



## EXAMINING THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN BOOSTING READING COMPREHENSION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the role of critical thinking skills in boosting the reading comprehension of university students. Despite the centrality of reading comprehension to academic success, many students struggle to engage with texts beyond surface understanding. Critical thinking, which encourages learners to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, is increasingly recognized as a key factor in overcoming these challenges. To explore this relationship, the study employed a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with two groups of participants: five university teachers who teach English and reading-related courses, and seven undergraduate students enrolled in different academic programs. The interviews were designed to elicit rich perspectives on how critical thinking is taught, perceived, and practiced in relation to reading comprehension. Teachers highlighted that while students often acquire basic reading skills, they frequently lack the ability to interpret arguments, question assumptions, and make inferences—skills that critical thinking directly cultivates. Students, on the other hand, reported that classroom activities fostering debate, questioning, and reflection improved their engagement with texts and enhanced their comprehension. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three core themes: (1) critical thinking as a catalyst for deeper textual understanding, (2) the role of instructional strategies in embedding critical thinking into reading practices, and (3) challenges such as time constraints, limited resources, and varying student motivation. Overall, the findings suggest that integrating critical thinking strategies into reading instruction can significantly enhance comprehension outcomes. The study recommends adopting active learning methods and reflective practices to strengthen the link between critical thinking and reading comprehension at the university level.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Thinking, Reading Comprehension, University Students, Qualitative Research, Teacher Perspectives, Student Engagement*

### Introduction

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as one of the most essential academic skills for university students, serving as a foundation for higher-order learning, critical inquiry, and academic success. While many students can decode texts and understand basic meanings, the challenge lies in moving beyond literal comprehension to deeper levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Critical thinking, defined as the disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, and evaluating information (Facione, 2020; Shah et al., 2025), has emerged as a crucial competence that directly enhances the quality of students' reading comprehension. Scholars have long emphasized that higher education must do more than transmit knowledge; it must equip students with the intellectual tools to interrogate information and apply it meaningfully (Paul & Elder, 2019). This study explores the role of critical thinking skills in boosting university students' reading comprehension, drawing on insights from teachers and students through a qualitative lens.



The importance of critical thinking in academic contexts cannot be overstated. According to Ennis (2018), critical thinking empowers students to distinguish between fact and opinion, recognize assumptions, and draw sound conclusions. Such abilities are particularly important when students engage with complex academic texts that require not only understanding but also evaluation of arguments and integration of ideas. Research suggests that students with strong critical thinking skills are better able to extract meaning from texts, recognize authorial intent, and apply information to new contexts (Liu et al., 2014). Conversely, limited critical thinking capacity often leaves students confined to surface-level comprehension, preventing them from engaging with texts in transformative ways (Halpern, 2014).

In university settings, reading comprehension extends far beyond language proficiency; it underpins success in disciplines ranging from the humanities to the sciences. Yet, educators frequently report that students struggle with tasks that require critical engagement with reading materials (Tiruneh et al., 2017). These struggles manifest in difficulties with summarizing arguments, identifying logical fallacies, and connecting theoretical frameworks with practical applications. Such limitations are not only barriers to academic performance but also to lifelong learning, as critical reading skills are closely linked with the ability to participate in informed decision-making and knowledge creation (Brookfield, 2017).

The significance of linking critical thinking with reading comprehension has become even more pronounced in the context of global information flows. In an era of information abundance, students are constantly confronted with diverse sources of knowledge, including digital texts, scholarly articles, and social media narratives. Without critical thinking skills, the ability to discern credibility, evaluate evidence, and synthesize perspectives remains compromised (Lai, 2011). Higher education institutions therefore have a pressing responsibility to embed critical thinking into reading instruction so that students can navigate complex information environments effectively.

