The QUEST for an approach to guided critical reading and writing

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ABSTRACT
When students write about something which they have read (for example, a critical review of a text), they often encounter problems with the style, content and authority of their written responses. This article introduces an approach to critical reading and writing, the QUEST analysis, which provides students with guidance in the form of leading questions. ELT students in two different settings were asked their opinions of using the QUEST analysis approach when reviewing academic articles for assignment purposes. Their comments, together with my own observations, are used to consider its application in a range of different contexts.

Introduction
Over the years as a language teacher educator I have often been disappointed by the quality of critical analysis produced by students when reviewing the written work of others. Usually, the written text under review has been in the form of published, typically research-based, academic articles, and the students’ responses have taken the form of academic essays. In order to resolve some of the problems experienced by the students, I have developed an approach to critical reading and writing which provides them with guidance in the form of leading questions; questions which students ask themselves when reading the text and when planning their written responses.

In this article I begin by explaining what I mean by critical reading and writing, and then discuss some of the problems my ELT students have experienced with this type of task. Next, I introduce the QUEST analysis by giving an overview of its aims and structure. Although numerous other approaches to critical reading have been considered (see, for example, Nuttall 1982; Collie and Slater 1987), the QUEST analysis approach is the outcome of my personal reflections as a teacher educator together with my collaborative efforts with students to find a solution to some of our concerns. I then report on recent experiences of using the QUEST analysis in two different ELT contexts. Finally, I suggest ways in which the approach could be applied to other reading and writing classroom contexts.
Critical reading and writing

Leki and Carson (1997) investigated the sources of information for writing tasks in university classes. One source was text which students then had to account for in some way: ‘they must produce text-responsible prose based on content acquired primarily from text’ (1997: 41). In other words, there is reading and then writing based on the content of that reading. It is this connection between reading and writing which is the focus of this article.

The first step in making the reading critical is the comprehension of the text. Students need to demonstrate an understanding of the source text. This includes both literal comprehension, or the understanding of the language and content of the text, and inferential comprehension, or the understanding of the relationship between main ideas and supporting details, logical organisation of ideas, conclusions drawn, and so on (He 2000). It is impossible to undertake a critical analysis of a text if its content is not understood in the first place.

One component of the critical analysis of the text is its evaluation – judgements about content (Grabe and Kaplan 1996). The evaluation needs to be objective: What supporting evidence has been supplied from the literature and from the writer’s own data? Are the statistics, the facts, the references, et cetera accurate? Has anything been left out? Is the report complete? The evaluation must also, essentially, be subjective: What is its relevance, to the reviewer and to the discipline? Does it make a contribution to the field? Where is the writer coming from? Are there are biases, values, morals evident? Does the writer look at the bigger picture and address any sociopolitical concerns?

Finally, to complete a critical analysis of a text, students need to consider its emotional and aesthetic impact (Johns 1997). Here they would include their appreciation of the language and style used in the text. Is it, for example, accessible and appropriate for the audience? The analysis would also include reactions to visuals (including tables, graphs and pictures), structural conventions and any imagery used.

Students’ problems

In this section, I consider some of the problems I have encountered with the quality of the written critical reviews attempted by my ELT students; that is, why it is that they fall short of producing critical responses which fulfil the criteria described above. Obviously, no one student exhibited all of these problems in any one essay; the list provided below is a collection of problems gathered from a number of students in a range of different classes.
1 In their written responses students tend to summarise rather than critically review the text; that is, their writing is more description than reaction.

2 Students claim that they have no or only limited knowledge of the text's subject matter and therefore feel that they have no authority to question its content. Vandrick (1996: 28) points out that these students 'have little sense that these materials are written, edited, and published by fallible human beings with their own blind spots and biases', and suggests that 'students need to be reminded of these facts rather explicitly'.

3 Written reviews are either too personal or too distant. Where they are too personal, there is too much emphasis on the student’s life as a former language learner or as a practising teacher. Where they are too distant, the responses appear overly academic or detached from the life of the student; no personal voice comes through.

