

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL READING ABILITIES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
ON THEIR CRITICAL THINKING ABILITIES IN KARACHI, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of critical thinking abilities is crucial for the success in post-graduate education, and this explains how it is a key part of most university introductory courses. Evaluating and analyzing the connection between reading comprehension and critical thinking is the significant aim of the current study. For students who aspire to pursue higher education in college, mastering the ability to read and evaluate material critically is an essential requirement. This study aimed to assess students' critical thinking skills while they were reading an English text. It focused on undergraduate students at a specific university in Karachi based on a qualitative study approach to obtain the objectives of the study using a questionnaire to collect data from undergraduate students. The observations of the study emphasize the significance of the correlation between reading comprehension and critical thinking, lack of cognitive vocabulary, lack of academic writing and learning skills, and lack of technology integration in a classroom environment, and the fact that university students still have not fully developed reading for pleasure skills. The results of this study indicate that university students have an exceptionally good attitude toward reading comprehension, but this attitude does not match their level of critical thinking or their ability to reflect critical thinking in their ability to read critically. Books offer numerous advantages over screen-based reading materials, particularly in terms of cognitive development, critical thinking skills, and overall health. Encouraging students to read books can help them develop a sturdy foundation for lifelong learning and academic success. Updated and stocked libraries, encouraging students the use higher order thinking strategies for reading and comprehension in any circumstance, and modernizing the English curriculum are some major recommendations of the present studies.

KEYWORDS: *Critical Reading Abilities, Critical Thinking Abilities, Undergraduate Students*

INTRODUCTION

Developing skills in critical thinking is essential for achieving success in higher or post-graduate education and is a prime focus in most university preliminary courses. Developing the skill to read and evaluate information critically is a significant requirement for students who wish to attend university. English for Academic Achievements courses usually have components that focus on critical reading, though the particulars may differ between diverse educational institutions. Wilson, K. (2016). In recent years, cognitive psychology has experienced a boost in focus and exploration about reading comprehension and critical thinking. Aloqaili, A. S. (2012). Cognitive scientists have developed sophisticated theories and trends that supply a theoretical framework for reading comprehension, including ideas like inference-making, critical thinking, prior knowledge, and metacognitive abilities (Limbach and Waugh, 2010; Zabit, 2010). It is essential to enhance the critical thinking of students since it is believed that critical thinking is crucial to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Critical thinking involves the ability to assess information and make use of it in a thoughtful and efficient manner Din, M. (2020). Critical thinking is a practical, reflective process that seeks to reach reasonable conclusions by considering beliefs and acting. Aloqaili, A. S. (2012) It involves analyzing information, forming conclusions, and making decisions based on evidence and reasoned argument. Wilson, K. (2016) Courses in English for academic achievements often comprise instruction in active reading or critical reading, though this component can differ significantly from one course to another.

Critical reading, as defined by Harris and Hodges (1981, cited in Köse, 2007, p. 12), Analyzing and assessing the significance and worth of a text is the process of critical reading. It closely examines a text to evaluate its meaning and relevance and to assess its quality. The ability to comprehend and make sense of what one reads is referred to as

critical reading skills. This includes the capability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize the material being read (Halvarson, 1992). Critical reading involves actively engaging with a text and analyzing it to form an opinion or draw conclusions. It involves analyzing the content, understanding the author's purpose, and evaluating the material's credibility and relevance to one's own beliefs and values. By reading critically, one's thought process is facilitated by the use of more evocative language and the clarification of ideas through debate and inquiry (Hafner, 1974). In contrast, critical reading is defined by Maker (1986) as deciding what is believable and what is unbelievable based on what we have read. This analysis can suggest that a critical reader should read with increasing interest Li, C. S., & Wan, R. (2022).

The 21st Century has created a need to improve all pathways and levels of education to better prepare students for the future. (Mahanal, Zubaidah, Bahri, & Dinnurriya, 2016). Critical thinking is an essential skill for students to possess, as it helps them make informed decisions, evaluate and analyze arguments, and identify any potential flaws. Having the ability to think critically allows students to better understand the world around them and equips them with problem-solving skills. It helps them develop their reasoning and logic skills, which can be applied to any situation. Furthermore, critical thinking helps students become better problem-solvers, allowing them to make decisions based on evidence and facts, rather than relying on superficial assumptions. In addition, it encourages students to be more open-minded and to consider different perspectives and ideas. Ultimately, critical thinking helps students become more informed and thoughtful individuals, which can benefit them in both their academic and professional lives. Reading has the capacity to improve critical thinking, broaden views, and offer insights into oneself and the larger world, making it one of the most effective learning activities. Reading can also assist pupils in interpreting events and foreseeing potential future scenarios. (Karadeniz, 2015).