Several studies provide evidence of the positive relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. For example, Fahim and Saeepour (2011) found that Iranian EFL students who received explicit critical thinking instruction demonstrated significant gains in reading comprehension. Similarly, Yeh (2019) reported that fostering reflective questioning strategies enhanced students' ability to analyze academic texts and improved their comprehension outcomes. These findings resonate with the argument by Abrami et al. (2015) that instructional interventions promoting critical thinking lead to measurable improvements in a range of academic skills, including reading. Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in understanding how critical thinking is perceived and practiced in real classroom contexts, particularly in non-Western higher education systems.

This gap is particularly evident when considering the lived experiences of both teachers and students. Teachers often face the challenge of balancing curriculum demands with the need to cultivate deeper thinking habits in students. Research indicates that time constraints, large class sizes, and standardized assessment pressures often limit the integration of critical thinking into daily reading instruction (Van der Zanden et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2025). On the student side, perceptions of reading are often shaped by exam-oriented learning cultures, where comprehension is equated with memorization rather than critical engagement (Kuhn, 2019). These dynamics suggest that while the theoretical importance of critical thinking for reading comprehension is widely acknowledged, its practical enactment in university classrooms remains uneven.

The present study seeks to address this problem by qualitatively exploring how teachers and students understand and experience the link between critical thinking and reading



comprehension. By interviewing five teachers and seven students, the research provides a nuanced perspective on instructional practices, perceived benefits, and the challenges of fostering critical thinking in reading contexts. This methodological choice aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) argument that qualitative inquiry is particularly effective in capturing lived experiences and contextual meanings, offering insights that quantitative measures may overlook.

The problem at the core of this study is the persistent gap between students' surface-level comprehension and the deeper analytical skills required for academic success. While many students demonstrate proficiency in literal comprehension tasks, their ability to interpret arguments, evaluate evidence, and make connections across texts remains underdeveloped. This issue not only affects academic achievement but also undermines the broader educational mission of universities, which is to cultivate independent thinkers and lifelong learners. Addressing this gap requires a clearer understanding of how critical thinking can be systematically integrated into reading instruction and how both teachers and students perceive its role in enhancing comprehension.

Ultimately, the study is significant because it contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving higher education outcomes through pedagogical innovation. By focusing on critical thinking as a pathway to enhanced reading comprehension, the research underscores the transformative potential of instructional practices that go beyond rote learning. It also provides evidence-based recommendations for integrating critical thinking strategies into reading pedagogy, thereby equipping students with the cognitive tools necessary for academic success and informed participation in society.

RQ 1. How do university teachers perceive the role of critical thinking skills in enhancing students' reading comprehension?

RQ 2. What are the experiences of university students in applying critical thinking strategies during reading tasks?

RQ 3. What challenges and opportunities do teachers and students identify in integrating critical thinking into reading comprehension practices at the university level?

### **Literature Review**

Reading comprehension is not merely the ability to decode text but the capacity to construct meaning, interpret arguments, and apply insights to new contexts. Scholars emphasize that comprehension goes beyond literal understanding to include inferencing, analysis, and evaluation of ideas, all of which require higher-order thinking skills (Cain & Oakhill, 2015). At the university level, where academic texts are often complex and discipline-specific, the need for advanced comprehension skills becomes more pressing. Critical thinking has therefore emerged as a vital cognitive ability that supports deeper levels of reading and enables students to engage actively with texts rather than passively absorbing information (Facione, 2020).

The link between critical thinking and reading comprehension is well-documented in the literature. Critical thinking is broadly defined as the process of conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to guide beliefs and actions (Ennis, 2018). In the context of reading, it equips learners with the ability to interrogate authorial claims, question assumptions, and assess the credibility of evidence (Paul & Elder, 2019). Research demonstrates that students with stronger critical thinking skills demonstrate superior comprehension of argumentative and expository texts compared to peers who rely only on literal interpretation (Liu et al., 2014). This relationship underscores the idea that reading comprehension is not just a linguistic activity but also a cognitive and metacognitive process (Kendeou et al., 2016).

