sano and De La Paz 2012; Reisman 2012; Veijola and Mikkonen 2015).

Reading processes can have specific features subject to the content area; when history is concerned, language is significant because historical knowledge is largely constructed on the basis of written sources and mainly also communicated verbally. Yet, reading history is more than just decoding the manifest contents of the text as the reader has to go beyond the text and situate the messages into their contexts. In order to become critical readers, students therefore need to be trained to choose, contextualize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and exploit the sources and their purposes (Britt and Rouet 2012; Francke et al. 2011; Smith and Lennon 2011, 46). Moreover, multifaceted and mutually contradictory sources are useful for understanding the differences between valid arguments and discrepant opinions (Macedo-Rouet et al. 2014, 205; Rantala and van den Berg 2013, 394–407).

Wineburg (1991, 495–519) has aptly divided the process of working with historical evidence into sourcing (evaluating the source of the document), corroboration (checking the factual information against other documents), and contextualizing the message within a broader background. The process of reading as a historian also requires analyzing the language of history: ideologies, metaphors, analogies, emotions, as well as devices of rhetoric implemented towards the influencing of the reader (Stradling 2001, 101–102; Husbands 2003, 30–42). Another requirement is to learn to understand and compare various interpretations and to accept the fact that there are perhaps no simple truths but instead various approaches to the same event (Wineburg, Martin and Monte-Sano 2011).

According to Francke et al. (2011, 681–688), there are different kinds of relevant frameworks for evaluating the credibility of sources. These include rhetoric in general, genre, and authorship, as well as author's perspective and social commitment, all of which are regarded as important factors in source evaluation. Moreover, references, applicability of the sources, and the currency of the text help to assess its reliability (Brumfit 2010).

However, it is unclear how these competencies are achieved at schools. In the 2011 national evaluation of the outcomes of history and social studies in Finland, more than half of the participants reached at least a moderate or satisfactory level (Ouakrim-Soivio and Kuusela 2012). Other studies give evidence of upper secondary level students' difficulties in critical reading of sources. In studying such students' skills of interpreting historical sources, Rantala and van den Berg (2014) implemented Van Sledright and Afflerbach's (2005) categories of types of readers, i.e. novices, recognizing, differentiating, understanding, and evaluating types, and found that most of the Finnish respondents fell into the category of novices. Notwithstanding this, there are studies suggesting that students do understand the process of constructing historical knowledge on the basis of sources when they are scaffolded and shown how to compare and contrast conflicting sources (Lee and Ashby 2000).

The primary purpose of the presented study was to find out how capable students are as critical readers. This question was addressed by observing the students' performance in source evaluation. Our further purpose in the study was to focus on two different age groups or levels of education. More specifically, we undertook to find out how a group of students in basic education, and a group of upper secondary level students, discuss a multifaceted historic topic on the basis of the source material provided to them.

A key question in both cases was how the students understood the multiplicity of the authors' perspectives. In particular, the first part of the study, with the younger target group, was concerned with the students' skills in seeing the differences in the sources, e.g. message, genre, and authorship as well as in their skills in assessing the credibility of sources. The second part of the study dealt with upper secondary students' comments on their writing based on a complex set of documents, a process in which they needed to implement various skills of critical reading.

Materials, participants, and methods

In our view, the integration of L1 and history studies is essential because literacy skills and critical thinking are crucial for both subjects. Therefore, the task assigned to students was based on a set of evidence typical for learning tasks in L1 and history education. The subject matter of the source material provided for students in the research arrangement deserves some illustration at this point. It namely deals with a national issue, debated from the years of the Second World War: the evacuation of so-called *war children,* from Finland to other Nordic countries.

On the basis of a Swedish initiative and an official decision made by the Finnish Social Ministry, about 80 000 children were transported from Finland, mainly to Sweden. It was the families that decided whether to send their child or not. After the war, Finnish families wanted to have their evacuated children back home while many Swedish foster parents wanted to keep them. Ultimately, some of the war children stayed in Sweden and were in due course adopted by their foster families. This remains controversial. Undoubtedly, the circumstances in Finland were difficult, and the future of the whole nation was uncertain. Of course, the evacuations were emotionally hard for children, who had to leave their families, homeland, and mother tongue. Granted, many of them have spoken about positive experiences as well. This basically affective human issue may not be personally touching for today's teenagers, and indeed it has not been given much attention within the big story of the Second World War. Textbooks tend to merely mention the topic, briefly, possibly with an authentic photograph of war children (Virta 2009).

