

Sustaining Quality Tertiary Education via Critical Reading Skills and Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

To sustain quality tertiary education students must possess the fundamental literacy skill of critical reading. This skill comes alongside with a repertoire of language learning strategies. Educationists have highlighted that a majority of tertiary students in Malaysia lack critical reading skills and this may be due to limited acquisition of language learning strategies. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to identify sustainability towards quality tertiary education through exploring the critical reading skills and language learning strategies of tertiary students in a private university in Malaysia. The study adopted a sequential exploratory research design with a mixed methods approach. The sample population comprised 108 tertiary students and data were collected through a three-pronged approach involving the use of a questionnaire, reading comprehension test and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics via the SPSS version 26 whilst qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the tertiary students' critical reading skills were rather limited and there was a significant difference based on gender and discipline of study. Furthermore, they displayed between low to average frequency use of language learning strategies. The findings of this study implies the need for educationists to equip tertiary students with the necessary critical reading skills and language learning strategies so that they can cope with academic needs in higher education and sustain the quality education at the tertiary level.

Keywords: quality education; critical reading skills; language learning strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill required to function in today's society. Inadequate reading skills and Language Learning Strategies (LLS) affect studying, working and survival in general as everything needs to be read and attended to. Primarily for tertiary students, reading critically is crucial as universities and workplaces expect a higher level of reading that comprises critical thinking and analytical skills.

However most educators and researchers specialized in reading have stated that Malaysian tertiary students are unable to critically read (Koo 2011, Thang & Azarina 2008, Nambiar 2007, Pandian 2007). Students

who lack critical reading skills (CRS) were unable to cope academically in universities and this affected their opportunity to be employed. Based on the Malaysian National Education Blueprint, the unemployment of Malaysian graduates has been one of the top five problems in Malaysia since 2006 (2013-2025 p.12). Furthermore, lecturers in tertiary institutions do not teach these skills assuming it has already been taught at both the primary and secondary school levels and this results with students being unequipped to handle texts at the university level (Zin et.al, 2014). Hence, most of these students often experience difficulty in coping with academic study at institutions of higher learning. This shows the ongoing

problem that has yet to be solved and the importance of CRS and LLS has often been ignored and swept under the carpet.

As Malaysia is progressing towards Education 4.0, the 4Cs of 21st century learning, namely, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication and Creativity has been emphasized and integrated in all educational levels. Through critical reading, the 4Cs can be achieved with ease as the skills are interlinked. In addition, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 and a new goal was added on global education (SDG 4) which aims to "...ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all..." such as basic literacy skills starting from early childhood level till secondary level. However, literacy skills become even more critical for students at the tertiary level as students have to sieve through volumes of written text and therefore tertiary students need to employ analytical and critical skills plus LLS to obtain necessary information from reading materials. The Curriculum and Instructional Design for Sustainable Development must be looked into as fundamental literacy skills such as CRS and LLS must be possessed first to sustain and provide equitable quality tertiary education and at the same time achieve our Nation's aspiration to equip learners with the skills required for the 21st Century.

With that, this paper will be guided by the following five research questions:

1. What are the tertiary students' level of critical reading skills?
2. Are there any significant differences among tertiary students' level of critical reading skills based on gender, discipline and English language proficiency?
3. What are the tertiary students' frequency use of language learning strategies?
4. Are there any significant differences among tertiary students' use of language learning strategies based on gender, discipline and English language proficiency?

5. What are the tertiary students' challenges faced based on critical reading skills and language learning strategies?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section will provide a brief review of literature on CRS, LLS and their relationship with gender, discipline and English language proficiency (ELP).

A. Critical Reading Skills and Language Learning Strategies

Critical reading involves the ability to judge the validity of the claims made in a written text. It is different from basic reading as it is the act of logical reasoning through clear evaluation and analysis of a text (Harris & Hodges, 1981). According to Bloom's Taxonomy by Benjamin Bloom (1956), a Critical Reader goes through 6 (six) levels to read critically; Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. The level moves from simple to complex and comprises skills to read critically. All critical readers will go through these levels until they reach the advanced level at Evaluation to be successful critical readers. However, for second language tertiary learners such as learners in Malaysia, they not only have to read in the second language but should also be able to read critically and that requires LLS.

