

Review research paper

FOSTERING CRITICAL READING AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH TEACHING PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF ADVANCED (EAP) ENGLISH COURSES

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Abstract. *The importance of critical thinking and critical reading skills in higher education and language courses is established and frequently explored, particularly with the shift from traditional to more contemporary teaching methods. The purpose of this study is to elaborate on the implementation of teaching practices with focus on development of critical reading and critical thinking. Both critical reading and critical thinking are considered to be essential parts of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) syllabi, including English language courses which target the students who are highly proficient in English. This study attempts to summarize and elaborate on the importance of critical reading and critical thinking skills and to provide further details regarding introducing and teaching these skills through various practices in the context of Advanced English / English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. In addition, the study will focus on students' perceptions of their critical thinking and critical reading competencies, compared and contrasted with students' performance and results when introducing activities and tasks which require critical reading and critical thinking. The research methodology is qualitative and includes a 5-point Likert scale survey targeting the student population in EAP courses. Finally, the study will suggest teaching practices and activities which can be used to foster critical reading and critical thinking skills in the context of EAP courses.*

Key words: *critical reading, critical thinking, English for Academic Purposes, teaching practices, tasks*

1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING AND CRITICAL READING

With the rise of communicative teaching methods and the need for transferable skills and competencies, higher education programs and universities worldwide include critical thinking and critical reading as one of the primary aims and course objectives in the language courses syllabi. Language courses as Advanced English or English for Academic Purposes also include, among other academic or transferable skills, critical reading and thinking. Although those skills seem to be universal and work on them listed in the aims and objectives across academic courses, defining them and implementing them in teaching

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practices is far from straightforward. What is critical thinking? What is critical reading? Is any of them a single distinct skill, or an amalgam of different sub-skills? Can these skills be taught? Do students believe that they need these skills, even though they are highly proficient? Even the definitions across literature of the terms critical thinking and critical reading vary. This study will attempt to provide some answers, starting by providing some of the definitions.

1.1. Critical thinking

The notion of critical thinking cannot be easily defined. One of the researchers who propose a definition for critical thinking is Halpern (1999, p.70), who defines critical thinking as follows:

Critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed. It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions. Critical thinkers use these skills appropriately, without prompting, and usually with conscious intent, in a variety of settings.

The definition focuses on the ability to use problem-solving and decision making skills in various settings and evaluating the outcomes of the problem solving and decision making processes. This definition, at the same time, argues that these skills can be taught. Wilson (2019, p. 3) argues that: "... critical thinking is not a clearly defined concept and many teachers are unsure how to operationalise it in their classrooms. Wilson uses the following definition: "Whether as workers, as citizens, or as members of communities and families, critical thinking helps us to make sound decisions (Wilson, 2019, p.3)." On the other hand, a very different definition is proposed by Willingham (2007, p.11) who defines critical thinking as follows: "Critical thinking is not a set of skills that can be deployed at any time, in any context. It is a type of thought that even 3-year-olds can engage in—and even trained scientists can fail in." In other words, Willingham argues that critical thinking cannot be taught as a set of skills. Also, there are scholars who argue against defining critical thinking. For instance, Paul, Elder and Bartell, and Karbalaei (in Uribe-Enciso, O. L., Enciso, D. S. U., & Daza, M, 2017) argue that because of the complexity and intellectual history, it is not wise to try one single definition of critical thinking that includes all the meanings, qualities and skills it really involves.

There is a variety of approaches of teaching critical thinking in educational setting and deciding if critical thinking can be taught as a set of skills or not. Scholars like Gelder (2005) and Halpern (1999) propose different models of teaching critical thinking, while others (Willingham, 2007) represent a completely opposing view-arguing that critical thinking cannot be taught in an educational setting.

1.2. Critical reading

Critical reading is also defined in a variety of ways. Shor (in Taglieber, 2000, p. 142) defined critical reading as: "Analytical habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking or discussing which go beneath the surface of impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context."