4 Students are sometimes too ‘nice’. They let writers off the hook, neglecting to comment on glaring problems, or they claim to see no problems at all, praising the writer sometimes undeservedly. On the other hand, some students are too ‘picky’, pointing out spelling errors, inappropriate punctuation or the over-use of particular vocabulary items.

5 There is no balance between positive and negative opinions, with students displaying too much of one or the other and not giving coherence to any particular argument.

6 Students do not know what questions to ask about the text, not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of academic style, research procedures, organisational conventions of an academic article, and so on.

7 Students do not know how to structure a critical review; that is, how to organise the answers to the questions they ask in 6 above. For example, is it an essay or is it a report?

The QUEST analysis

The aim of the QUEST analysis is to provide a form of scaffolding to the students who write the critical review. I use the term ‘scaffolding’ in the same way as Vygotsky (1987) to refer to collaborative instruction in which the teacher guides the student to a solution to a problem or to completion of a task which they could otherwise not solve or complete by themselves. The scaffolding in the QUEST analysis takes the form of leading questions which move students forward along the path of successful review writing. This moving forward by means of leading questions is what I mean by guided critical reading and writing.

It is important to note, however, that the QUEST analysis is not the final destination; it is not a model method for writing a critical review. Instead, it
is part of the scaffolding which directs students towards that goal. To sum up, then, the aim of the leading questions is to guide the students towards satisfactory comprehension, evaluation and appreciation of the source text, and then to report, in writing, on their findings.

The QUEST analysis takes the following form:

**Q** = What **Questions** do you have after reading the article?
   For example, anything you don't understand?
   any issues you'd like to debate further?
   anything you'd like to know more about?

**U** = What in the article are you **Unhappy** about?
   For example, any weaknesses in the article?
   any problems in the arguments?
   anything you disagree with?

**E** = Are there any **Excellent** points that got you **Excited**?
   For example, any points you agree with?
   anything that satisfied a gap in your knowledge?
   anything which sparked off a research idea for you?

**S** = What are the **Strengths** of the article?
   For example, is it well written?
   is it critical?
   does it confirm some of your beliefs and experiences?

**T** = What are the most important **Themes** in the article?
   For example, what is the main message in the article?
   are there useful recommendations related to these themes?
   what can YOU take away from the article?

These questions cover all the areas of successful critical reading and writing which I described above, and provide students who are doing the analysis with opportunities to be objective, academic and detached. Students can also evaluate the text subjectively, by voicing their opinions and judgments about content, structure and worth. Finally, there is a place for reviewers to be personal, to include their perceptions of the text’s relevance to their own ideas, experience and contexts.

Section Q asks students to think about questions they may have after having read the article. Section U focuses on negative evaluation and appreciation. Section E focuses on positive opinions, but the focus is on specific points or parts of the article. Section S also focuses on the positive, but this time on the article as a whole. Finally, Section T asks students to pay close attention to the content, conclusions and implications of the article.

**Trial 1**

The first time I used the QUEST analysis was with four postgraduate ELT
student teachers at a South African university. The 13-week Curriculum Theory and Practice course aimed to provide an introduction to topics in applied language studies. As part of the course assessment, the students were required to do a series of QUEST analyses. They were given the following instructions:

Instructions

Each week you will be required to write a three-page (maximum) QUEST analysis. A QUEST analysis works as follows:

1. Each week you will be assigned a reading to read and to respond to.
2. Your response will take the form of a short essay. It will include a brief introduction (which should include a short summary of the reading), the five sections of the QUEST analysis (in any order, but clearly identifiable) and a conclusion.
3. The five sections of the analysis are attached.
4. The analysis will be assessed according to the following criteria:
   a) The clarity of writing
   b) The level of critical analysis
   c) The relationship to personal experience
   d) The integration of other significant readings.
5. The assigned readings will not always be discussed in the seminars (they may, however, when their contents overlap with the topic of a particular seminar).
6. The purpose of the weekly QUEST analysis is to expose you to significant classic and current readings in the fields of applied language studies and curriculum development.

