

Critical reading skills: A Survey of Postgraduate Students' Perspective of Critical Reading

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine postgraduate students' critical academic reading skills. This study was inspired by the high attrition rates among postgraduate students although there is a significant increase in their enrolment. A total of thirty postgraduate students from social sciences and humanities background were surveyed and data were collected using questionnaires. The findings indicated that the postgraduate students have moderate readiness in utilising critical academic reading skills. Therefore, innovative approaches must be encouraged and implemented to improve critical reading skills among postgraduate students.

Keywords: Academia, critical reading skills, innovative approaches, postgraduate students, readiness

INTRODUCTION

The demand for higher education has led to mushrooming of universities that offer a wide range of postgraduate programmes in different fields. Malaysia has embarked on

an expansion of higher education through the launch of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) Beyond 2020 and a programme for financing postgraduate studies entitled MyBrain15. Through both NHESP and MyBrain 15, Malaysia aims to produce a critical mass of 60,000 PhD scholars by 2023. However, to date, the country has yet to succeed in its effort due to the high attrition rate among its postgraduate students.

A recent case study of MyBrain15 revealed that the PhD completion rate for a public university in Malaysia after four years stood at 5% while 10% of

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postgraduate students had been downgraded to master degree level. The postgraduate students, as reported in Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan's (2011) study, also took a longer time to complete their studies, within 4.84 years, which exceeds the usual Graduate on Time (GOT) period of 4 years.

One of the reasons for the shortcoming is the student's limited academic literacy and research skills (Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2013). Baik (2008) notes that even in Australia, increased concern and attention were given to students' English language skills because many students have struggled to meet the demands of mainstream university courses. Watson and Reissner (2014) stress that the ability to read critically is the basis of independent thinking and the creation of knowledge necessary for the continuous improvement of professional and managerial practice. Therefore, students should be equipped with critical thinking and effective reading skills.

Reading, especially critical reading, has always been viewed as a challenging skill by many ESL learners. Sengupta (2002) opines that academic reading is purposeful and students need to undertake "critical reading of a range of lengthy academic texts for completing the study of specific major subject areas". Academic reading involves questioning and evaluating texts in particular statements and claims put forward by authors alongside identifying the strengths or weaknesses of the arguments. In order to evaluate the relevancy of the claims, students need to cite both primary and secondary sources that can be used

as references, arguments and guidance. Finally, critical readers must be able to evaluate and conclude the value of a text by looking into the robustness of the arguments and evaluating the evidence provided. The ability to read critically and funnel information is crucial for tertiary students because students who possess good critical reading skills are able to go "beyond the information given by asking questions, making hypotheses, seeking evidence, and validating assumptions" (Langer, 1990; Marshall, 2012). Hudson (2007) maintains that students exposed to critical reading skills would be able to identify and synthesise main points or to compare texts critically.

Critical reading is not only limited to understanding the text, but also to determine accuracy of facts (Ozdemir, 1997), and its interpretations (Bagcı & Sahbaz, 2012) through the process of assessing the opinions or knowledge (Candan, 2003). Critical reading has been defined as the ability to: (a) make judgements and inferences; (b) distinguish between facts and opinion; and (c) recognise the author's purpose or points of view (Darch & Kameenui, 1987). In short, critical reading is to think about the subject to move beyond what the text had concluded to the point of how the author reached that conclusion and the accuracy of the latter (Wheeler, 2007).

Kadir, Subki, Jamal, and Ismail (2014) stress that students would be able to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information in the text easily if they acquire critical reading skills from an early stage. In academic

reading, students need to engage actively with the text and apply critical reading strategies in order to comprehend and interpret the text and evaluate its relevance (Spack, 1993). Critical reading skills will increase students' capabilities in expressing their views and opinions. However, Wallace (2003) asserts that despite the importance of critical reading, it has not been taken seriously.

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) highlight that besides macro reading skills, students need to be equipped with micro-skills such as the capability: (a) to create logical relationships, definitions, generalisations, examples, explanations and predictions; and (b) to distinguish fact from opinion. Hence, critical reading is an activity that requires critical and active thinking. Dreyer and Nel (2003) noted that many students underestimated the challenges of pursuing postgraduate studies. With limited critical reading abilities, their academic journey is an uphill task. Sidhu et al. (2013) reported that limited reading, writing and research skills among post graduate students in Malaysia is a main concern among the latter and their supervisors.

