Critical Literacy Practices of English Major in a Tertiary Institution

Sarjit Kaur
sarjit@usm.my
English Language Studies Section
School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Being able to read texts critically is a much sought after skill in today's globalised work environments. However, it is increasingly being reported that many tertiary students in Malaysia find this skill difficult to acquire. Students need to learn how to analyse a wide range of reading texts as it is seen as a response to the social construction of one's peers, culture, family, classrooms, neighbours, communities and world (Lesley, 2004). Responding to local concerns about the lack of attention accorded to the development of tertiary students' critical literacy practices, this paper examines the challenges faced by 25 students majoring in English in an undergraduate programme in trying to comprehend an opinion-based text. The findings show that many students still experience the following reading difficulties: understanding the author's message, distinguishing fact from opinion, understanding main ideas, guessing meaning from context and making inferences. The paper suggests that teachers can actively incorporate critical literacy theories into their classroom practice as it can generate more meaningful learning experiences among their learners as it encourages students to use their voices and life experiences as valid sources of knowledge (Hass-Dyson, 2001). Teaching instruction on developing readers to be more critical should be included in the pedagogical practices of undergraduate programme given that such instruction can hone students' critical literacy practices in the higher education sector.

Keywords: critical literacy practices; tertiary students; comprehension difficulties; opinion-based text; literacy

INTRODUCTION

Today's tertiary students interact with a wider range of information sources than students in the past two decades. With the twin waves of globalisation and internationalisation currently impacting higher education settings, there is a need to re-visit the manner in which students read academic texts for comprehension. In reading such texts and in establishing whether they can decipher the author's message and intent accurately, educators suggest there is a need for students to comprehend with a critical edge (Allington, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004; Pescatore, 2007). This indicates there are starting points for helping students become critically aware, including a rationale for reading from a critical stance and ideas to foster students' engagement in critical literacy.

Critical literacy has been defined in the field of education as reading and writing pedagogy that examines an omnipresent, unstated social agenda of power. Teaching students to give voice to experiences within oppressive social systems is a unifying goal

of critical literacy definitions (Freire, 1995; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Rosenblatt, 2004). Within such definitions, literacy is not seen as a series of decontextualised subskills but rather, literacy is defined as a highly contextualised "emerging act of consciousness and resistance" (Giroux, 1993, p. 367). For teachers enacting critical literacy in their classrooms, the pedagogy is a complicated weaving together of student awareness of power issues, student resistance to issues of power and often student (and teacher) frustration. Critical literacy is difficult to put into practice because it embraces multiple and conflicting perspectives of learners (Luke, 2000; Koo, 2008; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012).

When teachers decide to incorporate critical literacy theories into their classroom practice, the most compelling text in the course becomes that of the students' lives and the ways they are socially, culturally and politically mediated (Haas-Dyson, 2001). Not only are students' voices and life experiences included as valid sources of knowledge, but also notions of power, oppression and transformation found in the students' life experiences are presented as pieces of the framework of thinking that form the course curriculum. In other words, critical literacy is context specific. As Haas-Dyson (2001, p. 5) notes, "critical literacy is always a local as well as a societal matter because it is something we do in response to others' words and actions, including their voiced views on the social world". Critical literacy is a response to social construction of one's peers, culture, family, classrooms, neighbours, communities and world (Lesley, 2004).

One crucial element in getting students to read with greater focus is to create interest in the reading material. The overall strategy for creating interest in reading is to tap into readers' prior knowledge. It is not uncommon to find that most ESL readers never questioned who was writing the text when they were in school as they tended to believe everything they read. Reading has always been viewed as a challenging skill by many ESL learners. Even in the Malaysian context, there are scant research studies focusing specifically on analysing students' critical thinking in reading various types of texts, including the scope of discussion on language and literary studies in the local context (Pramela Krish, Hafizah Latif & Zalina Mohd Lazim, 2012). It has also been reported that research studies involving tertiary learners are relatively small in number (Lee, Lee, Wong & Azizah Ya'acob, 2010; Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012). These researchers lament that more research is needed to better situate the identity issues of English language learners and their learning experiences in the tertiary sector.

In other studies conducted in Malaysia, several researchers have reported that tertiary learners have limited critical ability because of the didactic nature of the learning process (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007 as cited in Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Kaur, Ganapathy & Sidhu, 2012). Nambiar (2007) also reports that Malaysian tertiary learners lack conventions of academic writing, are weak at understanding long sentences or sentences with difficult words and she contends that such limitations impose unnecessary barriers on students' comprehension abilities at institutions of higher learning. In a study conducted by Zaira Abu Hassan (2008), it was reported that many Malaysian tertiary learners struggle to locate information from a reading text and often do not engage critically or constructively to obtain meaning from text. Several researchers also corroborate this fact and report that predominantly Malaysian ESL learners are not

able to operate autonomously when they engage with a range of academic reading tasks (Koo, 2008; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012; Kaur, Ganapathy & Sidhu, 2012).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out in order to:
1. analyse the profile of tertiary students' reading habits
2. examine the specific comprehension difficulties faced by tertiary students when they read an opinion-based text
3. investigate the type of critical literacy practices used by tertiary students

As the sample respondents are students majoring in English at a public university in Malaysia, the research findings of this small scale study will help to further strengthen the quality of language and literacy instruction provided in the B.A. degree programme. The findings aim to provide insightful information to course lecturers on students' levels of critical literacy practices so that future assignments and course assessments can be better tailored to enhance students' critical thinking repertoires. The findings of the study may also have wider implications to the reading abilities of other tertiary students enrolled in other discipline areas.