On the other hand, Flynn (1989, in Taglieber, 2000, p.142), states that critical reading involves "an interactive process using several levels of thought simultaneously" (p.664),

as for example, analysis – the clarification of information by examining the component parts; synthesis – the combining of relevant parts into a coherent whole; and evaluation – which involves establishing standards and then judging ideas against the standards to verify their reasonableness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: CRITICAL THINKING AND CRITICAL READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

From the literature review and definitions presented in the previous chapter of this study, it can be concluded that both critical reading and critical thinking cannot be defined as unified or a single skill, consisting of only one component. Several abilities, intertwined and combined, result in the ability to think critically and to read critically. Critical thinking includes the following:

1. Being open-minded and unbiased is one of the crucial characteristics of critical thinkers. It establishes acceptance of different point of views and unburdened approach to information analysis.
2. Being able to analyze and interpret information is also an important characteristic of critical thinkers.
3. Being able to reach solutions and decisions, as well as being able to communicate to others those decisions and solutions is also an important aspect of critical thinking ability.

Which skills constitute the ability to read critically? Which characteristics define a critical reader? Critical or contemporary readers are defined by Javorčíková & Badinská, (2021, p.658) as follows:

A modern effective reader is not a mere “consumer” of the text; rather, he or she is a “co-creator” of its connotative and denotative meaning(s), as well as ethical, cultural, social, political and many other implications. He or she is also a “decision-maker” and “authority”, determining its significance for the life of the reader and their community.

The first requirement for reading successfully would be to understand the message of the writer. Horváthová & Nadřová (2021, p.3), define the successful reading comprehension as follows:” The results of active reading comprehension include an ability to engage with a text based on their previous experiences both from reading and from life.”

Pardede (2007) discusses the position of the reader and the skills that they must possess in order to be able to understand the message:

To achieve it, he must approach the reading with an open mind and a willingness to accept new ideas or another point of view. Although he has some doubts about the material before he begins reading it, he must give the writer an opportunity to present his position. He must avoid letting his personal biases or prejudices interfere with clear thinking and objectivity.

After understanding the message, a critical reader needs to be able to process the message. A critical reader is able to distinguish facts from opinions, assumptions from evidence and to locate illogical details. In other words, a critical reader analyses the text beyond the most obvious meaning. However, the focus is not only on the text. A critical reader should be aware of their own background and understanding of a text and that opinions, prejudices and preferences of the reader impact the understanding of the message.

Therefore, Pardede (2007) suggests a list of questions which can be used to guide the reader through a process of critical reading:

- Are the statements fact or opinion?
- What is the author's purpose or motif in writing this material?
- What is the author bias?
- How is the author qualified to write this particular material?
- How recently was the material written?
- What do I know about the publication of this material?
- Who is the target reader?
- Do I accept, reject, or defer judgment on the author's material?
- How has the author organized his material?
- Does the writer employ emotionally toned words?
- What is the relationship, if any, of the author's ideas to my own experience?
- What analogies exist in the reading?
- What are the cause-and-effect relationships, if any?
- What, if anything, is irrelevant in the reading?
- Is there any fallacious reasoning or misuse of statistics in the reading?

Yu (2015) lists six critical reading strategies.

1. The first one defined is pre-reading, or as Yu (2015, p.135) defines it: "Learning about a text before really reading it." This strategy involves analysis of the headings or subheadings, photographs accompanying the text or the title.
2. The second strategy defined is reading in context. Regarding reading in context, Yu (2015, p.135) states the following: "When we read, it is wise to place a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural contexts." This process enables a critical reader to compare the values and attitudes presented in a text with their own values and attitudes. Very frequently, the text that a reader is interacting with is written a long time ago or in a completely different cultural or social context. Therefore, comparison and analysis are important elements of critical reading.
3. The third strategy involves asking questions about the content of a text and trying to find answers. With this strategy, the readers design their own questions related to the text. However, the questions should not be directly derived and using the same wording as the text itself.
4. The fourth strategy defined by Yu (2015) involves further reflection and analyzing reader's own response and position, as well as the patterns of reactions on a specific text.
5. The fifth strategy involves summarizing the main ideas of a text and creating an outline of the text and the basic structure of a text, without using the same wording as in the text itself.
6. The sixth strategy involves evaluating the arguments presented in the text - are the arguments logical, do they present both the claims and the support, is there enough evidence to accept the arguments?