In this study, the selected sources made available to students portrayed opposing opinions and attitudes, as well as different kinds of textual genres, indicating the controversy surrounding the question of war children. In addition, we offered the students some lines of background information and a few

photographs of war children. The following source materials were employed to represent different genres:

- Sources 1 and 2: Memoirs of war children
- Source 3: A letter from a mother to a foster family
- Source 4: An excerpt from a newspaper article
- Source 5: An excerpt from a social media discussion
- Source 6: A summary of a PhD thesis (not included for 8th graders)

Sources 1 and 2 consisted of intimate personal memoirs and descriptions of the war children's positive as well as negative experiences during the transportation and stay in Sweden. Source 3 was an authentic letter from a Finnish mother to her son in Sweden during the war, which reveals the parents' anxiety together with the difficult and dangerous circumstances in Finland during the war. An emotional citation from a war-time newspaper against child transportations was offered as Source 4. In turn, Source 5 was a short excerpt from a recent social media discussion, similarly against the evacuation, and Source 6, a scientific summary of a PhD thesis, mainly dealt with negative consequences of evacuations as well. The study incorporated two target groups or substudies defined on the basis of the subjects' age levels as explained below. We used similar source material with two exceptions. Source 6 was not given to the younger group to read, instead we used photographs as starting points for interviews.

The participants in the younger group were 8th graders (n = 24, age 14 years, 9 females, 15 males) from two classes in a comprehensive school, whereas the participants in the other group (n = 96) came from five classes in an upper secondary school in southwest Finland. The data was collected from the 8th graders by a structured interview, and from the upper secondary students in the form of an essay during L1 and literature lessons.

Because both schools often participate in research, thanks to their roles as university teacher training schools, and students therefore frequently serve as subjects or respondents, their parents have authorized the students to participate in academic research during their school years. The reason for using two different methods for collecting data was mainly related to the students' ages. Our assumption was that the younger group would produce richer answers orally than in writing, given the fact that a large part of the students had Finnish as their second or third language. We also wanted to experiment with two different

methods of approaching students' reasoning on the basis of documents and the purpose was not to compare but to complement.

The 8th graders were interviewed individually, during their history lessons, in separate rooms. We had designed an interview guide, based on a carefully structured presentation of the sources. The students were first asked to read the background information and to offer their thoughts about the photographs of war children. After that, they were asked to read the first four textual sources and to answer factual questions, such as the reasons for evacuations. This was done in order to check that they had understood the contents. Step by step, they were conducted to go deeper into the issue by giving them multifaceted short source texts about war children to read. They were asked if they saw differences between the sources, and how they felt about the credibility of the sources. After reading the whole set of evidence, they were asked to consider the transportations of children, on the basis of the sources, from the children's perspective. Finally, they were asked to discuss why the evacuation of war children is still a controversial topic today.

The duration of the interviews varied from 12 to 20 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the analysis, the interviews were organized so that the answers of all participants were grouped for each question, in order to compare the styles of the students' thinking and argumentation. In this chapter, we focus on their skills of dealing with source material critically and comprehensively.

The upper secondary students were 16–19 years old. The number of participants was 96 (58 females, 38 males). Five of them had Finnish as a second language (L2). The data here is treated anonymously by marking the essays with codes (G1:1, G1:2, G1:3; G2:1, G2:2, G2:3; G3:1, G3:2, etc.). The letter G and the number after it refer to one of the five classes, and the last number of each code to each student in that group. For example, code G3:8 refers to student number 8 in class 3.

The upper secondary students were given 75 minutes to read the provided source materials and write an essay about the topic. The writing task given for the students was as follows:

> Consider the decision of the Finnish Government to send children to Sweden as 'war children'. Pay attention to different perspectives (the children's, their biological parents', and the Swedish foster parents')

using the documents attached, according to your choice. From what
point of view was it a good decision, and what problems did it possi-
bly cause? Make your conclusions on the basis of the source materials.
Formulate the title for your essay (for instance 'Finnish children sent to
Sweden from the middle of the warandhelp and its consequences').