Rebecca Oxford put forward the SILL which refers to Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (1990), a tool to measure the strategies used by a learner to learn the English Language. She classified 6 (six) LLS which are; Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social. These classifications were based on what 'A Good Language Learner' would employ to be proficient in the English Language. According to some studies, effective LLS has contributed to better reading comprehension (Ghafournia, 2014 & Pratama, 2015). To sustain quality tertiary education, all tertiary students should possess basic literacy skills such as CRS and LLS.

B. Critical Reading and Gender

Many studies have identified that male and females have different reading performances such as in comprehension, values, competency, frequency, habit, motivation, attitude and choice. Some researchers believe that the differences exist as a result of gender stereotypes in the education sector.

Based on the UNESCO'S Global Education Monitoring report (GEM) 2020, for SDG 4, it states that substantial gender gaps do exist in adult education and employment (p. 238, para 4). In addition, a study done in Chile during 2020 indicated that almost all respondents in the study agreed that reading was seen as a feminine activity (Espinoza & Strasser, 2020). Another study claimed that because from early ages, as mothers tend to read more to their children and teachers influence on gender stereotyping roles since young that girls should stay in class and read while boys should play outside has created a belief system that reading was a feminine activity while males were associated with subjects such as sports, math and science (Mutwoni & Retelsdorf, 2018). This claim has also been supported by the GEM 2020 report that family, teachers and society do pass down gender-stereotyping roles to children (p.16, para. 5). The GEM report also adds that females outperformed males in reading performance (p.13, para. 1) however females still face barriers in pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) related subjects (p.16, para. 1). If a person is not reading, they would not obtain the opportunity to practice their CRS and an equitable and quality education will not be obtained by each gender evenly. Therefore, the relationship between CRS and gender was looked into in this study.

C. Critical Reading and Discipline

Reading is a fundamental skill particularly for the teaching and learning process in every study discipline whether it is the pure science (PS) or social science (SS) as lessons and reading materials need to be read to obtain knowledge and information.

Yet, a study conducted by Zin et al. (2014) revealed that students from the PS discipline displayed limited critical reading ability as the respondents admitted that they were not familiar with the genre of the reading material which was a formal letter format. The PS students did not possess the necessary background knowledge on critical reading to read and understand different types of reading materials other than their standard scientific text which is contrary to SS students who have plenty of knowledge with various reading materials. Another study by Koray & Çetinkılıç (2020) indicated that the group of PS students who were taught CRS performed significantly better at extracting information from a text than the group of PS students who were taught the conventional way to understand a reading material. This further supports that PS students were not taught and lack CRS. Hence, the relationship between CRS and discipline was looked into in this study.

D. Critical Reading and English Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is evaluated based on reading, writing, listening and speaking ability in a particular language. Examinations such as TOEFL and IELTS require the second language learners (L2) to be proficient in these four abilities to determine their level of ELP. However, many institutions employ exam-oriented techniques rather than teaching to understanding a text critically (Abednia, 2015). Zin et. al (2014) stated that there was a significant difference between L2 learners' ELP and critical reading ability in her study.

Having said that, other studies such as by Yousefi & Mohammadi (2016) and Carson et al. (1990) argued that there was no relationship between CRS and English language as their study stated that the respondents' usage of CRS for both their first language (L1) and L2 does not differ. This indicates that CRS can be used in any language as CRS teaches one to obtain information from a text skillfully and critically and differences in language of the context does not affect one's critical reading ability. Thus, with this study, a more in-depth relationship between CRS and ELP was looked into.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a sequential explanatory research design with a mixed methods approach. The study was conducted in a private Malaysian University located at Kota Damansara, Selangor. The population comprised 108 randomly selected tertiary respondents. The sample was divided into two; Sample A comprised a total of 53 (fifty-three) respondents from the pure sciences (PS) discipline whilst 55 (fifty-five) respondents were from the social sciences (SS) discipline. Sample B was a sub-set from sample A and comprised a total of twelve (12) volunteers respondents who were involved in the semi-structured interviews.

