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## EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO CRITICAL READING

**Abstract.** Critical thinking skills are one of the key requirements for a modern specialist in the professional world nowadays. Applying critical thinking while reading texts must become the essential approach to dealing with information. This study focuses on an exploratory investigation of the students' attitude to critical reading tasks at the English classes. The present survey aims at exploring low-intermediate students' attitude to critical reading assignments used at the English classes. The main tasks are the following: 1) to carry out a survey on students' attitude towards critical reading and critical reading instruction at university; 2) to test the students' critical reading skills; 3) to interview the students on their assessment of the reading tasks to identify the habits of mind available to develop their critical reading skills. The data were collected from the students' questionnaire, the critical reading test and the students' interviews. The findings support the results of the foreign researchers' surveys about the lack of curiosity, relevant habits of mind and the majority of textbooks containing factual tasks which hinder the development of the readers' critical attitude to information. Although the students admitted the general importance of critical reading, they did not seem to understand the essence of these skills and showed indifference to critical reading tasks during the second and third stages of the experiment. Thus, the prospects of the further research aim at designing and implementation of a reading English texts program for university low-intermediate students which could involve more critical reading assignments to promote critical habits of mind.

**Key words:** attitude; critical reading; habits of mind; tasks; text.

**Introduction.** The fast pace of modern life and the growing number of nonprofessional authors of different news and ideas in the Internet have led to an uncontrolled flow of information grabbing people's attention with insulting titles and shocking details. Therefore critical thinking skills are one of the key requirements for a modern specialist in the professional world nowadays. They enhance efficient interpretation and comprehension of information which is in great abundance nowadays due to the extensive advancement of mass media sources. Applying critical thinking while reading texts must become the essential approach to dealing with information.

Many researchers call for teaching critical thinking and reading skills at high school and college or university when students have to process a lot of academic and scientific literature. They suggest different strategies to form critical thinking as high level thinking skills so the experiments are usually held in the mother tongue of the students or in case of students learning English as a foreign language the studies mainly involve advanced level students [1; 2; 3]. Meanwhile low-intermediate and intermediate students are rarely engaged into the critical thinking teaching processes in class which is rather unreasonable as critical reading tasks must equally be adjusted and implemented at different stages of education. It is considered relevant to explore low-intermediate students' attitude to critical reading assignments used at the English classes.

**Theoretical framework.** P.A. Facione refers to these skills as cognitive skills which include interpretation, analysis, inference, assessment, explanation and self-regulation. The author offers to use the terms «strong» and «weak» critical thinkers instead of just «critical» and «not critical» as he considers having dispositions to critical thinking can be more or less developed. P.A. Facione describes critical thinkers as curious, open-minded, flexible and understanding of other peoples' opinions, honest and fair to appraising their own ideas, diligent and self-confident in their reasoning, ready to reconsider their own opinions in case the change is necessary. Scholar generally points out to seven essential

critical thinking dispositions or habits of mind which characterize the person as: 1) truth-seeking, which means that the person tends to look for relevant reasons in order to gain new knowledge even if they contradict his own initial standpoints; 2) open-minded, admitting other people's opinions and ready to reconsider the own ones; 3) analytical, meaning anticipating possible results and outcomes of a problem; 4) systematic, meaning that the person is highly organized and diligent while dealing with problems; 5) confident in reasoning, relying on his own reasoning aptitude and trustful of his own abilities to judge; 6) inquisitive, which means being curious and willing to learn new information; 7) judicious, wise enough to see more than one solution to the problem and recognizing the responsibility to make judgments sometimes in ambiguous situations [4].