It can be concluded that critical reading and critical thinking skills consist of several sub-skills, which commonly depend on each other, cannot exist or be taught in isolation and are interdependent. This study will focus on students' awareness of these skills, their self-assessment of mastery of these skills and the results of some of the tasks which assess these skills.

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY: CRITICAL READING AND THINKING IN ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

One of the points that this research paper is trying to address is the need to teach critical reading and critical thinking for advanced students. Frequently, in context of teaching a foreign language to advanced students, we are being misled by the language proficiency and the fluency of the learners. We, as lecturers, are impressed and enthusiastic, believing that students who appear to be so fluent and with native-like pronunciation, do not need any instruction in critical thinking and critical reading – a wrong assumption in many contexts.

Why do we need critical reading and critical thinking in English for Academic Purposes? Wilson (2019, p. 3) defines the position of critical reading and thinking in the context of transferable skills that EAP courses have to provide to the students: “The skills that are now needed – ‘21st century skills’ such as creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, communication, collaboration, ethical judgment, and digital literacy – are all deeply connected with critical thinking.”

Regarding the need of teaching critical reading and critical thinking to highly proficient students and in language teaching context and students’ ability to read critically in EAP context, Wilson (2016, p.256) , states the following:

Many EAP students do not have a great deal of experience in critical reading and critical thinking—or at least of the kinds of critical thinking expected in tertiary education. Some come from educational backgrounds in which emphasis has been laid on rote learning and memorization... Some come from different traditions of critical thinking, and/or perhaps from political or religious backgrounds which do not foster robust debate.

Regardless of the course expectations, educational background or learning culture, it is still clear that in the context of English for Academic Purposes, the course goals and objectives, as well as the course curriculum, should include critical reading and critical thinking skills. Needless to say, these transferable skills are not reserved for language teaching and learning context only. In the context of higher education, critical reading and thinking are essential in every area. Wilson (2016, p. 257) defines this need as follows:

Whether or not such cultural differences exist, one thing is certain: all EAP students are entering a new culture of learning, and hence, need and deserve a curriculum for critical thinking which prepares them for tertiary study in the new environment. Of course, we should by no means assume that this is a monolithic culture of critical thinking, but one which is characterized by a great diversity of disciplinary, institutional, local and even personal cultures and discourses.

Therefore, this study will address two aspects regarding the position and ways of teaching critical reading and thinking in EAP context. First, the study will examine students’ perceptions of the sub skills which can determine the ability to think and read critically and their opinion: *do they believe that they are able to think and read critically?* Second, the study will examine *two different tasks which require critical thinking and critical reading - are students’ results in accordance with their perceptions.* Finally, the study will suggest methods and teaching practices of introducing critical thinking and reading skills in EAP courses.

4. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS - STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS VS TASKS AND RESULTS

4.1. Survey results

The research conducted for the purpose of this study can be described as qualitative in character and it consisted of two parts.

The first part was distributing a survey to a cohort of 26 students of English for Academic Purposes (Advanced English), whose language proficiency varied from B2 to C1 according to Common European Framework of Reference. The students' age varies from 19-21. Out of 26, 16 are female and 10 are male participants. The survey was created and distributed via Google Forms. The survey distributed consisted of 20 Likert scale statements, presented in the appendix and designed in order to explore students' perceptions and views on their critical reading and thinking skills. The survey was distributed prior to critical reading practice and critical thinking task. Thus, the survey only reflected students' perceptions of their critical reading and thinking skills. The results of the survey will be described in the following part of the chapter.

The first statement was: *I am able to identify the main ideas in a text/web content*. Out of 26 answers, the distribution was the following: 53.8% of the survey participants strongly agree with this statement, 38.5% agree, and 7.7% of the participants disagree with the statement.