TRIAL 1: MY FEEDBACK

The students did a lot of reading, and they got a lot of practice in writing critical responses to published text. The students found the questions and the framework provided by the analysis helpful. The four students (see later) and I, however, found the analyses too time-consuming. I initially planned for the students to do 12 readings, one each week except for the first week of the course, but after the first half of the semester we decided to reduce the analyses to one every other week. In a class of more than four students, even this reduced frequency may have been too much, if not impossible, for the teacher to manage. The following are my observations of what some of the students produced.
1 TESQU and TESUQ are probably a more logical sequence of the sections, but this was not exploited and students stuck to the QUEST arrangement.
2 The introduction (which included the summary) was too long. Obviously, students were avoiding the actual review by doing more of what they could do better, that is, the summary.
3 The students’ writing was sometimes in point-form notes, rather than in an academic prose style.
4 Students were unsure of the genre of the analysis, and their writing style reflected this. They wavered between a formal, academic style and a conversational, journal-writing style.
5 There was no clear demarcation (and labelling) of the five sections. It was left to me, the reader, to figure out when students were doing Q, or U, et cetera. In other words, and despite the instructions, they tended to avoid writing in sections and to write a holistic review instead.
6 In some of the sections, students responded by merely supplying a list of direct quotations from the article, or there would be a series of quotations each followed by a one-line comment.
7 Under Section Q, students listed their questions, but did not include a comment or discussion of these.
8 Almost no other reading was done, even though it was encouraged and listed as one of the assessment criteria.

**TRIAL 1: STUDENTS’ FEEDBACK**
At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the semester, I asked the students to evaluate their experiences of doing QUEST analyses. Their feedback was both positive and negative, and can be divided into the following categories (under each category I provide representative, self-explanatory samples of the students’ comments):

1 Depth of reading
   ‘I think it’s a brilliant way to get us to really read the article – having to respond to guideline questions means the temptation to scan or skim evaporates.’

2 Critical reading
   ‘I really enjoy the deconstructing and then the reconstructing that goes into it – it’s an attempt to make an academic masterpiece.’
   ‘I found the QUESTS to be the most worthwhile academic work I’ve done all semester, they combine writing skills and critical thinking skills (and just getting the essential readings done) perfectly. I also found that you marked them with an ‘engaged’ eye, which gave the whole process that added edge of external motivation.’
3 Time-consuming
‘Too much work!’
‘I am still enjoying them, but only once I get started – I don’t always have much enthusiasm beforehand. This is probably because I find them incredibly time-consuming.’

4 Writing style
‘My worry is to do with having been indoctrinated and dominated by academic styles. During undergrad you’re told so often that casual writing is the devil that it becomes your personal red-horned beast. This task seems to need an integration of both casual and formal styles, personal and academic. I find it difficult to choose which when.’

‘My main concern is the problem of not knowing in what written style our responses should be. It tends to be lingering on the fringes of being a conversational interaction with my lecturer but at the same time the technical mistakes are penalised in the same way as in an academic essay. I need further clarity on this.’

5 Personal experience
‘The QUEST analyses broadened my knowledge about teaching and provided me with practical ideas to reduce instability in my class. The critical study of other researchers’ and educationists’ viewpoints led me to be more reflective about my teaching and strengthened my own practices.’

‘What worries me is the fact that it will be assessed in terms of personal experience. I don’t feel I have much to contribute, but I suppose I can look at the issues from the perspective of a student or a trainee.’

6 Guided response
‘The fact that the task is so neatly structured also helps. Without the Q-U-E-S-T outline, trying to dissect the article and then synthesise it in three pages would be a mammoth exercise.’

‘The student is guided along by the fact that a framework is supplied. This framework is easy to follow.’

7 Relate to seminar work
‘I would have liked us to discuss or just touch on the ‘quest analysis’ theories and practices in our class and verify or explore each other’s viewpoints.’