Crismore (2000) discusses her five-year experience teaching in a Malaysian university and deduces that the majority of tertiary students are not wholly prepared in utilising their reading skills. Most Malaysian students, according to Koo (2003), are afraid to practice critical reading skills due to: (a) fear of loss of face should their views are found to be incorrect; and (b) fear of having different views from the majority.

Levine, Ferenz and Reves (2000) examined the relationship between students' perception and their development of critical reading skills in an IT-related environment. Progress reports and teachers' logs were analysed and the finding marked an increase in the amount of reading accomplished in class because the students were confident in reading critically in a computer-networked environment after they have self-evaluated their critical reading skills. The study also suggests that students' self-perception is an important component in determining their critical reading ability. In other study, Gorzycki, Howard, Allen, Desa, and Rosegard (2014) examined students' performance in critical reading exercises in order to understand student's perception and attitude towards critical reading. Twenty-three students participated in the survey and 848 reading tests were collected. Teachers' perceptions on the students' level of critical reading skills were also measured. The analyses from both surveys and test indicated that the students have overestimated their critical reading academic abilities because the performances from the tests did not reflect their positive self-perception.

Mohd Zin, Wong and Rafik-galea (2014) examined the level of critical reading skills among tertiary students specifically in the areas of: analysis, evaluation and understanding. A reading comprehension test was administered to both the low proficiency and high proficiency group. The results showed that though the students had the ability to understand the text, they

lacked the skills to analyse and evaluate it. This implies that students face difficulties to critically understand the writer's intention. The main concern was that they could not read the text critically such as "reading between the lines" or "read for deeper meaning". In other word, the students were able to read superficially but not critically.

The importance of critical reading skills among postgraduate students have been stressed in order to ensure their academic success and prepare them for future employment. This is in line with the key thrusts of the Malaysian Higher Education Action Plan of 2011–2015 (MoHE, 2011) that aim to produce first class human capital, employable graduates and knowledgeable workers. The development of critical literacy among students has been crucial following the recent move by the Malaysian Higher Education Ministry to implement the National Education Blueprint to innovate the education system (announced in September 2012), in the hope to ensure that Malaysian graduates are employable (Aisyah, 2012).

It is also important to assess postgraduate students' perspective on their critical reading skills because their view would play an important role in the completion of their postgraduate studies. Therefore, the students' perspective of critical reading skills must be determined and investigated. If not, they would become passive learners who are afraid to ask question and offer dissenting views. Critical reading skills is also outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025. Therefore, more

research is needed to better situate the level of critical reading skills among postgraduate students. This paper will investigate students' perspectives of critical reading skill which is highly dependent on their attitudes, commitment and current level of critical reading skills.

METHODS

The pilot study was conducted at a graduate school in a public university in Malaysia. Data were collected through questionnaires. The target population was thirty social science postgraduate students and they were given pseudonyms as R1 until R30.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section (Section A) explores the demographic variables of the students and the second section (Section B) consists of 39 items related to the students' frequency of usage of critical reading skills. Responses are measured with a five-point Likert scale consisting of "1" (*very limited readiness*), "2" (*limited readiness*), "3" (*moderate readiness*), "4" (*high readiness*), and "5" (*very high readiness*). The last section (Section C) comprises open-ended questions for respondents to provide detailed explanations about their perceptions and challenges that they have faced regarding critical reading. Reliability testing was conducted for each section and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are reported in Table 1. Overall, the scales showed good internal consistency. As such, no items were deleted from the questionnaire.

Table 1
Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for lower-order thinking skills and higher-order thinking skills

Sections	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Lower-Order Thinking Skills		
Knowledge	4	.937
Comprehension	10	.945
Application	6	.901
Higher-Order Thinking Skills		
Analysis	7	.938
Synthesis	4	.916
Evaluation	12	.915

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings of the study. Table 2 below shows the demographic profile of the respondents. The response rate was 100% as all postgraduate students responded to the questionnaire. Out of the 30 respondents, 27 were master degree students while the others were doctoral students.

This section presents the postgraduate students' perceptions of the six skills

mentioned in Bloom's Taxonomy namely: (1) knowledge; (2) comprehension; (3) application; (4) analysis; (5) synthesis; and (6) evaluation. In this paper, these skills are divided into two categories: lower-order thinking skills and higher-order thinking skills. Knowledge, comprehension and application are categorised as lower-order thinking skills while analysis, synthesis and evaluation are categorised as higher-order thinking skills.

