
An Exploration on Critical Reading Skills of M.A. English Majors at Thu Dau Mot University

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ABSTRACT

Studying at postgraduate level always requires learners to do a large amount of reading for some certain academic purposes. This becomes more notable when reading must be done in a strictly limited amount of time. On this account, postgraduate students must come up with particular strategies for reading. Thus, from the critical thinking perspective, the current study was conducted to investigate the M.A. English majors' use of reading strategies, especially critical reading skills. Through questionnaire and interview, data for analysis were collected from 30 M.A. students of English and five lecturers of English, who already completed their postgraduate program, at Thu Dau Mot University. The results showed that the participants could employ skimming and scanning. However, they seemed to be passive in evaluating sources and did not pay much attention to note-taking skills, which are considered really necessary in writing literature review for a research paper or a thesis. The findings suggest that critical reading skills should be taught at the beginning of the course in order to help M.A. students develop their critical reading skills and support them in doing their mini research projects.

KEYWORDS

Critical Reading;
Skimming; Scanning;
Note-taking

ABSTRAK

Belajar di tingkat pascasarjana selalu mengharuskan peserta didik untuk melakukan banyak membaca untuk beberapa tujuan akademik tertentu. Hal ini menjadi lebih penting ketika membaca harus dilakukan dalam waktu yang sangat terbatas. Oleh karena itu, mahasiswa pascasarjana harus mempunyai strategi khusus dalam membaca. Oleh karena itu, dari perspektif berpikir kritis, penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menyelidiki penggunaan strategi membaca di jurusan Bahasa Inggris MA, khususnya keterampilan membaca kritis. Melalui kuesioner dan wawancara, data untuk analisis dikumpulkan dari 30 mahasiswa M.A. Bahasa Inggris dan lima dosen Bahasa Inggris, yang telah menyelesaikan program pascasarjana, di Universitas Thu Dau Mot. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa peserta dapat melakukan skimming dan scanning. Namun, mereka terlihat

KATA KUNCI

Membaca Kritis;
Peluncuran; Pemindaian;
Pencatatan

pasif dalam menilai sumber dan kurang memperhatikan keterampilan mencatat, yang dianggap sangat diperlukan dalam penulisan tinjauan pustaka untuk makalah penelitian atau tesis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keterampilan membaca kritis harus diajarkan pada awal kursus untuk membantu siswa M.A. mengembangkan keterampilan membaca kritis mereka dan mendukung mereka dalam melakukan proyek penelitian kecil mereka.

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INTRODUCTION

Deriving from the fact that doing a master's degree not just in English but in other majors always requires learners to do a large amount of reading for some certain academic purposes, improving reading skills becomes one of the postgraduate students' top priorities. The reasons for the need of the improvement in reading skills are that, on the one hand, the M.A students must do a lot of reading in a strictly limited amount of time so that they can meet the deadline which is strictly set by their instructors/lecturers; on the other hand, reading is one of the greatest ways to increase academic knowledge (Brick, 2011; Oanh & Dat, 2015). Reading is therefore growing really essential and indispensable in doing a master's course. Besides, one important thing to be taken into consideration is that reading must be done more strategically or critically so that the learners can easily complete a large amount of reading in a strictly limited amount of time (Estika, 2019).

Reading is considered as one of the most important activities to increase the learning autonomy (Oanh & Dat, 2015). Through reading, the learners can get much information (Oanh & Dat, 2015), deepen their understanding (Brick, 2011), and acquire extensive knowledge outside classrooms (UWS Student Learning Unit, 2007). In addition to reading, at postgraduate level, the reading strategies have a considerable influence on achieving the academic purposes because most assignments are usually in the form of research which entails a great deal of reading. To do this, students are required to employ an effective and appropriate reading approach.

In this regard, critical reading is considered as a very active process (Brick, 2011; Wallace & Wray, 2011) by which the readers can easily complete a large amount of reading. This is because critical reading requires the readers to evaluate the information, ideas, or even arguments in the text for their strengths and weaknesses (UWS Student Learning Unit, 2007; Brick, 2011; Wallace & Wray, 2011). Furthermore, the readers are also required to determine why they read, what they want to find out, and whether the reading materials are relevant (UWS Student Learning Unit, 2007). To support this process, skimming and scanning are two important reading strategies for the critical readers.

Skimming is a reading technique helping the readers easily find out general information or main points by first looking through a book's titles, table of contents and chapter introduction or an article's abstract and conclusion (Gavin et al., 2001). In addition, the readers can look through the first sentence in each paragraph or the conclusion paragraph

in each chapter. Through skimming, the readers can find out the relevant materials from a large amount of reading in a limited amount of time (Wallace & Wray, 2011).