In today's globalised work contexts, critical reading abilities are much sought after by the industry and employers. The findings will also help students become more critical readers as they realise the need for them to consider the author's purpose in writing, seek to identify the main claims made by authors in putting forward their argument, adopt a sceptical stance towards the author's claims, checking whether they support convincingly what they assert and question whether the author has sufficient backing for the generalisations that they are making besides considering how any values guiding the author's work may affect what they claim.

UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL LITERACY

According to Lesley (2005, p. 323), critical literacy, when referred to from the perspectives of education, can be defined as "reading and writing pedagogy that examines an omnipresent, unstated social agenda of power". This would mean that it can be a credible pedagogy only if it can allow learners to understand and unravel the biases and prejudices that exist in a given language. Some of the aims of critical literacy are to recognise the non-neutral facet of language, examine power relations in texts, identify multiple voices in texts and address their own belief system in responding to a text (Luke, 2000; Gee, 2004; Lesley, 2004; Behrman, 2006). These authors explain that the practice of critical literacy requires higher comprehension levels of reading because it embraces multiple and conflicting perspectives of learners. Hence, due to the complexity of this process, teachers need to be patient in guiding learners towards achieving critical literacy and becoming autonomous learners but cannot expect it to be an automatic process of learning.

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004, p. 52) stress the importance of acquiring critical literacy so that "students can expand their reasoning, deepen their understanding, seek out multiple perspectives and become active thinkers who comprehend from a

critical stance". In addition to that, they also highlight the need for being critical as "it is not viewed as a classroom activity but rather as a stance used in all contexts of our lives" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 53). In her continuum of reading skills, Rosenblatt (2004) states that readers are always making choices about their thinking and reading from a critical stance as it allows readers to use their background knowledge to understand the relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text. This process, according to Rosenblatt (2004) allows readers not only to play the role of code breakers, meaning makers and text users but also the role of text critics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICAL LITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOMS

Anstey and Bull (2006, p. 37) stress the dangers faced by students if they are not taught how to read critically as "they can be marginalised, discriminated against, or unable to take an active and informed place in life. In short, the student will not be in control of his or her social future". Thus, by teaching students to read critically, the teacher is able to help individuals adapt knowledge to live life as active and informed citizens. Considering the emergence of New Literacies in today's digital age of information explosion and the changing literacy needs of learners, critical literacy then becomes pivotal in pedagogy design. As learners are confronted by overwhelming information posed by the waves of technology, critical literacy is able to allow learners to digest information with accountability and become critical consumers of the information that they receive.

Work on critical literacy originated from the constructivism theory (has roots in philosophy and psychology) which explains how knowledge is constructed in the human being when information comes into contact with existing knowledge that had been developed by experiences. In this regard, scholars who advocate teaching students critical literacy believe that the theory of constructivism in the field of education lays emphasis on the ways knowledge is created in order to adapt to the world and that the theory encourages educators to use some of the following number of applications in order to make learning meaningful: discovery learning, hand-on learning, experiential learning, project-based learning, collaborating with peers and task-based learning.

High school, college, university and workplace reading literacy requires the higher order of reading skills especially in finding value in texts. In line with the constructivism theory, Goodwyn and Stables (2004, p. 3) believe that when a reader approaches a particular text, he/she needs to be aware of the various positive and negative values inscribed in the text, which are subscribed by the author. Rather than merely accepting the values imposed by the author, the reader needs to be critical in his/her judgement of the text. They highlight that "the more you learn to be critical, the more you take responsibility for your academic learning activity and efforts to inform your own and others' practice" (Goodwyn & Stables, 2004, p. 3). In order to be a critical reader, they highlight the need for a reader to:
- consider the author's purpose in writing the account
- seek to identify the main claims the authors make in putting forward their argument
- adopt a skeptical stance towards the author's claims, checking whether they support convincingly what they assert
- question whether the author has sufficient backing for the generalisations that they are making

- consider whether and how any values guiding the author's work may affect what they claim.