### **Critical Thinking as a Foundation for Deep Reading**

One of the central themes in the literature is that critical thinking fosters deep reading, a process in which students engage with texts at analytical and reflective levels. Deep reading requires the integration of prior knowledge, recognition of logical structures, and evaluation of ideas in light of evidence (Wolf, 2018; Shah et al., 2022). Halpern (2014) argues that critical thinking encourages students to recognize ambiguity, weigh alternative perspectives, and draw conclusions based on reasoning rather than memorization. When students employ critical thinking strategies, they move beyond surface-level comprehension to extract nuanced meanings and form independent judgments.

Instructional research supports this view. Fahim and Saepour (2011) found that explicit teaching of critical thinking strategies—such as identifying assumptions and evaluating arguments—significantly improved Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. Similarly, Yeh (2019) showed that reflective questioning exercises enhanced EFL students' critical engagement with texts, leading to measurable gains in comprehension. These findings suggest that cultivating critical thinking within reading instruction enhances students' ability to derive meaning from academic materials.

### **Teacher Perspectives on Critical Thinking and Reading**

Teachers play a central role in linking critical thinking to reading comprehension. Research shows that instructors' beliefs and pedagogical practices strongly influence whether critical thinking is integrated into reading tasks (Tiruneh et al., 2017). Teachers who emphasize open-ended questioning, debate, and problem-based learning create conditions where students engage critically with texts (Abrami et al., 2015). However, several studies highlight persistent challenges. Van der Zanden et al. (2020) note that time constraints, standardized curricula, and exam-oriented teaching often discourage educators from embedding critical thinking activities into reading instruction.

Qualitative investigations reveal that teachers often perceive students as struggling to go beyond basic comprehension. For instance, Kuhn (2019) observed that many university instructors report students' tendency to memorize content rather than critically analyze it. Teachers therefore emphasize the need for structured strategies—such as Socratic questioning, reflective journals, and collaborative discussions—to strengthen the critical dimensions of reading (Brookfield, 2017). These perspectives align with the need to explore how teachers themselves conceptualize the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension, a core focus of the present study.

### **Student Perspectives and Experiences**

Students' perceptions of reading and critical thinking also shape how effectively they engage with texts. Research shows that many students equate reading comprehension with retaining factual information rather than questioning or analyzing arguments (Kuhn, 2019). This orientation reflects educational cultures that prioritize examinations and rote learning over analytical engagement (Lai, 2011). Yet, when students are encouraged to apply critical thinking, they report greater confidence in navigating complex texts and improved academic performance (Liu et al., 2014).

Qualitative studies highlight that students value classroom activities that stimulate critical thinking. For example, peer discussion, debates, and reflective writing tasks help students identify multiple perspectives and enhance comprehension (Yeh, 2019). Nevertheless, challenges persist. Students often lack prior exposure to critical thinking frameworks and may find it difficult to transition from memorization-based reading to reflective analysis (Tiruneh

et al., 2017). Understanding students' lived experiences with these challenges is crucial for identifying effective instructional strategies.

### **Instructional Strategies Linking Critical Thinking and Reading**

A recurring theme in the literature is the importance of pedagogical interventions that integrate critical thinking into reading. Abrami et al. (2015) provide meta-analytic evidence that explicit critical thinking instruction yields significant improvements in reading comprehension and related skills. Effective strategies include teaching students to evaluate the structure of arguments, recognize biases, and synthesize ideas across multiple sources (Ennis, 2018; Shah et al., 2025).

