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CRITICAL READING IN EFL COURSES: THE FACILE AND CHALLENGE CONFRONTED

Research Article

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Abstract

Although critical thinking has been on the agenda for the past few decades, there is a serious gap in the field of foreign language teaching especially for quantitative research carried out regarding the teaching of this process as a skill. When the case is the teaching of critical thinking in EFL courses more specifically, teaching critical reading skills shares the same problem as one of its sub-skills. Yet, it is of utmost necessity to proliferate this kind of research to reach beyond epistemological deductions to delineate the borders of such a significant skill. Thus, the current study is designed as quantitative research that aims to contribute to foreign language teaching literature utilizing the procedures of both descriptive and inferential statistics. In this sense, a specifically developed critical reading scale was chosen and distributed to the third-year EFL students of a state university in Turkey to obtain the required clear data to detect any probable connection between their age and attitudes and to assess their evaluation concerning the easiest and hardest sides of the critical reading process. The results indicated beneficial findings for the interests of EFL literature.

Keywords: critical reading, foreign language teaching, quantitative study, student attitudes

1. Introduction

As a 21st century skill, many disciplines whether it is engineering, physics, sociology or music education today pay strong attention to improving the critical thinking skills of students in some way, which makes it one of the most substantial objectives for teaching cycles (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003; Shaw, 2014; Holmes, Wieman & Bonn, 2015). Indeed, educations being the case, critical thinking skills have always been on the agenda with different labels since ancient days of human history (Siegel, 2010). Yet, a reasonable success of delineating the borders of this concept, if any, has not been achieved since the earlier teachings of Socrates ("Stanford University", 2003). Critical thinking, in this sense, resembles a piece of successful art that can be noticed at first glance and that can even be taught to others without any tangible means of evaluation per se (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003). Recently, critical thinking skill has been included in all phases of education and gained utmost importance since it is regarded as one the key skills necessary to equip the millennials in order to compete in the modern global world (OECD, 2018).

2. Literature Review

There have been also multifarious academic definition attempts for the concept of critical thinking (Ennis, 1962, 1987, 1997, 2011; Kurfiss, 1988; Siegel, 1988; Facione, 1990; Paul & Binker, 1990; Lipman, 1991; Watson & Glaser, 1994; Scriven & Paul, 1996; Halpern, 1997;

Facione & Facione, 1996, 2007; Facione, Facione & Giancarlo, 2000; Vaughn, 2005; Scriven, & Paul, 2008; Siegel, 2010; Facione, 2015) though all of these accommodate contradictory contents. There is, however, one exception above all, which is widely accepted among academic circles in the face of a minority of oppositions that find it so extensive in content and impractical in use. As the outcome of 46 experts' group study realized in a Delphi Panel held by the American Philosophical Association in 1990 the manifesto defines critical thinking as follows:

We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological and contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such, CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. Thus, educating good critical thinkers means working toward this ideal. It combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights, and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society. (Facione, 1990, p.2)

Mostly, critical thinking is attributed to the Frankfurt school of critical theory as a challenge to constructs; namely, rationalism, neutrality, naturalism. The critical theory claims that people's ideas, language, desires, interactions, learning contexts are not objective and natural. On the contrary, they are shaped by the inequalities introduced by the powerholders in the system (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Redmond, 2010). When Critical theory is shed light in the context of higher education and specifically pre-service teacher education, it is a tool to question many of de-facto assumptions and build a bridge between the prospective teachers' past experience as a learner and their 'future', emancipatory teaching experience. Although this connection may not guarantee being without conflict or dispute, it may lead to a continual challenge in teachers' course materials, classroom instruction and the sources in their agenda.

The arguments regarding the length and the practicality of its definition put aside, another problem faces critical thinking is the measurement issue. As the concept stands on the intersection of two discrete disciplines such as psychology or philosophy, it becomes literally hard to decide what kind of a solution to be devised when dealing with such an enigma. More overtly, it appears to be an arduous task to determine whether an epistemological or a psychological scale would be more proper when dealing with the measurement problem of the concept. Yet, notwithstanding the question, whether the case is the concern of psychology or philosophy, there are already 13 standardized famous scales that have been developed by academics for various teaching environments (Bernard et al., 2008). Among these, the Watson–Glaser CT Appraisal (WGCTA), the Cornell CT Test (CCTT), the California CT Skill Test (CCTST), and the Test of Critical Thinking-Form G, are the most renowned ones, and above all, WGCTA is reported to be 'the oldest and most widely used and studied CT measure' (Bernard et al., 2008, p.15). All the same, none of these tests focus on consolidating teaching critical thinking skills with a specific language skill, unfortunately. After all, there seems to be a serious gap regarding empirical studies on teaching critical thinking skills focusing on four skills of language teaching separately.

3. Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to make a contribution to the field literature focusing specifically on teaching critical reading skills in foreign language classes. With this intention, a well-developed critical reading scale was specifically chosen to apply to the students at the end of the course in order to screen which constituents of the process are easy and hard for the participants most.

Ultimately, the present study tries to find an answer to the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between students' attitudes and their age?

2. What are the easiest sides of the critical reading process?

3. What are the hardest sides of the critical reading process?

4. Method

4.1. Setting and Participants

The current study was designed as a quantitative one applied within the limits of solely one segment of a course entitled "Literature and Language Teaching II" during the spring season of a 2018-2019 education year. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used during the study. It embraced 93 participants (f=93) all of which were the third- year students of English Language Teaching Department of a state university in Turkey. Different from a usual foreign language teaching course, the students were exposed to great attention regarding the development of their critical thinking skills within the usual limits of the course. They were dreadfully encouraged to make inferences and criticism both about the text they went through and the course they attended in a constructivist teaching environment so most of the time they were due to contribute to the course at an utmost level. Additionally, the course was endorsed with a course book that involved critical reading activities, videos, and group work of the students. Having attended a 14-week Literature and Language Teaching II course, a questionnaire that investigates the students' attitudes towards the critical reading process was distributed to the third-year students of the English Language Teaching Department. The data obtained from the students were investigated through statistical procedures to determine the hard and easy sides of the critical reading process.

This present study was conducted at the English Language Teaching Department of a state university in Turkey. The participants consisted of 93 third year students of the above mentioned department. 79 of this number were females and 14 were a male which is because the majority of the foreign language departments usually comprise female students. The undergraduate program of the English Language Teaching Department accepts the students after a placement test that validates them to be proficient in English. Therefore, the participants of the current study were acknowledged to be proficient in English albeit their label of non-native speakers. Accordingly, all the participants of the study were supposed to be almost at the same proficiency level.

4.2. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection of the current study was executed by means of quantitative methods. The quantitative data were secured using a 33-item Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 6 = Strongly Disagree). Consistent with the aim of the study a specifically well-developed scale pertaining to Dr. Abdulkerim Karadeniz was selected by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of 33 questions. The participants answered these questions as:

1. Strongly Disagree 2. Disagree 3. Not Decided 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree in terms of their stance towards the case investigated. The statistics were measured by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0.

4.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 was used for the quantitative analysis of the present study. Having been calculated through statistical procedures, the results given to the 33 questionnaire items, the students' age, and the hardest sides of critical reading process were all submitted in the tables with the abbreviations: number of participants with (N), mean with (Mean), mean difference with (Mean Diff.), standard deviation with (Std. D.), standard error with (Std. Err.), standard error mean with (Std. Err. Mean), standard error difference with (Std. Err. Diff.), F statistics with (F), degrees of freedom with (df), significance (p) value of Levene's Test (Sig.), 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference with (95% Con. Inter. Diff.), the two-tailed p-value associated with the t-test with (Sig. (2-tailed)).

5. Results

5.1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between students' age and attitudes?

Table 1 reveals that age groups and attitudes do not possess any correlation (m=3.49 for age group 22 and below; m=3.43 for age group 23 and above). The similar mean values represent no difference between the two age groups, which means there is no significant correlation between the students' age and attitudes in general.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for age and attitudes*

Age groups	N	Mean	SD	Std.Er.Mean
22 and below	81	3.49	0.23	0.02
Attitudes mean				
23 and above	9	3.43	0.15	0.05

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in Table 2 shows no diversity between the variances of the two age groups, which enables t-test for Equality of Means to be considered. Therefore, the H0 –null hypothesis- that assumes no relation between the students' age and attitudes is tested. Since the Sig. (2-tailed) value (0.43) is greater than p value=0.05, the H0 hypothesis may not be rejected. This result signifies that there is no significant correlation between the students' age and attitudes as far as the critical reading process is concerned.

Table 2. *T-test for two independent samples in terms of age*

Levene's test for equality of variances			**t-test for equality of means**					
Attitutes mean	**F**	**Sig.**	**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean diff.**	**Std.Err. diff.**	**95% Con. Inter. Diff.**
								Lower / Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.15	0.28	0.78	88	0.43	0.06	0.08	-.09 / 0.22
Equal variances not assumed			1.08	12.36	0.30	0.06	0.05	-.06 / 0.19

5.2. What are the easiest sides of the critical reading process?

A careful analysis of Table 3 reveals that the majority of the participants (39) evaluate the easiest sides of the critical reading process to be item 11 which emphasizes finding the general meaning of a text the students read. The second easiest frequency belongs to item 7 which highlights determining the behaviors of a character the students read in a story or a novel. The third highest frequency pertains to item 27 with a frequency of 23 that reflects the ability of the students to connect the events taking part in the story or the novel they read in terms of cause-effect relationship while the closest frequency (21) in the fourth place belongs to item 32 that reveals the students' competency in detecting the contradictory or complementary expressions in the text they read. As for the fifth highest frequency 18, it belongs to item 25 that signifies the students' ability to find the intention of the text they go through. Another high frequency (16) that belongs to item 21 points to the students' ability to find the supporting ideas of the text they read. Finally, the last highest frequency 15 belongs to item 16 which indicates the students' aptitude to evaluate the text they read in different angles. Other 25 frequencies that seem relatively not so important are not listed on Table 3.