<div align="right">Goodwyn and Stables (2004, p. 7)</div>

In having the information needed in order to be a critical reader, the teacher will then need to enable students to develop a strategy in thinking about the above mentioned steps in achieving critical literacy so that they are able to negotiate meanings when dealing with challenging texts. The teacher would need to get students thinking about their own reading processes. Gallagher (2004, p. 216) reminds teachers that "there is a big difference between assigning students difficult reading and teaching them how to read deeply". Hence, teachers cannot merely hand out reading texts to students and expect comprehension to take place based on what they have learned about reading at their primary level. Teachers in any ESL context will have to guide their students by structuring questions regarding texts orally rather than in written form in order to maintain their interest and motivation. The questions posed by Goodwyn and Stables (2004) can be rephrased in a less sophisticated manner so that it does not intimidate learners. At the same time, the teacher would also have to bear in mind the background knowledge of learners. The teacher will have to work hand in hand with students and go through the entire process of reading critically so that they can successfully negotiate academic tasks in high school, college, university and beyond and function as responsible citizens of a functionally literate society. As such, the role of the teacher is not merely of an information dispenser but one who works in a collaborative manner with students.

Anstey and Bull (2006, p. 37) point out that a teacher who is guiding students towards achieving critical literacy can "limit the texts" that readers are using in the classroom and "review their content thoroughly" in the beginning stages of teaching critical reading skills and by using texts that are "agreed on-set of criteria regarding the topics, values and attitudes of the content". Once students have achieved some form of basic critical skills, then they can move on to a broad range of texts that are available and help students to develop the skills to analyse the texts. By doing so, they believe that learners will be able to identify a text's origins and authority and become more discriminatory and have skills to deal with texts they encounter in many different contexts. Therefore, when a teacher is able to develop critical reading skills in his/her students, readers are able to participate in meaningful engagement with reading and enjoy it as a lifelong learning endeavour.

METHOD

This study used a mixed method research design to collect data from first year students majoring in English (B.A. in English Language and Literature Studies) in a public university. For reasons of anonymity, the university will be referred to as "University A". The researcher collected data in Semester I (academic session 2011/2012) based on a text used during two tutorial discussions with 25 students majoring in English and conducted two focus group interviews with 12 students (6 students in each focus group) over a duration of one month. The text that was used in class was an opinion-based article titled "Fruits of the Poetry of Discovery" (Appendix A) by Michael West (*The Australian*, 7 July 2010).

Students also completed a short survey on their reading habits prior to the first tutorial class. The survey was administered by the researcher personally to the students and students only took between 5-10 minutes to complete the brief survey. The researcher devised the survey questions by selecting appropriate items from two research studies that sought to find out students' characteristics in reading (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Zaira Abu Hassan, 2008). The brief survey was carried out to find out some general characteristics of the students' reading habits prior to finding out their critical literacy practices. While it is possible that various factors could have affected the students' reading abilities and interests, this study focused on only reporting the student's general reading habits as the main focus is on analysing the students' critical literacy practices while reading an opinion-based text.

In terms of ethnicity of the sample group, there were 14 Malay, six Indian and five Chinese students and most of them came from middle and upper middle income families from urban and semi urban areas in Malaysia (mainly from the states of Kedah, Penang, Selangor, Perak and Sarawak). Most of the students have good language proficiency as most of them have a MUET (Malaysian University English Test) score of Band 4 as this is the prerequisite qualification for entry into the B.A. degree programme for students majoring in English.

The researcher was also the students' lecturer and while this may to some extent have affected students' responses on the various research instruments, the researcher informed students that their honest responses would help provide useful data on their critical literacy practices and that their responses would not affect their coursework grade. Out of the total number of 25 students, 12 students volunteered to take part in the focus group interviews (comprising five Malay students, four Indian students and three Chinese students – of these, nine were females and three were males). The focus group interviews attempted to find out qualitatively how students went about using their critical literacy repertoires when analysing the opinion-based text used during the two tutorial sessions (50 minutes per class). The interview sessions aimed to find out from students the specific comprehension difficulties (if any) they experienced in trying to understand the author's message and other aspects related to their understanding of the text.

Ethical considerations were adhered to in this study (e.g. student names were not mentioned and all data collected were used for research purposes only). Two tutorial activities were conducted with the students. In this regard, information and consent forms were distributed to the students before the study commenced. In Phase One of the study, the researcher analysed the students' critical literacy practices during the two classes. Each student was allocated a number (S1 – S25). The opinion-based text titled "Fruits of the Poetry of Discovery" (Appendix A) was distributed in the first tutorial class (an essay on Arts vs. Science) and the students were given 15-20 minutes to read the text silently. Following the silent reading, the researcher handed out a worksheet, based on the framework of questions to promote reading from a critical stance advocated by Goodwyn & Stables (2004) so students could consider the following questions while reading the text for a second time:

   a. Do you agree with the author's viewpoint?
   b. What does the author want us to think?
   c. Whose voices are missing, silenced or discounted in the text?
   d. How might alternative perspectives be represented?

e. How would that contribute to your understanding of the text from a critical stance?
f. Would your viewpoint change on the basis of what you have learned?

After the first class, the students were told to think about the viewpoint presented in the opinion-based text. In the next class, the researcher asked students to discuss their comprehension based on the text and students were encouraged to focus on the following reading skills: identification of main and supporting ideas in the opinion-based text, vocabulary used, guessing meaning from context, distinguishing fact from opinion, making inferences, organisation of text, choice of words used to relay ideas/opinions etc.

