

An Analysis of Students' Critical Reading Skills: A Study in Indonesian Tertiary Education

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Abstract

This study is descriptive qualitative research that aims to determine the extent of students' reading skills, namely their ability to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate texts. The population of this study was all second-semester students of the 2022/2023 academic year in the English Department of Makassar State University. The subjects of the study were 20 students from class 01 of the English Education Study Program 2022/2023. The data were obtained through the reading test. The results showed that the three aspects of critical reading - analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating were the easiest for the students. However, the results also showed a growing ability to recognize the author's intention and identify the underlying assumptions. Besides, there is still room for improvement in critical thinking, especially in areas such as analytical techniques, evaluating bias, and considering alternative perspectives.

Keywords: *Critical Reading Skills, Tertiary Education, and Reading Comprehension.*

INTRODUCTION

Critical reading skills are fundamental for academic success and lifelong learning. The ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information from various sources is not only essential for comprehending complex texts but also for making informed decisions in an increasingly information-driven world (Combs, 1992). In the context of Indonesia's tertiary education system, the development of strong critical reading skills among students is of paramount importance. Reading is a necessary ability for all students in higher education since it is a crucial component of academic achievement (Tavakoli, 2014). College students are required to complete extensive reading assignments based on scholarly literature such as essays, journal articles, and textbooks. Academic reading is difficult since it is distinguished by varying lengths and text levels at distinct stages (Sohail, 2015).

The problem behind this research is that the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018 stated that Indonesia's reading ability decreased from 397 in 2015 to 371 in 2018. The data proves that students' critical reading skills are still very low and Indonesia has not been optimal in developing the education process (Bekti Amalia, 2022).

Based on Megawati et al (2023), critical reading consists of activities such as annotating direct reactions to a text, skimming the text and recognizing the main points of the reading, drawing conclusions by looking for clues and main points of the text. In this context, we should

take into account what those clues elicit from prior knowledge and make predictions. Moreover, based on Arifin et al (2023), critical reading skills are built on five components: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. The researcher's primary concern in this study is reading comprehension.

The research gap between previous studies and this recent study is the differentiation of the subject of the research and research design. Subject of research in this recent study will be the second semester students of Universitas Negeri Makassar. This researcher will take 20 students from the English Department. Research design in this recent study will use descriptive qualitative methods.

Based on some previous studies above, most of them showed that critical reading has an essential role and is beneficial for students' vocabulary mastery. Therefore, this recent research will focus on critical reading skill in different subjects of research from previous studies.

The novelty of this research specifically targets Indonesia's tertiary education system, providing a contextually relevant and unique analysis of critical reading skills. Other researchers had focused on lower-level students as their subject. This research will acknowledge the diversity of Indonesia's education landscape and its specific challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Reading

"Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading materials in building meaning," claims Anderson (2011). Meaning is not limited to the reader's imagination or what is written on a page. Reading creates a synergy that mixes the reader's prior knowledge and experiences with the words on the printed page.

Reading is the cognitive process of decoding and comprehending written or printed symbols, such as letters, words, and sentences, in order to extract meaning and information from text. Reading is defined by Anderson in Seventilofa (2022) as the process of extracting meaning from written texts. It necessitates the synchronization of numerous interconnected data sources. It involves the ability to recognize and interpret written language, as well as the capacity to make connections, infer, and understand the ideas and messages conveyed by the text. Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in education, communication, and the acquisition of knowledge. It encompasses a range of activities, from basic word recognition to higher-level skills like critical analysis and interpretation.

Critical Reading

Critical reading is an active and analytical process involving the evaluation of a text's content, structure, and underlying assumptions, requiring readers to assess the source's credibility, the quality of arguments and evidence, while also examining organization, rhetoric, and potential bias (Par, 2018). It entails comparing the text with alternative viewpoints, recognizing implicit meanings, and fostering personal reflection to develop a well-rounded understanding and form informed opinions, making it a valuable skill for academic, professional, and everyday contexts.

Critical reading was also conveyed by Wheeler (2009) explaining that critical reading

activities are reading activities to evaluate writing as well as in content and writing style based on accountable criteria.

