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A phenomenological study of EFL teachers' experiences in teaching critical reading

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Abstract

Critical reading plays a crucial role in developing students' critical literacy, enabling them to engage deeply with knowledge and apply it throughout their lifelong learning journey. However, there remains a lack of research exploring how teachers design and implement strategies to balance passive and active critical reading activities, particularly in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms in Indonesian higher education. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the strategies used by English teachers to cultivate critical reading skills in university students. Using a phenomenological study, data were collected through structured interviews with six English teachers from four universities in Indonesia. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti8, revealing two primary categories of critical reading strategies: passive and active. Passive strategies include guiding students to answer questions with diverse arguments, critique reading content, comprehend reading passages, and consult dictionaries for unfamiliar words. In contrast, active strategies involve previewing information, reading passages in detail, interpreting visual elements such as charts and diagrams, summarizing content, taking notes, and participating in discussions and reviews. This study highlights the importance of a balanced approach to critical reading, providing a practical framework for integrating passive and active strategies in EFL classrooms. By doing so, it offers valuable insights for English teachers seeking to enhance their students' critical literacy and adapt their teaching practices to meet the demands of a globalized educational landscape. This research not only addresses a critical gap in the field but also contributes to the broader discourse on effective EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: Critical literacy, Critical reading, EFL classrooms, Higher education, Teaching strategies.

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1. Introduction

Teachers who want to implement a critical literacy approach in their classrooms frequently lack awareness or expertise about what critical literacy is and how to implement it. While these teachers have been teaching English for approximately five to seven years at various levels of schools, a focus group discussion shows that some of them lack information on critics [1]. For effective incorporation of skill-based and essential literacy activities, the relationships between teachers and students necessitate specific instructional measures of clear teacher guidance. Although the teacher was unable to discuss critical literacy to teach skill-based literacy, students began to engage in critical literacy activities as they learned to be critical analysts of texts [2].

Although critical approaches to second language education are under attack at the policy level, teachers continue to encourage them in the classroom through contextualized, dependent, and often covert activities. Teachers' continued dedication to the power of critical engagement to improve the lives of their EAL students is demonstrated through the explanation of these activities [3]. The critical literacy strategy had a positive impact on the critical reading abilities of pre-service language teachers. The study group outperformed the control group in basic reading skills and had higher average post-test scores. The critical literacy approach was found to have a substantial impact on critical reading skills such as interpretation, examination, inference, and evaluation [4]. The teachers used a literature-based curriculum and a critical literacy approach to engage their students in a recursive exploration of concepts in English and French to deconstruct social norms, foster diversity, and develop self-reflexivity about complicity in social injustice. An ethnographic data discourse research reveals how Translanguaging opened up new possibilities [5].

The teaching strategy is one of the important aspects of the teaching reading process. Therefore, the teacher needs some appropriate strategies to achieve the teaching reading's goal. Teaching reading in higher education refers to the goal of teaching English that emphasizes reading English scientific texts. In the Indonesian context, some purposes that guide teachers in teaching reading relate to the ability to read foreign scientific literature and comprehend English written texts for academic purposes. That argument is supported by the standards of content for higher education skills like reading for gist, reading for specific information, reading for detailed comprehension, developing speed reading, training learners on specific reading strategies, and inferring meaning from context.

The main problem of teaching reading in higher education commonly involves the literacy skills needed to be successful in higher education through a module integrating conventional teaching and student-centered approaches to teaching critical reading [6]. Students must be taught the skills needed to be successful in completing tasks in their classes and future jobs by creating creative reading texts as part of reform and modernization in teaching reading [7]. Besides, students must think critically, connect ideas, and complete research projects within the extensive reading definitions, effectiveness, and some issues concerning the EFL classroom culture context [8]. That problem also arises in the Indonesian context since students train to do reading only for those purposes.

In improving students' interest in reading, they need to have experiences in learning reading by implementing various models of reading. The models of reading that exist nowadays are derived from some previous reading models in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Goodman's model, which stated that the factors in the reading process are optical, perceptual, syntactic, and meaning. Additionally, there is LaBerge & Samuels's serial model, and Rumelhart's model, which proposed an interactive model of reading that combines top-down and bottom-up models. In early 2007, a hypothetical model of the reading process was developed, including some sample processing strategies and types of knowledge, as described by Birch. The latest reading model, announced in 2018, is called the BHH reading model, which refers to the brain, head, and heart.