In Phase Two of the study, focus group interviews were carried out with students who volunteered to take part in the interviews. Due to time constraints and related logistical issues, the focus group interviews were conducted with 12 students who volunteered (6 students in each group). Student consent forms were distributed to these students one week before the focus interviews were conducted to ensure that ethical considerations were met. In each of the focus group sessions, students were asked to openly discuss their critical reading repertoires based on the opinion-based text which was discussed with the researcher during the previous two tutorial classes. The time and venue of these interviews were decided based on mutual agreement between the researcher and the students (held in a tutorial room at University A). The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The sections below present the findings of the study. Firstly, a brief profile of the students' reading habits is presented. Then, several specific reading difficulties encountered by the students are presented and finally, a discussion on the students' critical literacy practices is presented.

PROFILE OF STUDENTS' READING HABITS

As the students are majoring in English in the B.A. degree programme, the researcher was interested to scope some of the students' reading habits by requesting students to complete a brief survey of their reading habits. The information gleaned from this survey would help yield some background information on the students' interests and motivations to read as well as present a snapshot of their home environments with regards to the efforts invested in inculcating and maintaining their reading habits. Table 1 below shows the profile of the students' reading habits at a glance:

TABLE 1. Reading Habits of Students

Characteristics of Reading	Percentage (%)
Member of a public library	25.0
Read widely when young	54.3
Parents were role models for reading	19.4
Read at least one book in the last month	24.2
Read one book in one month	45.8
Read a magazine once a week	67.5

Do not have any favourite author	82.5
Spend RM10 a week on reading materials	32.0
Read newspapers in English on a daily basis	4.0
Read online materials in English daily	76.0
Engage in reflective thinking after reading an article	60.5

As shown in the table above, very few students (25.0%) are members of a public library. Interestingly, slightly more than half the students (54.3%) reported that they read widely when they were young (from the ages of 12 – 18 years). The results also show that only a small percentage of students (19.4%) read because they looked upon their parents as role models. This shows that many of the other students came from households where the parents did not play a major role in encouraging reading as an activity. Only 24.2% of the students claimed that they had read one book in the last month while less than half (45.8%) read only one book in one month. In comparison to reading books, it seems that the English majors are more interested to read magazines as 67.5% of them reported reading a magazine in one week on a regular basis.

While the students do engage in reading activities, it appears that many of them (82.5%) do not have any favourite author, indicating that they read a variety of materials without sourcing out their favourite authors. It is also worth noting that slightly less than a third of the students (32.0%) spend RM10 a week on reading materials in English. On the other hand, it is heartening to note that more that three quarters of the students (76.0%) read materials online. This is hardly surprising in today's world of rapid technology use among tertiary learners. More than half the students (60.5%) reported spending some time reflecting on articles they had read.

READING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STUDENTS

During the two tutorial classes, the researcher asked students to discuss their specific reading difficulties in reading the opinion-based text. This was also asked in the focus group interviews. Table 2 below lists the students' specific reading difficulties in reading the opinion-based text:

TABLE 2. Specific Reading Difficulties of English Majors

Specific Reading Difficulties	**Percentage (%)**
Understanding author's message	65.7
Recognising fact from opinion	63.7
Weak English language proficiency	47.1
Guessing meaning from context	40.2
Understanding main ideas	44.1
Making inferences	54.6

UNDERSTANDING AUTHOR'S MESSAGE

As the sample group is small (n=25), the researcher asked students to raise their hands in class when discussing their specific reading difficulties as a class activity. The results show that more than half the students (65.7%) experienced great difficulty in understanding the author's message. This means that many of them could not understand what the author of the opinion-based text (West, 2007) was saying in relation to solving

the world's problems. During the tutorial sessions, the students explained that the language expressions used in the article posed some difficulty for them. Data from the focus group interviews also revealed this specific reading difficulty (code 'FG 1' stands for 'Focus Group 1' and code 'FG 2' stands for 'Focus Group 2'; students are coded as S1 to refer to 'Student 1'), as shown in the following excerpts:

> *"I think Michael West, being a native speaker, expresses his ideas in a roundabout way.....and this makes it difficult for me to gather what he is trying to say about ideas in general"*
>
> (FG 1: S2)

> *"I agree.....it wasn't easy to get to the exact message he was trying to get across. Actually, to be honest, I could only manage that after reading the text at least two times"*
>
> (FG 2: S5)

> *"This opinion-based text did discuss some rather high-level ideas ...you know ideas on intellectual endeavor, importance of technology, science and abstract thought.....I usually don't read articles of this nature"*
>
> (FG 1: S4)

DISTINGUISHING FACT FROM OPINION

The results show that 63.7 % of the students had difficulty in distinguishing fact from opinion when reading the selected text during the tutorial classes. This shows that students still exhibit some inefficiency in their reading skills. This issue was further elaborated on by students in the focus group interviews and the excerpts below highlight this reading difficulty:

> *"I think Michael West uses a lot of bombastic words you know! I got confused with his argument on the differences between the Arts and Science disciplines. In the end, no matter how many times I read the text, I still could not locate which ideas were facts and which formed his opinions.....I guess I need to work on this aspect of my reading skill"*   (FG 1: S1)

> *"I agree with you on this. Maybe, in some small part, I blame our education system.....we never had much practice in class on how to tease out fact from opinion.....our classes were always exam-oriented"*
>
> (FG2: S6)

> *"I would say in some parts of the text, I could tell when the author was expressing an opinion based on factual evidence especially in Line 4 of the text where he says "implicit in these lines is the idea that science is dry and dusty" – from here, I know this is a fact, not his opinion. However, in dissecting the text, in some other parts, I am not so confident if my knowledge on this is spot-on"*
>
> (FG 1:S3)

> *"Ok, where I am concerned…..aiyo…I am not so sure lah Dr. Most times, even in school, I just guess…..like 'tembak' and at times I am correct la! So, when reading this text, I think I can safely say I am not so good at analyzing if something said is 'fact' or 'opinion'….I think if it's a narrative or story-type article, it's easier for me. But this type of intellectual type article, not so easy …..and I know I had problems"*
>
> (FG 1: S4)

WEAK ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Slightly less than half the students (47.1%) put the blame on their weak English language proficiency when comprehending the opinion-based text. During the tutorial classes, many students were honest about this and told the researcher that they still felt they had room for improvement in this aspect, even though they are majoring in English. The following excerpts from the focus group interviews attest to this fact:

> *"Actually, some of the vocabulary used in the text is too hard for me….for example 'overstretched resource', 'prose of implementation', 'dreaming spire'…..really these words and expressions used did throw me off balance. I think such words are new for me…..also, my language power is not very good at this stage"*
>
> (FG 1:S3)

> *"I must say I have not been reading widely in English. I blame myself totally. Being Malay, I tend to speak mostly in BM to my friends and family. So, always reading in English is a slow process for me….sometimes I feel 'malu' to say I'm an English major to others….because my English is still weak even though I got Band 4 in MUET"*
>
> (FG 2: S5)

> *"For me, I am still working on improving my word power. This article has many bombastic words…….these are not commonly used words for me, words like 'proliferation', 'rickety scaffolds of ink and ideology' and 'testable predictions'….I would say I need to improve my English more before I can read such articles…..I did enjoy the article though and I think it's a suitable text for university students like me"*
>
> (FG1: S6)

> *"Dr, my English is still weak…I know I still make many mistakes when I speak and write…even my parents sometime scold me…they tell me "hey, you are English major, you should read more books!"….I spend too much time on Facebook and Twitter these days and I don't spend enough time on improving my reading in English. There are many words in this text that I cannot even guess the meaning, so this makes my reading slow"*
>
> (FG 2: S2)

GUESSING MEANING FROM CONTEXT

When students read the opinion-based text, several students (40.2%) were not able to guess the meaning of words from the context as the researcher told them the use of a dictionary in class was prohibited. Many students reported having this difficulty and this reading difficulty was also discussed in the focus group interviews, as shown below:

> *"I always used the dictionary to read in English. So when you said to us to guess the meaning from context, I had a lot of difficulty in making the correct guess….I must say many of my predictions were wrong when you finally discussed the article in class with us"*
>
> (FG 2: S2)

> *"I couldn't guess the meaning of the expression "anchored to the bedrock of reality by experiment" …I think 2nd page of the article, in the 3rd paragraph. I guessed wrongly….so this shows my guessing meaning from context reading skill is weak"*
>
> (FG 1: S4)

> *"I must admit I could not guess what 'intellectual apartheid' was; also I couldn't guess what 'dreaming spire' meant. I have always depended on the dictionary when I read texts at home. I really need to read more to improve this reading microskill"*
>
> (FG 2: S1)

> *"My word power is not large…I would say I suffer from insufficient vocabulary. I recognize this as my reading weakness"*
>
> (FG 2: S3)

> *"I know my vocabulary knowledge is limited….it's because I only read in Mandarin when I was in school. I actually read very few English articles. That's why I found this opinion text beyond my comprehension level…it was very difficult for me to guess the meanings of so many words"* (FG2: S5)

UNDERSTANDING MAIN IDEAS

44.1% of the students reported having difficulty in understanding the main ideas of the opinion-based text. This does, to some extent, show that many students are not able to confidently state that they can comprehend main ideas of articles. During the focus group interviews, the students freely spoke about this reading difficulty; however, some students expressed the view that they were confident of this reading skill. Some of the students' views are shown below:

> *"Frankly, I did not experience much difficulty in reading the text. I have been reading all sorts of articles since I was in Form 1 so this article wasn't difficult for me. I could pick out the main ideas the author was making and I understood the aim of the article"*
>
> (FG 1: S4)

"I would say, generally, I do sometimes have this difficulty. If the article is written using simpler English, mostly I can pick out the main ideas quite easily. This text was not written in simple English…so I would say I had some problems with it"

(FG2: S1)

