

An Investigation of Algerian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Critical Reading Challenges.

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Abstract :

Critical reading is a skill that requires higher-order thinking which makes it quite difficult to be mastered by EFL learners without teachers' guidance. This paper aims at scrutinizing teachers' perception of their students' critical reading challenges and different problems that prevent them from developing this skill. To realize the research aim, and to answer the research questions, descriptive research supported by quantitative and qualitative data was followed wherein a questionnaire was administered to Algerian EFL teachers via their emails. The obtained results clearly revealed teachers' awareness of the difficulties that their students face while dealing with critical reading tasks. They also revealed teachers' positive attitudes towards different critical reading strategies that should be used to enhance learners' reading performance. Based on these results, it is recommended to consider teaching and training students on the different strategies to overcome their challenges.

Keywords: Reading, Critical Reading, Strategies, challenges, EFL learners.



I. Introduction

In the teaching-learning process, students have to work on enhancing and improving different skills, and reading skill is no exception. Doubtlessly, reading is a receptive skill that can be considered as the core of the didactic process, by which other skills can be enhanced. The reasons and purposes behind reading cannot be the same from one student to another; some of them

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read to cultivate themselves, while others read for fun and pleasure, and some others read only for examinations. In addition, they often read for the sake of reading only by taking the written information for granted; they do not question what is between the lines.

Furthermore, reading something critically means that one should raise some questions, evaluate, analyze, and interpret different types of information that may clarify hidden messages (Kurland, 2000, p. 1). Teaching learners to be critical readers can be considered as one of the main concerns to EFL teachers since the latter believe in its importance, and this was also concluded in Harris's (2004) study about teachers' beliefs and knowledge about critical reading skills. Moreover, an experimental study conducted by Haromi (2014) confirmed that teaching strategies are generally missing the point of how to apply reading strategies to enhance critical reading. When he conducted his experimental study to investigate the effect of integrating such strategies on his students' critical reading, the results clearly showed positive effects. Similarly, another attempt to foster learners' critical reading ability was done by Koupaee Dar et al (2010) who asked their students to read news articles critically, and they tried to check their attitudes toward reading comprehension and whether or not they are motivated to read critically. Overall, the study's results showed that students have positive attitudes toward reading critically. To sum up, enhancing students' critical reading skills was and still is a major concern to EFL practitioners, and Algerian teachers are no exception.

In this regard, this current study aims at investigating Algerian EFL teachers' perception of their students' critical reading challenges and problems and tries to suggest some solutions and recommendations

II. Literature Review

According to Duncan (2004), critical reading can be considered as a more active way of reading. Normally, there should be a shift in readers' role from passive to active readers, by putting some efforts to understand what is meant to be understood. Thus, being a critical reader means that one should have the ability to digest, to question, to interpret, to analyze, to synthesize what is written/ read, instead of reading words and memorizing them simply. Accordingly, Paul (1990) claimed that being a critical reader is to have the ability to distinguish between what is accepted as meaningful information, and what is rejected as distorted and false information. In addition, he also

argued that most of the students cannot understand the logic of the language used, or how words in a language have been used in different ways. In this regard, the critical reading approach in pedagogy helps to emphasize students' ability to understand the logic of what is read and written. Similarly, according to Wallace (2003, p. 22), there is a dynamic relationship between the text, its producers, and its receivers in a social context. He also added that the notion of the context is wider than being limited in terms of the immediate situation of production, as he stated: "Implicit conditions can be understood only if we take account of the wider perspective of social power"

While reading, students have to try to comprehend the meaning of various words used in the text in order to get the information (Hirsch, 2003, p. 10). Thus, comprehension of information can be considered as one of the main aims behind reading (Snow, 2002) (Van Den Broek & Kremer, 2000, p. 13). Thus, comprehension refers to the complex process in which students should not only read the text, but also activate their thinking and use their cognitive abilities. Consequently, critical reading, which can be defined as readers' ability to process, analyze, and interpret the written piece, must be involved to achieve reading comprehension. According to different scholars, various critical thinking skills are adapted from the cognitive skills of Blooms' taxonomy, both lower-order and higher-order thinking skills such as logic, analysis, evaluation, inference, interpretation, explanation, and synthesis. Moreover, each one of the aforementioned skills can include different sub-skills; as an example, analysis can be decomposed into deconstructing, contrasting, and comparing. It is quite important to incorporate critical thinking in reading because it assists readers to reach the aim of reading comprehension. Undoubtedly, encouraging students to read and think critically would help them to accomplish the comprehension objective (Zabihi & Pordel, 2011, p. 80). In addition to that, critical thinking also helps them to answer different questions related to the main ideas. To conclude, thinking critically while reading fosters students' ability to activate their minds to achieve the aim of comprehension.