Based on the observation, the students as readers still engage in reading activities that focus solely on reading comprehension without considering the situational context. Their focus is just on understanding the content of the text, which is stated explicitly. Readers do not care about the intended meaning of the text. Therefore, a teacher or lecturer has to support learners to 'read between the lines.' Through this activity, readers will understand and deal with the information in the text that raises their curiosity. After all, they will be able to practice and see if there is something to be questioned, explored, researched, and shared [9]. By doing this activity, readers will be trained to read critically, and they can position themselves and infer the purpose of various texts. This activity for critical reading aligns with academic purposes, as reading involves searching for and learning information, quickly understanding content, comprehending texts, evaluating information, and criticizing texts. Reading activities are based on texts available in college/university textbooks. Each reading is accompanied by a before-reading and after-reading strategy, plus either a during-reading or vocabulary strategy, followed by a practice activity.

Reading, which is among basic linguistic skills, has a significant position in individuals' intellectual life. This is because perception, meaning construction, information retrieval, and the reuse of the acquired information in communicative processes in written communication are heavily dependent upon reading activities. Reading is a complex and interactive process between the reader and the writer that extends beyond a literal reading of the text [10]. It allows readers to actively participate in knowledge interpretation, decision-making, and assessment. Integrated college English courses, on the other hand, place a greater emphasis on students' language skills while restricting their critical thinking abilities.

The concept of critical reading, recently put forward as a model approach especially in education, can be regarded as an attempt at "re-reading," which requires handling many concepts affecting our lives directly or indirectly with a wider perspective. The most important part of the literary variety of the concept, which implies numerous novelties, is the emphasis on ideal reading and reading beyond the text Hussien [11] defines critical reading as "ideal reading." He supports that critical reading involves being in a communicational interaction with the text and the ability to comment on and evaluate the text. An individual's ability to retain what he has read in his mind for a long time can only be possible through critical reading. Akin et al. [12] points out that critical reading can be conducted by people who can be called "intellectuals". He also

emphasized that the way to enlightenment passes through critical reading, developing a personal competency limitation for critical reading.

Critical reading requires a process of active communication where comments and evaluations on the text are conducted. In critical reading, the text being read forms the basis for other readings, while reading of various texts forms the basis of the text being read at that time. Besides, although the reading process ends, the meaning transmission of the text is still in progress. These qualities critical reading possesses are quite sufficient for the information and production age. To be aligned with the age, it is necessary to create different and new information using inherent information and thinking processes. The active nature of critical reading has a setting that can enable the realization of this structure. This study aims to explore how to elevate students' active critical reading and develop students' critical passive reading skills.

In this study, the writers emphasize the discussion on teachers' strategies for boosting students' critical reading in the EFL classroom. It is not merely about reading comprehension but about guiding students to become critical readers. Students must interpret texts based on their experiential knowledge. Additionally, they need to be critical in their analyses, responsible in their reading, and aware of their emotions, as they will become English teachers in the future. Two research questions guide this study:

1. How do English teachers use strategies to develop students' passive critical reading?
2. How do they use strategies to elevate students' active critical reading?

2. Literature Review

A large and growing body of literature about students' critical literacy has been identified by some writers; a survey on critical literacy as a pedagogical approach to teaching English in Indonesia in an EFL context. There is an instructional model of critical literacy: balancing conventional and critical literacy. Thus, teachers' reinterpretations of critical literacy policy need to prioritize praxis. The effect of the critical literacy approach on pre-service language teachers' critical reading skills. Moreover, critical literacy can be found in the field of elementary social studies: juxtaposing historical master and counter-narratives in picture books. Besides that, sounding the garden, voicing a problem: mobilizing critical literacy through personal digital inquiry with young children. Also, translanguaging for transgressive praxis: promoting critical literacy in a multiage bilingual classroom [1-3, 5, 13-15]. Researchers grasp the theories from previous studies on critical literacy variables in support of the study of the researcher. The researcher believes the critical literacy of the previous authors contributed to creating this study.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on critical literacy by these following writers; as extenders and clarifiers of children's talk, two project aims turned out to conflict with each other. While the children enjoyed looking closely at the pictures and discussing the books' possible meanings, without repeated questions and prompts, they focused on the book as a story, not on how it was constructed by the author and illustrator. This required a more teacher-focused approach than what we had planned. Activity Theory perspective on how tool use mediates object-driven activity classified into five affordances are not in digital tools but rather are evoked through activity mediated by these tools. The review challenges are how multilingual learners are positioned within research, advocating practices that frame language learning and critical engagement as mutually reinforcing endeavors toward critical praxis. On the critical literacy tradition, the article outlines a range of salient socio-technical understandings of personal data generation and processing. Specifically, the article proposes a framework of Personal Data Literacies that distinguishes five significant domains: (1) Data Identification, (2) Data Understandings, (3) Data Reflexivity, (4) Data Uses, and (5) Data Tactics [16-19]. The researcher understands the ideas from past studies on important literacy factors in support of the researcher's investigation. The researcher feels that the preceding writers' critical literacy was helpful in the creation of this study.

