

## **An Investigation of Critical Reading Skills on Tertiary Level Students**

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### **Abstract**

Tertiary level students are supposed to graduate from university with fully critical reading skills awareness. However, for a variety of reasons these skills are not always as well developed as they might be. This paper seeks to explore first year university students' critical reading skills at Arab Open University. A reading test, assessing students' critical reading skills, was conducted by the researcher. The data obtained was entered and processed by using (SPSS) program. Results of the analysis showed that participants do not have critical reading skills and can't be considered as active readers due to their unfamiliarity with using reading strategies to deal with unfamiliar texts.

## **1. Introduction**

Critical reading is an area which has been the center of attention of critical pedagogues for many years. Several scholars and researchers have made attempts to incorporate, or encourage the inclusion of, critical reading indicators in reading programs (e.g., Freire, 1983; Patching, Kameenui, Carnine, Gersten, & Colvin 1983; Peavey, 1954; Walz 2001; Wolf, King, & Huck, 1968), yet the degree to which these attempts have been successful is an uncertain issue upon which we may cast doubt. For this purpose, the present study sought to qualitatively examine whether or not reading textbooks encompass critical reading items.

As an English teacher and lecturer for a long time, the researcher has noticed that today's students are capable of critical reading development however there has been little progress in developing critical reading in EFL classrooms. There is some concern regarding their poor thinking skills. This may be due to the neglect of critical reading and thinking in the school curriculum. Helping EFL students develop critical reading can be a challenging undertaking. A search of the literatures related to critical reading provides guidelines for a definition, or include studies by others who have observed in classrooms to learn about critical reading. (Combs, 1992) who used classics of children's literature to teach critical reading skills, defines critical reading as reasonable, reflective thinking focus on deciding what to believe or do. In his view, critical reading is an interactive process that uses several levels of thought simultaneously and critical readers are constantly asking questions about the text they are reading. Hence, individual students increased their critical thinking skills in varying degrees and became problem solvers. Using activities and explicit instructions based of reading strategies, the students developed a strong foundation in critical reading and their progress in the critical reading should continue in future reading instruction.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

The main objective of this study is to determine students' perceptions about their self-efficacy on critical reading skills. In this respect, the present study seeks answers to such questions as "What is the level of students' sense of self-efficacy on critical reading?"

From the researcher's observation as a lecturer and an academic coordinator at Arab Open University, it was initiated that these learners are having problems in comprehending and interpreting English text. Students face additional challenges when faced with unfamiliar topics that restrict their topical knowledge activation. As a result of having problem in comprehending English text, they face other difficulties when carrying out assignments or

taking tests. In order for them to understand and comprehend the text, they need to apply different strategies of reading which most of the students do not have.

However, and despite this current status of reading, the methodology employed in the area of reading instruction does not follow a communicative teaching approach. In fact, learners are often asked to read a passage and answer the typically list of comprehension questions that follow the text, without much training in critical reading. In such a process, learners read word by word and spend much time translating the unknown words they encounter in the passage and consequently rarely focus completely on the message. To become competent in a second language (L2), learners need to acquire not only linguistic accuracy but also reading competence. This competence is mostly concerned with the ability to deal with texts of the target language, interpreting and comprehending them. Information about reading competence and critical reading skills in English language learning for students is essential to interpret the performance of these students at school and assess their development to enable them peruse.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **Critical Reading**

As (Elder & Paul, 2004), reading a text or a paragraph involves finding the main idea of the paragraph and how it is related to other paragraphs. Structural reading can be used to locate the main paragraphs in a text. Having understood the main ideas in a paragraph, good readers are able to connect them meaningfully to their own situations and experiences. Many models of second language (L2) reading have been ultimately reductive in their effects. According to WallaceCatherine, (2003) early learners, reading may be seen as decoding texts, pronouncing the words correctly or practicing language structure. For more advanced learners a comprehension view remains the dominant model. Indeed, it is assumed that the eventual and unique goal of reading is comprehension of text, even though recent writers in the field of reading research make a plea for the development of a model of reading as interpretation (cf. e.g. Urquhart and Weir op. cit.). I do not want to deny that understanding a text conceptually and linguistically must be a starting point for all reading positions; merely to point out that readers may want and need to respond to texts in more diverse and complex ways than is generally acknowledged. All learners, whether reading in a first, second or other language, are, from the earliest stages, potentially both making meaning from texts, and engaging in critique.