To the contrary, such habits of mind are absent in non-critical readers who are not indifferent to reasoning, are inflexible and never change their opinion. The author believes that people with weak critical thinking dispositions are usually impulsive, disorganized, easy to stop trying if face any difficulties and get satisfied with unreasonable facts. The author uses the term mindset to describe the person's habits of mind and suggests ideas to cultivate a positive critical thinking mindset. He calls for seeing the value of critical thinking, striving for constant improvement of our habits of mind; checking regularly our positive or negative tendency toward critical thinking; being ready to address and solve problems reflectively; forgiving ourselves missteps and trying to be persistent in our thinking processes [4].

From an educational prospective, positive critical thinking mindset can be cultivated in students by applying its principles within academic environment, for example, while reading literature. Students may use their critical thinking skills to deeply understand, interpret and analyze information and draw appropriate conclusions and inferences. Critical reading goes beyond traditional approach to processing information and involves its analysis and personal attitude to the text.

According to most scholars [4; 5; 6] critical reading skills help the readers to be independent and unbiased,

able to fit events in their lives with their picture of the world. Critical readers get used to apply their critical thinking skills every time they deal with information [5]. The studies showed positive correlation between critical thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation, inference, deduction, induction, and reading comprehension. It is also proved that anxiety leads to disrupting the thinking process and can prevent from recalling information and its processing [6].

The results of M.Larking's survey dedicated to defining the frequency of critical reading skills being applied by advanced level students showed dominance of comprehension rather than critical literacy. The author identified ten essential critical reading strategies which are necessary to be taught to ensure the college students can navigate authentic texts: 1) distinguish main and supporting ideas; 2) evaluate the credibility of the claim; 3) make relevant inferences about the text; 4) make judgments about how the text is argued; 5) question the author's assumptions; 6) decide how to use the text for your own study; 7) identify rhetorical devices; 8) identify power relations; 9) evaluate the quality of the text; 10) distinguish between fact and opinion [1].

M.Larking emphasizes the idea that distinguishing between fact and opinion must be the key skill for college students to achieve their academic success while identifying rhetorical devices requires more attention in the classroom [1].

It goes in line with the findings of D.Sunggingwati and H.T.M.Nguyen [7] who having studied the contents of the textbooks for the type of text comprehension questions found the prevalent number of low level questions which inhibit the development of critical reading skills. The authors also interviewed teachers about their experience in asking students the critical questions while reading texts. The results showed the teachers' reliance on textbooks which leads to practicing more fact questions rather than high level thinking types [7].

Thus, the problems students usually experience while reading texts can be divided into two main groups: language-related and non-linguistic problems. Language-related difficulties involve new vocabulary, syntax and the content of the information. Non-linguistic problems refer to the students' anxiety which hinders the process of comprehension [8].

Based on the findings of researchers in this field one can summarize the most effective reading tasks to develop critical reading skills: 1) Filling in the charts and tables while reading. 2) Discussing answers to the questions in groups of students with and without the teacher's management. 3) Writing critical reviews, summaries or notes. 4) Expressing the students' personal opinion in front of other students and the teacher. 5) Introducing before-reading discussion, while-reading and after-reading tasks. 6) Anticipating further actions and events in the text after reading its title and the first sentence. 7) Asking questions which the text is supposed to give answers to. 8) The analysis of the author's grammar forms and vocabulary choice in the text. 9) The analysis of writing a summary algorithm [6; 7; 8; 9].

**Purpose of the study.** Thus the purpose of this study is to investigate the attitude of low-intermediate students towards critical reading assignments at the English classes in Ukraine. The main tasks are the following: 1) to carry out a survey on students' attitude towards critical reading and critical reading instruction at university; 2) to test the students' critical reading skills while doing different reading tasks; 3) to interview the students on their assessment of the reading tasks to identify the habits of mind available to develop their critical reading skills.

