

***Reading as a Classroom Activity to Enhance Learners' Critical Thinking Capacities: Teachers and Students' Insights
The Case of Third Year Majors of English at Larbi Tebessi University -
Tebessa-***

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Received: 11/06/2025

Accepted: 17/09/2025

Abstract:

This study attempted to investigate the role of reading as a classroom activity in enhancing students' critical thinking skill. It rested on an exploratory mixed-methods research design that made use of the interview and the questionnaire. Five teachers at the department of English at Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi University were interviewed during the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025. Moreover, a questionnaire was administered to 80 third year students majoring in English. The obtained results revealed that teachers showed a positive attitude towards the implementation of reading as a classroom activity as they stressed the effectiveness of reading in boosting critical thinking levels. As for the questionnaire, participants expressed their dire need to practice reading regularly for it increased their critical thinking abilities.

Keywords: *Classroom activity; critical thinking; English major; learning; reading*

INTRODUCTION

As a skill, critical thinking is as old as its early beginnings that date back to thousands of years ago. In this vein, Paul, Elder, and Bartel (1997) postulate that critical thinking has its roots in the work of Socrates 2500 years ago. He demonstrated the importance of asking deep questions that leads profoundly into thinking before accepting ideas as worthy to belief or not. His method of questioning is now known as “Socratic Questioning” and is the best known example of critical thinking.

Given the educational context, critical thinking is an important element in the learning process wherein the previously learnt concepts and theories are implemented effectively as they become relevant in the student's life. Traditionally, the teaching of critical thinking concentrated only on logical procedures, such as formal and informal logic. This accentuated to learners that thinking as an act adheres solely to logical. Nevertheless, new forms of critical thinking invite teachers to consider traditional and old techniques, at the same time widen the conceptualisation of critical thinking so as to revolutionise and renovate its denotation.

A significant research study conducted by Robert Ennis in the 1960s marked the start of practicing and improving critical thinking sub-skills in the classroom that were later on reflected in all domains of students' lives and also at the workplace. Ennis focused on critical thinking as a learned skill that would foster learning and could be applied to different aspects of life if taught and practiced appropriately. Ennis concluded that critical thinking is “focused on deciding what to believe or do.” (Ennis, p. 10). As such, critical thinking is highly useful when developing reasoning skills especially for university students who strive to accumulate reliable and valuable resources of knowledge during their academic journey.

This study, in turn, sheds light on one of the effective methods that teachers resort to in order to promote their students' critical thinking capacities, namely reading as a classroom activity (i.e. academic reading). While the present study emphasises the academic reading mode, similar research studies conducted in Algeria and other countries have tested the effect of practicing different types of reading (either extensively or intensively) on critical thinking, and how the quantity of analysing diverse types of texts can affect to a large extent critical thinking improvement.

1. Review of the Literature

1.1. Definition of Reading

According to Grabe's (1991) perspective, reading is an act in which students strive to grasp knowledge of techniques to examine reading materials effectively. That is to say, students employ techniques, such as skimming, inferring, and guessing that help them in discovering the meaning of texts. In relation, Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 22) describe reading as “the system of receiving and decoding data encoded in language through the medium of print”. Likewise, university students use their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and the rhetorical organisation of the reading material between hands to infer its intended meaning.

1.2. Types of Reading

Reading is categorized into two main types: “Extensive Reading” and “Intensive Reading”. Both types seek to gain knowledge from texts; however, they are totally different in their purpose and length.

1.2.1. Extensive Reading

Carrel et al., (1997), specified that extensive reading is based on fast and long reading of large texts included in books and novels. Since this type of reading is highly beneficial especially in the educational context, Day and Bamford (2002) asserts that expounding extensive reading programmes in the EFL curricula is central for English language teaching. Additionally, extensive reading gives students the opportunity to choose any subject they want from a variety of non-academic resources like fiction series, detective stories, and biographies. Depending on this process, students will be able to cultivate a comprehensive file and enrich their background information as they deal with multiple

subjects (Nuttal, 2005).

1.2.2. Intensive Reading

Intensive reading denotes the analysis of shorter texts to deduce their general ideas, and to build an understanding of them. According to Nuttal (2005), learners should try to understand well the text as needed in an intensive reading task. Nevertheless, Students will have to concentrate on a smaller amount of texts with their teachers guiding them. Concerning the difference between the intensive and the extensive reading, Hafiz and Tudor (1989) said that intensive reading exercises expose students to short texts which are invested as to demonstrate the concepts of the lexical, syntactic, or discoursal system of language. Conversely, extensive reading aims at flooding students with huge chunks of language with limited tasks to perform.