Reading critically is important because every text is meant to convey a certain concept; every text does not have a single meaning, every text has a unique version or focus that sets it apart from other texts, and every text offers the reader a means of accepting it as true. The process of critical reading gives the reader a filter to believe the information conveyed in the text. Critical reading has a level that aims to understand the meaning of the text in depth and then apply it through critical thinking, involving analysis and evaluation skills in interpreting the contents of the text as a whole, both implied and explicit.

On the other words, critical reading refers as an analytic activity in which a reader intensively reads a text to identify text structures which cover values, information, language as well as assumptions. By performing critical reading, a reader may involves total interpretation and evaluation on a text. This is in accordance by what stated by (Wang & Gierl, 2011). which define that 'critical reading is the reading skills that involve a higher level of thinking in which the reader uses a logical analysis, questioning attitude, as well as inference to judge the worth of what is read. Critical reading also be able to recognized based on following characteristics stated by (Hidayati et al, 2020) which underlines the key word 'examine', in which refers when a reader really reads the text, they would tend to start examining the evidence or presented arguments.

Critical Reading Skills

Critical reading is an active and careful reading process that involves analyzing and evaluating written information. More than simply understanding the words on the page, critical reading involves a deeper engagement with the text. It requires readers to assess the author's arguments, evidence, and conclusions, as well as consider the text's purpose, context, and potential biases.

According to Munir (2023) Critical Reading itself defined as set of process which focuses on the interpretation of the text and it involves to assume the main issue, find the strengths and weaknesses of the text, make a critique regards to the logic, argument or sentiments expressed in the text questioning attitude, logical analysis, and inference to judge the worth of what is read according to an established standard.

In order to teach critical reading effectively, educators should employ suitable critical reading strategies. with his four stages of critical reading strategies: (1) reading comprehension, (2) interpreting, (3) judging and (4) writing, and also interpreting, synthesizing, and assessing, as well as Kurland 000) restatement, description, and interpretation, along with refencing, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating. Nonetheless, these strategies effectively on questioning basis as tools for critical thinking that emphasize higher -level analytic and evaluative skills needed to improve student critical reading ability This is confirmed stating that critical reading is mainly a process of employing critical thinking questioning to react intelligently to the writer's ideas.

To identify students critical reading requires three main indicators that have been explained by Munir (2023) that in analyzing students' critical reading skills, namely analyzing three main indicators, namely analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating and here are the questions to identify students' critical reading.

Analyzing

Guided question of analyzing:

- a. What is the author's purpose or motive in writing this material?
- b. What is the author's point of view?
- c. How was the author's content organized?
- d. His writing techniques/style?
- e. What kind of vocabulary predominates in the text?

Synthesizing

Guided question of Synthesizing:

- a. If so, what viewpoint does the author try to convince you of?
- b. Are there any erroneous reasoning/bias/prejudices in writing?
- c. What has the author assumed to be facts/true?

Evaluating Stage

Guided questions of evaluating:

- a. Considering the whole text, what does the author want us to believe?
- b. Do you believe him/her?
- c. What in the text makes you believe him/makes you not believe him?
- d. Did the argument you read change the way you?
- e. Do certain sections make you feel Pleased? Guilty? Angry? Annoyed? Saddened?

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative method. According to Bogdan and Taylor in Susilowati (2017) qualitative approach is expected to be able to produce an in-depth description of speech, writing, and observable behavior of an individual, group, community, society, or organization in the context of a particular setting which is studied from a whole point of view, comprehensive and holistic. According to Moleong in Susilowati (2017) descriptive research is research by way of collecting data in the form of words, and pictures, without numbers. That is a type of descriptive qualitative data collection.

Data sources

The data sources in this study are from students in the English Education Study Program class of 2022 at Universitas Negeri Makassar This researcher took 20 students from the English Department. In this study, the subjects are chosen by using purposive sampling.

Instrument of the Research

In collecting data, researcher was needing some instruments. In this study researcher use a Reading test Meanwhile, where the text contains three main indicators related to students' Critical Reading.

Data collection techniques

In this study, the researcher will collect data by using the reading test. There will be 20 students who will do the reading test. The 20 students will take the reading test where they will answer questions from the reading provided.

Data analysis technique

The data obtained and collected by the researcher through the reading test will be analyzed using descriptive-qualitative analysis. According to (Milles and Huberman in 2014) in conducting qualitative descriptive data collection, the steps that must be taken are data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification.