**Methodology.** The study took place in spring 2021 at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University with first-year Choreography students involved. The data were collected from the students' questionnaire, the critical reading test and the students' interviews. At the first stage the students had to answer the questionnaire on their perspectives and attitude towards critical reading and critical reading instruction. It consisted of 10 Likert-type statements which the students had to agree or disagree with putting 1 in case they strongly agreed, 2 – partly agreed, 3 – equally agreed and disagreed, 4 – partly disagreed and 5 – strongly disagreed. At the following stage the students had to perform a critical reading test which involved reading the text (588 words) and completing 10 tasks involving various cognitive skills both on text factual information comprehension and critical reading tasks. The text was dedicated to the problem of the world of work changes and its topic was justified by the study program within the academic curriculum. Its purpose was to define the students' present abilities to perform critical reading assignments. The test had a multiple-choice format for the convenience of estimating results with four answer options to questions 1-5 and 8-10 and two options for questions 6-7. The assignments targeted the students' ability to identify the main idea of the text, state the author's purpose, understand vocabulary in context, and interpret the author's attitude to the problem. Tasks 1-5 were designed to check the students' understanding of the text vocabulary and aimed at finding factual information. Tasks 6-10 contained critical reading tasks. The students' low-intermediate and intermediate level of mastering English allowed for offering only those types of critical reading tasks which were connected with interpreting the evidence and could be estimated by applying a multiple-choice format. At the final stage the students were interviewed on their assessment of the reading assignments to the text. The aim of this interview was to see if the students possess the habits of mind necessary to develop their critical reading skills.

**Discussion and results.** The students' questionnaire on their perspectives and attitude towards critical reading and critical reading instructions at university adapted from M.Gorzycki et al. [2] was offered both in English and Ukrainian to avoid misunderstanding and anxiety which could interfere with giving true answers. The results are shown in Table 1.

The results were inconsistent with those of Gorzycki M. et al survey [2] and indicated that Ukrainian students did not overrate their critical reading skills too much and admitted critical reading importance for their academic achievements. Although the opinion on their ability to learn without academic reading gained the average point (mean 3,3) showing that about 50% of the students did not see the importance of academic literature. The similar point (mean 3,0) was obtained for the statement about poor rating of instructors if they give too much reading tasks which proved that almost a half of students did not like reading a lot.

The following reading test results are outlined in Table 2.

As seen from Table 2 the majority of correct answers were given to the tasks connected with understanding vocabulary in context (67-94%). The critical reading assignments results demonstrated difficulties for students to define the correct answer (9-16%) taking into account the fact that they were given options to choose from instead of answering on their own. The students were evidently challenged by inference and interpretation assignments which seemed to be unknown to them. The True / False task scored the most points among the critical reading assignments (49-51%) proving to be a

Table 1.

The students' perspectives and attitude towards critical reading

№	Questions	N	Mean	SD
1	Undergraduate studies should aim to make students proficient readers	42	2,4	1,13
2	Most of my courses so far have used a textbook as the primary reading material	42	2,7	1,31
3	I am very competent with reading articles from scholarly journals	42	3,8	1
4	I have a clear understanding of why critical reading is essential in my field of study	42	2,2	1,17
5	My instructors consistently and explicitly teach students how to read proficiently	42	2,2	1,14
6	Students can learn what they need to learn without academic reading	42	3,3	1,16
7	There is a strong relationship between reading proficiently and critical thinking	42	2,1	0,91
8	I always read the assigned materials carefully before going to class	42	2,2	1,18
9	Some students rate instructors poorly because they give lots of reading assignments	42	3,0	1,21
10	I would appreciate it if instructors would teach reading skills	42	1,7	1,27

Table 2.

