Critical Thinking in the Indian and Malaysian ESL Reading Classroom

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Abstract

This article investigates aspects of critical reading in two countries. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as instruments amongst the research population which consisted of 160 students from Indian and Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. The results suggest that more students from India as compared to Malaysia prefer to select their own reading material. The majority of the respondents in both countries attach great value to critical thinking while reading. According to the respondents, a critical thinker/reader should be curious, logical, self-critical and have the ability to identify problems and their solutions and distinguish between facts and opinions. A significant number are of the view that their teachers do embed critical thinking in different activities; however, a large number were not convinced by the teachers' assessment of critical thinking. In the Indian context, there appears to be more emphasis on creative expression in post-reading tasks as compared to the Malaysian context.

Key words: Critical Reading, Critical Thinking, ESL Reading, Reading Instruction

1. Introduction

In language education, the concept of *critical thinking* has recently gained a lot of popularity. This attention has often resulted in the concept being treated as a catch-phrase. It constitutes an inevitable part of modern syllabuses, curricula, institutional objectives, educational standards and assessment (e.g. Moore & Stanley, 2010; Paul & Elder, 2005; Shepard, 2001; Stobaugh, 2013). This concept

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is even perceived as one of the crucial products of liberal education (Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003), whose purpose, in brief, is to make students succeed in going through their lives responsibly, productively and creatively (The Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, 1998).

The question that needs to be posed, however, is why there is such an intense and growing interest in critical pedagogy these days. The answer is simple. Educators are concerned about whether students are ready to face the numerous challenges of modern life, where critical reading in English is the order of the day (e.g. Halpern, 2014; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). These challenges include, among other things, enhancing one's lifelong development, boosting one's employability or operating in multicultural settings in which "assumptions about people's behavior are rooted in historical and cultural contexts and function as invisible guidelines of a person's tacit knowledge" (Hellmueller, 2014, p. 131).

Current language pedagogy promotes critical thinking in both receptive and productive skills. The scope of this article, however, is limited to critical reading only. The discussion will begin by examining what critical thinking and critical reading entail. The profile of a critical reader as well as aspects of instruction and assessment of critical reading will also be presented. The theoretical discussion will then be followed by a research study that was conducted among ESL students in India and Malaysia.

2. Critical Reading in ESL Instruction

2.1. Defining *Critical Thinking* and *Critical Reading*

Proficient readers must be able to "read the lines", to "read between the lines" and to "read beyond the lines" (Manzo & Manzo, 1990, p. 28). Consequently, understanding the meaning of texts requires not only comprehension skills, but also good thinking skills. To be more precise, reading maturity and critical reading are guaranteed through the fine tuning of higher order thinking skills. Students should be able to analyse, interpret, evaluate and reflect on information from diverse sources (Cusipag et al., 2006). This position is in agreement with Rosenblatt (1994) and Leicester (2010). The former states that the reader must transact with texts. Rosenblatt (1994) stresses that texts themselves do not contain meanings; it is the reader that brings meanings to the texts. In other words, texts are meaning potentials that activate the reader. The comprehension of texts is facilitated by the reader's prior life and textual experiences. This also implies that the same text will convey diverse meanings in transactions with individual readers (Rosenblatt, 1994). Rosenblatt's position encourages deep and extensive exploration of texts. Such exploration should engage readers in creative, reflective and critical thinking.

According to Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory, the same text can be read in two different ways: efferently and aesthetically. Each way has a different purpose. Each way requires different types of thinking and strategies. The aim of efferent reading is to look for information or conclusions to be memorised and utilised in different situations. In this type of reading, the reader is only concerned with what the words used in texts mean. Aesthetic reading, on the other hand, is about reading for pleasure. When reading aesthetically, readers not only enjoy the language of the text, but also focus and reflect on emotions, thoughts, viewpoints and stances that come into being while reading.

For Leicester (2010), critical reading necessitates three types of reflection. *Questioning reflection* deals with the interrogation of assumptions, hypotheses and arguments. *Rational reflection* is related to providing sound reasons and evidence for the previously listed assumptions, hypotheses and arguments, plus understanding "the sources of knowledge and what counts as rational within the various knowledge domains" (Leicester, 2010, p. x). *Metareflection*, in turn, focuses on the successful use of analytic instruments such as research skills, conceptual analysis or categorisation and comparison.