The data was evaluated to find out students' critical reading competence.
The analysis of the interviews first focused on one aspect of critical literacy: how
the participants understood the differences in the sources, and their messages
and perspectives. The second target was how they explained the credibility of
sources, and which sources they preferred. This analysis draws on the contents
of the students' speech, and all relevant units were gathered and categorized ac-
cording to their contents. The essays (approximately 250 pages of handwritten
texts) were investigated by content analysis in order to find out how the students
used the sources provided, and how they discussed this controversial issue by
drawing on texts that conveyed multiple viewpoints.

Both authors independently examined the essays in light of the research
questions. After systematic investigation of the students' essays, the findings
were compared and evaluated for verifying the reliability of the analysis. The
highlights of the findings were selected for further classification and for the de-
sign of the tables that describe and summarize the various aspects of the data.
Frequencies were counted to better illustrate the structure of the data. In report-
ing the findings, quotes from the students' interviews and essays in Finnish were
translated to English by the authors of this chapter. Methodologically, this study
mainly employs a qualitative content analysis, but descriptive statistics are also
included in making conclusions about upper secondary students' skills of critical
reading, especially source evaluation.

Results

8th graders' reasoning with multiple sources. The first step in assessing the students' skills of dealing with documents was to check how they understood the primary factual contents of each document. In general, all of the 8th graders were able to understand the controversial nature of the assigned topic on the basis of the selected sources. All interviewees felt that the photographs were sad or depressing, but they mainly described what they saw in the photographs without comparing them. The respondents understood the main factual contents of the written sources and could mention different reasons for sending children to Sweden. They could tell that it was because of the children's safety and the wartime circumstances, such as bombings and the lack of food. They also managed to find the different perspectives contained in the sources and, sometimes when specifically asked, saw that the authors represented different types of persons (mother, war children as adults, journalist). In addition, they could point out which sources supported the child evacuations and which opposed them.

However, it was obviously difficult for the students to explain why the sources were reliable or not (Table 2-1). The explanations are first classified into broad categories, under which we identify more specific types. Each single reference to reliability is categorized. Some interviewees gave several types of explanations, all of which have been included. A majority of the 8th graders considered the primary sources reliable, especially personal memoirs and letters, because "the person is telling him-/herself or about his/her own experiences." Some students supported their opinions with previous knowledge: "I have read that in history books." Quite frequently, the respondents needed introductory questions to be able to reflect on reliability or credibility.

Table 2-1. Types of explanations for why students considered sources reliable or unreliable

REASONS FOR RELIABILITY	REASONS FOR UNRELIABILITY
TYPE: Explanation based on primary sources	**TYPE: Relativity of the question**
The child / the person is telling himself/ herself	That is not the whole truth; some may have had it that way; most of them were feeling well
When it is about the person's own experience	
Letters are reliable	
Photos are reliable	
TYPE: Explanation based on second-ary sources / previous knowledge	**TYPE: Opinions are not reliable**
Student has previous knowledge (has heard or read about it in history books)	Suspicions about factual contents
TYPE: Quality of evidence	**TYPE: Quality of evidence**
There are many sources and points of view	Writing under a pseudonym (newspaper column)
	Internet sources are unreliable (cf. above: letters are reliable)
TYPE: Miscellaneous; student not explaining but giving individual im-pressions	**TYPE: Miscellaneous**
Thinks/feels that sources are reliable and cannot tell why	No specification; the respondent cannot tell why s/he feels that the sources are not reliable

The following quote provides an example in which the student is able to distinguish between different types of sources and obviously also understands the complexity of the question as well as differences in individual experiences. The student is underlining the firsthand experience of the phenomenon and is suspicious of a piece of writing on the internet, though they do not reflect further on the contents but rather makes the conclusions on the basis of the authors' position.

Interviewer: Do you think the sources give a reliable view of the event? Do you doubt something?