The second statement was: *I am able to distinguish between the main idea and supporting details in a text/web content*. According to the results, 46.2 % of the participants strongly agree with this statement, 38.5% agree, 7.7% are neutral, and 7.7% strongly disagree. The results of third statement: *I am able to review and predict the content of a text by analyzing the title, introduction or photographs/captions*, were as follows: 61.5% strongly agree, 7.7 % agree, and 30.8% selected the option neutral.

The responses to the fourth statement: *I am able to read and understand a long and complex text in a relatively short period of time*, indicate that 38.5% strongly agree with this statement, 30.8% agree, 15.4% disagree, 7.7% are neutral, and 7.7% strongly disagree. The summary of the responses to the fifth statement: *I am able to derive the meaning of specific words from context* is as follows: 61.5% strongly agree with this statement, 30.8% agree, and 7.7% are neutral. The sixth statement read as follows: *I am able to summarize a text / paraphrase a text effectively*. The results show that 38.5 % strongly agree, 53.8 % agree, and 7.7% selected the option neutral. The responses to the seventh statement: *I am able to infer information which is not explicitly stated in a text* can be summarized as follows: 23.1% strongly agree, 46.2% agree, and 30.8 of the participants selected the option neutral.

Statement number 8: *I am able to distinguish a fact from an opinion in a text or web content* resulted in the following summary of responses: 38.5% of the participants strongly agree with the statement, 38.5% agree, while 23% selected the option neutral. The next statement (number 9): *I can differentiate important from unimportant points or details*, shows that 61.5% strongly agree, and 38.5% of the participants agree with this statement. The following statement (10): *I am able to locate arguments in a text*, resulted in 38.5% of the participants strongly agreeing with the statement, 46.1% agreeing, while 7.7% selected the option neutral and the same number of participants disagreed with the statement. Statement 11: *I am able to reach conclusions or identify a message in a text* shows that 53.8 % strongly agree, 38.5% agree, and 7.7% disagree with the statement. The results of statement 12: *I am aware and able to recognize prejudice/ bias in texts or web content* show that 23% of the participants strongly agree with this statement, 38.5% agree, 30.8 are neutral, and 7.7%

disagree. The following statement, number 13, is as follows: *I can recognize misleading notions in texts/ web content (advertisements, propaganda)*. Out of 26 participants, 23 % strongly agree, 46.2% agree, and 30.8 are neutral. The responses for statement 14: *I can recognize fake news/false information* were as follows: 38.5% strongly agree, 30.8% agree, 23% are neutral, and 7.7 % disagree. The next statement, *I am able to recognize the causes of specific problems described in texts/web content*, (number 15) resulted in the following summary: 38.5% strongly agree, 53.8% agree, and 7.7% are neutral. *I can evaluate the ideas presented in texts/web content* was statement number 16. The results show that 61.5% strongly agree, 30.8% agree, and 7.7% are neutral. *I can compare and contrast issues/ events presented in different ways in texts/ web content* was statement 17. Out of 26 participants, 38.5% strongly agree, 53.8 selected the option agree, and 7.7 (2 participants) are neutral. Statement 18 was written as follows: *I am able to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source of a text/ web content*. The participants responded in the following way: 15.4% strongly agree, 53.8% agree, 23% are neutral, and 7.7% disagree. The responses to statement 19, *I am able to relate the content of the text/ web source to my personal experience*, show that 38.5 % of the participants strongly agree, 38.5% agree, 15.4 are neutral, and 7.7% disagree with the statement. The summary of the results of the last statement *I am able to define arguments when I disagree with points of view presented in texts/web content*, shows that 53.8% of the participants strongly agree, 30.8% agree, and 15.4% selected the option neutral.