"Generally, I am ok with picking out main ideas from any text. I think, even with this article, I was able to pick out the main ideas easily….when you discussed it with us in class, I realised I was on the right track"

(FG 1: S5)

"For me, it's not always easy going. With some expository texts, I can pick out the main ideas quite easily. You see Dr, this text wasn't so direct….because it was an opinion piece…I think it wasn't so easy for me"

(FG1: S3)

MAKING INFERENCES

More than half the students (54.6%) reported experiencing this specific reading difficulty. The excerpts below are from the focus group interviews:

"I have always had difficulty in this skill – I always ask myself how do I improve on this? I find I cannot answer this question as I maybe don't read enough so I cannot improve this aspect"

(FG1:S5)

"This opinion-based text actually requires us to make many inferences. I found that I am still weak at this skill"

(FG1: S4)

"Making inferences is a vague and abstract skill for me. I just don't know how to infer the author's standpoint as it's usually not clear to me"

(FG2: S1)

"This is a difficult skill area for me. I feel generally I can understand much of what I read…but if someone questions me on the details…..like ask me a question like "in this line, what is the author inferring" , then I would feel lost as I think I might not be sure"

(FG 2: S5)

CRITICAL LITERACY PRACTICES OF STUDENTS

Based on the results of the study, it can surmised that the 25 students majoring in English in this small-scale study do not exhibit very clear indications of being confident of their critical literacy (reading) practices. The findings (data gathered from tutorial discussions and focus group interviews) reveal that the students are not critical readers yet. Many of

the students admitted to not being able to read critically and stated that they found this to be rather daunting. During the class discussion, they revealed to the researcher that they usually '*do not question*' when they read an opinion-based text as they usually take the stand that '*the author knows best*'. Indeed, such practices are not healthy for the students if they wish to hone their critical reading abilities at the tertiary level and future workplaces. The following excerpts from the focus group interviews show how many students feel they lack critical literacy skills when reading texts in English:

> *"This is the first time a lecturer like you has given us a task to see if we use our critical literacy skills. I am only now beginning to realise that I need to use my world and background knowledge in order to decipher an author's message. I always thought of not questioning what I read…you have made this point clear to me now. I feel from now on, I need to pose questions in my mind while I am reading. This way, like you said, it will make me question what is written by any author. I really learned a lot from this exercise"*   (FG1: S1)

> *"You know Dr., all this while I thought I was a good enough reader. Now I realise I never posed any questions when I read materials. I now feel honing my critical literacy skills when reading any text is paramount to my development as an individual who can make some contribution to society. I really never spent time doing reflective thinking. I enjoyed doing this in your 2 tutorial classes….usually we're always rushing to answer exam questions when in school. It's good to have time to think about what we read"*   (FG1: S4)

> *"I never saw the relevance or the importance of questioning what I read before. You have opened my eyes…I was talking about this to my friends after your tutorial class. We now know we should discuss what we read in groups so we can argue, make assertions and judge opinions of others based on our own life experiences. I actually enjoyed discussing this text with the class and now I feel I can further improve my questioning stance. From now on, I shall evaluate what I read in the newspapers and magazines"*   (FG1: S2)

> *"Actually, what I learned from this exercise is my view matters and it's interesting to debate what the writer says in the text. I always believed every view I came across….as long as it's printed on paper, I thought the author's view was correct. How wrong I was! From now on, I think I'll slowly think about what I read to see if I agree or not with the author"*   (FG2: S2)

From the class discussions and the focus group interviews, it is clear that most of the English majors did not comprehend the importance of being critical readers. The findings also show that majority of the students (87.5%) wanted to be given some training in how to employ critical literacy skills in reading English texts. This is also the view of educators in the area of critical literacy as students "cannot just become critical"

(Comber, 2001). Students (and teachers, to some extent) need to be shown how to gradually become critical readers (Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012; Kaur, Ganapathy & Sidhu, 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study presented a brief profile of the reading habits of the students majoring in English. The findings from the survey show that the reading profiles of these students leave much to be desired – it is clear that many students do not read materials in English on a regular basis. In answering the second research question, the findings indicated that while they could cope with other reading tasks, the students experienced specific difficulties in the following reading skills: understanding author's message (65.7%), recognising fact from opinion (63.7%) and making inferences (54.6%). The third research question sought to find out the critical literacy practices of the students and the findings show that most of the students (87.5%) are not critical readers as yet and state that they need training to hone their critical literacy skills.

While the findings of this small-scale study cannot be generalised to the entire population of tertiary students in Malaysia, the reported critical literacy practices of the students suggest that Malaysian tertiary students need to work on improving their critical reading abilities. This concurs with findings of previous studies carried out among secondary and tertiary students in Malaysia (Nambiar, 2007; Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007 as cited in Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012). This study provided valuable insights on students majoring in English in one public university while most of the other local studies focused on Malaysian students in secondary schools and students from other academic disciplines in the tertiary sector. As students majoring in English in a degree programme, the students need to read more extensively if they wish to improve their general English language proficiency. The findings show that only a small percentage of students feel they are efficient readers of all types of texts. Most of the students realise the importance of developing critical reading skills at the tertiary level as this was discussed in good depth with the researcher during the class discussions and the focus group interview sessions.