In order to meet the 21st century learning skills in education, the teaching-learning process should be based on developing critical reading and thinking different skills especially while reading. It is not an easy task to teach critical thinking. Thusly, it requires different kinds of practice using techniques and strategies to help oneself to think critically when a reading subject is taught. Accordingly, Kadir et al asserted: "critical reading skills are skills that will help the students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate

what is read” (2014, p. 209). In the light of their words, applying analysis, synthesis, and evaluation on the piece of writing while reading will help learners not only to understand what is read, but also to comprehend what is written/ said between lines, or in other words the embedded meaning within words, so that students can read and think critically at the same time.

Speaking of critical reading strategies, Leicester University (2009) describes critical reading as: “examining the evidence or arguments presented; checking out any influences on the evidence or arguments; checking out limitations of study design or focus, examining the interpretations made, and deciding to what extent the reader is prepared to accept the author arguments, opinions or conclusions”. From such description, one can infer that in order to be critical readers, learners should never accept the given information at face value without analysis and evaluation. Additionally, Salisbury University (2009) stated that critical reading contains 7 important strategies: first, previewing which is seen as activating schemata to improve learners’ reading comprehension. Second, contextualizing that can be considered as making a reference to the text’s historical, biographical and cultural contexts, where learners can interpret how such contexts are different from those of their own. In the third strategy “questioning”, readers should ask critical questions by thinking out of the box, then these questions must be answered in the reader’s own words and style. Reflecting on challenges to one’s beliefs and values was the fourth strategy. In addition to that, outlining and summarizing by which readers can identify the main and supporting ideas, and restate them in their own words. Then, evaluating which means analyzing and judging the different arguments and evidence given by the author and not accepting everything blindly. Lastly, comparing and contrasting by which readers can explore the similarities and differences between either texts or ideas within one text for better understanding.

Moreover, numerous research studies highlighted the importance of using critical reading strategies, so that different strategies and techniques to improve this skill are suggested. Hudson (2007) said: “critical reading requires: analyze, synthesize and evaluate” (cited in (Maslakhatin, 2018). However, Khabiri and Pakzad (2012) chose seven (7) strategies of critical reading which are similar to Salisbury University strategies. Furthermore, the following strategies were presented by Axelord and Cooper (1999): annotating by which students can circle keywords and comment, previewing, contextualizing, outlining, analyzing opposition, summarizing, paraphrasing,

synthesizing, questioning and reflecting. Moreover, Nasrollahi et al stated annotating, previewing, scanning and skimming, fact vs opinion, drawing conclusions, monitoring, summarizing and paraphrasing, synthesizing, and questioning as critical reading strategies that students should apply while reading to enhance their critical reading skills (2015). Finally, Tovani (as cited in Nasrollahi et al (2015, p10)) suggested the following critical reading strategies which were divided according to reading steps: before reading: first, readers should determine the aim of reading, then they have to preview the text and pay attention to keywords and figurative language used in the text. While reading, readers have to take notes, preview their prior knowledge, then monitor their comprehension. After reading, they should sum up key points in their own style and words.

In this regard, this paper tends to investigate Algerian EFL teachers' perception of EFL students' critical reading challenges by asking the following questions:

Q1- What are the students' different critical reading challenges?

Q2- What are the best ways to improve students' critical reading?

III. Research Methodology:

In order to reach the aim of this paper which is to investigate teachers' perceptions of EFL students' critical reading challenges, and to answer the research questions, the researchers opted for descriptive research which is supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. The population of this study consists of fifty-two (52) EFL teachers from different universities in Algeria. Data have been collected through an online questionnaire sent to teachers' Emails so that they access a Google form containing the questions. As McDonough stated about the use of a questionnaire: "it affords a good deal of precision and clarity because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions" (1997, 171)

IV. Results and Interpretation

This section is devoted to commenting and interpreting the results obtained from the teachers' questionnaire.

1- Participants' Teaching Experience.

As it is shown in Table 1, the majority of teachers (69%) have been teaching English for more than 5 years, while 16 (31%) teachers have been

teaching for less than 5 years. The results indicate that the participants are in a good position to be aware of and to know students' critical reading challenges.