Nation (2009:7) provides a list of principles for the teaching of effective reading. In his view, a reading program should be designed and practiced for a range of reading purposes, from reading to search for information to reading to critique texts. He maintains that effective reading involves training learners to acquire and integrate a range of reading strategies such as: “previewing, setting a purpose, predicting, posing questions, connecting to background knowledge, paying attention to text structure, guessing words from context, critiquing, and reflecting on the text”. Furthermore, it is suggested that learners master different text structures including those typically found in newspapers, stories, reports, and so on.

According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), a book may deceive readers at the same time that it can enlighten readers and expand their knowledge (as cited in Molden, 2007). It is because readers sometimes leave texts unquestioned (Molden, 2007). So whether readers are deceived or enlightened depends on how they approach the task of reading: They are deceived if they read the books without questioning them, but if they question the author’s perspective and their own, they are more likely to be enlightened. Molden (2007:51) further suggests that in order to keep the balance between writing in which writers typically write critically with a clear purpose in mind, and reading we need to “read against the grain” we need to maintain the equal status of reader-author relationship. Thus, comprehension may not only be a final goal, but it can also be a point at which readers begin their critical discussions. All the texts that we use for teaching have got ideologies behind them, the ideologies that were dominant in the day of their publication (Wallace, 2003). (Johnstone, 2008) stated that discourse is shaped by prior discourse and how discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse are also important points to ponder. Several authors and researchers have emphasized the importance of assigning critical reading tasks and activities to students of different ages (e.g., Alderson and Bachman, 2000).

It can be concluded that critical reading means applying critical thinking to a written text, by analyzing and evaluating what you read: check out any influences on the evidence or arguments; examine the interpretations made; and decide to what extent you are prepared to accept the authors’ arguments, opinions, or conclusions.

According to (Taschow, 1972) critical reading is a thinking process which occurs over a sustained period of time and is learned, purposeful, and planned. The reader, supported by a background of experiences, interacts actively, intelligently, and emotionally with the author. The outcome of this interaction is a different or new understanding for the reader. Petty (1956) defined critical reading as appraising, evaluating, selecting, judging, or

comparing ideas as part of the total process of reading. He compared this to non-critical or literal reading which involves the exact reproduction of the material as it appears. Petty considered critical reading as related to, or part of, critical thinking. Critical reading involves judging and analyzing not only the content of materials, but also, the degree to which the writing style has contributed to comprehensibility (Wolf, et al., 1968).

### **The Focus on Critical Reading**

As Wallace, (2003) critical reading as one strand within the wider project of CLA, and one which has been relatively neglected. Fairclough (1992a: 28) notes: 'In critical linguistics there tends to be too much emphasis upon the text as product and too little emphasis upon the processes of producing and interpreting texts.' It is largely, perhaps, because of the relative neglect of the interpretation of texts, within their contexts of use, that critical discourse analysts have been accused of merely 'reading off' effects from texts (cf. e.g. Stubbs 1994; Widdowson, 1995). At the same time, within ELT, while reading is well covered in the psycholinguistic and general methodology literature (cf. e.g. Davies 1995; Nuttall 1996; Urquhart and Weir 1998), there is little on critical reading in the second or foreign language classroom. Many models of second language (L2) reading have been ultimately reductive in their effects. For early learners, reading may be seen as decoding texts, pronouncing the words correctly or practising language structure. For more advanced learners a comprehension view remains the dominant model. Indeed it is assumed that the eventual and unique goal of reading is comprehension of text, even though recent writers in the field of reading research make a plea for the development of a model of reading as interpretation (cf. e.g. Urquhart and Weir op. cit.). I do not want to deny that understanding a text conceptually and linguistically must be a starting point for all reading positions; merely to point out that readers may want and need to respond to texts in more diverse and complex ways than is generally acknowledged.