Table 2
Mean score of postgraduate students' lower-order thinking skills

No.	Items	Mean	SD
SECTION 1: KNOWLEDGE			
1	I can recall the information in a text	3.433	0.971
2	I am able to identify specific terms in a text	3.433	1.165
3	I can identify main ideas in a text	3.433	1.194
4	I can identify supporting details in a text	3.533	1.074
OVERALL MEAN		3.458	1.101
SECTION 2: COMPREHENSION			
1	I read and try to understand the title of a text	3.667	1.398
2	I can skim and scan quickly through long and complex texts, locating relevant details	3.200	1.031
3	I can describe the main ideas in a text	3.467	1.042

Table 2 (continue)

4	I can describe supporting details in a text	3.333	0.959
5	I can derive the meaning of words, or sentences from the context	3.367	1.159
6	I am able to understand linear and non-linear texts	3.233	0.858
7	I am able to recognise a paraphrase	3.133	1.074
8	I can extract specific information from a text	3.433	1.135
9	I can understand the relationships	3.600	1.070
	i. Within sentences	3.533	1.106
	ii. Between sentences	3.667	1.398
	OVERALL MEAN	3.421	1.112
	SECTION 3: APPLICATION		
1	I can predict the outcomes of an article	3.067	1.048
2	I can apply existing knowledge to the reading process	3.267	1.285
3	I can apply personal experiences to the reading process	3.533	1.106
4	I can apply a concept to other situations	3.300	0.915
5	I can interpret linear and non-linear texts (graph/tables/charts)	3.433	1.135
6	I can apply the idea in the text to other contexts	3.467	1.008
	OVERALL MEAN	3.345	1.083

Table 2 shows that the postgraduate students display a moderate level of readiness in utilising the skills in the first section (M=3.458, SD=1.101) (knowledge). In particular, the students exhibited moderate readiness in: (a) recalling the information in a text, (M=3.433, SD=.971); (b) identifying specific terms in a text (M=3.433, SD=1.165); and (c) identifying main ideas in a text (M=3.433, SD=1.194). The students were also found to be more confident in identifying supporting details in a text (M=3.533, SD=1.074). In the open-ended section, a majority of the respondents pointed out that the first skill is the easiest. R1 stated, “*Knowledge is not that difficult since it is already embedded in myself,*” and R30 stated, “*This skill only requires me to*

recall and memorise which do not involve any thinking.”

The results in Table 2 also indicate that the postgraduate students display a moderate level of readiness in applying the skills in the second section, Comprehension (M=3.421, SD=1.112). In particular, they were relatively weaker in recognising a paraphrase when reading an academic text (M=3.133, SD=1.074). They also lacked readiness in skimming and scanning long texts in order to locate relevant details (M=3.200, SD=1.031). However, as Table 3 shows, the students were confident in understanding the relationship within sentences (M=3.533, SD=1.106) compared to between sentences (M=3.667, SD=1.398). In the open-ended section, they added that

they find it difficult to connect the meaning of sentences in a paragraph hence found the task discouraging. In Comprehension, students are more confident in reading and understanding the title of the text (M=3.667, SD=1.398).

The results also show that the postgraduate students also displayed a moderate level of readiness in practicing the skills in Application (M=3.345, SD=1.083). The results pointed out to the fact that students were the least ready and confident

in predicting the outcome of an article (M=3.345, SD=1.0). In contrast, they appeared to be more confident in applying their personal experiences to the reading process (M=3.533, SD=1.106). This ability has allowed them to connect and understand in a more in-depth manner. In the open-ended section, R12 noted that this skill was the hardest to acquire. R30 stated, "*This skill is very complex because this skill is what you need in real-life situations.*"