The findings of this study have wide reaching implications for the workforce readiness of these students. It is evident that more can be done in the B.A. degree programme to instil effective critical reading practices in many of the courses. It is essential for the course lecturers to engage learners in meaningful learning experiences towards further developing students' critical thinking repertoires in various linguistics and literature courses offered in the degree programme. Indeed, some form of structured guidance need to be provided by course lecturers to learners in order to raise their awareness in becoming more engaged when reading opinion-based texts or other expository or content-subject texts.

While such recommendations are made, it is also incumbent on educators and university educators to realise that altogether teachers, students and texts play important roles in creating a context that fosters critical literacy. The role of the teacher can include raising awareness in terms of designing activities ranging from course assignments, semester essays and oral presentations. Teachers too can role model such behaviours in their course lectures so students can head along the path towards becoming more critical

readers. As such, course lecturers need to be critically aware of their students' lacks in reading different types of academic texts and they also need to constantly encourage learners to use their background knowledge when reading texts. McLaughlin & Allen (2002) advocate the use of the following five-step instructional framework in instilling critical literacy practices among learners: Explain, Demonstrate, Guide, Practice and Reflect.

The pedagogical implication of teaching students critical literacy skills at the school level is that teachers can gradually make students aware of the importance of reading texts in a critical manner and that questioning what they read can help shape them as individuals who can process information effectively. Additionally, they would then be prepared to handle academic reading tasks at the tertiary level. Their critical reading behaviours would make them capable of handling a range of reading texts at the tertiary level. There are indeed many benefits for tertiary learners to hone their critical literacy practices. Among others, one clear benefit is that students who are critical readers become more open-minded, active and strategic when they read various types of texts. It is also reported that critical readers understand that information presented in a range of texts (such as magazines, newspapers, song lyrics and websites) has been authored from a particular perspective for a particular purpose (Gee, 2004; Lesley, 2004). According to Serafini (2003), critical readers know that meaning is grounded in the social, political, cultural and historical context in the reading text. Ultimately, critical readers are those who know that they need to view a text from a critical stance as naturally as they view it from the aesthetic (emotional perspective) and efferent (factual perspective) stances (Rosenblatt, 2004).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Allington, R. L. (2000). *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Anstey, A. & Bull, G. (2006). *Teaching and Learning Multiliteracies: Changing Times, Changing Literacies.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Behrman, H.E. (2006). Teaching about language, power and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. Vol. 49* (6), 490-498.

Comber, B. & Simpson. A. (2001). *Negotiating Critical Literacies in the Classroom.* New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Gallagher, K. (2004). *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Gee, J.P. (2004). *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling.* New York: Routledge.

Giroux, H. (1993). Literacy and the politics of difference. In C. Lankshear & P. McLaren (Eds.). *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis and the postmodern* (pp. 367-377). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goodwyn, A. & Stables, A. (2004). *Learning to Read Critically in Language and Literacy*. New York: Sage Publications.

Haas-Dyson, A. (2001). Relational sense and textual sense in a US urban classroom: The contested case of Emily, girl friend of a ninja. In B.Comber & A. Simpson (Eds.). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 3-18). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Kaur, S., Ganapathy, M. & Sidhu, G.K. (2012). Designing learning elements using the multiliteracies approach in an ESL writing classroom. *3L Language, Linguistics, Literature: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies. Vol. 18*(3), 119-134.

Koo, Y.L. (2008). *Language, Culture and Literacy: Meaning-making in Global Contexts*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Koo, Y.L., Wong, F.F. & Kemboja Ismail. (2012). Students' critical consciousness through critical literacy awareness. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, *Vol. 12*, No.1, 727-143.

Lankshear, C. & McLaren, P. (1993). *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lee S.K., Lee, K.S., Wong, F.F. & Azizah Ya'acob. (2010). The English Language and its impact on identities of multilingual Malaysian undergraduates. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies. Vol. 10*(1), 87-101.

Lesley, M. (2004). Looking for critical literacy with postbaccalaureate content area literacy students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. Vol. 48*(4), 320-334.

Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. Vol. 43,* 448-461.

McLaughlin, M. & Allen, M.B. (2002). *From Guided Comprehension: A Teaching odel for Grades 3–8.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

McLaughlin, M. & DeVoogd, G. (2004). Critical literacy as comprehensions: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. Vol. 48*, 52-56.

Nambiar, R. M. K. (2007) Enhancing academic literacy among tertiary learners: A Malaysian experience. *3L The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies. Vol. 13*, 77-94.

Normazidah Che Musa, Koo, Y.L. & Hazita Azman. (2012). Exploring English Language learning and teaching in Malaysia. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies. Vol. 12*(1), 35-51.

Pescatore, C. (2007). High school students' instructional preferences when reading literary works of art. *The Reading Matrix. Vol. 4*(2), 97-118.