1.3. Definition of Critical Thinking

According to the Oxford dictionary, critical thinking is the process of evaluating and analyzing information to get a logical definition about the truth and the believability of something. Given its ambiguous nature, this term has been defined differently by a myriad of researchers who have tried to elucidate its meaning and form a conceptualisation that renders the teaching of its sub-skills a viable task (Thiziri, 2023).

According to Facione (2011), critical thinking is a purposeful judgement that aims at analyzing, evaluating and interpreting facts. It is a set of thinking that results in the explanation of the conceptual, methodological, and contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. In another definition, Ennis (2015) emphasises that critical thinking is a skilful activity that necessitates a lot of attention.

1.4 The Role of Reading in Enhancing Critical Thinking

Recently, augmenting critical thinking skills as part of EFL reading classroom activities has got the attention of many researchers. The latter planned to investigate critical thinking instructions as well as teachers' commitment in the classroom in order to determine how can critical thinking be related to academic reading. Researchers sought also to gauge the influence of reading as a classroom activity on the other variables of their research (Reed, 1998).

According to Syariffudin et al. (2021), Eftekhary (2014) conducted an enquiry on how academic reading can develop ESL students' critical thinking skills in Azad University. They indicated that targeting the improvement of critical thinking capabilities while assigning reading activities represented a useful method to aid students determine and manage learning difficulties. They deduced that students with high critical thinking skills could understand the reading materials better, and that good understanding in reading could boost students' critical thinking capacities.

A similar study, which related critical thinking to the act of reading, took part in an Intensive English Program (IEP) in Minnesota in which 61% of the participants were Saudi students (Wong, 2016). The results showed that the participants employed reading as a central technique for memorizing rather than reciting. At first, reading was challenging due to cultural factors. Nevertheless, depending on collaborative tasks turned out to be extremely beneficial for students. They first analyzed and inferred ideas to written essays and passages, and then participated in critical thinking and problem-solving activities. This assisted them in addressing and creating solutions to real-life problems and issues.

2. The Study

In what follows, an explanation of the present research study will be provided. More precisely, this section casts light on the following research elements: statement of the problem, research questions, underlying hypothesis, as well as the aim of the study.

2.1. Statement of the Problem

For the bulk of university students, critical thinking is perceived as a challenging learning task which they do not master in their first years of higher education. More specifically, the problem was

manifested in third year majors of English at the University of Larbi Tebessi of Tebessa. The main reason behind this problem was the lack of reading, which can be an effective tool to construct and nourish critical thinking capacities.

2.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to provide answers to three main questions, namely:

1. Were third year majors of English at the University of Larbi Tebessi introduced to critical thinking in their previous years at university?
2. Why do third year majors of English at the University of Larbi Tebessi consider it difficult to think critically? And what are the factors leading to this?
3. According to both teachers and students, how can reading reinforce critical thinking capacities? And to what extent?

2.3. Aim of the Study

This study attempted to stress the focal role of reading in class as an essential tool that enables students to unconsciously be critical thinkers. As such, this study attempts to demystify the role of reading in foreign language classes, precisely English, and its effectiveness in developing students' critical thinking skill.

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Study Design

The most appropriate research design to carry out this study and assemble relevant data is the exploratory mixed-methods research design. It employs research instruments belonging to both quantitative and qualitative approaches, namely the questionnaire and the interview. The interview was useful to elicit teachers' insights and practices regarding the investigated topic. In addition, the questionnaire administered to students was based on numerical data, which facilitated the data gathering process and saved time and effort.

2.4.2. Data Collection Methods

In view of the present study, two research tools were employed in order to gather relevant data. These include the teachers' interview and the students' questionnaire. Description of the chosen data collection methods is provided under the subsequent headings.

2.4.2.1. Teachers' Interview. The researcher conducted an interview with five teachers at the department of English at Larbi Tebessi University, Tebessa. Some of them held a Magister Degree while others were Ph.D. holders. The participants were of different majors or area of expertise including Literature, Civilisation, and Applied Linguistics. They served as university professors for disparate periods; and were in charge of varied subjects. The interview aspired to elicit professors' perceptions about the vital role of reading in class in developing learners' critical thinking capacities. Given its overall structure, the interview incorporated seven questions that were organised under three main sections as follows: General Background, Teachers' Perceptions of Reading as a classroom activity, and finally The Role of Academic Reading in Boosting Critical thinking.