Before looking at various aspects of critical thinking in the ESL reading pedagogy, it seems fitting to reveal the complexity of the concept by presenting some key definitions. For example, Dewey (1909, p. 9) equates critical thinking with reflective thinking, referring to it as an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends". Chaffee (1988, p. 29) argues that critical thinking is an "active, purposeful, and organised effort to make sense of our world by carefully examining our thinking, and the thinking of others, in order to clarify and improve our understanding". In a more recent definition, Tuden and colleagues (2013, p. 71) state that critical thinking is "a systematic and active process that assesses the depth and breadth of a [reading] situation, issue or problem (…). It assimilates past experiences and knowledge; integrated with creativity, logical reasoning, thoughtful reflection, seeking an appropriate outcome, and transforms this knowledge to the presenting situation that provides clarity for the most appropriate action, decision or judgment".

As can be seen, critical reading is a complex process in which the reader focuses on what texts say, what texts do, what texts mean and how texts position themselves against other texts. Recognising what texts say about the topic they present involves non-critical reading, also described as a linear activity. At this stage, the reader is to understand, or analyse and interpret, a sequence of connected ideas that are encoded in sentences and paragraphs. The reader recognises what texts say and how the theme is illustrated in the text. Unlike linear activity, critical reading is analytic, and this means that it takes the reader a few steps further. Apart from grasping what texts say, critical readers must be able to say what texts do, what they mean and how they compare to other texts or

how they stand in relation to other texts. In the process of recognising what texts do, the reader must find out what function they perform, for example, arguing, apologising or offering examples (Halliday & Hassan, 1989). In other words, the reader must find out, among other things, the author's intention, frame of reference and justification of the language choice. Ultimately, the reader deduces what texts mean as a whole. The last stage is based on the previous two and involves drawing conclusions and making connections to prior knowledge/experience or other texts.

On the whole, reading and thinking skills are inextricably connected (Cohen, 2015; Darch & Kameenui, 1987). Reading skills (e.g. word attack, skimming, scanning) allow readers to attain comprehension and fluency. By contrast, thinking skills are important because they enable readers to engage in text interpretation, analysis and evaluation (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; Facione & Facione, 1996). For instance, Shields (2010) notes that while reading, critical thinking facilitates understanding. The author goes on to say that texts can only be critically elaborated upon once they have been fully comprehended. For this reason, the importance of critical thinking in ESL reading must be emphasised and investigated, hence the research project in the later part of this article.

2.2. The Profile of a Critical Reader
The foregoing discussion indicates that critical readers possess a number of characteristic features. First of all, it is important to point out that critical readers are always independent, self-controlled and self-corrective thinkers. All the other features of critical readers that are listed below are in agreement with Lipe and Beasley (2004, p. 4) and Goodwin and Sommervold (2012, p. 71). Critical readers:
- rely on reason rather than emotion;
- raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gather and assess relevant information, and effectively interpret it;
- come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems;
- accept new evidence, explanation, and findings;
- are willing to reassess information;
- put aside personal prejudices and biases;
- consider all reasonable possibilities;
- avoid hasty judgments.

2.3. Teaching Critical Thinking in Reading
Having listed the qualities of critical readers, it seems only fitting that the importance and teachability of critical thinking skills be addressed. Learning to

read in a second language is a difficult task (Rayner, Pollatsek, Ashby, & Clifton, 2012). To become an effective reader requires developing a wide range of critical thinking skills. As the literature reveals (e.g. Beyer, 2001; Cottrell, 2005; Fisher, 2001), critical thinking skills can be taught both explicitly (i.e. through directing the learner's attention to specific features under investigation) or implicitly (i.e. through deliberately leaving specific features for learners to discover for themselves). It is the former, though, that has been observed to be more effective (Halpern, 2014). This is our observation and preference, too. Explicit instruction provides language teachers with ample opportunity to train students in critical thinking skills (e.g. analysis, inference, interpretation, explanation) and strategies (e.g. questioning, visualisation, mind-mapping) as well as ways of employing these skills and strategies to accomplish both in- and out-of-class tasks. For example, in such training, as Halpern (2014, p. 18) observes, language teachers could facilitate learners by going through the following four stages:

1.   explicit learning of the skills for critical thinking;
2.   developing the disposition for effortful thinking and learning;
3.   directing learning activities in ways that increase the probability of transcontextual transfer (structure training);
4.   making metacognitive monitoring explicit and overt.