Scanning is another technique to look for specific information. It requires the readers to make sense of all key words and concepts for in-depth understanding (Oanh & Dat, 2015). While scanning a text, the reader is not allowed to be passive. Instead, he/she must think critically. This means that the reader must evaluate information before making decision that he/she agrees or disagrees with the information. In order to do this, the reader himself/herself raises the critical questions regarding the writer's purposes, assumptions, arguments, or ideas in the text. He/she then compares them to those of the other writers in the same field in order to see how the text positions him/her. (UWS Student Learning Unit, 2007).

In addition, a critical reader is one who knows how to take notes because note-taking assists him/her in reviewing, classifying, or synthesizing information and easily determining where it comes from (Oanh & Dat, 2015). Furthermore, note-taking will support the summary writing of what has been read. According to UWS Student Learning Unit (2007), there are three basic note-taking methods. The first type is three-column notes including source, notes and comments. The second type is chunking (note making under separate themes). The third type is mind maps (branching diagram) showing relationships between ideas. In spite of this, no note-taking method is the best because it depends on each individual's own learning style (Gavin et al., 2001; Oanh & Dat, 2015). For example, while reading a text, a person can take note by highlighting the key words or main points in the text instead of writing them down in another book.

However, in many universities around the world, there is not much attention paid to students' ability to read critically or even students are not very familiar with the term *critical reading* (Gavin et al., 2001; Manarin et al., 2015). In Vietnam, there is the same phenomenon in which most M.A. students at many universities basically read the academic materials without any strategies. This is very time-consuming and inefficient. Thus, the current study is conducted to investigate the M.A. English majors' use of CRSs hopefully to gain more insights into the need of teaching critical reading skills at the beginning of the course. To reach this goal, the research questions are raised as follows:

- 1) What difficulties do M.A. English majors encounter in academic reading?
- 2) What approach do they use in academic reading?
- 3) To what extent do they apply critical reading skills to their academic reading?

METHOD

Research design

To achieve the research objectives, this research was done through mixed method. In quantitative approach, the researcher conducted a survey through a questionnaire find out the postgraduate students' awareness of academic reading, methods of reading, and thinking of critical reading skills. In qualitative approach, the researcher carried out semi-structured interviews to get more insights into and to strengthen the interpretation of data collected from questionnaires.

Participants

Thirty M.A. students majoring in English and five lecturers of English, who completed the M.A program, at Thu Dau Mot University participated in the current study. All except one were between the ages of 23 and 40, and none was over the age of 45. The participants are at the average age of 29 and have been learning English for an average of 30 years and most of them have been working as teachers of English.

Instruments and data collection procedure

The questionnaire, composed of 15 Likert-type items and two open-ended items, was divided into four sections. The first section contained four questions to gain the participants' personal information. The second section (item 5-9) dealt with the participants' awareness of and approach to an academic text. The third section (items 10-14) was related to the participants' methods of reading. In sections 2 and 3, the participants would be asked to answer each question followed by a four-point scale ranging from "Yes, certainly" to "No". Finally, in the fourth section, the participants were asked to give their own opinions on critical reading skills.

The researcher met with all the participants individually. At first, the researcher explained the study's purpose and committed that the results would be used exclusively for the research purposes, and the participants' anonymity would be guaranteed. The questionnaires then were distributed to each of the participants and were collected right after the questionnaires were filled out. To obtain reliable data, explanations of the technical terms used in the questionnaires were given to the participants before they began to answer the questionnaires. When some participants had difficulty in understanding a certain item in the questionnaire, the researcher explained it to them.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually after the questionnaires were distributed in order to obtain more insights into the data collected from the questionnaire. For the participants who are M.A students, the research shoes randomly five of thirty M.A. students for the interview while five lecturers were all interviewed. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were accompanied by personal notes. The researcher constructed questions to elicit the following information: difficulties in academic reading and viewpoints on critical reading.

Data analysis

Altogether 30 questionnaires were collected back, and none of them were considered invalid. The data collected from the questionnaires was processed and analysed by Excel. The data processing results were displayed in the form of statistical tables. Notes of the interviews were synthesized and classified according to from *most mentioned* to *less mentioned*. Analysing the interviews is to interpret and compare the students' self-report from questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Findings are presented in three parts: (i) Research question 1: What difficulties did postgraduate English majors encounter in academic reading? (ii) Research question 2: How did they approach academic reading? and (iii) Research question 3: To what extent did they apply critical reading skills to their academic reading?

Difficulties in academic reading

Although reading skill is one of the important skills to increase knowledge (Brick, 2011; Oanh & Dat, 2015), when asked “*what are basic skills to develop academic knowledge?*” 89% of the participants (see Table 1) failed to mention this skill. Moreover, 65% of the participants shared that CRSs do not influence the assignment completion because they assumed the knowledge they acquired in class is enough.