Critical reading items with corresponding cognitive skill and the students' performance

№	Critical reading test item	Cognitive skill	Percentage of correct responses
1	In the text, identify the examples of changes in the world of work.	Understanding vocabulary in context	67%
2	What does the underlined word in bold <b>which</b> refer to in the text.	Understanding vocabulary in context	83%
3	What does the underlined word in bold <b>whom</b> refer to in the text.	Understanding vocabulary in context	81%
4	Match the word in bold in column A with the corresponding meaning in column B.	Understanding vocabulary in context	94%
5	Match the word in bold in column A with the corresponding meaning in column B.	Understanding vocabulary in context	93%
6	Define if the following statement is true or false.	Drawing inferences from the evidence	51%
7	Define if the following statement is true or false.	Drawing inferences from the evidence	49%
8	What is the main idea of the text?	Generalization of the text contents	11%
9	What is the author's purpose?	Interpretation of the author's intentions	16%
10	What is the author's attitude to the problem?	Drawing inferences from the evidence, expressing judgments	9%

common task at the English reading classes.

The following interview on the students' assessment of the reading assignments to the text at the second stage of the experiment revealed that 89% of students found tasks 1-5 more common to fulfill while tasks 8-10 appeared to be rather confusing as the students could not define the difference between the options to choose as the right answer. They argued that several options could be chosen as correct. The students assessed task 1 as «the most interesting» one, tasks 2-5 as «the easiest» ones, tasks 6 and 7 as more difficult and more boring as the previous ones. Tasks 8-9 were characterized as «dull» and «irrelevant to the problem under the discussion in the text». Task 10 was considered to be «the most challenging» because the students did not know «how to define the attitude of the author without speaking to him in person». This task caused the students' confusion and frustration. They confessed that such assignments had

never been given them before during their high school years and they preferred «to get more professionally relevant information and facts» rather than «marking time» with discussions about the author and the text.

**Conclusions.** These findings support the results of the previous surveys [4; 6; 7] about the lack of curiosity, relevant habits of mind and the majority of textbooks containing factual tasks which hinder the development of the readers' critical attitude to information. Although the students admitted the general importance of critical reading, they did not seem to understand the essence of these skills and showed indifference to critical reading tasks during the second and third stages of the experiment. Thus, the prospects of the further research aim at designing and implementation of a reading English texts program for university low-intermediate students which could involve more critical reading assignments to promote critical habits of mind.

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#### СТАВЛЕННЯ СТУДЕНТІВ НЕМОВНИХ СПЕЦІАЛЬНОСТЕЙ ДО КРИТИЧНОГО ЧИТАННЯ

**Анотація.** Стаття присвячена дослідженню ставлення студентів до завдань з критичного читання на заняттях з англійської мови. Застосування критичного мислення під час читання текстів має стати головним підходом до опрацювання інформації. У більшості досліджень пропонуються стратегії формування критичного мислення та читання для студентів з високим рівнем володіння іноземною мовою. Тому ця робота має на меті дослідити ставлення студентів із середнім рівнем володіння англійською мовою до завдань з критичного читання під час занять з англійської мови. Основними завданнями дослідження є такі: 1) провести опитування ставлення студентів до критичного читання та навчання критичному читанню в університеті; 2) перевірити наявність у студентів навичок критичного читання; 3) провести опитування студентів щодо їх оцінки завдань з читання, щоб з'ясувати наявність у них здатностей для розвитку навичок критичного читання. Дані були отримані за допомогою таких інструментів: анкетування, тест з критичного читання та усне опитування студентів. Результати дослідження підтвердили експериментальні дані закордонних вчених щодо відсутності у студентів зацікавленості в отриманні нових знань та відповідних здатностей до критичного опрацювання інформації, а також свідчили про наповненість підручників переважно текстовими завданнями на розуміння фактичних даних, що заважає розвитку критичного ставлення студентів до інформації. Хоча студенти й визнали важливість вмінь критичного читання, проте вони продемонстрували нерозуміння сутності цих навичок та байдужість до критичних текстових завдань протягом другого та третього етапів експерименту. Таким чином, перспективним для подальшого дослідження вважається розробка та впровадження програми читання англомовних текстів для студентів середнього рівня володіння англійською мовою, яка передбачатиме більше завдань з критичного читання для розвитку критичного способу мислення.

**Ключові слова:** ставлення; критичне читання; спосіб мислення; завдання; текст.