The strategies mentioned above are directly linked to promoting strategic reading in the classroom. Currently, strategic reading involves both cognition and metacognition (Cooper & Greive, 2009; Efklides & Misailidi, 2010; Forrest-Pressley & Waller, 2011). In the past, however, reading was viewed as a cognitive task only (Forrest-Pressley & Waller, 2011). Cognition consists of all the processes and strategies readers employ while reading. Metacognition, in turn, is the reader's knowledge of their own cognitive resources, plus the reader's ability to monitor and control their own thinking (Flavell, 1978; Cooper & Greive, 2009). Metacognitive readers plan their reading activities, monitor the reading process and critically examine the outcomes of reading (Krause, Bochner, & Duchesne, 2003; Forrest-Pressley & Waller, 2011). Hence, metacognition is a higher order executive process which is further subdivided into declarative, procedural and conditional types of knowledge (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2013).

Declarative knowledge is characterised as knowledge of facts, also labelled as "know-what" or "know-that" (Almasi & King Fullerton, 2012). It involves, for example, information about a reading task's structure. Procedural knowledge refers to the ability to perform reading tasks (Almasi & King Fullerton, 2012). Conditional knowledge is nothing less than the reader's awareness of the value of learning and using strategies and the reader's awareness of when to utilise these strategies (Almasi & King Fullerton, 2012). With this in mind, it can be concluded that metacognition is a component of critical thinking. Critical readers must be fluent in the use of cognitive and metacognitive skills and strategies.

Only then can they turn into critical thinkers (Willingham, 2007; Tarricone, 2013).

Strategic reading is closely related to reading engagement. Reading engagement is often described as a process that blends motivation, reading and learning strategies, social interaction and topical knowledge (Almasi & King Fullerton, 2012; Cooper & Greive, 2009). Motivation is vital for engagement. The more motivated the readers are, the better. Motivated readers do not hesitate to reach for challenging texts and question writers' views, claims and choices. These readers read for intrinsic reasons, for example, to enjoy learning new facts or to critically analyse the content of texts.

Critical readers engage with texts on a regular basis and read them for various purposes. The aims of critical reading vary among students and range from linguistic through conceptual to cultural (Wallace, 2003). In the first approach, learners engage in examining the way language is used in texts. Although the name of this approach may fallaciously indicate that students will do the conventional language work and analyse grammatical structures, the focus is different. The linguistic approach involves language learners in deliberation on language choice and its various consequences (Wallace, 2003).

The second approach is referred to as conceptual and seeks to shift the reader beyond the textual world. According to this approach, language learners develop reasoned and convincing arguments concerning the texts they read. Reflection, whether individual or collaborative, is very important at this stage. It helps language learners to explore ideas presented in texts, generate deeper insights and understanding of presented concepts and appropriately react to given texts (Zuidema, 2008).

The purpose of the cultural approach is to study cultural implications of texts read in and out of the classroom. It is essential that language learners are aware that texts are culture-specific products. Texts promote diverse cultural perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and practices (Kern, 2000). For this reason, discussions on books or articles that attempt to cross national boundaries are highly desirable.

Discussions on books can be promoted through reciprocal teaching. According to this approach, students are encouraged to assume the role of the teacher and lead discussions about texts they read (Wood, Lapp, Flood, & Taylor, 2008). Reciprocal teaching promotes a number of comprehension strategies and social interaction. Comprehension strategies include: predicting (i.e. constructing hypotheses about texts), questioning (i.e. exploring texts through questions), clarifying (i.e. explaining unclear or unfamiliar concepts/parts in texts) and summarising (i.e. providing accounts of the most important aspects of texts). The social interaction aspect, on the other hand, is related to class discussions, the purpose of which is to extensively and critically explore the content of texts.

Given this evidence, it can be inferred that reciprocal teaching is social-constructivist in nature. The latter affirms that "(a) knowledge and meaning are active creations of socialisation; (b) knowledge and meaning are social creations and as such reflect social negotiation and consensus; and (c) knowledge and meaning are constructed for the purposes of social adaptation, discourse, and goal achievement" (Siddiqui, 2008, p. 221).

The concepts of strategic reading, reading engagement and reciprocal teaching, briefly discussed above, all come under the umbrella of critical literacy. The main purpose of promoting critical literacy in language education is to encourage students to engage in active, reflective and critical reading of texts by means of which "individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society" (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3). This type of reading seeks to encourage students to look at the social construction of texts and evaluate them in the light of various factors that could have affected the authors to produce the texts in a particular fashion. This type of reading also promotes a better understanding of social issues, including power, inequality and injustice. It can be concluded that critical literacy assists language learners in reading not only texts, but also the world with regard to "power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources" (Janks, 2013, p.227). As such, critical literacy assists learners in rewriting the surrounding reality to make it a better place to live (Janks, 2013).