From the results of the survey summarized above, it can be concluded that according to the results, students believe that their critical reading competencies are quite high when they preview, identify the main ideas in a text, read and understand a complex text, infer information which is not explicitly stated and reach conclusions after reading a text. Furthermore, the participants have similar beliefs about the aspects and competencies which constitute critical thinking. Although in slightly lower numbers (more participants opted for the neutral response in the survey segment of critical thinking) identifying arguments and evidence in a text, recognizing bias in a text or web content, recognizing false information in a text or web content and being able to identify causes and results of specific problems. The second part of the survey was observation of students' performance on specific tasks which are related to critical reading and critical thinking competencies and analysis of the results.

4.2. Tasks and in class activities – results

It can be concluded, from the survey results above, that the majority of the students believe that their critical reading competencies are quite solid, which was also the instructor's/author's opinion. However, the results on a specific task which involved critical reading indicated that further work on these competencies are needed.

The critical reading practice was conducted by assigning a text consisting of two passages. The instruction stated the following: *Using only the stated or implied information in each passage and in its introduction, if any, answer the questions*. The passages were followed by 15 multiple choice questions, which tested the sub skills or the competencies which constitute critical reading and are described above. The questions following the passages tested the skills of pre-reading, reading in context, summarizing the main ideas and creating an outline, inferring, evaluation the outline and guessing the meaning of words and phrases from context. The results showed that out of 26 students who took the reading practice test, 2 (7.7%) had only 6 correct answers, 10 (38.5%) had 8 correct answers, 14 (53.8%) had 10 correct answers, and 4 (15.4%) had 12 correct

answers. There were no participants who answered all of the questions correctly. More importantly, the most difficult questions proved to be the questions which tested evaluation of arguments presented in a text (number 6), summarizing and creating an outline (number 5), and reading in context (number 4).

It can be concluded, from the results stated above, that the results from reading practices do not confirm students' views on their critical reading competencies. Furthermore, the results showed that skills which reflect and necessitate critical reading competencies proved to be the most difficult, even for highly proficient users of English language.

The critical thinking task involved spotting fake news article online. The activity was part of the research project that the students had to prepare by the end of the semester and the same cohort of students who took the survey worked on this activity. As a part of research project preparation, part of the coursework was focused on locating and evaluating Internet sources and websites. This evaluation involved practice and identifying fake news online. Three different websites with news were used, among them and article from the fake news website found through Hoaxy, created by Indiana University Bloomington. According to the description, the website Hoaxy aims to track the spread of fake online by tracking the sharing of articles from low credibility sources on social media. All of the articles presented to the students were dealing with the same topic – COVID 19 vaccines. The students worked individually and had to detect the fake news article. Initially, they had to identify the fake news article without a previous instruction on the ways to do that.

According to the survey, the majority of the participants stated that they are able to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source, ideas presented in a text, recognize false information and misleading ideas. However, during the activity, only 2 (7.7%) students out of 26 were able to identify the fake news article. The students were provided with strategies to identify low credibility sources, including the following:

- Asking questions in order to develop critical mindset,
- Checking the credentials of the authors,
- Checking the trustfulness of the source,
- Checking dates, years and references.

After the instruction session, the rate of the students who managed to identify the fake news website has increased to 22 participants (84.7%). From the results of the task described and summarized above, it can be concluded that regardless of the language proficiency, students still need instruction targeting critical thinking skills.

The following chapter will provide recommended activities and tasks which can provide effective instruction and foster critical reading and thinking.

5. CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES AND APPROACHES

Following the results of the survey and comparison to tasks and results summarized in the previous chapter, several conclusions can be drawn. First, it can be concluded that critical reading and critical thinking competencies are not always interconnected with advanced language proficiency. In other words, it cannot be automatically assumed that highly proficient learners do not need instruction and critical reading or thinking practice.

It can be also concluded that in many cases, the learners in Advanced English or EAP courses, similarly to the instructors in these settings, believe that their critical reading and thinking competencies are quite advanced. However, the results described show otherwise. Furthermore, it can be concluded that instructors cannot rely only on students' language

proficiency when determining the course aims and objectives, thus planning the instruction. Finally, it can be concluded that critical reading and thinking skills are necessary and they need to be an integral part of the course syllabi design and course aims and objectives.