FINDINGS

Analyzing

Analyzing is the first step and skill in critical thinking, where readers mostly start to realize the author's belief by linking the questions, claims, and concepts that could reveal the author's stance on the problem (Facione, 2011). Readers or in this context, students, get to look at various identifiers (claim, context, concept, ideas, etc.) to develop a preliminary conclusion on the matter. In this first phase of the critical reading, students were all capable of answering the question. Only some very little of them failed to identify a more nuanced thing, like the author's point of view.

Generally, the answers in the analysis part represents two things; how the author looks at the issue, and how he constructs the content. Some of the students assumed the author favors one side over the other, for instance. As for the construction of the writings, many students share some similarities and differences with others. Here are some key takeaways about how students worked out their answers in analyzing.

Subjective and Favorable to text

In this first part of the analysis, the researcher has managed to separate students' answers based on their view to the issue, at least that is what questions in analyzing part is all about; author's direction of the narrative. So, there are some portions of student who subjectively view author as trying to promote distance learning. Convincing enough, the students in this group mostly agreed with the author, even though some others -the opposite group to these students- argued the author has been quite the opposite, neutral in his opinion. Below, the researcher will explain representatively about the first group, ones that viewed author, or his writing, as promoting, pushing slightly in favor of distance learning.

Students perceived authors as favorable to just one side of the story, distance learning and had from there, developed answers subsequently based on their hunches. Student (Az) for example, viewed the author of the text writer of the text toward distance learning and intentionally promoted it as well. Written of the text answered it:

(Extracts 1, 20 Juni 2024)

"The author purpose is to promote distance learning" "Favorable towards distance learning".

(Question 1 and 2, Student 1)

In accordance with student 1's answers to questions number 1 and 2 where it can be concluded that the author's aim for distance learning is aimed at a more practical and enjoyable learning experience for students, therefore what is meant by the author is that students can support distance learning.

Balance view

The second group of students is more neutral in view towards the author. Their perspectives summarized and placed the author as a provider of the issue, free from any subjective, prior assumption of the first group. Whereas the first group put the author in a much one-sided favoring one -that is distance learning- over the other, this second group of students sees it as more of an option to consider (traditional learning and distance learning). In some of the answers, they analyzed the author's view on distance learning as an alternative to the traditional method. So, students in this category are those who did not put one option superior to the other.

As explained previously, only a small number of students perceived the author as subjective and favored one view over the others. Most students answered the analyzing part of the questions by slightly agreeing on the neutral side of the author's view. Every student except 2, 4, 16, and 18 did not favor one side in their answers. Student 1 (S) for example, stated the author's purpose and view is quite fair to the issue. Below is her answer:

(Extracts 4, 20 Juni 2024)

"The author's motive appears to be to provide information, guidance, and advocacy for distance learning as a relevant and beneficial educational pathway for students of their post-secondary choice".

"Distance learning offers a viable and profitable alternative"

(Question 1 and 2, Student 1)

According to student 1 To sum up, the author wants to inform, mentor, and encourage remote learning as a viable and advantageous choice for students who have finished their secondary school. According to the author, distant learning can be a useful and advantageous substitute that gives students more flexibility and accessibility to continue their education, based on their needs.

The Rhetorical devices of the passage

Another aspect in the analyzing phase of the questions, worthy of analysis, is how the students perceive the passage structurally. There are some different opinions on this, as seen by the answer sheets. Some of the students think the content is rather formal, thus employing more elements of formal language and writing to the content. Some others are opposed to this. The slightly contrast view of students on this question further hints at their perceptions and analysis afterwards.

Some students think that the language and tone used by the author are technical while others see it as more casual. However, most students fail to analyze and answer the content organization question properly. Based on the passage's construction, the author organizes the content in a problem-solution format, which most students fail to see.

(Extracts 6, 20 Juni 2024)

“The author's content is organized in a structured manner with clear sections and logical flow”.

“With clear sections and logical flow”.

“The vocabulary used in the text leans more towards formal and technical language rather than colloquial expressions”.

(Question 6,7,8 Student 1)

According to student 1 From the statement, it can be inferred that writers present information in an organized manner, with each section having a clear and logical flow. Instead of using informal and common language, the writer usually uses formal and technical language, which indicates that they are writing for an audience that requires in- depth and professional knowledge.