2.4. Assessing Critical Thinking

The discussion of the importance of teaching critical thinking in ESL reading would not be complete without mentioning the assessment procedure. A systematic and thorough assessment, both formative (i.e. providing ongoing feedback) and summative (i.e. assessing student learning at a particular point in time), is an integral part of instruction (Westwood, 2008). The purpose of assessment is not to mark the end of a learning cycle as is sometimes the case, but instead, to encourage and support further learning. For this reason, ESL teachers should provide students with a large number of critical thinking activities as a formal part of reading assessment. Such activities can include: open-ended written/spoken tasks, agree/disagree group discussions, mind-mapping, research tasks, recognising underlying assumptions and implicit arguments in texts and presenting one's own reflections to others (e.g. blogs). These activities will definitely supplement ESL course books, which tend to pay special attention to comprehension skills and strategies, but not so much to critical reading.

3. Critical Reading in Indian and Malaysian ESL Classrooms: The Study

The discussion above reveals that critical reading is about the systematic analysis, synthesis and evaluation of texts. It also entails active engagement with texts, the use of a wide range of strategies as well as a communicative transaction between readers and authors, the end product of which is new understanding. This observation resonates well with the current debate on critical thinking among

higher education experts (Davies & Barnett, 2015; Evers, 2007; Wisdom & Leavitt, 2015). This debate reveals that critical thinking is a complex construct, consisting of both universal and culture-laden features. This complexity has contributed to numerous definitions of the term "critical thinking", many of which illustrate that critical thinking assumes different forms in different cultures (Mason, 2008; Turner, 2006). This observation has been repeatedly confirmed by international students themselves. In addition, some students even state that their definitions of critical thinking are extremely narrow (Viete & Peeler, 2007; Yoshino, 2004), and thus prevent them from maintaining academic rigour and excellence.

It should also be emphasised that the current debate reveals that international students lack critical thinking skills, and therefore these students struggle in their academic journey (Huang, 2008; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Turner & Acker, 2002). With this in mind, the first aim of the present study is to gain useful data regarding critical thinking skills for ESL reading. The second aim is to develop the data in the Indian and Malaysian teaching contexts. Critical reading is essential if one is to successfully study at universities in the UK, where students are systematically required to read texts by their lecturers. Academic reading itself is not assessed, but *how* students make use of it is subject to continuous assessment and review. Since British universities enjoy growing numbers of students from the Asian context, it is necessary to thoroughly investigate the concept of critical reading. Increased awareness of existing issues will help academic bodies to suggest optimal solutions. As a result, Asian students' learning experience in the UK will be more enjoyable and successful.

In the present study, the following five research questions were posed:
• To what extent are ESL students aware of the concept of critical thinking in reading?
• To what degree do ESL students consider themselves to be critical thinkers/readers?
• In the opinion of students, to what extent and how do ESL teachers help students to become critical thinkers and readers?
• How would ESL students like their teachers to help them to become critical thinkers/readers?
• What aspects of critical thinking do ESL students wish to develop further in their L2 reading practice?

3.1. Research Population
The current project's research population was made up of 160 students from Indian and Malaysian ESL classrooms. The participants were selected randomly for filling out the questionnaire and for participating in the interview stages. These students were both secondary school and undergraduate students. They came from different backgrounds and had diverse learning experiences.

According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001), the research population consisted of independent (B2) and proficient (C1-C2) users of the target language.

There were two reasons why Indian and Malaysian teenagers were the focus of this inquiry. Firstly, the study was meant to reveal to what extent ESL students from these two countries are critical thinkers and critical readers. There has been little research done on critical thinking and critical reading in the Asian context. The available studies report contradictory findings. For instance, according to some researchers, Asian students are not critical thinkers (Atkinson, 1997; Kutlieh & Egege, 2003). Others, in turn, take issue with the former observation (Hongladarom, 1998; Jones, 2005; Lun, Fischer, & Ward, 2010). It was hoped that the current project would support the latter group.

As far as age is concerned, the participants were supposed to be mature enough to be aware of and able to talk about critical thinking and critical reading. Since the project was related to critical thinking and critical reading at the secondary school level, final year students appeared to be ideal candidates. A number of participants in this project were undergraduate students. They took part in this investigation in the first week of their studies and had not attended critical thinking skills classes/workshops up till then.