Reading is a complex task that involves psychological, linguistic, and sociological components also includes integrating the fragments of text with readers' own prior knowledge to generate meaning. The reader imparts the meaning of the text and interprets it based on their own existing knowledge and understanding along with the authors. Shihab, I. A. (2011). Schemata and critical thinking serve to facilitate comprehension by allowing us to use our existing knowledge to draw conclusions and make inferences. Reading for pleasure defined by Clark and Rumbold (2006), Pleasure reading is an enjoyable, voluntary activity that often involves reading material that we have chosen ourselves and at our own convenience. It can be an opportunity to explore topics that interest us and bring us joy. (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, p. 6). Studies have found that between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, there was a decline in the amount of reading for pleasure in students. Regrettably, this decrease in leisure reading had a detrimental effect on student performance. A person reads of their own volition if they have a strong and passionate enthusiasm for reading that is accompanied by positive emotions towards reading. This interest indicates a desire to focus on the activity and enjoyment of it that is chosen independently. Sharma & Singh (2005) Reading is mainly a cognitive exertion, and having a reading practice is an attribute of a person that develops over time through repetition and practice. A person's psychological makeup is often characterized by their desire for reading. Pfau (1967) stated Psychology concerning the formation of habits indicates that an inclination to read must be developed during the early stages of life. The use of reading habits can provide multiple advantages for children, potentially transforming them from average to exceptional students. Starke (1931) emphasized that it is the responsibility of parents to foster a devotion to reading in their children and to ensure that books are accessible in the home. Parents, teachers, publishers, and writers/artists all play an important role in supplying children with reading material. Awais, S., & Ameen, P. (2013) Reading is proposed as an act of learning and understanding written words and materials. Additionally, having a strong interest in reading is thought to be an individual's psychological characteristic. Through the development of the habit of reading, one can sharpen his comprehension and communication skills.

Pakistan is a nation that is still in development, with a population that has a low literacy rate and is falling behind in the global reading competition. This is largely due to its children having reading comprehension levels below the expected grade level. (Annual Survey of Education Research as cited by Ministry of Finance, 2012, p.148). The lack of access to quality education is posing a serious threat to the future of youth and must be addressed and tackled on all fronts. To raise the standard of education, the Pakistani government unveiled its 2011–2012 education plan. The government has taken an interest in the education sector because the youth of Pakistan seem to have lower reading skills compared to those of other countries. For a nation to have a prosperous future, its children must be raised with care. Awais and Ameen, (2013) given the context, it is significant to conduct a preliminary investigation to determine the reading interests and habits of urban students in Pakistan. Soroya and Ameen, (2016) Pakistan Today (11 July 2011) reported that reading books is rapidly declining, with most students preferring physical copies over digital books. Most students prefer to read printed books rather than digital ones. To improve children's reading capability, it is important to investigate their interests. Consequently, authors, publishers, parents, and school libraries will be able to provide children with the highest-quality books and reading materials.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Davies, M., & Barnett, R. (Eds.). (2015) Research and policy in higher education have been placing an increased focus on developing the critical thinking skills of students. Studies have been conducted to evaluate the importance of equipping college students with the required skills for lifelong learning, being active members of society, and finding employment. Three distinct but interconnected approaches to critical thinking that have been recognized in the literature are presented by Davies and Barnett (2015). These views often conflict with one another, but they also have considerable areas of overlap. This complexity can be difficult for educators of English for Academic Purposes to contend with, but Davies and Barnett's framework offers a great way to make sense of it. First is Skills' perspective on critical thinking; this approach assumes that by breaking down arguments into their constituent parts, and through careful analysis, it is possible to identify logical flaws and inconsistencies and assess the strength of the supporting evidence. This approach is particularly useful for identifying logical fallacies and for evaluating the overall quality of an argument. Second is the criticality perspective; to promote the criticalness movement, which emphasizes the importance of knowledge, skills, and reasoning, as well as the advancement of a crucial character or temperament in students. Third is the critical pedagogy perspective approach to critical thinking the critical pedagogy movement, which emphasizes the need for students to be aware of the power dynamics that shape our social environment and restrict human freedom. Barjesteh, H., & Vaseghi, R. (2012). A contentious discussion about whether critical thinking abilities can be taught has been triggered by the inclusion of these abilities in education. A wide range of models and techniques have been developed to educate, evaluate, and analyze the capacities and skills of critical thinking. Experts have also addressed concerns about culture, emotion, and the potential for transferability and generalization of learned abilities. Everyone agrees that the main goal of education should be to foster critical thinking, despite the huge variations in opinion over the best way to achieve this (Reed, 1998).