Taking these conclusions into consideration, several ways of introducing critical reading and thinking instruction in teaching practices will be described.

- *Debates / Online discussion forums* - both can be developed around controversial questions determined for an in-class activity and/or set online after working on a controversial issue, for instance. This activity can be developed after watching a TED talk on a specific issue or after working on a reading text. The debates in class require a pre-determined question, grouping in 2 groups, setting the roles for individuals within those groups (for instance stating the opening statement or delivering the concluding statement). The online forum can be also preceded by an in class debate on a controversial issue. It is important, when setting a discussion forum online, to give clear guidelines regarding the arguments, length of the expected answer and determining the number of classmates that a student has to interact with.
- *Double entry journals* - using a worksheet with 2 columns after reading a text. One column is used for inserting different parts of the text, while in the other one - parallel column, the students enter their comments regarding part of the text that they are analyzing: for instance, the main idea of the passage, the ideas presented, the argument in support of an opinion. The worksheet can have an undefined number of rows, depending on the aspects that the students will be required to analyze.
- *Self reflection and reflection essays*
Self reflection essays are an excellent way to promote critical thinking skills and self analysis. Frequently, these essays can accompany, for instance, a reading text or self-assessment of a specific skill (for instance reaction to a conflict or ability to listen actively). These tasks are completed with better success if they are accompanied by models (a model of a reflection essay for instance) and clear guidelines including rubrics if they are part of the assessment criteria.
- *Pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities* which accompany a reading text promote critical reading skills. Previewing and predicting are the most obvious choice of activities prior to reading a text, which include analysis of titles, photographs and headings, predicting the content or analysis of the context where the text can be found). A variety of activities can be introduced in the later stages, while reading and post reading. Some of them include: paraphrasing and summarizing of parts of a text, identifying arguments, distinguishing facts from opinions and other activities. Post reading tasks can include, for instance, writing outlines or analyzing the text from opposing perspectives.
- *KWL Charts* or Know-Want to Know-Learned charts are an excellent reading strategy to promote both critical reading and critical thinking. In practice, it engages the students and promotes their interaction with the text, due to the fact that the students need to think and distinguish among the facts known to them, the new information presented in the text and the information they want to obtain beyond the text.

The above mentioned strategies and tasks are only some examples among the many possibilities of teaching practices which can be used in a language classes and English for Academic Purposes. There is a variety of tasks and ideas which can be selected taking into consideration students' needs and characteristics and used successfully to promote students' critical reading and thinking skills.

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APPENDIX

Critical thinking skills and critical reading skills survey

Statement	SA (strongly agree)	A (agree)	N (neutral)	D (disagree)	SD (strongly disagree)
1. I am able to identify the main ideas in a text/ web content.					
2. I am able to distinguish between the main idea and supporting details in a text/ web content					
3. I am able to review and predict the content of a text by analyzing the title, introduction or photographs/ captions.					
4. I am able to read and understand a long and complex text in a relatively short period of time.					
5. I am able to read and understand a long and complex text in a relatively short period of time.					
6. I am able to summarize a text / paraphrase a text effectively.					
7. I am able to infer information which is not explicitly stated in a text.					
8. I am able to distinguish a fact from an opinion in a text or web content.					
9. I can differentiate important from unimportant points or details.					
10. I am able to locate arguments in a text.					
11. I am able to reach conclusions or identify a message in a text.					
12. I am aware and able to recognize prejudice/ bias in texts or web content.					
13. I can recognize misleading notions in texts/ web content (advertisements, propaganda).					
14. I can recognize fake news/false information.					
15. I am able to recognize the causes of specific problems described in texts/ web content.					
16. I can evaluate the ideas presented in texts / web content.					
17. I can compare and contrast issues/ events presented in different ways in texts/ web content.					
18. I am able to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source of a text/ web content.					
19. I am able to relate the content of the text/ web source to my personal experience.					
20. I am able to define arguments when I disagree with points of view presented in texts/ web content.					