Studies on teaching reading comprehension have been explored by the following; there is the effect of the tea party strategy toward students' reading comprehension of narrative text that can enhance students' reading skills. The relationships between reading strategies, English proficiency, and reading comprehension might be achieved among Saudi high school EFL learners. The REAP strategy can significantly improve students' reading comprehension of narrative texts. How the EFL learners read, encode, annotate, and ponder (REAP) strategy and reading interest impact reading comprehension achievement, providing a positive effect in empowering students' reading skills. Assessing students' reading comprehension and interpretation using the toolkit. Using note-taking in reading demonstrates effectiveness in reading activities for EFL learners. The use of the Cornell note-taking system can help eighth-grade students alleviate the impact of interruptions while reading at home [20-26]. Researchers agree with the findings of previous researchers and comprehend the concepts from previous studies for critical instructional reading in support of the researcher's inquiry. Fortunately, reading strategies can help learners improve students' critical literacy, which can be used in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Explanations on critical reading have been revealed. To enhance EFL critical reading, creative writing, and problem-solving skills of secondary stage students, a problem-based learning program at school might be used to engage students in critical and creative thinking. When evaluating & developing critical reading skills, students can utilize an interactive digital storytelling environment. Moreover, a brain-based learning program has affected the development of primary stage students' English language critical reading skills. The key issues in research on students' critical reading and learning in the 21st-century information society are significant. In the twenty-first-century information society, student readers can draw on a wealth of resources available through various print and digital technologies when seeking well-grounded answers to crucial socio-scientific issues. In raising EFL learners' awareness towards developing critical reading skills, a program based on brain-based learning can help develop critical and creative reading skills among preparatory stage students [14, 21, 27-31]. Earlier studies have encouraged researchers to use critical reading as a strategy for supporting critical reading, creative

writing, and working skills in EFL learners. Previous studies have had an impact on the researcher's study because they discussed the variables related to the impact of the study.

Some investigations about the students' critical reading have been described to enlighten the key issues in research on students' critical reading and learning in the 21st-century information society. In the twenty-first-century information society, student readers can draw on a wealth of resources available through a variety of print and digital technologies when seeking well-grounded answers to crucial socio-scientific issues. Comparing college students' reading comprehension levels, critical reading, and study skills. This study compared reading comprehension, critical reading, and use of study skills between students reading e-Texts on e-Readers and those reading with paper texts. Critical reading is the understanding of scientific texts [29, 31]. The current study above aimed to investigate qualitatively whether students' critical reading incorporates students' reading comprehension for this identification.

Over the past decade, most research on teachers' teaching strategies has been explored by several writers, such as the analysis of English teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension. Teachers used some strategies in teaching reading, with the highest percentages being Question Generating (27%), Encouraging the use of dictionaries (25%), and Question Answering (23%). On the other hand, English teachers' perceptions of strategies in teaching reading comprehension aim to motivate students. The review of this study showed that teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension had a considerably positive effect on reading comprehension activities. An analysis of English teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension at the second-grade students of Junior High School 1 of Wonomulyo identified two strategies used: Scaffolding and QARs (Question-Answer Relationship). The scaffolding strategy helps students develop ideas that are readable by them. QARs (Question-Answer Relationship) allows teachers to assess how well their students understand what the teacher has provided to them [12, 32, 33]. From previous findings, teaching strategies implemented by teachers encourage students to think independently, participate actively, and express themselves freely when they are given creative education. Students who receive creative education are more likely to become motivated easily.

Reading comprehension strategies in secondary content area classrooms: Just as elementary teachers provide minimal reading comprehension instruction, middle and secondary teachers are equally unlikely to utilize their instructional time to explain, model, and coach students through reading strategies. Teacher use of and attitudes towards reading comprehension instruction are important. Reading is an essential material, similar to other skills like writing, speaking, and listening. A review of studies on cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies in teaching reading comprehension for ESL/EFL learners reveals that ESL/EFL teachers need to keep updating their teaching methods to meet the students' needs, particularly in the use of correct reading strategies. The study elaborates on teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension. The results indicate that teachers need to be equipped with effective strategies in teaching reading comprehension to help students cope with difficulties in learning English [34-37]. Reading the strategies used by the ESL/EFL teachers that have been explained by various authors presents several interpretative that refer to them as references to the foundation.