Table 1. Opinions on basic skills to develop academic knowledge

Skills	Frequency	Percentage
Communication skills	8	23%
Soft & hard skills	8	23%
Learning skills	4	11%
Reading skills	4	11%
Writing skills	11	31%
Total	35	100%

Notably, when it comes to assignments, the participants have difficulties in working on a large amount of reading. Most of them shared that they had to read a lot of materials. Especially, one teacher said that he read more than 20 books for his master’s thesis. Additionally, the participants also added that they read one article at least three times to find out the relevant information and complained that they did not have enough time to read because they had to spend about half a day reading an article and at least two days reading a book. Unfortunately, they shared that in some cases they did not find out any relevant information after reading through articles and books. More importantly, when asked “*Do you encounter any difficulties in including relevant information in your assignment?*” they responded that they could not remember where the relevant information was from and they had to read the materials again for in-text citation.

Thus, in terms of Research question 1, the results indicate that postgraduate students seemed to have insufficient time to read a large amount of reading and to synthesize information.

Approach to academic reading

The statistical results indicated that the majority of the participants did not know how to approach the academic reading. The average score ($M=2.41$) of all participants’ responses

was nearly equal to 3.0 which is the accepted mean for *Not sure* (see Table 2). The standard deviation of 0.41 showed that individual responses were not over 0.5 point away from mean.

Table 2. Mean of participants' awareness of and approach to academic reading

	No.	Min	Mean	Max	St. deviation
Student's awareness of and approach to academic reading	20	1.80	2.41	3.40	0.41

The statistical result (see Table 3) shows that all participants have read many academic books/articles. However, most of them usually started right after their lecturer gave them materials and asked them to read (Q6's mean = 2.05). However, they did not think that materials given by their lecturer offer them enough chance to complete the assignment (Q7's mean=3.80). Notably, although they tried to find other sources to read (Q8's mean=2.15), they did not evaluate whether sources are reliable or not (Q9's mean=3.05). When interviewed, all the participants shared that they sought additional materials from the internet and they find the materials they sought easy to understand even though they did not know whether those sources are reliable or not.

Table 3. Statistics on participants' awareness of and approach to academic reading

	1	2	3	4	Mean	St. Deviation
5. Have you ever read an academic article/book?	100%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1	0
6. Do you start right after your lecturer gives you an academic article/book and asks you to read?	43.3%	23.3%	23.3%	10.0%	2.05	1.05
7. Have you thought that academic articles/books given by your lecturer offer you enough chance to complete the assignment?	0.0%	0.0%	23.3%	76.7%	3.8	0.41
8. Do you find other articles/books which are relevant to and supportive of your assignment?	23.3%	46.7%	23.3%	6.7%	2.15	0.81
9. Do you usually ask questions: Is the writer an expert in the field? Does the material provide original information? Is the writer objective? Is data reliable? Is information outdated?	6.7%	16.7%	53.3%	23.3%	3.05	0.83

1. Yes, certainly 2. Yes to some extent 3. Not sure 4. No

In sum, concerning Research question 2, results indicate that the participants seemed to be passive in their reading. Especially, they did not make the evaluation of the source.

Use of critical reading skills in academic reading

Another primary interest in this study was to determine the extent to how the participants used critical reading skills to complete the reading texts. According to Table 4, the majority of the participants could employ critical reading skills in their reading. The average score $M=2.05$ of all participants' responses was nearly equal to 2.0 which is the accepted mean for *Yes, to some extent*. The standard deviation of 0.40 showed that individual responses were not over 0.5 point away from mean.

Table 4. Mean of participants' methods of reading

	No.	Min	Mean	Max	St. deviation
Student's methods of reading	20	1.40	2.05	2.80	0.40

The statistical results (see Table 5) show that all participants have good skimming skill. They used the book's title, table of contents and chapter introduction or the article's abstract and conclusion to get the general idea of what the reading is about (Q10's mean=1.00). That is why they can select relevant articles/books or relevant parts of articles/books to read intensively (Q11's mean=1.40). In reading for specific information or evaluation, readers are required to make sense of the terms in the texts (Duong & Nguyen, 2015). The remarkable results of the survey show that did look up the meaning of the new terms or concepts while reading (Q12's mean=1.85). However, three fifth of the participants (65%) did not make notes while reading (Q13's mean=3.05). Therefore, they could not write a summary of the important points as well as synthesizing and classifying the information (Q14's mean=2.95).