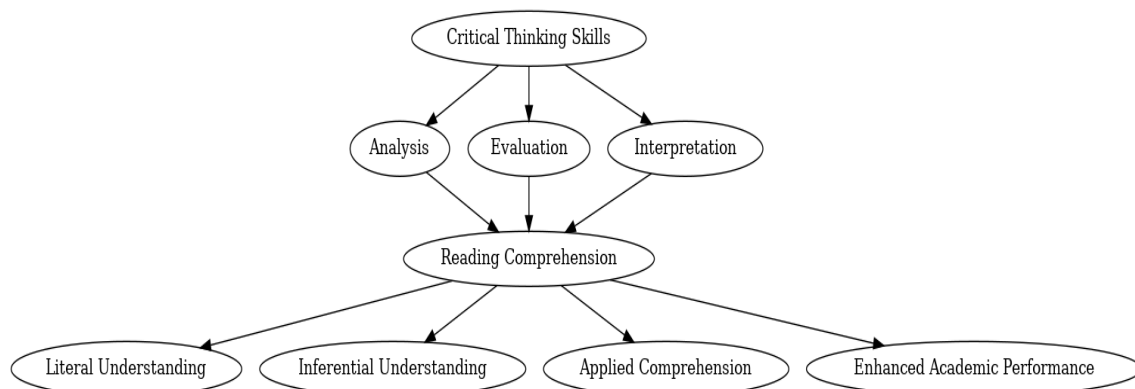
Cognitive apprenticeship models, where instructors model critical reading processes and gradually transfer responsibility to students, have shown promise in fostering independent thinking (Brookfield, 2017). Similarly, collaborative learning strategies—such as group problem-solving and peer questioning—enhance both critical thinking and reading comprehension by exposing students to diverse viewpoints (Van der Zanden et al., 2020). However, the literature also cautions that without institutional support, such practices may remain inconsistent or superficial (Halpern, 2014).

### **Challenges and Gaps in Current Research**

Despite growing recognition of the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research is quantitative, focusing on test scores and standard assessments (Liu et al., 2014). While these studies establish correlations, they often fail to capture the nuanced experiences of teachers and students in real-world classrooms. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring such complexities, as they reveal how participants interpret, negotiate, and enact critical thinking in practice.

Moreover, most empirical studies focus on Western or EFL contexts, with limited attention to diverse higher education systems (Yeh, 2019). Cultural and institutional factors strongly influence how critical thinking is perceived and practiced, suggesting a need for more context-sensitive investigations (Tiruneh et al., 2017). This gap highlights the relevance of exploring the perspectives of both teachers and students in university settings, particularly in regions where exam-oriented learning remains dominant.

### **Theoretical Framework**



The theoretical framework guiding this study is built on the premise that critical thinking skills—particularly analysis, evaluation, and interpretation—serve as essential cognitive tools that enhance reading comprehension. When students engage critically with texts, they are better able to move beyond literal understanding toward inferential and applied comprehension, where they connect arguments, question assumptions, and transfer knowledge to new contexts.



This deeper engagement not only improves comprehension outcomes but also contributes to broader academic performance, as students develop the ability to synthesize ideas and apply them meaningfully in their studies. The framework, therefore, positions critical thinking as both a mediator and a catalyst in strengthening the reading abilities of university students. Literature consistently underscores that critical thinking is integral to advanced reading comprehension, enabling students to move beyond literal understanding toward deeper analytical engagement. Teachers and students both play crucial roles in this process, yet face significant challenges, including curricular constraints and entrenched learning cultures. While instructional interventions show promise, the gap between theory and practice remains substantial. Addressing this gap requires qualitative insights into how teachers and students experience and enact critical thinking in the context of reading. This study, therefore, contributes by examining these perspectives through interviews, offering a richer understanding of the challenges and opportunities in linking critical thinking with reading comprehension.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of critical thinking skills in boosting the reading comprehension of university students. The choice of a qualitative approach was guided by the objective of capturing in-depth insights into the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by both teachers and students in relation to critical thinking and reading. As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize, qualitative inquiry is particularly effective when the aim is to understand meaning from participants' perspectives and to generate rich, descriptive data that goes beyond surface-level observations.