All learners, whether reading in a first, second or other language, are, from the earliest stages, potentially both making meaning from texts, and engaging in critique. I would want too to challenge the dominant 'four skills' view, which is common in the discourse of foreign language teaching, by which we mean 'speaking, listening, reading and writing'. Even though integrated approaches to teaching the skills are argued for, it continues to be assumed in ELT methodology that there is an underlying discrete set of abilities which can be sequentially taught and learned. Broadly I want to argue not just for an integrated approach in teaching,

but that language abilities are holistically acquired – in helping learners to be better readers one is necessarily enhancing overall knowledge and use. When I say ‘better’, I mean more critical, more powerful users of a language, in this case of a second language. Terms such as ‘powerful’ and ‘critical’ are much used and abused, so I hope that I may be permitted to use them provisionally for the moment, in advance of arguments which I will flesh out in future chapters. In graduate school you will need to read critically most of the time, so it’s important that you understand how to approach a text with a critical eye. Critical reading involves evaluating and judging the accuracy of statements and the soundness of the reasoning that leads to conclusions.

### **The Importance of Critical Reading**

According to Hudson (2007), one of the categories in reading skills is critical reading skills. Critical reading skills are skills that will help students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read. When teachers expose students to critical reading skills, they will also make students see the cause – and – effect or comparing relationships in the text, or adopting critical stance toward the text. In other words, when we teach critical reading skills to students we will develop them to be critical thinkers as well because when they do critical reading it will lead to critical thinking (critical reading will come first before critical thinking). What is meant here, students need to have fully understood a text where they would analyze, synthesize, and evaluate it, then only they would think critically about the text – choose or reject the ideas put forward, agree or disagree with the issues, and most important of all they know the reason(s) why they do it. We need to teach critical reading skills to students because we want them to not only know how to convert orthographic symbols to language (word attack skills), use context and knowledge to comprehend what is read (comprehension skills), or see larger sentences as wholes, a process which help students to read fluently (fluency skills) (Hudson, 2007). We know that most students can read but our main concern is whether they could understand the text critically like “reading between the lines” or ” reading for deeper meaning” because if we could help them to develop critical reading skills, they would definitely have good reading comprehension skills and could be successful in schools. Students with good reading comprehension skills could perform well in any subject/course because they have developed the critical reading skills to not only understand but analyze any text given to them. This will also help them to score better in any

tests or exams they have to take in schools. What is more crucial here is that we will prepare them to be better students if they embark in any program at the tertiary level.

Wallace (2003) states that there are three personal reasons for reading: we read to survive (reading for survival), we read to learn (reading for learning), and we read for pleasure (reading for pleasure). When we teach reading to students, and try to understand their personal reasons for reading we will try to make reading process a meaningful one. For example, when we engage students in reading for learning we must not all the time carry out reading activities which have little to do with facts or opinions like what Goodman (1984) sees as "ritualistic". One good example of these reading activities is the reading aloud activity which Wallace (2003) finds this kind of reading activity may only have a „display“ function rather than offering evidence of learning or reflection. However, this is what happening in most reading classes in schools. We do not employ any critical reading skills here because such an activity imposes little understanding of its content to students. Therefore, we need to minimize on such reading activity in our reading class if we want to help our students to develop critical reading skills.

### **What Affects Critical Reading?**

There are two issues that affect student reading: the skill issue and the compliance issue. Many students, particularly first-year students, simply don't know how to read critically; throughout high school, students may have been asked to read only for information and may not have experience with "engaging" The assigned text. This Is the skill issue. Another Important issue being researched is that nearly 70% Of students do not feel that they need to do the assigned reading in order to succeed academically (Burchfield, C.M. &Sappinton, (2000). Compliance with required reading assignments. Teaching of Psychology, 27(1), 58-60.). This Is the compliance issue.

### **Critical Reading Skills**

Critical reading skills include specific behaviors such as evaluating internal consistency of arguments, recognizing propaganda techniques, considering others' points of view, comparing and/or contrasting various text types, analyzing story structure, and determining reliability of sources (Wolf, King, & Huck, 1968). Critical reading skills help students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read. However, in order for students to acquire these skills, they need to be exposed and taught how to be critical readers.