The research instruments employed included a reading comprehension test, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The reading comprehension test was based on past year MUET, (Malaysian University English Test) Reading Tests. This test is set by the Malaysian Examination Council and has been vetted for validity and reliability at the ministry level. This test was used to determine the respondents' CRS and comprised 4 (four) reading passages with 30 (thirty) multiple choice questions. MUET is a CEFR (Common European Framework of References) aligned English language proficiency test based on the four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is often employed for University Admissions in Malaysian public universities. The questionnaire, employing Rebecca Oxfor's SILL, evaluated LLS and it comprised 50 (fifty) items. The semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the twelve respondents' challenges faced based on CRS and LLS.

Since the MUET Reading Test is a test prepared by the Malaysian Examination Council, test validity and reliability were not issues of concern. Nonetheless, since the researchers picked passages from a few past year papers, the passages were arranged from simple to complex through a readability checker (Flesch-Kincaid and Gunning Fox) to make sure the levels of difficulty were

appropriate with the students' level of language proficiency. For reliability, a pilot study was conducted prior to the actual one. As for trustworthiness, the interviews were transcribed verbatim for member-checking and peer-debriefing. To achieve triangulation, data was collected from three different sources (questionnaires, tests and semi-structured interviews) to obtain valid results by converging information from the different sources. Data was analyzed through independent sample t-tests and ANOVA for parametric tests plus Man-Whitney U test and Kruskal Wallis H test for non-parametric tests.

To protect the subjects' rights in this study, several ethical considerations were taken into consideration. Prior permission was obtained from the universities and faculties involved. All students' informed consent was obtained, and they were given assurance that all students' information will not be disclosed as anonymity will be maintained at all times. To maintain anonymity, a pseudonym was given to each respondent based on gender, discipline and language proficiency: M=Male, F=Female, PS=Pure Science, SS=Social Science, HEP=High English Language Proficiency, IEP=Intermediate English Language Proficiency, LEP=Limited English Language Proficiency. The students were also informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time from the project. All data was kept secure in password protected laptops

IV. FINDINGS

The following section will report the findings of the five main research questions that guided the study.

A. Tertiary students' level of Critical Reading Skills

Research Question One in the findings examined the students' level of CRS where the data were obtained from the MUET reading comprehension test and descriptive analysis were conducted to determine the mean and standard deviation. The test scores were divided into three levels (low=0 to 33.3),

(moderate=33.4 to 66.7) and (high=66.8 to 100). The findings indicated that the respondents' critical reading skills level was between low to moderate levels ($M=45.83$, $SD=13.489$).

Research Question Two investigated if there were any significant differences among tertiary students' level of CRS based on gender, discipline and ELP. The findings on gender were analyzed through an independent samples t-test as only two groups were involved (male and female). Table 1 indicates there was a significant difference based the tertiary students' level of CRS based on gender as the females ($M=48.456$, $SD=11.828$) showed significantly higher CRS level compared to males ($M=43.210$, $SD=14.608$) with a p value of $0.043 < 0.05$.

TABLE 1 *CRITICAL READING SKILLS OF TERTIARY STUDENTS BASED ON GENDER (n=108)*

Gender	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	43.210	14.60851	.043
Female	48.456	11.82868	

* $P < 0.05$

Further in-depth inferential analysis based on the two disciplines (PS & SS) presented in Table 2 below indicate that there was a significant difference among tertiary students' level of CRS based on discipline of study. The findings showed that the SS respondents ($M=50.48$, $SD=11.76$) displayed significantly higher CRS levels compared to the respondents from the PS discipline ($M=41.00$, $SD=13.565$) with a p value of $0.000 < 0.05$.

TABLE 2 *TERTIARY STUDENTS' CRITICAL READING SKILLS BASED ON DISCIPLINE (n=108)*

Discipline	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
PS	41.006	13.56530	.000
SS	50.484	11.76591	

* $P < 0.05$

The one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted to examine CRS based on English Language proficiency (ELP) which was viewed based on three levels (high, average & limited). The results shown in Table 3 below indicate that there was no significant difference based on the respondents' level of CRS based on ELP. The HEP respondents had a $M=47.56$, $SD=15.042$, IEP ($M=45.79$, $SD=13.365$) and LEP ($M=42.56$, $SD=10.98$) with a p value of $0.555 > 0.05$.