3.2. Research Methods and Instruments

The present project promoted methodological pluralism. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were combined to provide a deep understanding of the concept under study. The former was meant to measure and analyse causal relationships between certain variables, whereas the latter was to reveal what participants think or how they feel about critical reading (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The quantitative-qualitative sequence employed sought to assess the reliability of data obtained from the individual approaches. The sequence also sought to compensate for the shortcomings of either method alone (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008).

As a result, two instruments were used to collect data: a questionnaire (Appendix 1) and a semi-structured interview (Appendix 2). The questionnaire consisted of seven closed-ended questions with pre-defined options. The questionnaire was completed by 160 respondents. There were seven questions which were based on multiple choice items and Likert scales. The first two questions were related to the respondents' first language. The remaining five questions focused specifically on the respondents' reading experiences in the second language, that is, English. The main reason for using questionnaires was that it is easy to analyse when compared with other research techniques such as face-to-face interviews or telephone surveys. Many computer software packages are available for data entry and tabulation of almost all kinds of questionnaires. In addition to this, most

people are familiar with questionnaires (Berdie, Anderson, & Niebuhr, 1986). Nearly everyone has had some experience completing questionnaires, so this research tool does not generally make people feel apprehensive. The uniform question presentation of this technique reduces bias. Thus, the researcher's own opinions do not influence the respondents' answers.

The semi-structured interview, on the other hand, was used with 60 participants from both teaching contexts. The interview was based on four open-ended questions, all of which were related to the participants' L2 reading experiences. The open-ended questions were deliberately used as they allow respondents not only to supply detailed answers to the presented questions, but respondents could also clarify their responses (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Another reason for using open-ended questions was because they offer respondents the possibility of giving unlimited answers, which provided additional information on their thinking processes, creativity and resourcefulness.

3.3. Ethical Issues
The researchers in the present study took into account the protection of the students with whom they worked, and thus strictly performed in accordance with the ethical standards promoted by the American Psychological Association, the American Educational Research Association and the British Education Research Association. As a result, all the participants were requested to submit their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. The rights and dignity of the participants were respected at all stages of the research project. Also, all the information that could disclose the identity of the participants was deliberately excluded.

3.4. Data Analysis and Discussion
This section provides a discussion on the research outcomes in relation to each of the five research questions that underlie the inquiry.

Research Question 1: To what extent are ESL students aware of the concept of critical thinking in reading?

In the present study, all the participants showed familiarity with the concept of a critical thinker/reader and all the participants knew, to a greater or lesser degree, what it entails. No significant differences in terms of participant gender and nationality were reported. However, all twenty nine descriptors provided in the questionnaire were used by the participants with varying frequency. The most popular responses used to describe a critical thinker/reader were: (1) has a keen sense of curiosity (72%), (2) thinks logically and bases judgments on ideas and evidence (63%), (3) is self-critical about their own understanding and interpretation of texts (61%), (4) identifies and solves problems (59%), and (5) distinguishes between theory, facts and opinions (58%). The results are presented below (see Figure 1).
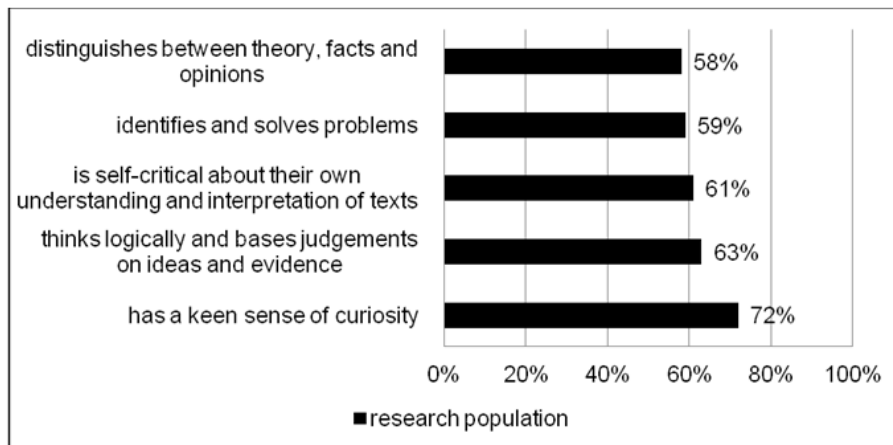
Figure 1. The profile of a critical thinker/reader: The most popular features