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This perspective is particularly relevant to the current research, as it seeks to understand how teachers and students conceptualize the integration of critical thinking into reading practices. By drawing on lived experiences, the study provides nuanced insights into the contextual and pedagogical dynamics that shape the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension.

The participants of the study included two groups: five university teachers who were responsible for teaching English and reading-related courses, and seven undergraduate students from different academic programs. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure that participants were directly involved in teaching or experiencing reading comprehension tasks where critical thinking plays a role. Teachers were selected based on their experience in higher education and their direct involvement in reading instruction, while students were chosen from diverse academic backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives. Purposeful sampling is consistent with qualitative research traditions, as it allows the researcher to select information-rich cases that provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, a method that provides flexibility for participants to elaborate on their views while ensuring that the conversation remains focused on the research questions. An interview guide was developed around the three research questions, with separate prompts for teachers and students. For teachers, questions explored how they perceive the role of critical thinking in enhancing reading comprehension, the strategies they use to foster critical thinking, and the challenges they encounter. For students, questions focused on their experiences of applying critical thinking while reading, the instructional methods they found most helpful, and the obstacles they faced.



Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet environment to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing their views. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews was appropriate, as it enabled the researcher to probe for clarification, follow up on emerging themes, and capture the richness of participants' narratives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring ideas, which were coded systematically. Codes were then grouped into broader categories, leading to the identification of three major themes: critical thinking as a catalyst for deeper comprehension, instructional strategies for integrating critical thinking, and challenges to fostering critical engagement.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it is well-suited for identifying patterns across participants' experiences while allowing flexibility to interpret meaning within specific contexts. The process was iterative, with codes and themes refined throughout the analysis to ensure accuracy and depth. To enhance the credibility of findings, member checking was employed by sharing summaries of interpretations with a subset of participants, who confirmed the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of perspectives by including both teachers and students, as well as through member checking. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was supported by reflexive journaling, where the researcher documented personal assumptions and decisions to minimize bias. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of participants and context, enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect identities. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The study received institutional approval prior to data collection.

In sum, the methodology combined purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis within an interpretivist paradigm to explore how teachers and students perceive and experience the role of critical thinking in reading comprehension. This approach enabled the generation of rich qualitative insights that directly address the research questions and contribute to understanding the practical integration of critical thinking into university reading practices.

### **Research Findings**

RQ1: How do university teachers perceive the role of critical thinking skills in enhancing students' reading comprehension?

The interviews with teachers revealed a strong consensus that critical thinking is indispensable for meaningful reading comprehension. Teachers consistently described reading as a process that extends beyond decoding words into what one participant called "an intellectual negotiation with the text." One teacher explained, "*My students can read fluently, but fluency is not comprehension. Unless they learn to question the author, identify assumptions, and make*



*connections, they are only skimming the surface.*” This sentiment was echoed by others who emphasized that critical thinking transforms reading into an active, rather than passive, process. Teachers highlighted that when students employ critical thinking strategies—such as analyzing arguments or evaluating evidence—their comprehension deepens significantly. One faculty member reflected, *“I have noticed that the students who engage in debates, who are not afraid to challenge the text, perform much better in exams and assignments. Their reading is purposeful, not mechanical.”* Another teacher described critical thinking as the “missing bridge” between understanding what is written and applying it to academic or real-life contexts. At the same time, teachers acknowledged the difficulties of embedding critical thinking in reading classes. Large class sizes limited instructional time, and pressure to cover curricula often reduces opportunities for fostering critical engagement. As one participant candidly remarked, *“I wish I had more freedom to slow down and let students wrestle with ideas. But the reality is that we rush through content, and critical thinking gets sidelined.”*

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers view critical thinking as the key that unlocks deeper comprehension, yet they remain constrained by systemic challenges that hinder its consistent application.

RQ2: What are the experiences of university students in applying critical thinking strategies during reading tasks?