Reviews on teachers' strategies for teaching critical reading have been clarified in teaching reading comprehension of procedural texts. The effectiveness of reading strategies on reading comprehension has been analyzed. An analysis of English teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension influences students' improvement in reading comprehension by learning how to teach reading strategies. Explicit reading strategy instruction or daily use of strategies and studying the teaching of reading comprehension through naturalistic classroom observation in English L2 are emphasized. Teachers' strategies in teaching reading comprehension are described through an analysis of teachers' strategies. Three strategies that the teacher used include: a) As for the conclusion based on the English teacher strategies in the opening activity, beginning with greetings, reciting prayers, asking about the news, literacy, and directing the topic to be discussed; b) As for data about the English teacher strategies in the core activity, starting with stimulation according to the lesson, conveying the core of learning, allowing students to ask questions, and concluding the learning outcomes; c) The English teacher strategies at the closing activity involve summarizing the subject matter, giving a conclusion, and assigning students their tasks [32, 38-42]. Teachers play essential roles in teaching critical reading abilities that are already covered in this study. Teachers must possess critical reading skills and be able to identify them in order to teach these skills to their students.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences of English teachers in implementing strategies for teaching reading, with a particular focus on both passive and active critical reading strategies in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. The phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges in fostering students' critical reading skills within the unique context of EFL instruction. Grounded in sociocultural theory [43] which highlights the interplay between social interaction and cognitive development, as well as developmental systems theory [44] and achievement emotions theory [45] the study examined how these theoretical frameworks informed and influenced the teachers' strategies in cultivating critical reading abilities among students. The research was driven by the following questions:

3.2. Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at multiple universities across Indonesia, involving six English teachers with over 10 years of experience teaching reading comprehension courses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling [46] ensuring that the teachers had substantial experience and had been teaching reading comprehension for several years. The sample consisted of eight participants from four universities, all of whom had expertise in teaching critical reading skills to EFL students. This selection was aimed at obtaining rich, informed insights into the teachers' perspectives and strategies.

Table 1.
Participants' profiles.

Participant	University	Years of Experience	Expertise	Role in Study
P1	University A	Over 12 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies
P2	University A	Over 14 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies
P3	University B	Over 20 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies
P4	University B	Over 15 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies
P5	University C	Over 10 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies
P6	University C	Over 11 years	Teaching critical reading skills	Provided insights on teaching strategies

3.4. Data Collection

Following the narrative case study design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants. These interviews aimed to capture the teachers' personal experiences and strategies related to enhancing students' critical reading skills. Teachers were asked to share their beliefs about the strategies they used to encourage both passive and active critical reading, providing examples from their teaching practices, particularly how they tackled common challenges faced in the EFL classroom. The interviews were designed to explore the range of strategies teachers implemented to develop students' reading comprehension, from passive activities such as silent reading and gap-filling exercises to more active strategies like group work and critical analysis of texts. The collected data provided insight into the teachers' approaches and their understanding of how to elevate students' literacy skills through these reading practices.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through a qualitative coding process using Atlas.ti8 software, which facilitated the systematic examination of the interview transcripts. The analysis was deductive in nature, with the main themes predefined based on the research focus. The social-ecological model was applied as a qualitative research tool to categorize and interpret the data. The analysis identified two key areas of focus: passive critical reading and active critical reading strategies. These areas were further broken down into sub-themes, with teachers' strategies classified under each category. The analysis focused on the following strategies: 1) Passive Critical Reading Strategies (Silent reading to respond to multiple-choice exercises, Superficial comprehension questions, Gap-filling exercises, True-false statements, and Vocabulary and dictionary work) and 2) Active Critical Reading Strategies (Encouraging students to read "between the lines" for deeper understanding, Group work, and collaborative tasks, with or without teacher guidance, Use of diagrams and tables to understand the coherence and logic of the text, Teaching students to create graphic representations of texts, Book reviews, summary writing, and notetaking as individual tasks for critical analysis). The iterative coding process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how teachers navigated the complexities of fostering critical reading skills in their students. By focusing on these defined strategies, the study aimed to shed light on the practical applications of teaching reading in EFL classrooms and the role of teachers in supporting students' development as critical readers.