As AbdKadir N. et al, (2014), in any reading class in Malaysian schools, we are not worried of the word attack skills, comprehension skills, and fluency skills not taught in schools because most teachers would teach these skills but we are more concern with the critical reading skills which seem to be neglected by teachers.

Wallace (2003) sees early reading skills as a performance on certain kinds of motor skills, the ability to discriminate shapes and patterns, and phonic and word recognition skills. "Phonics" involves the ability to match up letters (or "graphemes") to some kind of sound representation and phonic skill can be displayed by the ability to read aloud with a „good“ native-like standard English pronunciation. This phonic skill seems to one popular method in teaching reading in schools.

However, the question here is students will only read but rarely use their cognitive ability to "interact" with the text and try to analyze it. If students are exposed to this type of reading skill all the time, it is difficult for them to be critical readers and if this happens the teaching of reading is more on just sounding and recognizing English words. What teachers should do in their reading class is to use all four reading skills which have been categorized by Wallace (2003). They must not concentrate on only one or two reading skills but try to integrate all four reading skills, paying more attention to the critical reading skills. When discussing about these four broad categories of reading skills, there are researchers who look at these skills as being separable and can be narrowed down into sub skills but these have been debated because there are skills that overlap. As Overturf and Shanahan (2010:2) explain,

*“The Common Core State Standards stress that “students must learn to engage independently in critical reading, determining what a text says explicitly, making logical inferences, and analyzing a text’s craft and structure to determine how those affect the text’s meaning and tone, evaluating the effectiveness or value of the text, and using the information and ideas drawn from texts (often referred to as evidence) as the basis of one’s own arguments, presentations, and claims.*

Students who possess critical reading skills are able to read "beyond the information given...by asking questions, making hypotheses, seeking evidence, and validating assumptions” (Langer, 1990: 815). Reading theorists and researchers recognize a strong relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking. Readers are believed to



consider alternate interpretations in light of prior experience and world knowledge while delaying decisions until further information can be gleaned (Anderson et.al, 1984;). The resulting decisions reflect a reader's acceptance or rejection of the alternate interpretations presented. Grabe (1991) discloses that cognitive skills employed in reading comprehension include inference, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. Reading comprehension is dependent upon the reader's cognitive skills of inferring, synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Participants**

Participants were 176 preparatory year students at Arab Open University (AOU) in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jeddah Branch where these students take Orientation & Foundation programmes. These two programmes, which the students normally take in their first-year, are tailored for students who enrol at the university, with the dual aim of working on their problem areas in English and on enhancing their English communication skills, to enable them pursue their studies at AOU successfully and to prepare them for the workplace later.

#### **Procedure**

The data was collected for the validation study by distributing the instrument in the first part of the first semester 2017 – 2018, directly after the participants have been enrolled in the program of preparatory year. First, the participants were given instructions, asked to complete reading the test then answer the questions provided. The researcher then collected all the paper after all participants have written their names on the test paper. The resulting data was submitted to SPSS for analyses. The critical reading skills test measures critical reading ability of participants.

The test consists of two sections multiple choice and Essay questions. Essay questions require participants to write answers to statements or questions. To complete a successful essay exam, you need to be able to recall relevant information and to organize it in a clear way, generating a thesis and building to a conclusion. Instructors give essay tests to determine whether or not students can make connections among various ideas, apply course information to new situations, and (most importantly) demonstrate that they have made the information their own. All questions are designed around the main theme of the reading text. The questions assess critical reading skills in general without specific content, and there is no requirement of science content to complete this test.

Based on the criteria for determining whether a text or reading material helps investigate critical reading skills in students, two types of text selecting criteria were considered by the researcher while selecting the reading text: criteria related to the students and criteria related to the texts. In this study, the researcher is going to outline and review some of these criteria briefly. There are some factors directly related to the students such as students' level and background knowledge. Students' level: The present linguistic level of the students and their level of content and cultural schemata has been considered while selecting the text for the test. Students' background knowledge has also been considered: The knowledge the students to assure a fit between the selected text and participants' background information before they are asked to read the text and answer the questions.