2.4.2.2. Students' Questionnaire. It was inclusive of 12 questions, and targeted at assembling important data from third year majors of English at the University of Larbi Tebessi pertinent to classroom reading practices. It employed multiple choice and open-ended questions to collect varied kinds of responses, and give students a room to communicate their own ideas about the topic investigated.

2.4.3. Population and Sampling

This study took place at the department of English belonging to Larbi Tebessi University of Tebessa. The target population involved third year students, wherein eighty (80) students out of 180 were randomly selected to form the sample of this study. The reason behind opting for this level is that third year students are confined to use critical thinking sub-skills because of their advanced level of proficiency and the different and numerous modules they study compared to first and second years.

2.5. Results and Discussion

This section displays the results attained from two research instruments; hence, it is inclusive of two main parts. First, it summarises the results of the teachers' interview. Second, it lists and highlights the most significant results obtained from the students' questionnaire respectively.

2.5.1. Teachers' Interview Results

Teachers specified that academic reading and critical thinking are better seen as two sides of the same coin, in that both acts are intricately tied. The more students are encouraged to scrutinize reading materials in class, the more their critical thinking capacities would augment. The interviewed teachers claimed that they tried to improve the critical thinking skill of their students in different ways, such as asking them to read extensively about a given topic as a homework, summarising the content of reading materials, setting them to answer after-reading questions of sample essays, and involving them in class discussions and other types of reading-related activities. Addedly, they stressed the need to motivate students to read different types and genres of materials, be it for academic purposes or for pleasure, as well as providing them with debatable topics to read about, prepare and discuss in class. Teachers also expounded that critical thinking is a fundamental skill that is acquired and refined through practice until it becomes a habit. Finally, teachers affirmed that raising the potential of thinking critically would definitely affect students positively given its pivotal role in their academic, professional, as well as personal life.

Moreover, the interviewed teachers posited that, apart from reading, students should be introduced to the concept of critical thinking and should be trained to use their grey matter and doubt every single thing they come across. Therefore, there should be a module or subject in higher education that is devoted to 'critical thinking' especially that we are living in an era that notices rapid technological and educational developments. With the widespread use of AI tools, students are threatened to cease using their critical thinking capacities due to the over reliance on such research-facilitating instruments. This is deemed as a threat if not wisely controlled by students and teachers on an equal footing. Remarkably, these tools keeps students away from all the different forms of reading, which in turn would result in poor reading habits in and out of class, as well as demotivating them to read fairly longer reading materials. That is why the interviewed teachers insisted on the addition of a new module that would be dedicated to introducing this overarching skill and unveiling its paramount importance and the sooner the better of course.

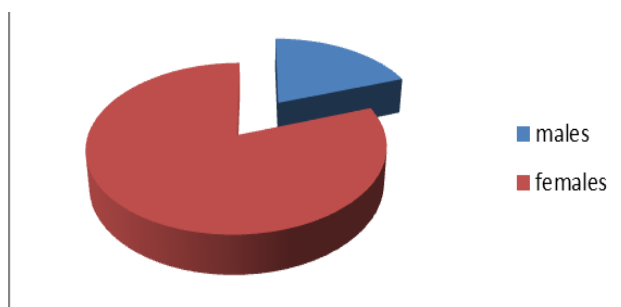
2.5.2. Students' Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire yielded informative data that are highlighted in the list below:

- There were eighty participants, twenty of which were males and sixty were females. Surprisingly, female students tend to read more than male students, be it for academic purposes or for pleasure. Apart from enjoying the act of reading, females had developed more reading habits compared to males due to the fact that they spend more time at home, which is mostly devoted to this engaging activity.

Figure 1:

Participants' Gender

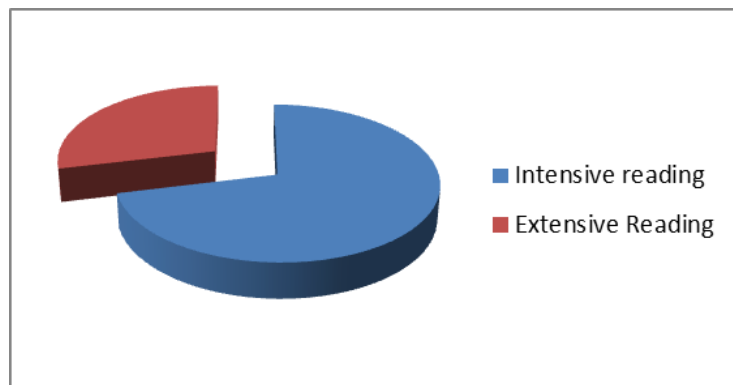


- The majority favoured intensive reading, which they practiced in and out of the class for the sake of

gaining useful knowledge and improving their vocabulary repertoire with new and advanced words. As per extensive reading, they specified it is practiced voluntarily only for enjoyment, and it compromises reading novels, books, magazines, blogs and so on and so far.

