

# The Role of Critical Reading in Understanding a Written Discourse: A Linguistic Review

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## Abstract:

*This study intends to investigate to what extent 4th Year English students at the graduation level of different Sudanese universities do not know how to read a written discourse critically. The investigation has adopted the quantitative method as well as the questionnaire as a tool for collecting data relevant to the study. It has brought the importance of critical reading skills in terms of understanding a written discourse to the light. The population for the study is one hundred English language teachers working at different Sudanese universities who were randomly selected for the questionnaire to use. The scores obtained from the questionnaire conducted by the university teachers have been compared and the results show that the students encountered difficulties in using reading skills. The result from the questionnaire has also indicated that there is a significantly high difference among the students. So, the outcome of this study points out that fourth year university students do not know how to read a written discourse critically.*

**Key words:** Critical Reading, English as a Foreign/Second Language, Basic Reading Skills

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The term 'critical reading' refers to 'close reading', 'active reading' or 'serious reading' of a written text. Critical reading is a most important point for the students because it is chosen as an instrument to widen their knowledge in comprehending a written discourse. Critical reading has been the center of attention and interest of several critical researchers and scholars who made attempts to incorporate, or encourage the inclusion of, critical reading indicators in reading programmes. It is very essential for students who study English as a foreign language since most text books, the sources of science, knowledge and information in higher education and modern technology are published in English.

Most of the university students who study English for four years, are found by the teachers while teaching English, have problems in reading English texts. Therefore, the study is designed to yield data that would contribute to our understanding of the nature of problems that our students encounter in comprehending English texts and the way they process such texts. Through investigating the reading process, we can learn a great deal about how students approach reading and what kind of strategies they use.

Critical reading is an extremely essential skill that equips individuals with the ability to interact with written texts. The ability to read allows one to attach meaning to written words thereby facilitating fluency and comprehension. There are numerous skills, which are extremely essential when it comes to grasping the ability to read. Reading plays a significant role since it brings tremendous satisfaction to individuals through enabling them to be informed and enriched. Competence in reading makes it possible for readers to understand and learn how to attach meaning to various texts.

## **DISCUSSION:**

It is essential for students and teachers to have an easy access to pertinent reading materials. In most cases, comprehending a foreign language is a difficult task that can only be made possible through matching the interests of students with appropriate learning materials.

Contemporary reading tasks involve various phases, which include pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages. Pre-reading phase entails motivating students before engaging them in an actual reading exercise. This plays a pertinent role in aiding the activity of the appropriate schema, thereby facilitating the comprehension of a text. The while-reading stage is aimed at enhancing the ability of students to develop their linguistic and schematic knowledge too. Post-reading phase on the other hand emphasizes the enhancement of learning comprehension through reference to matching exercises, cut-up sentences and comprehension questions. Studies on the efficient teaching of reading skills have, in recent times, dwelt on the use of computers (MacGregor, 1988; Knaack, 2003; Johnson, Perry & Shamir, 2010) or considered the role of information technology, such as the Internet (Laborda, 2007).

Teachers make use of different reading strategies in order to enhance comprehension by students. It is essential to note that the teachers are exceptional when it comes to teaching about reading strategies. The teachers demonstrated the fact that they did not teach students how to establish the purpose of regular reading exercises. It is also essential to note that the students were not competent when it comes to generating questions concerning various texts in a consistent manner. The strategy of assessing the comprehension process was taught to students some of the time only as opposed to

regularly. However, comprehension strategies are essential when it comes to enhancing reading processes.

Critical reading competence enables one to undergo the process of understanding and constructing meaning from a piece of text (Zhao, 2009). Therefore, the improvement of reading competence among English as foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners is a primary and overriding goal in the English-language pedagogy.

### **AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY:**

This study aims to investigate to what extent fourth year students of English at different Sudanese universities do not know how to read a written discourse critically. The scope of the study is limited to the English language teachers of Sudan. There are 100 (one hundred) English language teachers at different universities who were randomly selected.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

A disability in the area of reading comprehension affects a student's ability to understand and make meaning of a text. The Reading Study Group (RAND) defines comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" Cox, C. (2002). Reading comprehension is a complicated set of processes that has been studied relatively little compared to the other areas of reading. In spite of the lack of research on reading comprehension only disabilities, there is consensus that all students with any type of reading disability benefit from direct, systematic, explicit instruction in reading comprehension skills and strategies.