4. Findings

This study scrutinizes the English teachers' strategies for boosting students' critical reading, especially for EFL students in English education study programs at the university. These critical readings are divided into passive critical reading and active critical reading, beyond the strategies implemented in the EFL classroom. according to Davies [47] and Moore [48] there are groups of reading activities into two kinds: passive and active. Passive reading tasks include silent reading to respond to multiple-choice exercises, superficial comprehension questions, gap-filling exercises, true-false statements, vocabulary, and dictionary work. Such tasks involve silent reading and do not require students to read deeply to answer the questions, as once students locate the information in the text, they are likely to find the "correct" answer. Thus, these tasks offer limited learning potential.

4.1. Passive Critical Reading Strategies

This theme highlights how EFL teachers utilize silent reading to scaffold students' comprehension before engaging with multiple-choice questions. Although multiple-choice tasks are often considered low-level in terms of cognitive engagement, the teachers strategically use them as tools to promote attentive reading. Encouraging students to read questions before the passage fosters focused reading and primes students to look for relevant information. Re-reading strategies are employed to deepen understanding and improve retention. Monitoring students' responses provides a window into their comprehension, allowing teachers to offer immediate support. In this context, silent reading is not merely passive; it is guided and reflective, encouraging students to move from surface to slightly deeper engagement with texts.

"Fostering a habit of careful reading improves both academic performance and problem-solving skills, aiding in understanding complex materials and making informed decisions. I encourage students to read the text thoroughly

before answering questions because it helps them understand the context and content. It can also improve their comprehension and critical thinking skills, and lead to more accurate and thoughtful responses.” (participant 1)

“I always direct students to read and understand the questions before engaging with the passage. This method helps them focus on key information, improve their comprehension, and ensure they can find relevant details in the text efficiently. By understanding the questions first, students are better prepared to tackle the passage and provide thoughtful responses.” (participant 2)

4.2. Superficial Comprehension Questions

In this theme, teachers emphasize surface-level understanding through literal and direct questions but creatively extend these by incorporating inferential questioning. Closed-ended questions are used to ensure that students grasp explicit information in a text. However, teachers also prepare students to engage with texts by previewing content and anticipating structure, helping them form expectations and context before reading. By embedding inference-based questions, teachers push students to interpret meaning beyond what is explicitly stated. These strategies demonstrate how teachers blend passive comprehension tasks with critical thinking elements, bridging the gap between surface understanding and deeper cognitive processes.

“I use closed-ended questions to focus on specific details within the text. This strategy helps students identify and recall specific information, ensuring they understand key facts and elements. I think closed-ended questions are effective in testing comprehension and reinforcing the importance of paying attention to details. By using this strategy, I can quickly assess students’ grasp of the material and provide immediate feedback to guide their learning process.” (participant 6)

“I encourage my students to preview the text and anticipate key points before diving into the reading. This strategy helps them develop a framework of what to expect, making it easier to understand and retain the material. By previewing, students can identify headings, subheadings, and any highlighted information that can guide their focus. I anticipate key points to activate their critical thinking abilities, encouraging them to draw connections and predict the content. This proactive strategy fosters more effective and engaged reading, ultimately enhancing students’ comprehension and overall learning experience.” (participant 2)

4.3. Gap-Filling Exercises

Gap-filling tasks are conventionally associated with vocabulary drills, yet teachers in this study approach them as opportunities to cultivate linguistic awareness and contextual reading. They guide students to recognize polysemous words (words with multiple meanings) and interpret them based on context. Vocabulary enrichment becomes a central aim, embedded into reading comprehension rather than treated as an isolated skill. By using contextual clues, students are trained to become autonomous in deciphering meanings. Observing student responses during these exercises allows teachers to assess the depth of understanding and provide tailored interventions. Thus, gap-filling becomes more than a mechanical exercise; it is transformed into a formative activity that supports nuanced language comprehension.