Students’ perspectives offered an equally compelling narrative, reflecting both their struggles and breakthroughs with critical reading. Many admitted that their early university experiences involved treating reading as memorization. One student confessed, *“When I entered university, I thought comprehension meant remembering definitions and examples. I never thought I could argue with the text.”* This reliance on rote learning often left them unprepared to engage with complex academic material.

However, students also described moments of transformation when instructors encouraged critical questioning. A participant noted, *“The first time my teacher asked me, ‘Do you agree with this author?’ I was shocked. I thought my job was just to accept what was written. But once I realized I could disagree, my reading completely changed.”* Another student recounted how group discussions helped her see that texts could be interpreted in multiple ways: *“Listening to classmates challenge the readings made me more confident to share my own interpretations. I began reading with questions in my head rather than just looking for answers.”*

Despite these positive experiences, students also voiced ongoing challenges. Some felt unprepared to analyze texts independently without structured guidance, while others admitted struggling with academic language that made critical engagement difficult. Yet even within these struggles, students expressed enthusiasm for developing critical thinking. As one student put it, *“Now I can’t read without asking myself why the author said this and what evidence they used. It makes reading slower, but much more meaningful.”*

The student voices underscore a shift from passive to active reading, with critical thinking emerging as both a challenge and a liberating skill that enhances comprehension and academic confidence.

RQ3: What challenges and opportunities do teachers and students identify in integrating critical thinking into reading comprehension practices at the university level?

Both teachers and students articulated significant challenges but also recognized opportunities for improvement. A recurring theme was the dominance of exam-oriented learning cultures, which discourage critical inquiry. As one teacher remarked, *“Our students have been trained to give the ‘right answer.’ Critical thinking threatens that system because it thrives on*



*ambiguity and multiple interpretations.*” Students echoed this, with one admitting, “*Sometimes I hesitate to question the text because I worry the exam will only reward memorized information.*”

Resource limitations were another challenge. Teachers noted the lack of access to diverse reading materials that could stimulate critical discussions, while students felt that overly prescriptive textbooks limited opportunities for analysis. Additionally, time constraints were repeatedly mentioned. A teacher explained, “*Critical thinking takes time—it requires discussion, debate, reflection. In our context, time is a luxury.*”

Yet alongside these barriers, participants identified clear opportunities. Teachers suggested that embedding reflective questions into assignments and encouraging peer discussions could normalize critical engagement even within rigid curricula. One faculty member observed, “*Even small practices, like asking students to write a one-paragraph critique instead of a summary, can shift their reading habits.*”

Students, on their part, expressed a desire for more interactive learning. As one explained, “*I learn critical thinking best when I talk to others about the reading. Discussions make me see the text in new ways.*” Another proposed that instructors could use digital platforms to encourage critical dialogue beyond the classroom.

Together, these insights highlight a shared recognition that while structural barriers persist, there are practical opportunities to foster critical thinking in reading. Both teachers and students expressed optimism that with intentional practices, reading comprehension can evolve from rote understanding to critical engagement.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the relationship between critical thinking skills and reading comprehension, as experienced by both teachers and students in university contexts. The three research questions revealed teachers’ strong belief in the transformative role of critical thinking, students’ evolving engagement with texts through questioning, and the shared acknowledgment of both challenges and opportunities in embedding critical thinking into reading instruction. These findings resonate with, extend, and in some cases challenge existing literature on the subject.

#### **Teachers’ Perceptions: Critical Thinking as the “Missing Bridge”**

The teachers in this study consistently framed critical thinking as the catalyst that moves students from surface-level reading to deep comprehension. Their emphasis on questioning, evaluating, and connecting ideas aligns with Facione’s (2020) definition of critical thinking as the disciplined process of analyzing and evaluating information to guide reasoning and action. Teachers’ descriptions of students “skimming the surface” reflect Cain and Oakhill’s (2015) argument that comprehension requires going beyond decoding words toward constructing meaning through inference and evaluation.