TABLE 3 *TERTIARY STUDENTS' CRITICAL READING SKILLS BASED ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (n=108)*

English Language Proficiency	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
Limited	42.564	10.98318	.555
Intermediate	45.797	13.36593	
High	47.564	15.04236	

* $P < 0.05$

The above findings were further supported by respondents during the semi structured interviews. On the whole, the interviews with the respondents indicated that they were aware of the importance of equipping themselves with CRS as stated by Respondent 2/F/SS/HEP, 9/M/PS/IEP and 11/M/PS/LEP.

Respondent 7/M/PS/HEP stated that "Yes I do face challenges with academic reading because I am not sure if what I understand from the passage is what the writer means exactly. Even though I try to read and understand, I still have trouble identifying the main points." This excerpt indicates that this male respondent from the pure science discipline is facing some difficulties with critical reading ability.

B. Tertiary students' frequency use of Language Learning Strategies

Research Question Three analyzed the frequency use of LLS of the tertiary students through a descriptive analysis. The levels of the mean scale for LLS were divided into four categories: (very low=1.00 to 2.00), (low=2.00 to 3.00), (moderate=3.00 to 4.00) and (high=4.00 to 5.00). The findings indicated that

the respondents possessed between low to moderate frequency use of LLS ($M=3.19$, $SD=0.511$).

Research Question Four examined if there were any significant differences among tertiary students' use of LLS based on gender, discipline and ELP. The findings (Table 4) analyzed through a Mann Whitney U Test indicate that there was no significant difference for the overall LLS strategies based on gender as the mean rank for males were 55.89 and for females were 53.16 ($p=0.425>0.05$). However, further analysis indicated that the males had a significantly higher frequency use of the Cognitive strategy with a mean rank of 61.30 for males and 47.70 for females ($p=0.024<0.05$).

TABLE 4 *LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TERTIARY STUDENTS BASED ON GENDER (n=108)*

Gender	Mean Rank	Sig.(2-tailed)
Male	56.90	.425
Female	52.10	
Cognitive Strategy		
Male	61.30	.024
Female	47.70	

* $P<0.05$

Furthermore, the findings for tertiary students' LLS based on discipline (Table 5) indicate that no significant difference was displayed through the Mann Whitney U Test as the mean rank for PS was 55.89 and for SS was 53.16 ($p=0.651>0.05$). However, the PS respondents' frequency use of the Cognitive strategy was significantly higher than the SS respondents with a mean rank of 62.37 for PS and 46.92 for SS ($p=0.10<0.05$).

TABLE 5 *LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TERTIARY STUDENTS BASED ON DISCIPLINE (n=108)*

Discipline	Mean Rank	Sig.(2-tailed)
PS	55.89	.651
SS	53.16	
Cognitive Strategy		
PS	62.37	.010
SS	46.92	

* $P<0.05$

In terms of the tertiary students' LLS based on ELP, the Kruskal Wallis H test was employed and the findings indicated that there was no significant difference based on the respondents' ELP as HEP respondents had a 66.04 mean rank, IEP had a 50.33 mean rank and LEP had a 53.54 mean rank ($p=0.091>0.05$).

TABLE 6 *LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TERTIARY STUDENTS BASED ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (n=108)*

ELP	Mean Rank	Sig. (2-tailed)
Limited	53.54	.091
Intermediate	50.33	
High	66.04	

* $P<0.05$

During the interview sessions, the overall findings indicated that most of the students were not aware of LLS and how they can be helped as stated by Respondent 1/M/SS/HEP, 5/M/SS/LEP and 8/F/PS/HEP.

When the respondents were asked if they were able to analyze, reason and conclude which were the sub-strategies for the Cognitive LLS, a few pointed out that this was a challenge for them. For example, Respondent 4 F/SS/IEP, stated "I do have difficulty analyzing, reasoning and concluding. Maybe it is because of my field of study that I find it hard to do so" This statement indicates that the female from the SS discipline found it challenging to

employ the Cognitive LLS strategy and that it may be because she was not a PS student.