Reading comprehension has been defined and operationalized in a variety of ways. Reading is a collaborative process in which the reader constructs meaning via various cognitive techniques. The reader must be actively engaging with the text to gain comprehension; simply looking over the words is not enough. During the reading process, the existing knowledge of the reader is tapped into, forming the basis for the construction of a mental structure. Shihab, I. A. (2011) the structure is formed by connecting the incoming information from the text, such as sentences, to the existing knowledge. Plastina (1997) suggests that schemata are characterized by both flexibility and creativity. This flexibility allows them to store information in memory and provide it when needed with minimal effort, while their creativity enables them to represent any type of experience and knowledge. Therefore, schemata can be used to make sense of the bits of knowledge encountered by an individual. Creative schemata allow readers to actively participate in critical reading by representing a variety of experiences and knowledge. to bridge prior and incoming information. Analyzing a text critically involves being able to assess, infer, and come to conclusions based on the evidence presented. Harmon et al. (2010) pointed out that students with a limited vocabulary may have difficulty understanding a text, thus diminishing their comprehension of it. According to Grabe and Stoller (2019), reading comprehension is a fundamental academic competence, and reading comprehension scholarship has dominated EAP reading teaching and research (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Effective use of language is essential for successful international communication. Students must be proficient in the English language, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, to communicate effectively (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). EAL (English as an Additional Language) learners are well-prepared for their university studies by taking English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Since they are foundational skills, reading comprehension holds a prominent role in these preparation courses. Most of the reading education and research in EAP has been on reading comprehension abilities. Although these skills must be included in instruction programs, advanced reading abilities are needed in higher education (Enright et al., 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Urquhart and Weir (1998) encourage critical reading at all levels (understanding underlying principles and supporting information, drawing inferences) and efficient reading at all levels (skimming, inquiry reading, and local and state levels) (scanning). Understanding the basic meaning of a word or sentence, implied meaning, information across sentences, paragraphs, or across whole text, and combining information across texts are all operationalized as comprehension skills by Khalifa and Weir (2009). (p. 43). For quite a while, advanced reading comprehension skills are necessary for higher education. According to Enright et al. (2000) and Grabe & Stoller (2000), readers engage in more cognitively demanding activities when they read to learn from texts, develop information, compose, and evaluate texts. The more consistently students read the text, they improve their ability to engage in critical analysis. Zubaidah, S., Corebima, A. D., & Mahanal, S. (2018). Reading involves more than just remembering or memorizing what is written; it also involves thinking. Understanding confusing sentences and providing an explanation requires critical thinking. According to Aloqaili (2011) and Yu-hui, Li-rong, and Yue (2010), critical thinking is characterized as the process of understanding what one is reading. It is evident from the assertions made earlier by a number of experts that reading and the acquisition of critical thinking skills are correlated to each other.

Higher-level reading skills, along with broad comprehension, are crucial for success at university levels, according to research. The skills that were revealed would include applying the knowledge and getting ready for lectures (Anderson, 2015), contrasting and evaluating ideas in a text or across texts, synthesizing texts (Rosenfeld et al., 2001), incorporating information from texts in assignments (Weir et al., 2012), and critical reading (Gravatt et al., 1998; Moore et al., 2012). Undergraduate students face a number of challenges when it comes to meeting university reading requirements. These include difficulties with reading course texts, reading strategically, managing the amount of reading, reading journal articles, reading thoroughly and comprehensively, and recognizing issues and arguments in texts (Anderson et al., 2001; Johns, 1991; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). According to Gravatt et al. (1998), undergraduate lecturers noted that ESL students tend to view the purpose of reading as memorizing facts rather than applying, assessing, and combining them with other information (p. 82). Also, undergraduate study respondents mentioned their difficulties with critical reading and academic text comprehension. In Weir et al. (2012)'s study, students spoke about the obstacles they experienced when reading for tasks, including the time constraints and the need to read extensive books. These studies demonstrate how difficult it is for pupils to complete reading assignments that require purposeful skills.