8 No questions
‘I am not sure whether the questions I always ask help the cause of this quest analysis, because sometimes an article is so clear and straightforward to the extent that I have no questions to ask. This means I will be asking questions for the sake of asking them.’
Trial 2

Having learned a number of lessons from Trial 1, I tried the QUEST analysis approach to critical reading and writing in a different context: 12 MA (ELT) students in a Sociolinguistics for Language Teachers class at a New Zealand university. This time, the analysis was a one-off assignment, rather than a series of analyses. The students were required to find their own article or chapter to review in the field of sociolinguistics and language education, since the aim of the task was to get them to search through the relevant literature so that they could become acquainted with publications in the field, as well as to produce a written critical review.

Assignment instructions were similar to those given to students in Trial 1. The differences were as follows:

1. A short introductory paragraph explained the purpose of the analysis.
2. Word limits were given for the introduction (250), the conclusion (250) and the five sections (altogether 1000 words).
3. Suggestions were made as to which academic journals were likely to contain appropriate articles.
4. A mini-workshop was held during one of the lectures to go through the QUEST analysis procedures step-by-step.

TRIAL 2: FEEDBACK

The workshop and the clear instructions seemed to have taken care of most procedural difficulties, and I found that the students produced insightful, coherent reviews. The students, in written feedback given after their assignments were returned, were positive about the experience. Some of their comments were similar to those made by the students in Trial 1, with the following additional categories:

1. Flexibility of sections
   ‘I’ve enjoyed very much to carry on with the method of analysis. I found it was a kind of balanced way to look at an issue. Obviously I did not follow the same order, as it was allowed, and it was even better in a way; that is, a flexible sequence. Generally, it was a very useful tool.’

2. Providing guidance
   ‘It’s like a walking stick which facilitates a student when he/she is attempting to write an academically presentable paper.’
   ‘I found this an excellent framework for writing a review. My problem was trying to just cover each letter one at a time rather than letting the ideas flow. Maybe the QUEST format is better because it forces you to structure your ideas.’
Overlap of sections

'It was good to have these four sections to analyse logically. But when I started writing, what I wanted to include in each section, there was some overlap, and it was a bit difficult to decide how I should distribute those ideas.'

'I do think that Excited and Strengths were a bit too similar. If the idea is to write equal amounts about each letter, perhaps the two ought to be combined. Another idea – maybe Excited could be broadened.'

More support needed

'It's very hard to dig deeply (comment on) the contents of the article at my level. I think we need to read more supporting materials along with the article to do the QUEST analysis.'

**Further application of the QUEST analysis**

In this article, I have described the use of the QUEST analysis in two different contexts. In both, the students who wrote the critical review were ELT student teachers with varying levels of experience in the classroom, and all were studying at the postgraduate level. Also, in both contexts the QUEST analysis involved reading a published, research-based article and then responding to it for assessment purposes in the form of a written review; in the South African context, a series of weekly and then biweekly responses; and in the New Zealand context, a one-off assignment.

There are, of course, numerous alternatives to this arrangement. The texts which students read could be varied. Text, in the broadest sense of the word, could include newspaper and magazine articles, other students’ writing, film and theatre, websites, and literary works, for example.

The QUEST analysis could be used for other students in different contexts. It could be used in general ESL classes, at any level, and it certainly has a place in ESL reading and writing classes. Since comprehending and evaluating text is one of the major tasks for school and university students, the QUEST analysis also has a place in EAP (and ESP) classes. Although I have presented the QUEST analysis as a static framework in this article, it need not be, and it certainly would need to be adapted for use in contexts different from those I have described in this article; for example, as has been shown, there is no need to follow strictly the sequence of the QUEST sections. Some of the sub-questions in each section could be deleted, and others added depending on the nature of the course, and the proficiency level and needs of students. It is also not necessary always to complete all five sections; one, or more, could be chosen for practising or for teaching a particular review skill.
The QUEST analysis approach, therefore, is a versatile one. It is also a thorough one. It requires students, in whatever context, to read a text carefully and cautiously, and to relate whatever is read to one's own ideas and beliefs. And most important, it demands that students be critical. It is important to remember, however, that the QUEST analysis is not a model for a written critical review; it is a step along the way towards achieving that goal.

REFERENCES