Figure 2:

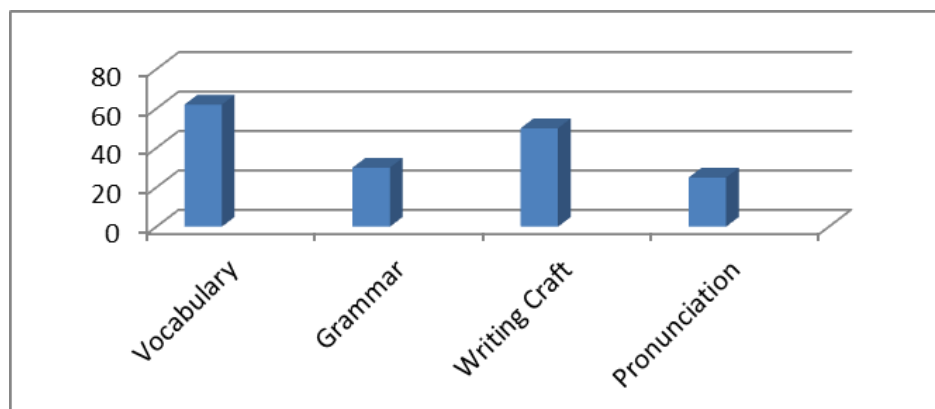
Students' Reading Preferences



- All the participants without exception agreed that reading in English boosted their proficiency level in terms of vocabulary, grammar, writing craft, and even pronunciation and intonation when relying on reading aloud protocol. As they read different materials, they came across new vocabulary and experience writers' writing craft and how they communicate their ideas smoothly and effectively. Also, they became more aware of the grammatical structures employed, as well as the mechanics and overall layout of texts or what is known as the rhetorical structure. Additionally, students' prosodic features would improve as well especially when practicing reading aloud protocol. Such features include: intonation, rhythm, pronunciation, stress, assimilation, linking and elision.

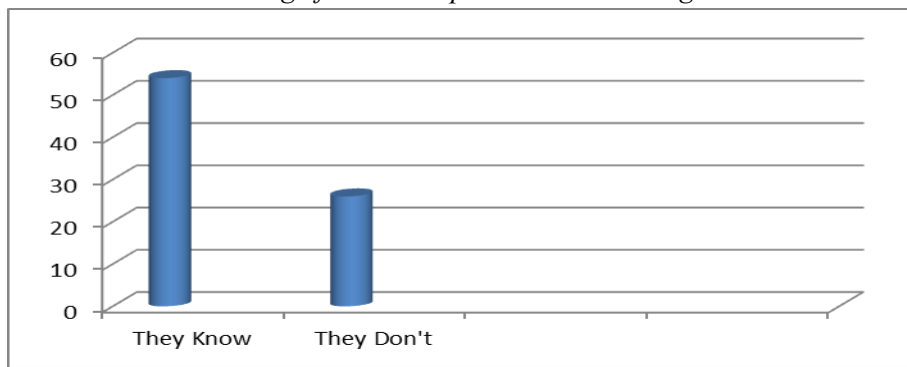
Figure 3:

Benefits of Practicing Reading



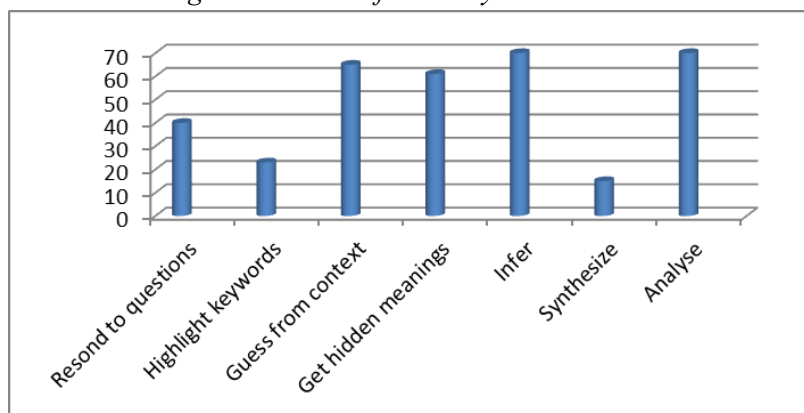
- The main advantages of reading, according to the participants, were scaffolding and informing the writing skill, nurturing necessary thinking sub-skills (such as inferring, deducing, synthesising, interpreting, weighing views and so on) , as well as deepening knowledge about the target language itself .
- From their answers, the majority of the participants seemed to really know what the concept of critical thinking means although they did not study it as a module or a title under a given lecture, nor dealt with it in expose or homework. Nevertheless, they could not come up with the exact and accurate conceptualisation of it as they have somehow a general understanding of it. Therefore, teachers are advised to raise students' awareness about the genuine definition of critical thinking as to avoid any misconceptions or rigidly limited information about it.