Table 3
Mean score of postgraduate students' higher-order thinking skills

No.	Items	Mean	SD
SECTION 4: ANALYSIS			
1	I can distinguish facts from opinions	3.333	1.093
2	I can differentiate the relevant points from the irrelevant	3.267	1.311
3	I can make inferences	3.467	1.008
4	I can separate the idea into its components parts	3.633	0.890
5	I can identify cause and effect in a text	3.433	1.165
6	I can analyse the suitability of references in a text	3.600	1.329
7	I can identify comparison and contrast in a text	3.633	1.129
OVERALL MEAN		3.481	1.132
SECTION 5: SYNTHESIS			
1	I can relate the ideas and concepts		
	i. Within a paragraph	3.633	0.964
	ii. Between paragraphs	3.533	1.008
2	I can follow the development of a point in a text	3.667	1.028
3	I can summarise information after reading a text	3.533	1.224
OVERALL MEAN		3.592	1.056
SECTION 6: EVALUATION			
1	I can appraise information in a text	3.400	1.070
2	I can make judgments on the arguments or ideas when I read a text	3.400	1.133
3	I can evaluate the strength of an idea in a text	3.367	1.033
4	I can evaluate the weakness of an idea in a text	3.367	0.964
5	I can evaluate the relevancy of an idea in a text	3.333	1.155
6	I can draw conclusion after reading a text	3.633	0.999

Table 3 (continue)

7	I first evaluate answer choices before reading a text	2.900	1.155
8	I can recognise and interpret writers'	3.333	1.184
	i. Views in a text	3.400	1.003
	ii. Attitudes in a text	3.433	1.073
	iii. Intentions in a text	3.533	0.937
9	I am able to discern the organisation of a passage	3.433	0.935
10	I can assess the sources of a text and determine the trustworthiness of the sources.	3.400	1.070
	OVERALL MEAN	3.379	1.055

Based on the findings shown in Table 3, it is revealed that the postgraduate students also displayed a moderate level of readiness in utilising the fourth skill (analysing) ($M=3.481$, $SD=1.132$). In particular, the students were found to be the most confident in separating ideas into components ($M=3.633$, $SD=.890$). The table also highlights that the students have had difficulty in distinguishing facts from opinions ($M=3.333$, $SD=1.093$) and differentiating relevant ideas from the irrelevant ($M=3.267$, $SD=1.311$). R23 added, "*Analysis requires critical thinking which I find challenging*" and R14 further stated that '*analysis needs a sharp analytic thinking in order to gain the best results and I am often scared of analysing.*' These show that the postgraduate students tend to shy away from analysing because they were afraid their analysis would be inaccurate or they found the task too challenging. These findings are similar to those of Mohd Zin et al. (2014) whom the students involved in their study had experienced difficulties in analysing texts

The results in Table 32 also indicated that the postgraduate students displayed a

moderate level of readiness in applying the skills in Synthesis ($M=3.592$, $SD=1.056$). They are moderately ready in relating ideas and concepts within paragraphs ($M=3.633$, $SD=.964$) and between paragraphs ($M=3.533$, $SD=1.008$). It is also illustrated in Table 4 that the postgraduate students have moderate readiness in summarising information after reading a text ($M=3.533$, $SD=1.224$). Interestingly, Table 4 reveals that the students are more confident in following the development of a point in a text ($M=3.667$, $SD=1.028$). R13 and R21 chose synthesis as the most difficult skill to practice because they believe the skill forced them "to create something new" which they were often not sure about. In the same vein, R25 added that the skill of synthesising requires "in-depth thinking and it's a time-consuming" and thus was a difficult task for him/her to complete.

The results in Table 4 shows that the postgraduate students have a moderate level of readiness in evaluation ($M=3.379$, $SD=1.055$). The student appeared to have limited readiness before reading a text ($M=2.900$, $SD=1.155$). In contrast, the results illustrates that the postgraduate

students are more confident in drawing conclusions after a text ($M=3.633$, $SD=.999$). This skill appears to be the hardest to acquire according to majority of respondents. R20 has succinctly described evaluation as “*difficult because we need to critically think in order to identify the relevancy, weakness and strength of the ideas in a text.*”

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION

This study is not without limitations. It is a pilot study that involved a small sample size, and thus, the findings cannot be generalised. The data represent students' perspective of their critical reading skills and their readiness for these skills. The postgraduate students were shown to have generally moderate readiness towards critical reading. The finding is consistent with those of earlier studies that highlighted students were not prepared for critical reading for their postgraduate studies. Given this point, it is crucial to foster critical reading skills among postgraduate students because these skills can assist them to be capable workers hence the achievement of the aspiration in the Malaysian Education Blueprint. However, it needs to be pointed out that this study did not measure the students' performance, therefore the relationship between the students' perspective and their performance cannot be measured. It is recommended that future research investigates the perspective of a larger sample of postgraduate students and include more doctorate students. It is also recommended for future studies to incorporate the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(CEFR) in determining students' critical reading abilities.

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