In Pakistan, university students are becoming less and less likely to read books. Traditional professors cannot inspire their students to read or emphasize the value of reading books outside of their course syllabus. There are many social factors that contribute to this decrease in students' reading habits Dilshad, M., Adnan, A., & Akram, A. (2013). Shah, S.M.H., and Saleem, S. (2010) The poor reading habits of Pakistani people, particularly university students, can be attributed to a number of causes like poor literacy rate, absence of reading culture, insufficient purchasing power, improper education system, insufficient library resources, unfavorable reading environment, unfriendly reading atmosphere, and unenthusiastic library personnel. To improve the situation, there needs to be a shift in attitudes and practices toward reading. Sehar, N., & Ghaffar, A. (2018) University students are embracing the use of technology when it comes to reading and applying technological devices like smartphones, tablets, and e-readers. However, traditional paperback books remain a vital source of knowledge for both educational and leisure activities. In the modern world of education and career development, it is essential for university students to maintain a strong relationship with books and read widely. A good method for students to decompress and take a break from their studies, tasks, and note-taking is to read books during their leisure time. Simultaneously, it should be taught to students who use screens while reading to understand that they should only be used as tools and not as a substitute for paper-based content. Din, M. (2020) Success of students is ensured by the growth of critical thinking abilities so that they can contribute positively to society through communication, strong leadership, teamwork, and cross-national and cross-cultural awareness (Zivkovic, 2016; pp. 103). The development of students' critical thinking skills and abilities is of utmost significance as it represents a highly coveted integral part of education.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at one of the universities in Karachi, Pakistan. The population of this research was undergraduate students mainly from the Department of Education. These students have different majors and educational backgrounds. The persuasive sample of this investigation was the students from all four grades of undergraduate with a total size of 46. The sample was collected randomly during the even semester of the 2021/2023 academic year. The research instrument used in this study comprised of two reading comprehensions and a reading questionnaire Reading Passage #1 contained comparatively difficult vocabulary and a lengthy text, while Reading Passage #2 had simpler vocabulary and phrases, and included multiple-choice questions at the end. The reading questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included 9 questions covering demographic data. The second section contained 29 questions related to cognitive vocabulary, academic writing and learning skills, technology integration in the classroom, and developing skills for pleasure reading, which differed in difficulty, complexity, and type of questions.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

At the end of the class time, first, the reading comprehension passages 1 and 2 were given to the selected 46 undergraduate Learners. After a brief elaboration, participants were asked to answer the questions on the answer sheets in 15 minutes. Participants were asked to solve both comprehensions, choosing any one of them to solve first before completing the reading questionnaire for which, they were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree in this section. All of them were allowed to work at their own pace when they were rating the items of the questionnaire. They could take as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The result shows that 39 participants out of 46 chose paragraph # 1 to solve first considering the passage a bit easier, interesting, and having multiple-choice questions at the end. 40 participants out of 46 found the need for a dictionary or the internet to get help solving the answers to the passages, especially for comparatively difficult ones. The results of this study demonstrate the critical relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking as well as the

detrimental effects of inadequate cognitive vocabulary, poor academic writing and learning skills, a lack of classroom technology integration, and a lack of skills in leisure reading among university students. Although students' attitudes towards reading comprehension are positive, the findings show a worrying gap between those attitudes and their levels of critical thinking and reading comprehension. These findings underscore the need for educators to focus on enhancing students' critical thinking and comprehension skills, as well as incorporating technology and promoting a culture of reading for pleasure. Failure to address these issues may lead to students struggling with academic performance and hinder their ability to think critically in their personal and professional lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been suggested that encourage students to find reading opportunities in daily life and make reading a habit.

Making reading a regular habit is the first step in improving students' critical reading habits.

Consider that books often have higher-quality writing and content than the screen, and students can strengthen their cognitive vocabulary and critical thinking skills by reading them.

Transform the English curriculum and modernize it with technology so that students may use screens while reading and understand that screens can be used as a tool but not a replacement for books.

Pleasure reading should be prioritized by teachers and parents to improve vocabulary development, attention span, and critical thinking skills.

It is important to teach students higher-order thinking strategies that they can use in any circumstance to improve their critical thinking skills while reading and comprehension.

Libraries ought to be updated and stocked with quality literature since they are the ideal place to encourage students to read.

There needs to be a change in reading habits and attitudes if the traditional methods of university lecturers are to be improved.

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