Synthesizing

Facione (2011) defines synthesizing as the evaluation process, in which the reader tries to connect and be relevant to the findings. by incorporating it with the experience, and reader's knowledge. The result is several questions in mind about the contextual relevance of the passage, which is the question number 3, 5, and 9.

Students who favor the text by thinking it as biased/ prejudice-free

Interestingly, some students who subjectively agreed that the author has favored distance learning also agreed about the unbiased representation claim. They sort of backed up the narration by claiming the superiority of distance learning being brought fairly, away from any bias or prejudice. This category is about some number of students who back up the narrative by stating is as a bias-free writing.

The results are not very contrast from the analyzing section. Students tend to fall on question number 5, in which they differ about the bias or prejudice found in the writing. Some of them argue the author misses the drawbacks of distance learning while others also state that about no bias at all. In general, the answer in synthesizing sections can be distinguished by whether the students have subjective or objective views toward the passage. They analyzed as if the author prefers distance learning over traditional ones or vice versa.

The researcher has the answers from some of the students to better present and show the analysis. For example, here is the answer of the first student (S).

(Extracts 14, 20 Juni 2024)

“The author attempts to convince readers of the viewpoint that distance learning is a superior alternative to traditional on-campus education for many students”.

“While the article advocates for distance learning as a viable educational option, it's important to critically evaluate the reasoning presented and consider potential biases that may influence the argument”.

“The author assumes that traditional on-campus education presents challenges based on common experiences and perceptions. The author assumes that distance learning provides greater flexibility and accessibility”.

(Question 3,5,9, Student 1)

According student 1 The aforementioned remark suggests that the author is attempting to persuade the reader that distant learning—which emphasizes flexibility and accessibility is a superior option than traditional on-campus education. However, as the author's conclusions can be predicated on generalizations about the difficulties of traditional education, readers are urged to critically assess the logic put forward. The author's thesis should be viewed in light of potential prejudice because it presupposes that all students have a similar experience with on-campus education and fails to acknowledge that not all students will benefit equally from distant learning.

Students who think the text has bias prejudice.

Actually, there are some students who think critically about the only one side of a particular option -out of the two options- is being discussed in the text. the researcher thinks that question number five (5), about whether the text has slightly biased or prejudiced narrative, is a tipping point to see how fair and balanced are all students towards the text. Thankfully, some of the students answered properly in the test.

Students 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 are just a few who spot the slight bias in the text. They argue that the text only promotes the positive side of distance learning without any proper or considerable negative to count. Here are two examples of those answers which the represent bias.

(Extracts 18, 20 Juni 2024)

“The author lists many benefits of distance learning, but the author is acting here because the author does not include the negative potential of distance learning, such as students not studying seriously, students not doing their own questions and using jockeys, etc”.

(Question 5, Student 7)

According to student 7, the answer implies that although the writer mentioned a number of advantages of distance learning, he failed to mention the possible disadvantages. The author's reasoning seems incomplete and does not take into account the potential dangers that could disrupt the success of distance learning. Some challenges, such as fewer serious students, dishonesty in assignments, and the involvement of third parties, such as jockeys, are not highlighted.

Evaluating

Students who believed in the author

This category in the first of evaluation analysis sees some of students who believed everything the author state /write in the passage. Pacione (2011) explains evaluation as a significant process to assess one's credibility, merit, based on the statements, questions, and other sort of representations. At this particular stage, ones will try to see how each clue (statements, questions) relates and contradicts to each other. Simply put, evaluating means assessing whether the author's stance is justifiable based on the presented arguments /reasons. The researcher developed eight questions for this part of critical reading 10-17.

Based on the answers, some students believed and some were not. The answers indicate there a couple of reasons, which can be traced back to the passage as why did the students think the way they do. The first student (S) for example, explained her answers as signs of agreement

with the author and in general, developed and believed the superiority of distance learning. Below is her answer.

(Extracts 20, 20 Juni 2024)

“Yes. The author makes a compelling case for the benefits of distance learning” “The author presents logical arguments supported by reasoning and evidence”.

“Yes. I was affected and believe the argument”. “No”.