It is most common for students to have Basic Reading Skill (BRS) deficits combined with comprehension deficits, and/or fluency deficits. If this is the case, it is critical to instruct on the basic skill deficits, as well as the comprehension deficits. Although it tends to be more unusual for a student to have a comprehension only deficit, this can occur. A reading comprehension deficit assumes that basic reading skills are intact and that the student can read fluently without errors. Students with a reading comprehension disability are typically not identified until the shift occurs from learning to read to reading to learn. In most cases, this is around the third or fourth grade.

### **The Role of Reading in Writing:**

Writing effectively in English, it has been argued that reading has an important role to play. In other words, possession of the basic skills of reading can enhance the skills to compose and write (Ross & Roe, 1990). Sovik (2003) believes that reading and writing, support, complement and contribute to each other's development. Other authors such as Cox, C. (2002) and Tierney & Leys (1984) rationalize that both reading and writing should be taught together. In fact, Heller (1995) and Ross & Roe (1990) contend that the processes involved in learning both skills are the same.

Reading or modeling (McCann & Smagorinsky, 1988; Irwin & Doyle, 1992) in writing has been looked at from different perspectives. Meriwether (1997) and Nunan (1999) look at it from a product oriented perspective when linked to extend writing.

### **Characteristics:**

Reading comprehension encompasses a multi-faceted set of skills. First and foremost, children with this deficit may have more basic struggles in the area of oral language including new

vocabulary development. In overcoming Dyslexia, Sally Shaywitz determined that a child learns about seven new words per day, which amounts to three thousand words per year (Shaywitz, 2003). If students struggle with acquiring oral language, this will certainly impair their ability to comprehend written language. Typically, students who struggle in this area use smaller words and need significantly more exposure to new words. These students may also be challenged by how to form sentences. Their ability to understand what makes a complete sentence and what order to put words in may be impaired. For students with breakdowns in language comprehension, phonological processing is often intact. Here are some suggested steps necessary for a reader to be critical:

1. Preparing to be a part of the writer's audience
2. Preparing to read with an open mind
3. Considering the title of the text
4. Reading in a slow pace
5. Using the dictionary and other appropriate reference works
6. Making notes for necessary things
7. Keeping a reading journal
8. Using logical and rhetorical skills etc.

### **Intervention and Progress Monitoring:**

Despite the fact that assessment tools are limited for identifying specific reading comprehension deficits, there is good news about reading comprehension interventions. Both specific skills instruction and strategy instruction have been shown to result in very positive outcomes.

As the name implies, specific skills instruction includes direct instruction on improving the skills required to be a successful reader and can include vocabulary instruction, instruction on how to find the main idea, fact finding and making inferences. Teachers should model and coach students in these skills. Instruction must be explicit.

Strategy instruction is “viewed as [instruction on] cognitive processes requiring decision making and critical thinking” (Clark & Uhry, 1995). This includes instruction on activating prior knowledge, comprehension monitoring and understanding how to read for different purposes.

**The National Reading Panel outlined the following seven categories of text comprehension instruction that have a solid, established scientific basis:**

1. Comprehension monitoring, where readers learn how to be aware of their understanding of the material
2. Cooperative learning, where students learn reading strategies together
3. Use of graphic and semantic organizers (including story, map etc), where readers make graphic representations of the material to assist comprehension
4. Question answering, where readers answer questions posed by the teacher and receive immediate feedback
5. Question generation, where readers ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story
6. Story structure, where students are taught to use the structure of the story as a means of helping them recall story content in order to answer questions about what they have read
7. Summarization, where readers are taught to integrate ideas and generalize them from the text information (National Reading Panel, 2000) while many of these strategies are effective in isolation, they are far more powerful and produce greater effect sizes when used in combination in a multiple-strategy method. As with the area of assessment, there is significantly fewer progress monitoring tools available to measure the specific areas of comprehension. AIMS web and Ed Checkup do have made progress monitoring tools that measure overall comprehension.

## **METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS OF THE STUDY:**

In our research, the descriptive, analytical and quantitative methods as well as a questionnaire have been used as a tool in the collection of relevant data and information in pursuing this paper. Population of this study is drawn exclusively from English language teachers at different Sudanese universities. A sample of (100) teachers was randomly selected for the questionnaire.

The questionnaire has been designed and used to answer the question “to what extent fourth year university students of Sudan do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse critically”. The students who study English as a second language provide answers to the problems encountered but the teachers who are using the questionnaire do not know why these took place.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

The questionnaire has been used by the researchers as a tool in the collection of data relevant to this study. The questionnaire has also been designed and used to answer the question “to what extend fourth year Sudanese university students do not know how to read a written discourse critically”. Among the students who study English as a second language provided answers to the problems encountered but the teachers who used the questionnaire do not know why these took place. The tables below are going to illustrate what has been stated earlier.