Table1: Participants' Teaching Experience

Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	More than 5 years
Number of Teachers	36 (69%)	16 (31%)

2- Teachers' Perception of Students' Reading Comprehension and Reading skills

Through the analysis of Table 2, the results clearly display that the majority of teachers agree with the importance of reading and using its different strategies and techniques to assure students' comprehension of the text. As it is shown in table 2, 90% of the informants agree that reading is an important skill in the teaching-learning process, and only 2 teachers disagree with that. However, statements 2 and 3 show that the majority of the informants agree that in order to understand the text easily, students should have a good vocabulary and master the language, as they should use reading strategies like activating schemata, questioning, summarizing, etc. In addition, most of them (87%) agree that critical reading and reading comprehension can be considered as interrelated processes that share a linear relationship. Teachers who agree on the importance of reading purposes because this latter can help students to foster their critical reading skills represent 92%. Most of the participants (57%) admitted that applying lower-order- thinking skills (remembering and understanding) can help students to raise their critical reading. Lastly, almost all teachers (94%) assert that applying critical reading strategies such as: skimming and scanning, previewing and contextualizing, etc. help students to read the text critically and understand it easily.

Table2: Reading Comprehension, Critical Reading Skills

Section One Questions	A	N	D
1-Reading can be considered as the core skill in the teaching learning process.	90%	4%	6%
2-Mastering the language and having good vocabulary can help students to understand the text	94%	2%	4%
3-Activating schemata, questioning, summarizing, visualizing and inferring, as reading strategies, can help students to comprehend a text easily	100%	/	/
4-Critical reading can be considered as the master skill in the reading process.	90%	8%	2%
5-Reading comprehension and critical reading are interrelated processes that share a linear relationship.	87%	13%	/
6-Reading purposes generally help students to foster their critical reading skills.	92%	8%	/
7-Retrieving relevant knowledge from memory (remembering), and constructing meaning from instructional material, including oral, written, and graphic communication (understanding) as lower-order- thinking skills would help students to raise their critical reading.	57%	37%	6%
8-Having an overview of text structure and cues (previewing), finding out the key features and gist of the text (skim and scan), and distinguishing facts and opinions (contextualizing) as critical reading strategies would help students to easily understand and to critically read the text.	96%	4%	/

(A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree)

3- Teachers' Perception of Students' Critical Reading Skills

As it is displayed in table 3, the majority (81%) of teachers admitted that students rarely apply SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite and review) and taking notes strategies while reading. In addition to that, 73% of the informants assert that these students, who do not apply reading strategies, generally face difficulties in their reading comprehension. Similarly, participants, who agree that students who do not differentiate between the main idea and supporting ideas generally cannot comprehend the text properly, represent 62%. For statements 4 to 6, the majority of the teachers agree that students who neither master the language, nor have a rich

vocabulary, nor activate their schemata before reading, nor know how to analyze and evaluate a text, generally cannot read critically.

Table 3: Teachers' Perception of Students' Critical Reading Skills.

Section Two Questions	A	N	D
1- Students usually read without applying SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite and review) and taking notes strategies.	81%	19%	/
2- Students who do not apply reading strategies generally face difficulties in their reading comprehension.	73%	25%	2%
3- Students who do not distinguish between the main idea and supporting ideas cannot comprehend the text.	62%	21%	17%
4- Students cannot read critically because they have lack of vocabulary.	56%	25%	19%
5- Students cannot read critically because they do not master the language and do not activate their schemata before start reading.	71%	25%	4%
6- Students cannot read critically because they do not know how to analyze, synthesize and evaluate a text	83%	15%	2%

(A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree)

4- Teachers' Perception of EFL Students' Critical Reading Challenges

The last section contains 3 open-ended questions:

RQ1: In your opinion what are the best ways to improve students' reading skills?

The majority (40) of the informants believe that the real problem to be highlighted and solved is that students do not read if it is not obligatory like for an exam or a test, as one teacher said: "I would say we have to get learners to like reading first then try to improve it. Material selection is really important. The level should be taken into consideration as well as their love and motivation to read".