“I encourage students to understand the multiple meanings of words to enhance their vocabulary and comprehension skills. Then, I lead students in exploring different meanings and contexts. Students can develop a richer understanding of language and become more adept at interpreting and analyzing texts. This practice also helps them to navigate more complex readings and real-world situations where word meanings may vary. By encouraging this habit, I foster students to be more nuanced and versatile in their learning and communication.” (participant 1)

“I promote vocabulary enrichment as an integral part of my exercises to help students expand their language skills and improve their comprehension. By incorporating vocabulary-building activities into our lessons, I encourage students to explore new words, understand their meanings and usage, and apply them in various contexts. I use this strategy to improve their reading and writing skills, while it also increases their confidence in communication. I believe that fostering a rich vocabulary is essential for their academic success and overall language development.” (participant 2)

4.4. True-False Statements

This theme explores how teachers use true-false tasks to sharpen students’ attention to detail and factual analysis. Far from being rote, these tasks are designed to cultivate critical reading by encouraging students to question the accuracy and logic of the text. Teachers teach students to spot qualifiers and distinguish fact from opinion, enhancing their analytical skills. They also prompt students to read in detail and to cross-check statements with textual evidence, developing habits of accuracy and skepticism essential for academic literacy. The strategy of response analysis further supports reflective teaching practices, ensuring that learning is monitored and misconceptions are corrected.

“I always direct students to read carefully and identify key information in the text. I also encourage students to read precisely so that they learn to pay attention to important details and understand the context better. I find this strategy helps them to extract relevant information more efficiently and provides a solid foundation for their responses. I believe it also improves their critical thinking abilities, allowing them to link ideas and infer conclusions from the identified main points. In the end, I see that this strategy promotes a more profound and thorough grasp of the material.” (participant 1)

“I teach students to analyze qualifiers and ensure factual accuracy to enhance their critical thinking and analytical skills. By examining qualifiers, words or phrases that limit or modify statements, students learn to identify biases, assumptions, and the strength of arguments. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of verifying factual accuracy

by checking information with reliable sources. This strategy helps students notice important details and question information, which are essential for their academic success.” (participant 2)

4.5. Vocabulary and Dictionary Work

This theme explores how EFL teachers employ vocabulary development strategies to support passive critical reading and strengthen students’ linguistic foundations. Vocabulary instruction is not treated as isolated memorization but as an integral component of critical text engagement. Teachers use vocabulary-focused multiple-choice questions to reinforce understanding of lexical meaning in context, helping students distinguish word usage and build precision in comprehension.

Another critical aspect of this theme is promoting dictionary use to foster learner autonomy. Encouraging students to independently look up words builds not only vocabulary but also research and problem-solving skills. Teachers further enrich students’ lexical awareness by explicitly teaching synonyms, antonyms, and context clues strategies that empower students to infer meaning independently and handle complex texts with more confidence. Note-taking is also incorporated as a metacognitive tool, helping students process, summarize, and retain vocabulary and ideas. Overall, this theme reveals how vocabulary work supports critical reading by deepening language comprehension, enhancing text interpretation, and cultivating habits of active learning.

“I implement vocabulary-focused multiple-choice questions to enhance students’ language skills and comprehension. These questions will help students identify and understand the meanings of new words within different contexts. Then, by regularly practicing with multiple-choice questions, students can expand their vocabulary, improve their ability to distinguish between similar words, and reinforce their overall language proficiency. I believe that this approach is an effective way to assess and support their vocabulary development, ensuring they are well-equipped for both academic success and everyday communication.” (participant 1)

“I encourage students to use dictionaries as tools for independent learning. By teaching them how to effectively look up words, they can expand their vocabulary and deepen their understanding of language on their own. I am glad to see that this practice can promote self-reliance and enable students to control their learning process. I also motivate students to use dictionaries that help them develop research skills and foster a habit of lifelong learning, which is essential for their academic and personal growth.” (participant 2).

4.6. Active Critical Reading Strategies

4.6.1. Encouraging Deeper Analysis (Reading Between the Lines)

This theme focuses on how EFL university teachers promote active engagement with texts by implementing strategies that foster deeper analysis, collaboration, and interpretation. These strategies reflect a shift from passive decoding to dynamic meaning-making, aligning with higher-order thinking skills essential for academic literacy.

“I find that instructing students to highlight key ideas and make inferences is crucial for enhancing comprehension and critical thinking. I also guide them to identify main concepts and supporting details so they can better retain information. I think making inferences involves reading between the lines and drawing conclusions based on context clues, which helps develop analytical skills. Therefore, I agree that these techniques promote active engagement and higher-order thinking, essential for academic success and real-world problem-solving.” (participant 5)

“I consider teaching summarization techniques to be essential for better comprehension and retention of material. I guide students to summarize key points and main ideas from texts to improve their understanding and recall information. I also implement strategies such as identifying topic sentences, recognizing supporting details, and paraphrasing the content in their own words. I find these strategies help students focus on the core message and develop critical thinking skills, which are invaluable for academic success and lifelong learning.” (participant 1)

4.6.2. Collaborative Reading Activities

Group-based strategies such as the jigsaw technique are employed to cultivate peer learning, accountability, and shared understanding. Through collaborative tasks, students are encouraged to co-construct meaning, reinforce one another’s comprehension, and develop interpersonal skills. Facilitating discussions and peer collaboration enhances critical thinking and communication by enabling students to express insights, challenge perspectives, and co-create solutions. These interactions also create a supportive classroom culture that values diverse viewpoints and nurtures active participation.