This finding supports Halpern’s (2014) claim that critical thinking strengthens cognitive engagement, enabling learners to recognize ambiguity and interrogate evidence. Teachers’ recognition of critical thinking as the “missing bridge” echoes Abrami et al.’s (2015) meta-analysis, which concluded that explicit instruction in critical thinking significantly improves reading and related academic skills. However, teachers also expressed frustration about systemic constraints such as time limitations and curriculum pressures. These practical barriers mirror Van der Zanden et al.’s (2020) observation that institutional contexts often restrict the integration of critical thinking, even when teachers value it.

What stands out in this study is the passion with which teachers articulated the transformative power of critical thinking, even while acknowledging structural limitations. This finding adds



nance to previous quantitative studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2014), which demonstrated correlations between critical thinking and reading performance but did not capture the emotional and professional commitment teachers express toward fostering critical engagement.

### **Students' Experiences: From Passive Reading to Active Inquiry**

The students' accounts illustrated a journey from perceiving reading as memorization to recognizing it as an active, critical process. Their reflections support Kuhn's (2019) view that students often enter higher education with habits shaped by exam-oriented learning cultures, where comprehension is equated with retention. The shift students described—learning to question, disagree, and interpret—mirrors Paul and Elder's (2019) conceptualization of critical thinking as a tool for taking charge of one's learning.

Students' acknowledgment that critical thinking made reading "slower but more meaningful" reflects Wolf's (2018) notion of deep reading, which requires time, reflection, and intellectual engagement. Their experiences resonate with Yeh's (2019) findings that reflective questioning improves comprehension among EFL learners. Similarly, Fahim and Saeepour (2011) demonstrated that teaching critical thinking strategies significantly enhanced reading performance, findings echoed in the voices of students who reported greater confidence and comprehension when encouraged to engage critically.

At the same time, the students' struggles—difficulty applying critical thinking independently, challenges with academic language, and hesitation due to exam pressures—highlight persistent barriers. These findings corroborate Lai's (2011) review, which identified cultural and systemic obstacles to embedding critical thinking in educational practice. However, the students' enthusiasm for developing these skills suggests a readiness for change, aligning with Brookfield's (2017) assertion that students respond positively when provided with opportunities to engage critically.

### **Shared Challenges and Opportunities**

Both teachers and students identified exam-oriented learning cultures as a major challenge. Teachers worried that critical inquiry is undervalued in assessment systems, while students expressed hesitation to question texts for fear of being penalized. This reflects Ennis's (2018) critique that educational systems often undermine critical thinking by rewarding rote answers over independent reasoning. Such findings reinforce the argument by Tiruneh et al. (2017) that systemic reforms are necessary if critical thinking is to be genuinely embedded in higher education.

The lack of resources and time was another shared challenge. Teachers lamented limited opportunities for extended discussions, while students noted the restrictiveness of prescribed textbooks. These concerns resonate with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) observation that qualitative engagement requires space and flexibility, conditions often absent in traditional classrooms. Yet participants also identified creative opportunities—such as embedding critical reflection into assignments or using group discussions and digital platforms—which align with Abrami et al.'s (2015) call for integrating critical thinking strategies into everyday pedagogy.

### **Convergences and Divergences with Literature**

The findings largely converge with international literature emphasizing the positive relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. For instance, the emphasis teachers placed on analysis and evaluation as essential for deeper understanding aligns directly with the frameworks proposed by Facione (2020) and Paul and Elder (2019). Students' recognition of questioning and debate as transformative mirrors Yeh's (2019) evidence that critical thinking-oriented activities enhance comprehension outcomes.