Table 5. Statistics on participants' methods of reading

	1	2	3	4	Mean	St. Deviation
10. Do you use a book's content table and chapter introduction or the abstract and conclusion part of an article to get a general idea of what it is about?	100%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1	0
11. Do you select relevant articles/books or parts of articles/books to read intensively?	63.3%	26.7%	0.0%	10.0%	1.4	0.75
12. Do you look up the meaning of the new terms in the dictionary while reading?	30.0%	53.3%	10.0%	6.7%	1.85	0.81

13. Do you record the important points or points you disagree with in your notes while reading?	10.0%	20.0%	23.3%	46.7%	3.05	1
14. Can you summarize the important points in the article/book after you read?	10.0%	23.3%	40.0%	26.7%	2.95	0.89

1. Yes, certainly 2. Yes to some extent 3. Not sure 4. No

Thus, with regard to Research question 3, results indicate that, although the participants partially employ the appropriate methods of reading, they did not pay attention to note making while reading as a basis for writing a summary which reflects the readers' in-depth understanding of the reading.

Discussion

By addressing three research questions, the purpose of the research has been achieved. Findings suggest some factors that may have contributed to the shaping of readers' critical reading skills.

First, how students approach an academic text affects their performance of collecting reliable information. In particular, the M.A students seem to be passive in their reading. Especially, they did not make the evaluation of the source. In a previous study, Shamida et al. (2021) found that students held a higher perception of their ability when compared to their actual performance in critical reading skills. This means that students have full awareness of how to approach an academic text, but they have problems in dealing with it. From that finding, Shamida et al. (2021) suggested that postgraduate students' critical reading skills need more improvement so that they can successfully complete their studies within the given duration and graduate on time. In addition, Sidhu et al. (2016) also found that students perceived that they had a higher moderate level of readiness compared to supervisors. Supervisors also felt that students possessed limited readiness in terms of critical reading skills such as questioning and evaluating texts. From these results, the authors have implications for the need for innovative approaches to advance the critical reading skills of postgraduate students. Moreover, Stoller and Nguyen (2020) also provided an initial snapshot of Vietnamese university English majors' reading habits. Vietnamese students often consult the Web to complete university assignments. It means that they do not develop the habits of evaluation. Therefore, this study also suggests that the students must prove critical when they are given reading materials from their teachers; be active to seek other sources; and criticize the sources they have sought. This suggestion finds the results of a study by Baki (2020). In particular, Baki (2020) found that critical reading skills were directly and strongly related to the evaluation skills of the critical reading process. Furthermore, Kadir et al. (2014) claimed that students will better understand whatever text given to them if they are developed be critical thinkers.

Second, how much students employ the critical reading strategies affects their purpose and effectiveness of reading. In particular, the students did not pay attention to note making while reading as a basis for writing a summary which reflects the readers' in-depth understanding of the reading. These findings contribute to some recently studies which did not focus on these aspects of critical reading skills. For example, the results of the study by Karimi and Veisi (2016) showed that teaching critical thinking skills positively affect reading comprehension of intermediate EFL learners, but the interaction of gender and teaching critical thinking was not significant. In 2017, Wang and Seepho concluded that the three teaching strategies they employed in their experimental study could improve critical thinking skills. Each teaching strategy made unique and specific contributions to the development of critical thinking skills. In addition, Aghajani and Gholamrezapour (2019) found that there was a statistically significant predictive of critical thinking skills. In particular, the result of their study indicates that a negative relationship between critical thinking skills and foreign language reading anxiety exists as measured by FLRAS. Furthermore, Hidayati et al. (2020) also found that there was a significant correlation among critical thinking skills and reading comprehension and there was a significant correlation among critical reading skills and reading comprehension by predictor variables. Most recently, Le et al. (2022) found that scholars in Turkey and the United States place a higher premium on critical research than researchers in other parts of the world. Most papers focus on investigating feasible approaches to develop critical reading skills amongst undergraduates and proposing critical reading pedagogy in higher education institutions. However, there has been a deficiency in research of critical reading in STEM education, especially in the Asian tertiary context. Thus, from the above discussion, this study suggests that the students need to practice skimming skills more often to eliminate difficulties in academic reading; and to exercise scanning skills more frequently so that they are able to hold and connect ideas quickly as well as to enrich their vocabulary. Besides, they also need to come up with and improve their own note making skill so that they can easily review, classify and synthesize information explicitly, logically and accurately.

CONCLUSION

Basically, the findings have identified some difficulties that many M.A. students encountered when working on a large amount of academic reading. Although the majority of the participants could employ skimming and scanning, they seemed to be passive in their reading activities. Especially, they failed to evaluate sources and take notes. With the findings, we can realize the need of teaching CRSs to the students at the beginning of the course to eliminate difficulties in academic reading.

I also acknowledge several limitations of this study, especially restriction of sample size. It could be inadequate to represent the population of Vietnamese postgraduate English majors. Additionally, this survey could not cover a better form of data collection because it reported only what participants thought. For those limitations, suggestion for future research

is that the study should be carried out with a broader sample of population. Additionally, it would be possible to interview teachers who used to teach critical reading skills; and to observe students' learning process in order to evaluate self-reported information from questionnaires.

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