“I find that assigning group-based reading tasks, such as the jigsaw technique, promotes collaborative learning and deeper comprehension. I organize the class into small groups, giving each group a different section of the text to read and become proficient in. Afterward, I have students regroup to share their findings, effectively teaching each other the content. I think this strategy develops accountability, encourages peer teaching, and helps students develop critical thinking and communication skills. By working together, I assume that students develop a more thorough understanding of the material and learn to appreciate diverse perspectives.” (participant 6)

“I suppose facilitating discussions to share insights and negotiate answers is essential for active learning and deeper understanding. I motivate open dialogue where students can exchange ideas, challenge perspectives, and collaboratively solve problems. By guiding discussions, I assist students in expressing their ideas, listening to their peers, and building upon each other’s inputs. So, I can assume that this strategy not only improves understanding but also promotes critical thinking, communication skills, and a sense of togetherness within the classroom.” (participant 3)

4.6.3. Using Diagrams and Tables for Comprehension

Teachers integrate visual aids to scaffold comprehension and analytical thinking. Activities such as transferring information from graphics to text encourage students to synthesize visual data into coherent written explanations, reinforcing the link between reading and writing. Strategies like using mind maps and distinguishing between facts and opinions enhance students' ability to organize, evaluate, and critically respond to information. Allowing students to seek clarification about visual representations also contributes to a learner-centered environment that encourages curiosity and critical engagement.

"I think providing information transfer activities, such as converting graphics to text, is an effective way to enhance comprehension and critical thinking. I design tasks where students analyze visual data such as charts, graphs, and diagrams and translate it into written explanations. I assume this practice helps students interpret and synthesize information, improving their ability to communicate complex concepts clearly. Besides, I see that by engaging in these activities, students develop a deeper understanding of the material and strengthen their analytical and writing skills, which are crucial for academic success and beyond." (participant 4)

Based on my experience, encouraging students to use mind maps for structuring ideas is an effective way to enhance their creativity and organizational skills. I introduce mind mapping as a visual tool that helps students break down complex topics into manageable parts. I also guide students to arrange ideas in a hierarchical structure with branches and sub-branches, so they can see the relationships between concepts and better retain information. Then, I decided this strategy fosters critical thinking and enables students to plan and organize their thoughts more effectively, whether for writing assignments, presentations, or studying for exams. (participant 1)

4.6.4. Graphic Representation of Texts

This sub-theme highlights the use of visual representation to help students structure and internalize complex information. Through mind-mapping exercises, students organize key ideas and supporting details, facilitating better retention and conceptual clarity. Scanning techniques are taught to enable efficient information retrieval from large texts, while visual storytelling engages students by linking abstract ideas with concrete imagery. Guiding students to interpret and analyze graphical data helps them build data literacy and apply critical thinking to real-world content, thus preparing them for academic and professional challenges.

"I find assigning mind-mapping exercises to outline key ideas is an effective way to enhance students' organizational and critical thinking skills. Besides, I incorporate mind maps as a visual tool to help students break down complex topics into main ideas and supporting details. I think that by visually structuring their thoughts, students can see the relationships between concepts and retain information more effectively. Therefore, I see this technique fosters creativity, improves comprehension, and aids in the planning and organization of their work, making it easier to grasp and communicate complex ideas." (participant 2)

"I encourage scanning techniques to extract relevant information, which is essential for efficient reading and comprehension. I teach students to quickly identify and focus on keywords, headings, and subheadings while skimming through a text. Then, this strategy helps them locate the most important information without getting burdened by unnecessary details. So, by mastering scanning techniques, students can enhance their ability to process large amounts of information swiftly. This will make them more effective learners." (participant 5).

5. Discussion

Reading instruction in EFL university settings plays a vital role in shaping students into critical readers capable of navigating complex academic texts. Each institution, through its curriculum, aims to develop students' reading competence, not only in terms of decoding texts but also in making meaning, evaluating arguments, and engaging critically with content. As highlighted in Davies [47] the concept of critical reading is broadly divided into passive and active dimensions, both of which are evident in the strategies employed by EFL teachers in this study.