Fifteen (15) teachers stated that one way would help students to improve their reading skills is by making extensive reading practice compulsory of the curriculum and evaluation, not only teaching them reading strategies. Doubtlessly, students' reading skills will improve when they read correctly, intensively, and extensively in class and out of it. In addition to that, teachers believe that integrating explicit ways of reading strategies and extensive reading programs would mainly serve the best. However, ten (10) other teachers assert that nothing would be improved without a lot of practice. Thus, teachers suggest that students should have extensive practical sessions by giving them: first, the opportunity to read, and second by relying on other skills like listening skill vis-à-vis reading skills such as audiobooks, subtitled movies, etc. Nine (9) teachers also suggest that different sorts of reading materials should be used by following gradual steps from easy to difficult texts may help improving reading skills for learners and would encourage them to read long academic texts like novels, plays and so on. Repeatedly, different teachers stated that motivation is the most important key to enhance students' reading skills. They assert that teachers should motivate their students to read by: choosing a motivating text like funny short stories, suggesting to read for pleasure like reading about their favorite subjects, and motivating them to do a lot of daily reading for at least 10 minutes per day.

On one hand, seventeen (17) out of 52 teachers did highlight the importance of expanding students' vocabulary knowledge through practice, exercises, and workshops, by developing their inference skills and by considering the linguistic peculiarities of each text. On the other hand, thirteen (13) of them believe that students can enrich their vocabulary through reading and not vice versa through highlighting the text (keywords), discovering new vocabulary, and using dictionaries to understand the ambiguous ones. Finally, the majority (41) of the participants stated that all teachers should introduce, integrate and teach them reading strategies by giving them reading assignments and by training their students on those strategies, such as: activating schemata, reading in portions, applying problem-solving skill, asking questions about the given text, using context clues, looking for the main idea, summarizing what they read, and discussing the ideas together as one teacher said: "I believe discussing ideas after reading does really help and also reading should be approached with critical minds".

RQ2 “In your opinion, what are the most helpful ways to improve students’ critical reading skills?” was the second question in the last section in which many similar answers have occurred.

Some (19) teachers believe that one of the best ways to improve students’ critical reading is: first, to read about how to read. Second, teachers should try to make them enjoy and like reading by motivating them. Third, after students are well equipped with technical knowledge of how reading which is basically undertaken as a process, teachers should teach them how to be critical readers. Additionally, twenty-eight (28) teachers suggest that learning critical reading theories and strategies and being invested to dive more into the topics provided in the reading material, would help their students to read critically, because any reader should have rich background knowledge or at least minimum information about the reading material. Speaking of critical reading strategies, many (33) teachers state that applying them is one of the most important ways to help students to be good critical readers. Some suggested strategies were like the following:

- Activating students’ schema before reading.
- Asking comprehension questions for reflection not for recalling information by asking the 5 W’s questions (what, when, how, where, why)
- Outlining, annotating, summarizing, paraphrasing, comparing and contrasting, exploring figurative language, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating the arguments, and applying Project-based learning strategies based partly on text as a source of evidence to support arguments
- Reading intently and attentively, taking notes and highlighting keywords, as well as analyzing sentences' meaning one by one.
- Helping students to develop their critical thinking and making them aware of their ability to criticize, and that they are not obliged to share similar opinions with authors by teaching them how to use their lower (knowledge, comprehension, and application) and higher (synthesis, analysis, evaluation, and creativity) order thinking skills.

After teaching students how to apply the aforementioned strategies through different activities and a lot of practice, teachers also believe that there is another key element that would help students to improve their critical reading which is the Socratic method by creating reading groups discussion

around the text after reading. In a class discussion, teachers should show their help and guidance by: showing them how to apply the given strategies, providing tasks, asking them to perform, and letting learners express themselves with no barriers or fences. In addition to that, seven (7) participants assert that the role of teachers is to encourage students to read between lines, think out of the box, not to take things for granted, and not to read and accept things blindly. Lastly, sixteen (16) informants state that the more they read, the more they acquire critical reading skills, and the more they understand the piece of reading, the more they have the ability to go deeper into details. It's all about broadening one's own knowledge and mastering reading techniques.

RQ3: According to your experience, what are the most important challenges that prevent students from reading critically?

The majority (47) of the informants stated that one of the main important challenges that would prevent students from reading critically is that students do not read because either they are demotivated or they unwillingly read in the first place. Teachers also stated that over-crowdedness can be considered as an obstacle for students to have a lot of practice with the teacher and even with their classmates. Consequently, lack of motivation and interest, lack of practice, and lack of using reading strategies are considered as barriers to develop students' critical reading.

On one hand, twenty-one (21) teachers believe that learners do not trust themselves. For them, the author is always right and the teacher is always the source of knowledge. They are not encouraged to develop their critical thinking, so they stagnate. Until now, the majority of teachers have not accepted students' answers if they differed from their views, and this is seen as a barrier to the development of their critical thinking skills, not just in reading. On the other hand, eleven (11) teachers proclaim that the reading lesson is so limited so that teachers need more freedom and more timing. In addition to that, they find the overloaded syllabus that stresses grammar and writing over the rest of the skills, especially reading, as another drawback to be checked.