There are some factors such as relevance, the content of the passage, exploitability, suitability, readability, topic, cultural suitability, and appearance (Hetherington, 1985) related to the texts that should be considered while selecting reading texts for EFL/ESL classes. The text was relevant for the students' level. It was related to the students' real world reading purposes. The content of the text was useful, meaningful, interesting for the students, semantically and conceptually complete. While selecting the text, syntactic appropriateness of the text, logical or rhetorical ordering of ideas, textual phenomena at the discourse level, lexical appropriateness, and background knowledge of the reader has been considered. In selecting the text, the participants' content schemata were the researcher's major concern. Most of the students had no previous access to the selected reading passage. before taking part in study. As an academic coordinator and a lecturer at Arab Open University for more than two years, where the data has been collected, the researcher knows well that this text hasn't been chosen in exams for the classes from which the researcher draws the participants. The text was taken from a carefully selected reading book which investigates students' effective reading skills –“Select Reading” by (Linda Lee, Erik Gundersen, and Jean Bernard).

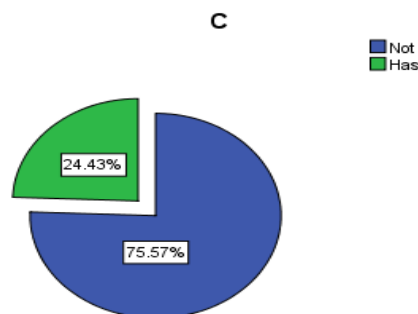
#### **4. Data analysis**

Based on the analysis of critical reading assessment test, the mean was 1.49 and T-Test was -7.872 and there were statistically significant differences with the level 0.00, at the level 0.05 which indicates high agreement from the sample with all statements of the test.

According to the table and diagram below it has been noticed that there was high agreement from the sample with the total frequency 176, i.e., 100% and it has been divided as follows: 133 of the sample, with frequency percentage 75.6%, do not have critical reading

skills al, and only 43 of the sample, with frequency percentage 24.4%, have critical reading skills. This indicates that the majority of the sample does not have critical reading skills.

Critical reading assessment analysis			
		Frequency	Percent
	Not	133	75.6
	Has	43	24.4
	Total	176	100.0



Students' critical reading deficiency is due to lack of strategies rather than a lack of their ability and skills

## 5. Results

Based on the findings:

1. It can be said that AOU students show very poor awareness of critical reading skills examined in this study.
2. It has been noticed that the majority of the students who participated in the study were uncertain of their knowledge of all skills in the measurement of critical reading skills.
3. Participants do not know when and how to use deliberate strategies to repair comprehension problems.

## 6. Recommendations

1. One implication from the current research findings is that teaching critical reading strategies to students earlier may be a key toward helping them to improve critical

reading skills. Since critical reading can be taught and trained (Halpern, 2007), it is essential to teach critical reading skills to students at every level of education process.

2. Training students using critical reading strategies increase utilizing critical reading strategies directly as a medium for improving the deep understanding to find the concepts behind the lines.
3. Comprehension will also be facilitated by instructional attention to teaching reading based on cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy.
4. Professional development for teachers at schools, is needed to encourage them to employ critical reading through their teaching to engage their students in critical reading.
5. The instruction of the critical reading strategies based on cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy is also explicit and direct so that students are able to ask many organized, and higher order questions.

## **7. Conclusion**

As referred earlier in this paper's objectives, critical reading is very important for tertiary level students to pursue their study. Critical readers know when and how to use deliberate strategies to deal with unfamiliar texts. Participants involved in this study, lack these skills. The researcher considers the reason for that is that these students did not have any previous idea of these critical reading skills. These results suggest that participants were drawing on their L1 skills to support their English language reading knowledge. In other words, they did not have any practice in teaching these skills in their reading comprehension lessons. Therefore, they did not make much progress in the use of critical reading skills. This indicates that there was a relationship between the improvement of critical reading skills and the amount of practice they had. Most students faced some problems in understanding these skills and they did not acquire any more positive attitude towards critical reading skills.

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