C. Tertiary students' challenges faced based on Critical Reading Skills and Language Learning Strategies

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve (12) respondents to obtain their perspectives on CRS and LLS. Based on the interviews, 83% of respondents agreed that CRS are important for their studies in university regardless of the discipline. For example Respondent 9/M/ PS/ IEP stressed that, "I think it is very important for university students for each discipline to have critical reading skills especially after their studies as they are going to be global citizens and reading and communication are going to be key in their daily lives. I feel that in order for them to excel in their career and life, critical reading skills are going to be very important".

Moreover, 50% of the respondents claimed that they were not taught LLS in school and those who were taught admitted that they were only taught one out of the six strategies. This was well articulated by Respondent 2/F/SS/HEP when she said that "In school I don't think they asked us to even skim and scan. We just go through with it...basically just read...My school didn't even say anything...just like stand up and read and that's it...they didn't teach us like any strategies or how to like highlight a point and so on".

Moving on with more probing, approximately 58% of the respondents agreed that lecturers and universities should conduct classes on CRS. One respondent stated "Universities or lecturers should take the initiative to have an extra English language class for the students to learn critical reading skills. This will make it easier and faster to learn the skills properly" 11/M/PS/LEP.

All (100%) respondents agreed that CRS are important for students at higher learning. Many of them highlighted that CRS are important because it is needed for understanding reading materials at the tertiary level and workplaces as well. For example one respondent felt that "Students must give more

importance to critical reading skills....most of my course mates have trouble reading in English...so I hope everyone of us will take the initiative to improve our reading skills especially since we are in university" 12/F/PS/LEP.

V. DISCUSSION

The results shows that the tertiary respondents' CRS level and frequency use of LLS are of only low to moderate level indicating that Malaysian students in universities do lack in CRS and LLS and it aligns with findings from previous studies (Koo 2011, Thang & Azarina 2008, Nambiar 2007, Pandian 2007). Females scored a higher CRS level compared to males indicating that gender stereotypes in the education sector could exist as stated in the GEM report and by Espinoza & Strasser (2020). The SS respondents scored a higher CRS level compared to PS respondents which indicates that PS respondents lack CRS skills and this result aligns with the study conducted by Zin et al. (2014). There were no significant differences based on CRS and the respondents' ELP and this result was consistent with Yousefi & Mohammadi (2016) and Carson et al. (1990) as they claim that CRS are a set of skills to analyse a text and can be employed for any language thus ELP does not determine one's ability to critically read.

On the other hand, there was no significant difference based on the overall LLS use based on gender but males employed significantly higher Cognitive strategies compared to females. This result was consistent with a study by Ariyani et.al (2018) that males employ cognitive strategies the most compared to other strategies. Based on the overall LLS use and discipline of study, there was no significant difference based on the overall LLS use based on discipline however the PS respondents employed the Cognitive strategies significantly higher than SS which aligns with a study reported by Afni et al. (2019) who stated that the PS respondents in their study employed the Cognitive strategies the most as well. On top of that, the findings also revealed that there was

no significant difference based on the respondents' use of LLS and ELP. This result was in line with Mashhady & Fallah (2015) as they claimed that there were no significant differences between LLS and the respondents' ELP as well.

Based on the semi-structured interviews, all respondents agreed that CRS are important for their study at the tertiary level. This indicates that the respondents acknowledge the significance of possessing critical reading skills which can be aided by having the knowledge of a variety of language learning strategies. They all felt that these two skills can help them not only in their current academic study but more importantly for their future workplace. Henceforth, necessary action and initiatives need to be put in place to ensure all students are well equipped with basic and critical literacy skills so that they can become life-long learners capable of taking responsibility for their own learning.

VI. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings have implications for sustainable provision of quality education for tertiary Curriculum and Instructional Design. It is perhaps timely and pertinent that universities integrate CRS and LLS within the curriculum of core subjects that are being taught. Likewise, universities should also provide seminar and training camps on academic reading skills so that students can cope with reading and sieving through volumes of written text at the tertiary level. Such a move can help provide sustainable and equitable education alongside achieving our Nation's aspiration in progressing with Education 4.0 with the 21st Century Learning skills. As what Martin Luther King once said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and critically". Hence it is pertinent that CRS and LLS be given the due attention at all levels including tertiary level.

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