(Question 2,3,4,5, Student 1)

According to student 1 Differences of opinion regarding the author's claim about the advantages of distance learning are evident in the conclusion of the answer. The majority of the answers show that the writer is able to provide convincing arguments supported by adequate reasons and evidence. This resulted in readers agreeing with this point of view. However, one negative comment also indicates that not everyone agrees with the argument - although the source of the disagreement is not discussed in detail. The majority of respondents found the author's argument persuasive overall.

Students who contradict the author

The second to this category of evaluation stage is those who opposes the author. Students who opposed the author, as showed by their answered, were answering the question firmly by stating their strong tendency not to entirely agree with the author.

Some students contradict the author's belief on the issue for some reasons. Student 4 demonstrates a limited ability to critically evaluate the text. While they correctly identify a lack of information regarding potential disadvantages of distance learning, their overall valuation lacks depth. The student's belief that distances learning is not the best option for all students is not sufficiently supported by their analysis. Additionally, the absence of any emotional response to the text suggests a limited engagement with the material.

(Extracts 24, 20 Juni 2024)

“No, I do not really believe him”.

“The text emphasizes the flexibility of distance learning but does not discuss its potential disadvantages”.

“These arguments did not change my perspective significantly”.

(Question 2,3,4 Student 4)

According to student 4 this leads to the conclusion that, despite the text's emphasis on the flexibility of distance learning, readers are still skeptical as there is not enough information given about its potential drawbacks. The readers' concerns seem to go unaddressed and their skepticism about the efficacy of distance learning seems to be reinforced by the weak arguments made, which fail to dramatically change the readers' perspective.

DISCUSSIONS

Critical Reading skills in Indonesian colleges the results of analyzing the answers from reading the text then answering each question that has been provided is that most students have a fairly good level of reading comprehension.

The test also revealed that critical reading skills, such as the ability to evaluate arguments and draw conclusions based on evidence, varied among students. Some students demonstrated strong critical skills, while others needed improvement in this regard. Several areas for improvement were identified, including the ability to understand contextual meaning and draw conclusions from more difficult texts. The use of diverse reading sources and intensive reading practice can help improve students' reading ability.

Thus, it can be said that Synthesizing is not the easiest task, but analyzing is easier than evaluating. The process of breaking down data or ideas into smaller components to understand how the parts are connected to each other is called analyzing. Analyzing this case study may include determining student difficulties, their causes and how they affect students pursuing higher education. Analyzing a problem mainly focuses on understanding its structure and dissecting it into more manageable parts.

Evaluation, on the other hand, involves determining the effectiveness or quality of a method or solution. In this situation, assessing the reaction to a student or college crisis requires a more thorough understanding and careful assessment of a number of factors, including the efficacy of the action or policy. Since you have to determine the relative importance of several factors that have been analyzed, this procedure requires better critical thinking skills. In other words, analysis is often considered simpler because it only requires understanding and interpreting a problem, whereas evaluation requires more rigorous judgement, subjective factors and thorough consideration.

The process of reassembling knowledge that has been dissected at the analysis stage to create a new understanding or solution is known as synthesis. Synthesizing in the context of students' crisis reading can include combining information from different aspects of a situation to produce a more thorough knowledge or a more thorough approach to solving it. Synthesizing is usually ranked second as it serves as a bridge between analysis and evaluation. After analyzing the aspects involved in a crisis, you must bring them together before you can make a full evaluation.

The synthesis process involves designing new knowledge through data analysis, and the results will guide the evaluation. In general, the sequence of analysis, synthesis and evaluation follows the logical flow of information processing: we first break down the information (analysis), then reassemble it to get the bigger picture (synthesis), and then assess its quality or effectiveness (evaluation).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into students' critical reading skills and their perceptions of distance learning. The findings indicate that students are increasingly capable of engaging with texts critically, demonstrating their ability to analyze arguments, recognize rhetorical strategies, and understand complex organizational structures.

Moreover, students' perceptions of distance learning reflect a nuanced understanding of its advantages and challenges, suggesting a growing acceptance of alternative educational methods.

However, the variance in students' abilities to articulate their analyses indicates a need for further development of critical reading skills within the educational curriculum.

This research underscores the importance of fostering critical reading skills in students, particularly as educational landscapes continue to evolve. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies aimed at enhancing these skills, ultimately contributing to more informed and capable learners in both traditional and distance learning environments.

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