Figure 4:
Students' Understanding of the Concept 'Critical Thinking'



- The participants postulated that as a skill, critical thinking is difficult to develop owing to a number of crucial factors, namely the absence of courses and seminars dedicated to instructing it solely, the shortage of in-class reading assignments, as well as the lack of appropriate reading materials. Besides, students are in a dire need of teachers' guidance even when they read. Teachers' questions before and after reading assists their students to scrutinize texts, passages, and essays; hence, put into practice their critical thinking sub-skills. The latter is inclusive of inferring, deducing, inducing, analysing, synthesizing, guessing meaning from contexts, and so on.
- They admitted the fact that when they read more, their critical thinking capacities would increase regarding the amount of reading they perform. This implied that reading and thinking critically and logically are, hence, tightly linked. We deduce that there exists a correlational tie between the two as performing more reading chunks leads definitely to boosting and augmenting critical thinking capacities not only of students but of all sorts of readers in general.
- Lastly, the majority of participants strongly agreed that reading as a classroom activity or as an assignment at home enhanced their critical thinking abilities, and this was manifested in the way they approached exam questions and how they dealt with the subject matter of their major. Put differently, reading as a classroom activity is of countless benefits for students as it trains them on how to respond to questions in exams and quizzes. Students would bear in mind the importance of key words, the context, the targeted audience, the communicative purpose of the text, the metadiscourse devices utilized, the rhetorical moves, and even the hidden messages and morals that lie behind lines.

Figure 5:
Critical thinking Sub-Skills Performed by Students



As discussed above, the field work has provided concrete evidence to the topic under investigation, and provided answers to the research guiding questions. The obtained results revealed that third year majors of English at the University of Larbi Tebessi, Tebessa really know what the

concept of critical thinking means (RQ 1). They considered critical thinking as a difficult activity due to some reasons, such as the lack of modules devoted to teaching this skill on its own, the absence of reading-related assignments, the shortage of useful and appropriate reading materials analysed in the class (RQ 2). Both teachers and students acknowledged the fact that, undeniably, practicing reading be it in or out of the class, would affect their critical thinking skill positively, and hence improve it to a large extent with time and recurrent practice (RQ 3).

2.6. Recommendations and Pedagogical implementation

The study between hands has some pedagogical recommendations to university teachers regardless of their specialty and the subjects they are in charge of. Teachers are highly advised to design more reading activities to assist students improve their cognitive abilities. Besides, reading can be integrated during the class time in order to train students on inferring, analyzing, synthesizing, criticizing, and evaluating content of reading materials. Teachers have better suggest some strategies that target at developing students' critical thinking capacities as all the interviewed teachers agreed about the impact of improving this skill on students' academic performance. More importantly, syllabus designers and materials developers should create new subjects that are focused on teaching students how to think critically. For stance, they can suggest the teaching of reading and text analysis as a single module in its own terms. This endeavor would train students to read and respond to different types of texts, and would form an opportunity to those who do not practice reading on their own at all.

Conclusion

This study addressed the connection of reading as a classroom activity and the skill of thinking critically. As such, it explored the influence that reading exerts on the development of critical thinking capacities of university students majoring in English, particularly third year students. The selected literature review highlighted the significant role that critical thinking plays in education, and how it develops over time as a result of various academic practices among which is the reading of relevant source materials to students' major.

To conclude, future studies may well investigate critical thinking abilities in under-graduates from a different perspective and address other concerns that the current study has overlooked. They can rely on a larger sample, and opt for an explanatory rather than exploratory research design and use more solid quantitative research instruments, such as quasi-experiments. Hence, they may resort to utilizing other analysis procedures like the t-test independent and paired samples. Such numerical data would permit researchers to gauge any tangible improvements made through testing students' critical thinking abilities in quizzes or even exams.

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