The findings reveal that EFL teachers frequently employ strategies associated with passive critical reading, such as silent reading followed by multiple-choice questions, vocabulary exercises, gap-filling tasks, and the use of dictionaries. These strategies are generally teacher-centered and focus on comprehension at a literal level. For instance, implementing vocabulary-focused multiple-choice questions enables students to grasp word meanings in context without necessarily engaging in deeper textual analysis. Similarly, asking students to identify true/false statements or complete gap-filling exercises based on textual information tests their ability to recall and locate explicit content but often does not require them to engage in interpretative reasoning. Encouraging dictionary use, while useful for vocabulary development, typically supports independent surface-level reading rather than critical interrogation of meaning. These strategies, while foundational, operate within the boundaries of Davies [47] passive critical reading, as they do not require extended discussion, justification, or negotiation of meaning.

Nonetheless, these passive strategies serve as necessary scaffolding, especially for lower-proficiency learners. They help build lexical knowledge, basic comprehension, and familiarity with text structures, which are essential precursors to more advanced critical reading tasks. Contrastingly, the study also highlights a strong orientation toward active critical reading through strategies that require students to engage with texts more deeply. Teachers guide students to read between the lines, make inferences, and construct summaries, all of which demand higher-order thinking and a nuanced understanding of the text. As Davies [47] suggests, such activities go beyond superficial reading and instead foster analytical reasoning and interpretive skills.

Teachers in this study implement summarization techniques, encourage highlighting key ideas, and promote note-taking strategies that not only enhance retention but also require students to process and reorganize information actively. These practices align with Davies' view of book reviews, summary writing, and note-taking as key components of active reading.

Moreover, the incorporation of collaborative reading activities, such as the jigsaw technique, small-group discussions, and peer problem-solving, reflects a shift toward socially constructed learning. These strategies allow learners to negotiate meaning, challenge assumptions, and develop communication and reasoning skills, an essential move from individual decoding to collective interpretation. Such collaboration aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the value of social interaction in cognitive development.

An additional feature of active critical reading is the use of visual aids, such as diagrams, tables, mind maps, and graphs, to support comprehension. Teachers encourage students to transfer information from graphic to textual form and vice versa. These tasks, though sometimes time-consuming, are beneficial for understanding. Davies [47] notes, enhance students' ability to interpret, analyze, and synthesize complex information. The practice of creating mind maps, distinguishing fact vs. opinion, and analyzing graphical data reinforces students' capacity to structure their understanding, draw logical connections, and identify key arguments within a text. These strategies also develop data literacy, which is increasingly important in academic contexts.

Furthermore, strategies such as scanning for key details, visual storytelling, and clarifying visual information cater to diverse learning styles and foster multimodal literacy. They help students move from linear, textual comprehension to integrated, holistic understanding, equipping them with the tools to handle academic texts more efficiently and independently. While passive and active reading strategies may appear dichotomous, the findings suggest they are complementary rather than oppositional. Teachers strategically use passive strategies to build foundational skills before transitioning students to more active, cognitively demanding tasks. This progression mirrors Bloom's taxonomy, where students move from knowledge recall to analysis and evaluation.

The integration of both strategies also reflects the practical realities of classroom teaching, where learner proficiency, institutional expectations, and time constraints shape instructional decisions. Teachers demonstrate pedagogical flexibility by adapting their methods to learners' needs, aiming to strike a balance between building language proficiency and fostering critical literacy.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that teaching reading to EFL students demands well-structured strategies to enhance their critical reading skills and foster critical literacy. Teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating both passive and active critical reading, guiding students to navigate reading sessions with confidence and effectiveness. Passive critical reading focuses on comprehension, where students engage with texts systematically, using guided questions to deepen their understanding. Extensive reading is essential in this process, enabling students to grasp content thoroughly and answer comprehension questions accurately. Conversely, active critical reading promotes collaboration, encouraging students to work in pairs or groups to analyze texts in greater depth. Through discussions, they explore diagrams, charts, tables, and descriptive elements, honing their ability to interpret and present graphical information as part of their critical reading practice. This research provides valuable insights for university students and educators, offering practical strategies to strengthen both passive and active critical reading skills. Teachers can apply these approaches to support students in developing critical literacy and mastering reading comprehension. Additionally, the findings of this study contribute to the academic discourse on critical reading, serving as a foundation for future research in this field.

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