On the other hand, the least popular descriptors (see Figure 2) used to describe a critical thinker/reader were as follows: (1) asks thought provoking questions (30%), (2) distinguishes between primary and secondary sources of information (27%), (3) reassesses views when new evidence is introduced (25%) and (4) distinguishes between emotive and neutral vocabulary (19%).
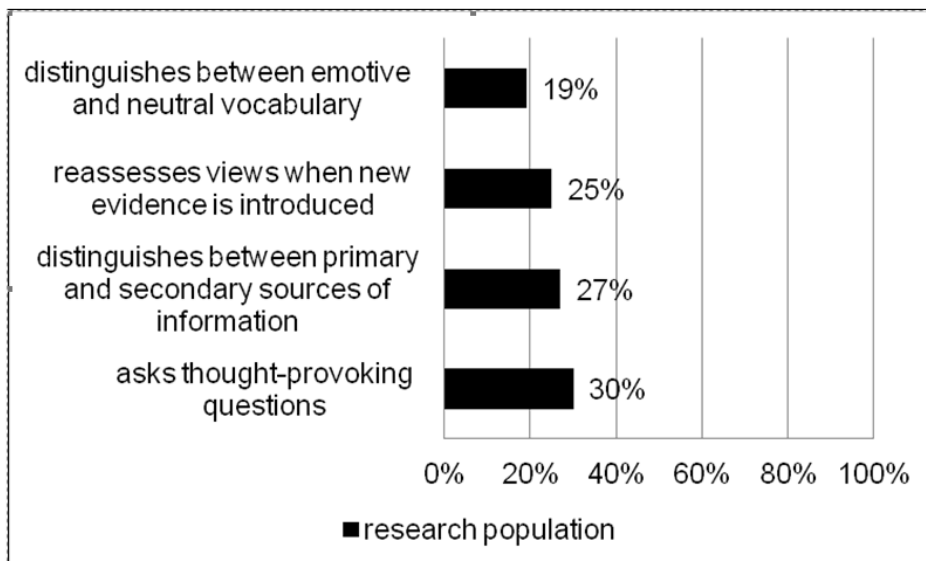

Figure 2. The profile of a critical thinker/reader: The least popular features

It is vital that teachers draw students' attention to these aspects while teaching reading skills. For example, it is vital that students realise that critical readers ask,

themselves and one another, thought provoking and clarification questions to better understand what has been read (Dugan, 2006). All these questions require that the reader goes beyond the material to carefully think about and properly analyse it. Likewise, the use of emotive and neutral vocabulary in texts should be given close attention. Students can then see that critical readers are aware of how the choice of vocabulary impacts the message being conveyed (Arndt, Harvey, & Nuttall, 2000).

The collected data also showed that the majority of the participants considered critical thinking while reading as very important. No significant differences in terms of the participants' nationality were reported in this respect. Out of 30 percent of the male participants, almost all (27%) agreed that critical thinking while reading is very important. The same point of view was shared by 65 percent of the female participants. These findings are in agreement with Cottrell (2005), Wallace (2003) and Taylor and MacKenney (2008). According to these authors, critical reading contributes to academic success, for it enables readers to deeply understand ideas expressed in texts. Readers can then successfully interact with these ideas as well as distinguish between valid and invalid inferences or arguments. Goodwin and Sommervold (2012) also emphasise that critical thinking is an essential life skill, and therefore should be an important part of successful education.

Research Question 2: To what degree do ESL students consider themselves to be critical thinkers/readers?

Being able to identify various features of critical thinkers/readers, the participants were asked whether or not they consider themselves to be critical thinkers/readers. The gathered data showed that only 51 (18 percent of the Indian participants and 33 percent of the Malaysian participants) percent of the research participants considered themselves to be critical thinkers/readers. Analysing the responses in terms of the participants' gender, it was found that out of 30 percent of male participants, 18 percent considered themselves to be critical thinkers/readers, while 9 percent were uncertain and 3 percent admitted to not being critical thinkers/readers. As far as the female participants are concerned, 35 percent considered themselves to be critical thinkers/readers, while 28 percent were uncertain and 7 percent stated that they were not critical thinkers/readers.