Student 11: I do not believe that the whole truth can be told in these sources because all of them aren't reliable. Some children were not feeling so well in Sweden but most of them were.

Interviewer: Which one is reliable, which perhaps not?

Student 11: For example, this pen name "Thinker" can have written in the chat forum about somebody else's experiences, but that cannot be trustworthy. It is just written on the net.

Interviewer: What about letters then?

Student 11: They can be fairly reliable, when a war child has in olden days told about his/her experience that can be true.

There were few suspicions about the factual contents of the texts. It is noteworthy that internet sources as well as the newspaper text written under a pseudonym were seen as less convincing than for example the letters, although all this was subjective material. Many of the students had noticed that the texts were contradictory, as is shown in the excerpt that was quoted above. The 8th graders showed a distinct progress in understanding the different perspectives after they were scaffolded with the guiding questions during the interviews. Yet, there were also comments that reveal the complexity of the topic. It was hard for the students to explain why a source may not be reliable, and they seemed to rely heavily on their own impressions (see Brumfit 2010, 15).

Upper secondary students as source evaluators. Only 9.4% of the upper secondary students incorporated evaluation of the sources into their essays and referred to them as an organic part of their argumentation. Most of them did not assess the credibility of the sources, and as many as 32.3% did not mention the sources at all. Furthermore, if more than one source was mentioned, it was only "knowledge telling" (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1986), not critical reading. To sum up, most students were not used to assessing the reliability or the credibility of the sources (Table 2-2).

Table 2-2. Upper secondary students' (n = 96) ability to use source materials and make references, numbers (n = 96) and percentages

HOW STUDENTS REFERRED TO SOURCES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS (%)
No references made	31 (32.3%)
References only to "texts" or "materials"; not specified	12 (12.5 %)
One source mentioned by name	17 (17.7%)
More than one source mentioned but only telling previous knowledge	27 (28.1 %)
Convincing and critical use of sources; proper references	9 (9.4 %)

Table 2-3. Students' use of different sources (1–6), numbers (n = 96) and percentages

SOURCES →→→→→	NUMBER OF ESSAYS with a reference to the source (%)
SOURCE 1: Memoirs of war children	43 (44.8%)
SOURCE 2: Memoirs of war children	38 (39.6%)
SOURCE 3: Letter from a mother	18 (18.8%)
SOURCE 4: Excerpt from a newspaper article	18 (18.8%)
SOURCE 5: Excerpt from social media discussion	7 (7.3%)
SOURCE 6: Summary of a PhD thesis	25 (26%)

Table 2-3 shows that most often the students referred to the memoirs of war children (Sources 1 and 2). Correspondingly, most of the students who used the letter of a mother (Source 3) as evidence, considered the evacuations a wrong decision, even though the letter included specific descriptions about the dangers and horrors of the war. The letter also articulated an important human factor: the mother missed her son. Source 4, a citation from a war-time newspaper, was against evacuations, but three respondents who used this source still considered transportations a good decision. Regarding Source 5: the students seemed to be least inspired by the excerpt from a social media discussion which strongly criticized the transportations of war children; only 7.3% used it as a reference. Correspondingly, none of the students who considered the evacuation a right decision referred to Source 5. Moreover, only 26% referred to Source 6 (a summary of an academic dissertation), which focused strongly on the negative effects of the evacuations, and merely 8% of those who read the scientific abstract considered the evacuations a right decision.

It is obvious that the students preferred the affective and subjective sources, rejecting the formal ones. Instead of analyzing the sources, they often criticized the phenomenon as such and described it emotionally: "Migrating alone to a

foreign country was certainly a highly stressful and traumatizing experience for many of them" (G1:8). The lack of facts and historical knowledge left the students to argue on the basis of their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings: "Children's thoughts are simple. What they need is safety and love. When these are given by whosoever, children consider those people their parents, regardless of whether they are biological or not" (G2:22). The students were apparently confused by the issue, and it caused anxiety among them. Their strong will to somehow understand the reasons for the evacuations may also be seen in their comparisons between the wartime and the present. For example, two of the respondents mentioned the experiences of exchange students as similar to what war children had faced (G1:2; G2:13), and one of the students suggested that evacuation offered a good possibility to see a different kind of life (G4:2). Also, an analogy between the situation of war children and present-day child custody was suggested (G2:13).