Table 3. *Students' views on the easiest and hardest sides of the critical reading process*

Categories	**f**
Item 11: I always find it hard to understand the general meaning of a text I read.	39
Item7: I always find it hard to question the behaviors of a character I read in a story or novel.	31
Item 27: I always find it hard to make connections of the events taking part in the story or novel I read in terms of cause-effect relationship.	23
Item 32: I always find it hard to detect the contradictory or complementary expressions in a text.	21
Item 25: I always find it hard to make inferences about the intention of the text through reading it.	18
Item 21: I always find it hard to detect the supporting ideas of the text.	16
Item 16: I always find it hard to evaluate a text from different angles.	15
Item 6: I can find the contradictions in a text which I read, or which is narrated.	15

5.3. What are the hardest sides of the critical reading process?

The result of the research question 3 is also submitted in Table 3. As it is instantly noticed in table 3, item 6 in the eighth place with a frequency of 15 at the same frequency level with item 16 points to the students' ability to easily detect the contradictions in a text, whether the text is narrated to them or they read it on their own. Since the rest of the scale items appeared to have considerably minor frequency levels when compared to the 8 items listed in Table 3, item 6 inevitably becomes by far the hardest side of the critical reading process as far as students' views are taken into consideration. This situation also explains why it was essential that the rest of the scale items be discarded from Table 3.

6. Discussion

In light of the quantitative data processed, the findings of the present study revealed no existent correlation between students' attitudes towards critical reading process and their ages, which turned out to be in compliance with the previous hypothesis the researcher had predicted. To be more precise, the result showed no correlation between the age groups that represent third-year university education (either 22 and below or 23 and above at university level) and their attitudes toward the critical reading process. These findings are in conformity with the field literature in that the previously fulfilled multifarious university-level studies (Soku, Simpeh, & Osafo-Adu, 2011; Charkins, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 1985; Wetzel, James, & O'Toole, 1982) report no correlation between students' attitudes towards any instruction technique and age.

In view of the data obtained from the respondents, it is clear that the students are successful in the processes that are similar to those which they refer to in their native language. In other words, what they find as the easiest sides of the critical reading process in foreign language teaching classes constitute the fundamentals of conscious reading activities actually. Therefore, the development of critical reading skill seems to begin with the students' primary school education since what they assert they are already capable of doing is gained through a learned process, or rather repetition. This may be the reason why students

find higher order skills such as finding the general meaning or connecting the plot with the cause-effect relationship as the easiest sides of critical reading process.

Similarly, the students oppose to the item 6 and item 32 at the same time as a result of their success in a learned process. Yet, as it is overt in their content these two items possess contradictory expressions so the students are to decline at least one of them while accepting the other. Otherwise, the two items would be mutually exclusive. The answers, nonetheless, oppose each other making the slight difference in the two expressions important. The expression ‘or which is narrated' taking part in item 6 stands the case on its head and leads the students to decline both items at the same time. In this sense, although the two items seem to involve the same expression, indeed, they ascribe to entirely different skills especially when the case is critical reading process.

7. Limitations and Conclusion

It is necessary that the present study be evaluated in two certain limitations;

First and foremost, this study rests on Likert Scales, and Likert Scales are in need of further projection for their statistical identification. To amplify the case, it would be more proper to stress there is no consensus in the statistics literature as to which kind of scale type Likert Scales belong to. With a quick glance to the literature, one would instantly notice that there is research either sides that evaluate Likert Scales as ordinal or interval (Brown, 2011). Hence, such vagueness makes it hard for the researcher to determine which the test type to use depending on the scales of measurement.

As a second limitation, the element in which the current study has been implemented is EFL environment, which is why the same study is supposed to reveal different results when it is applied in the inner circle as far as ELT is concerned. Critical thinking skills develop subject to language use, and the circumstance in which the language is instructed would therefore certainly play an important role in such a different environment.

Ultimately, the present study within the aforementioned limitations would provide new benefits for critical thinking literature, especially regarding teaching critical reading skills during EFL courses. Besides, the study would have implications for further quantitative studies to be carried out in different courses such as content-based courses or with different target groups such as high school students.

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