Questions 1, 2 and 3 in the semi-structured interview were designed to observe whether the students perform as critical readers in the classroom. The obtained data disclosed that the responses received at the interview stage match the participants' perceptions about being critical readers in the questionnaire. To see whether or not the participants perform as critical thinkers in reading, three aspects were taken into account. These were: (1) reflecting on texts, (2) making predictions and (3) analysing and evaluating arguments while reading texts in English.

According to the data, 63 percent of the Malaysian participants and 65 percent of the Indian participants reflected on what they read. No significant differences in terms of gender were observed. For example, two interviewees provided the following comments:

-I always reflect *after* reading. I want to process the content once again to better understand the text. Also, this thinking involves making links to books or films I already know. Sometimes, I try to imagine what I would do if I were in a character's shoes.

-Reflection is so helpful. I generally reflect after reading, but from time to time I catch myself doing that while reading, too. It facilitates my comprehension of the text, but also makes me think how the life of a particular character is different from mine (...) If it is better or more interesting, I then move to the world of the story and live the new life for a while.

It is good to see that many of the participants employed reflection in reading. Readers make inferences, clarify new ideas and refine their thinking while reflecting on reading, which consequently makes them more critical and effective readers (Dechert, 2007; Siena, 2009). It is through reflection on texts that readers can objectively evaluate the quality of the texts they read.

Next, the participants were asked about making predictions while reading in their second language. According to the gathered data, the majority (66%) of the participants make predictions while reading. More specifically, 70 percent of the Malaysian respondents and 64 percent of the Indian participants gave positive responses to this question. For instance, some interviewees stated that:

-I make predictions to find meaning in the text. I am not always right, but still it is nice to play with the author.
-Making predictions is very useful. I often make use of the images in the text to think what will happen next. This guessing game can be a lot of fun.
-I predict the content for two reasons: to enhance my comprehension and to avoid boredom while reading.

It can thus be concluded that a large number of the participants possess a valuable feature of successful readers. As Eagleton and Dobler (2007) disclose, efficient readers make predictions before, during and after reading. This activity, heavily reliant upon prior knowledge, assists readers in prompting both choices based on reasoning and speculations about texts (Cohen, & Cowen, 2008; Moreillon, 2007). Generating predictions also enhances higher level thinking skills, thus making the process of reading more critical (Moreillon, 2007).

The participants were also asked whether they analyse and evaluate arguments while reading English texts. Of the Malaysian participants, 67 percent admitted to

regularly doing so. The same response was provided by 60 percent of the Indian participants. The quantitative analysis can be supported by some qualitative data. For example, the interviewees said that:

-I always evaluate authors' arguments because I want to be a critical reader.
-I analyse and evaluate arguments in texts to see what message, and how, the author wants to convey.
-I analyse and evaluate arguments to get to the heart of the text I read.

According to Evans Carter (2012), critical readers systematically analyse arguments to see how individual parts of texts they read fit together. Critical readers also evaluate arguments to be able to make judgments about whether or not texts are successfully argued (Collins, 2010; Evans Carter, 2012).

Research Question 3: In the opinion of students, to what extent and how do ESL teachers help students to become critical thinkers and readers?

The statistical analysis reveals that 64 percent of the participants (23 percent of the Indian participants and 41 percent of the Malaysian participants) agreed with the statement that English language teachers help them to develop critical thinking skills. The teachers do so through various means (see Figure 3), including: debates, forums and discussions (50%); teaching through questioning (48%); involving students in self- and peer- assessment (43%); teaching through problem-solving (42%); appropriate reading tasks (41%); presentations (40%); teacher feedback (24%); appropriate writing tasks (12%) and workshops (10%).
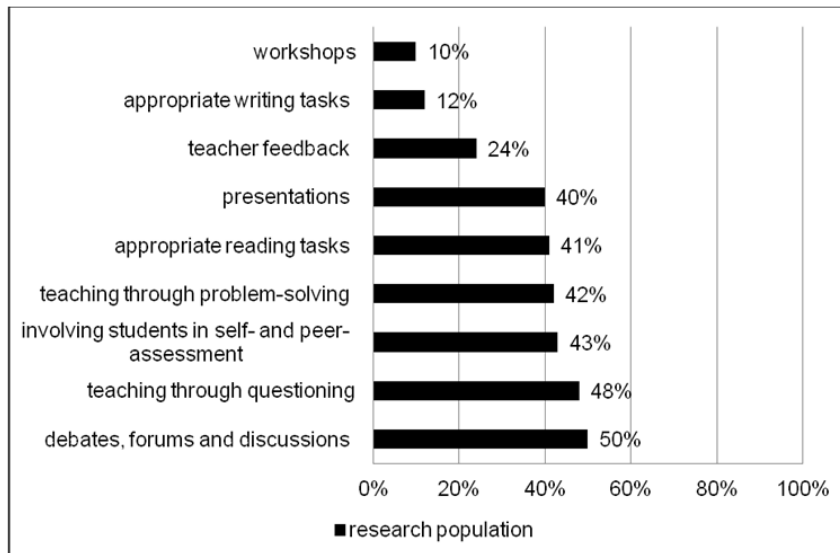