Discussion

The source material used in this study represented different genres and included contradictory information about the question of war children. In general, the students' comments tended to be occasional observations rather than the results of consistent and critical analysis. A remarkably large number of the students neither mentioned the sources nor made any references to them. They did not assess, criticize, or evaluate the credibility or reliability of the source material. The most popular means to discuss the subject was the traditional in-my-opinion style, in line with what, for example, Jonassen and Kim (2010, 442) have found in their studies. When the students did make use of the sources, they typically just picked up the facts (see Francke et al. 2011, 678).

Only a few upper secondary students evaluated the sources in their essays. Instead, it was common not to take into account or analyze the genre of the source text, the writer, the date, the aims of the text, or the forum of publication. This suggests that the students are not accustomed to source evaluation and the basic demands of critical reading, or that they do not do it spontaneously. The same can be said about the younger group of respondents, although the 8th graders did, sometimes, after introductory questions, discuss the quality of sources and explain why a certain source could or could not be trustworthy. Their reasons were short and superficial, obviously owing to a lack of contextual knowledge; Indeed, as Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) claim, "knowledge telling", i.e. repeating the contents of documents and other sources, is not critical reading.

Furthermore, rather than analyzing the sources, the upper secondary students often emotionally described the phenomenon as such. This, too, can be explained by the nature of the sources, some of which were intimate memories. Such an emotional stance was not obvious in the younger group, because interviews were structured and focused on reliability and factual contents.

Moreover, some upper secondary level students made arguments for or against the evacuations of children by using the sources selectively, even though they were only instructed to discuss the positive and negative effects of child transportations and not to make justifications. They did not evaluate the source texts or use them as reference material, but did understand the multiple perspectives of those who were involved. These findings suggest that controversial, emotional, and ethical questions can offer opportunities to teach critical reading skills by raising students' awareness of the importance of source evaluation and valid argumentation.

Finally, regarding the limitations of this study, let us point out that our conclusions are based on a small data set, and further experiments need to be conducted before any generalizations can be made. For instance, it is possible that our informants could not verbalize their thoughts perfectly. Nevertheless, this study offers certain feasible ideas for eliciting students' skills in critical literacy, such as asking critical questions, and using relevant sources that touch them.

Implications for policy and teaching

Even if the aims and contents to teach critical literacy are expressed in national curricula, there is a need for more specific information about how to construct the teaching of critical reading skills in a proper way. Teachers need new didactical tools and professional couching to engage learners in the use of their critical reading skills, because a citizen's ability to function in society is an important part of critical competence (Apple 2000; Dam and Volman 2004).

According to previous research (Wiley and Voss 1999; Monte-Sano and De La Paz 2012), writing an argumentative essay on a historical topic has proved to be a successful method for learning conceptual understanding, compared for example to writing summaries, narratives, or explanatory essays. Furthermore, discussions and debates are generally seen as "a welcome departure from the lecture and memorization" because they offer students "a unique opportunity to stretch themselves beyond the familiarity of their contemporary belief system", as Reisman and Wineburg argue (2012, 185), and, as pointed out before (Reisman

and Wineburg 2012), student engagement is an important aspect of motivation and substantive learning.

Furthermore, the importance of teaching critical reading skills at schools is to be especially underlined in light of the "digital turn"; after all, the demands and possibilities of the 21st century and digital learning environments are totally different now compared to the previous eras (Kuhn and Crowell 2011, 5). Thus, the learning of literacy calls for new didactics and pedagogical methods to help students in confronting new digital environments. The skills of using digital sources and assessing their relevance, sufficiency, and credibility are necessary because students are now able to access more sources and second-hand knowledge than ever before, thanks to the modern web and mobile technology (Francke et al. 2011, 676–77, 691; Macedo-Rouet et al. 2014, 207, 222; Wineburg and Reisman 2015). When students learn to understand the importance of adequate sources and convincing arguments, they learn skills needed in everyday life. Curriculum designers and other educational decision-makers need all possible support in constructing fresh guidelines for future curricula that focus on learning critical reading skills.

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