However, the study also reveals divergences. While previous quantitative research (e.g., Liu et al., 2014) demonstrated strong correlations, this qualitative inquiry highlights the affective and cultural dimensions of critical engagement. Teachers expressed frustration, students described moments of “shock” when first asked to critique texts, and both groups pointed to systemic pressures as obstacles. These perspectives provide a more complex picture than statistical associations alone, underscoring the value of qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings reinforce the theoretical framework of this study, which positions critical thinking as a mediator in enhancing reading comprehension. Teachers’ views of critical thinking as the “missing bridge” and students’ recognition of its transformative effect support the model that critical thinking sub-skills—analysis, evaluation, and interpretation—feed into deeper comprehension processes (Kendeou et al., 2016). The findings extend theory by illustrating how this relationship is conditioned by institutional and cultural contexts, particularly exam-oriented educational systems that discourage ambiguity and multiple interpretations.

### **Practical Implications**

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that even within constrained environments, small but intentional practices can promote critical thinking in reading. Teachers’ suggestion of replacing summaries with critiques, and students’ enthusiasm for group discussions, point to practical strategies that can be implemented without major structural reform. These align with Abrami et al.’s (2015) evidence that targeted instructional interventions can yield significant improvements in critical thinking and related skills.

At the institutional level, the study highlights the need to align assessments with critical thinking goals. As Ennis (2018) and Tiruneh et al. (2017) argue, unless examinations reward critical engagement, both teachers and students will remain constrained by rote learning pressures. Universities must therefore consider curriculum reforms that integrate critical thinking into learning outcomes and assessment frameworks.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this study offers rich insights, it is limited by its small sample size and context-specific focus. The voices of five teachers and seven students, while illuminating, may not capture the full diversity of perspectives in broader higher education contexts. Future research could expand the sample and employ comparative case studies across institutions or cultural contexts to deepen understanding. Additionally, longitudinal research could explore how students’ critical thinking and reading comprehension evolve over time with sustained instructional interventions.

Overall, the findings affirm the central role of critical thinking in enhancing reading comprehension among university students, highlighting both the enthusiasm of teachers and students for deeper engagement and the systemic barriers that constrain it. The study supports existing theories while adding nuanced insights into the lived experiences of participants. By integrating teacher and student perspectives, the research demonstrates that critical thinking is not simply an academic skill but a transformative practice that reshapes how students read, interpret, and apply knowledge. Addressing the challenges identified requires both pedagogical innovation and systemic reform, ensuring that reading in higher education evolves from a passive activity into an active, critical process that prepares students for lifelong learning and informed citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of critical thinking skills in boosting the reading comprehension of university students through qualitative inquiry. Drawing on



interviews with five teachers and seven students, the study highlighted the ways in which critical thinking transforms reading from a passive act of memorization into an active, analytical, and reflective process. The findings revealed that teachers strongly view critical thinking as the essential bridge to deeper comprehension, students experience it as both a challenge and a liberating practice, and both groups recognize systemic barriers but also identify opportunities for improvement.

The findings support the theoretical assertion that critical thinking skills—particularly analysis, evaluation, and interpretation—mediate the relationship between reading and comprehension outcomes. Teachers described critical thinking as the factor that determines whether students simply “skim the surface” or engage in genuine meaning-making. Students, in turn, described a shift in their reading habits, moving from rote memorization to active questioning and interpretation when encouraged to think critically. These experiences align with the wider literature, which establishes that critical thinking enriches comprehension, fosters academic achievement, and prepares learners for lifelong inquiry (Facione, 2020; Halpern, 2014; Yeh, 2019).

However, the study also uncovered pressing challenges that limit the integration of critical thinking into reading instruction. Teachers pointed to institutional barriers such as time constraints, rigid curricula, and exam-oriented assessments, while students admitted that their prior educational experiences conditioned them to view comprehension as mere recall. These findings echo concerns raised by Ennis (2018) and Tiruneh et al. (2017) about the structural obstacles to embedding critical thinking across educational contexts. At the same time, both teachers and students expressed optimism that even small, intentional practices—such as replacing summaries with critiques or embedding reflective questions—could cultivate more critical reading cultures.

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