Pramela Krish, Hafizah Latif & Zalina Mohd Lazim. (2012). Editorial: Interdisciplinary perspectives on culture, power and values: Language and literary studies in the local-global context. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies (Special Edition). Vol.* 12(2), 339-341.

Rosenblatt, L.M. (2004). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In R.B. Ruddel & N.J. Unrau (Eds.),*Theoretical models and processes of reading 5th ed* (pp. 1363-1398)*.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Serafini, F. (2003). Informing our practice: Modernist, transactional, and critical perspectives on children's literature and reading instruction. *Reading Online. Vol. 6*(6). Retrieved June 6, 2012 from http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=serafini/index.html

West, M. (2007). "Fruits of the Poetry of Discovery". *The Australian*, 7 July 2010.

Zaira Abu Hasan. (2008). Peer interaction and meaning construction among ESL learners in comprehending texts in 2nd language context. Unpublished Ph.D thesis. Faculty of Modern Languages, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang.

APPENDIX A

FRUITS OF THE POETRY OF DISCOVERY
Michael West (*The Australian,* 7 July, 2010)
SCIENTISTS, not artists, will solve the world's big problems.

ARTISTS are oddly insecure about science. John Keats lamented its ability to "unweave the rainbow" and Walt Whitman urged us to ignore the "learn'd astronomer" and instead just look at the stars.

Implicit in these lines is the idea that science is dry and dusty, the province of charts and equations that strip the beauty from nature, to be dissected and locked away in glass cases. Given the steady decline in science enrolments across the world, this view seems to have caught on. But nothing could be further from the truth. Science offers a rare blend of intellectual elegance, civic contribution and economic benefit.

Far more than just dreary repetition, science "needs the free play of the mind in as great a degree as any other creative art", in the words of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Max Born. It is one of humanity's greatest academic achievements and students should take the opportunity to be a part of it.

Importantly, this intellectual endeavour also leads to practical outcomes. Science takes the poetry of discovery and adds the prose of implementation. In fact, our lives depend on the fruits of research. From the fertilisers that nourish our crops to the medicines that save us from polio, smallpox and countless other afflictions, no part of the modern world is untouched by science.

But we are not out of the woods yet, with overstretched resources, a potentially hostile climate and a host of threatening diseases that still plague us. These immense challenges can be met only by the determined application of scientific knowledge. The work of artists may bring temporary happiness to the impoverished, but it cannot fill their stomachs or cure their sick children. We need more bright young people to study science so their enthusiasm can be harnessed to its tools of genuine transformational ability.

Technology is also the engine powering our economy and Australia's dwindling supply of scientists and engineers is a serious risk to our global competitiveness. Studies for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show scientific research and development accounts for about half of all gross domestic product growth and two-thirds of productivity growth. Sometimes this has led to fear, the Luddite view that inevitably science brings a bleak future of unemployment as artisans are replaced by soulless automation. But, actually, net job growth occurs as employers increase productivity with the same workforce instead of reducing staff numbers. Moreover, hi-tech industries pay the highest wages. Even basic research, seemingly remote from business, often spawns new fields of enterprise. Quantum theory brought the transistor and the computer, while investigations of a particular tiny worm have been crucial to the development of genetic engineering. Science underpins prosperity and will continue to do so; but a reliable supply of science students is vital.

Finally, science should be studied because it prioritises a search for truth over a proliferation of opinions. Scholars in the humanities construct theories and counter-theories, generating complex ecosystems of debate that may be entirely divorced from

reality and supported only by intricate arguments, not facts. Sadly, they are often little more than rickety scaffolds of ink and ideology.

Where science builds similar edifices of abstract thought, they are always anchored to the bedrock of reality by experiment. A theory that does not make testable predictions remains merely an intellectual curiosity, unable to claim any privilege over dozens of other equally valid hypotheses. Science may be complex and specific, and sometimes inaccessible to the public, but it represents our best representation of the truth about the world around us. Despite science's clear strengths, few scientists would advocate its study to the utter exclusion of the arts. It is not a case of scientists looking down on artists in a sort of intellectual apartheid. Indeed, the plea of C. P. Snow in his famous 1959 Two Cultures speech at the University of Cambridge was for a greater connection between the arts and science communities. Educated citizens, he thought, should understand as much of thermodynamics as they do of Shakespeare. But that equality does not exist at present and, because they directly address the human condition, the arts are often seen as more relevant to our lives than science. In a world ever more dependent on technology, that emphatically is not true. There is room for both the dreaming spire and the gleaming laboratory, but in this century we will need science more than ever, and that is why we should study it.

Michael West is a University of Sydney physics honours student completing his bachelor of science-bachelor of engineering degrees. He won the university's talent opinion editorial competition, in which entrants were asked to write an essay on arts vs science.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarjit Kaur (PhD) is Associate Professor at the English Language Studies Section, School of Humanities in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Widely published, her research interests include English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Oral Communication, Learner Autonomy, Multiliteracies and policy research in higher education.