### **Teachers’ Questionnaire:**

This item (i.e. Questionnaire) tries to elicit information from the teachers who were randomly selected concerning their views about fourth year Sudanese university students who do not know how to read a written discourse critically.



**Statement: 1**

Students are not able to understand the direct meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

**Table (1): Students are not able to understand the direct meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.**

Alternative choices		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	80	80.0	80.0	80.0
	Neutral(No opinion)	9	9.0	9.0	89.0
	Disagree	11	11.0	11.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (1) above shows that a majority of the respondents/participants (80%) ‘strongly agree and agree’ that students are not able to understand the direct meaning of the words when they read a written discourse. Only 11% do not agree to that. This justifies that students need to be trained and developed in terms of direct meaning understanding of a written discourse.

**Statement: 2**

Students are not able to understand the indirect meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

**Table (2): Students are not able to understand the indirect meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.**

Alternative Choices		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	65	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Neutral(No opinion)	19	19.0	19.0	84.0
	Disagree	16	16.0	16.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (2) above explains that a vast majority of the respondents (65%) ‘strongly agree and agree’ that students are not able to understand the indirect meaning of the words when they read a written discourse. Only 16% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed to understand the indirect meaning of the words of a written discourse.

**Statement: 3**

Students are not able to infer meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

**Table (3): Students are not able to infer meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.**

Alternative Choices		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	70	70.0	70.0	70.0
	Neutral(No opinion)	12	12.0	12.0	82.0
	Disagree	18	18.0	18.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (3) above shows that a vast majority of the respondents (70%) ‘strongly agree and agree’ that students are not able to infer meaning of the words when they read a written discourse. Only 18% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in inferring meaning of the words to understand a written discourse.

**Statement: 4**

Students are not able to read critically the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

**Table (4): Students are not able to read critically the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.**

Alternative Choices		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	66	66.0	66.0	66.0
	Neutral(No opinion)	20	20.0	20.0	86.0
	Disagree	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (4) above shows that a vast majority of the respondents (66%) ‘strongly agree and agree’ that students are not able to read critically the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse. Only 14% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in reading critically to understand a written discourse.

### **Statement: 5**

Students do not have lot lexis to understand the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

Table (5): Students do not have lot lexis to understand the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse.

Alternative Choices		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	70	70.0	70.0	70.0
	Neutral(No pinion)	15	15.0	15.0	85.0
	Disagree	15	15.0	15.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>		100	100.0	100.0	

The table (5) above shows that a vast majority of the respondents (70%) ‘strongly agree and agree’ that fourth year students do not have lot lexis to understand the meaning of the words when they read a written discourse. Only 15% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in how they can understand the meaning of the words.

### **REPORT DISCUSSION:**

After the comparison and calculation of the sub-hypotheses; we have found that the total number of the five sub-hypotheses percentage (80%+65%+70%+66%+70%) is equal to 72%(in average)which represents negative response that justifies that teachers do not know why fourth year university students do not know how to read a written discourse critically.

### **CONCLUSION:**

A critical reading usually helps understand the ‘deep structure’ of a written text. The act of reading to extract information and reading critically are enormously different because when we read a difficult text, we need to talk critically. So, if we cannot read critically, we cannot reach the ultimate goal of reading. What is expected here to achieve from critical reading is the conscious control of our reading skills.

We have used, in our research, the questionnaire as a tool in the collection of data relevant to this study. The questionnaire is designed to identify the problems encountered by the teachers who do not know why fourth year students of different Sudanese universities do not know how to read a written discourse critically.

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed in relation to the study of five sub-hypotheses. The questionnaire had been given to teachers exclusively drawn from English language teachers of Sudan who did not know why these took place. The population is English language teachers at different Sudanese universities. A sample of (100) teachers was randomly selected for the questionnaire.

Finally, the marks obtained from the questionnaire for all participants were analyzed and compared statistically by using frequencies and percentages. The analysis showed that the highest percentage which is represented strongly agree and agree is estimated by (72%) in contrast to the percentage of strongly disagree and disagree which is estimated by lesser than this one. Accordingly, this justifies that there is statistical difference in terms of teachers' point of views that fourth year Sudanese university students do not know how to read a written discourse critically.

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