However, lack of reading purposes, laziness, lack of vocabulary, lack of language proficiency and language mastery, absence of culture-related knowledge, inability to reflect on the text, lack of schema about the text and problems in comprehension skills, ignorance of critical reading strategies, and

lack of knowledge on how to use the critical thinking skills are the most occurred responses as different important critical reading challenges. Thus, reading critically requires understanding concepts, knowing about the different uses of language, and recognizing the textual and contextual layers of language. Perhaps the most visible challenge that students may face is the lack of a clear understanding of the intended meanings of texts, which can pose a hindrance to critical reading.

V. Discussion and Recommendations

This research paper aimed at exploring Algerian EFL teachers' perception of the various challenges and problems students may face while reading critically. The researchers were interested in exploring teachers' awareness of the importance of using critical reading strategies to foster students' reading skills and to help them be good critical readers. The analysis of the questionnaire shows that teachers show a positive attitude towards the importance of using both reading strategies and critical reading strategies while reading, so that students' critical literacy would be improved. Moreover, based on the results obtained, it is also deduced that teachers completely agree that students who do not apply the aforementioned strategies would face difficulties and problems concerning their reading comprehension. However, the results revealed that teachers totally agree that activating schemata and doing cognitive process like questioning, previewing, predicting, summarizing and paraphrasing, and synthesizing and analyzing are quite important to improve students' critical reading skills. Therefore, the results of this study are similar to different studies among them the study conducted by Syatriana, Husain, & Jabu (2013) which was about the effect of using background information and applying different cognitive processes on students' critical thinking in reading.

Another significant problem was deduced from teachers' open-ended questions responses was that students do not read as a result of many reasons. Lack of motivation, lack of interest, and lack of purpose would prevent students from reading easily. In addition to that, in many Algerian universities, reading skill is neglected, if it is compared to other skills. In EFL curriculum, we clearly find great importance given to writing, listening, and speaking skills which are taught in two of the most important courses "written expression" and "oral expression" respectively, but no specific course is devoted to teach EFL learners how to read properly and critically.

Speaking of reading properly and critically, the obtained results revealed that teachers chose many best ways that could help students to overcome reading challenges like reading extensively and intensively, and using different reading strategies and skills such as: annotating, outlining, inferring, reasoning, questioning, summarizing, paraphrasing, analyzing, evaluating, etc. Therefore, teachers' choice of critical reading strategies and skills is similar to the ones presented by Nuttall (2005), Nasrollahi, Krishnasamy, & Noor (2015), and Maslakhatin (2018). However, another challenge can occur even if students are willing to read, which is the lack of vocabulary or lack of language mastery and proficiency. The results of this study reveal that sometimes students are afraid of new and difficult words they encounter while reading, which makes them hesitate to keep reading. Thus, understanding the vocabulary and knowing the relations among words and concepts would help students to foster their reading skills, but the opposite would create anxiety for students which would negatively affect their reading performance. Similarly, this paper's results are supported by similar results of different studies conducted by Chou (2011), Rajab (2012), Narjes (2013), and Sen & Kuleli (2015)

To conclude, the researchers would like to suggest some solutions:

- 1- EFL curriculum should contain a reading module for at least one hour and a half per week for first and second-year students
- 2- EFL teachers should look for ways to motivate students to read more.
- 3- Teachers should teach and explain reading strategies as well as critical reading strategies and skills.
- 4- Teachers should highlight the importance of reading vis-à-vis linguistic proficiency.

VI. Conclusion

To conclude, this research paper shed light on the importance of both reading and critical reading strategies and highlights the different challenges students may face while reading critically. Moreover, the researchers aimed at exploring Algerian EFL teachers' perceptions of the different reading strategies, skills, and problems that occurred while reading. It was very clear, based upon the results elicited by the questionnaire, that participants are aware of what would prevent students from being good critical readers. This

study has been conducted through a descriptive approach supported by both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The results obtained show that teachers strongly admitted that students face a lot of difficulties when they read. The majority of informants attribute these difficulties to the unwillingness to read in the first place, lack of motivation and interest, lack of language mastery and vocabulary, and lack of knowledge of how to apply different reading strategies to read properly and critically. Finally, it is highly recommended that teachers should find some solutions concerning adding a module wherein reading skill is taught, by contacting the adequate responsible. Without forgetting, teachers should teach students how to read critically.

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