Figure 3. Ways of promoting critical thinking in the classroom

As a whole, though, the results regarding the variety of ways of developing critical thinking skills presented above were not very impressive. As a result, ESL teachers are expected to provide more varied support and guidance to their students. Critical thinking skills can be successfully developed in various ways, as pointed out above. Additionally, Mukalel (1998) and Hickman (2007) strongly recommend implementing reading projects in the classroom. These projects aim at extending students' reading experiences and creating reading communities in which students collaboratively, reflectively and critically respond to texts. For more information on establishing reading clubs in the language classroom see O'Donnell-Allen (2006) or Author 1 (xxxx).

Another interesting issue that came up at the interview stage was the assessment of critical thinking. A large number of interviewees thought it would be very helpful and useful to assess critical thinking skills in reading tests and assignments. As the gathered data revealed, many interviewees were not convinced that critical thinking skills in reading are integrated into the assessment procedure in their schools. Some of them stated that:

-My teacher never assesses critical thinking in reading. We get True/False or multiple choice exercises, but they only check whether we understand the text or not.
-Reading tests are quite rare in my classroom. If we have a test, there are a number of questions to answer. We have to answer the questions below the text in full sentences. In general, these questions check how well we understand the text. I do not think critical thinking is part of these tests.
-We read a lot of texts, but our reading is not assessed. We always discuss the assigned texts in the classroom. They encourage us to use our second language in the classroom.

The results presented above are rather disappointing. There is a need for improvement in this area. The decision of not assessing or of neglecting to take the assessment of critical thinking skills seriously may be linked to the common observation that the reading component in standardised tests and examinations mainly focuses on text comprehension. Comprehension is frequently checked through tasks that do not reflect real life reading (Gordon, 2007). However, being aware of the weaknesses of standardised tests, ESL teachers should include critical thinking in the assessment procedure. The important reason, as mentioned earlier, is that critical thinking is a transferable skill that will help second language readers to thrive in their personal as well as professional lives (Nara, 2003; Ellis, 2011; Goodwin & Sommervold, 2012).

It must be clarified, though, that those Malaysian participants who stated that critical thinking skills are assessed by their ESL teachers clarified that they are marked for classifying information in their reading experience, sequencing information and ideas, identifying implied or hidden meanings in texts; analysing

arguments, thinking logically, finding the author's purpose in a text and making logical judgments and deductions. The Indian participants, on the other hand, feel that they are marked for expressing thoughts creatively, applying imagination to texts, analysing information and reading between the lines, thinking logically, comparing different points of view, recognising error in thought and looking for the author's meaning in a text.

In consequence, the interview comments show two things. Firstly, different aspects of critical thinking were taken into consideration in these two contexts. Secondly, much more can be done about the assessment of critical thinking skills in both countries as the presented results are not very satisfying. In the Indian context, there seems to be more emphasis on creative expression than in the Malaysian context. This problem, however, must be addressed by Malaysian teachers. In this study, a number of participants made it clear that a reader's creativity in responding to texts should become one of the principle assessment criteria.

Research Question 4: How would ESL students like their teachers to help them to become critical thinkers/readers?

The issue of teacher's scaffolding in promoting critical thinking in second language reading was also probed in the current project. The gathered data showed that methods employed by the teachers to promote critical thinking/reading in the classroom meet the participants' expectations. The same issue was additionally probed in the semi-structured interview. For example, one question sought information on how many respondents expected their teachers' assistance to help them to improve their critical thinking skills. There were a very large number of Malaysian participants (93%) that expected help from their teachers, in contrast to 65 percent of the Indian participants. There were no significant differences in terms of participant gender reported in the two responses above. This considerably smaller result in the Indian group raises a number of questions: Are the students more self-reliant? Are the teachers not very helpful? Is the curriculum based on a purely traditional classroom model of teaching involving little student-teacher interaction or student participation? The answers to these questions require further investigation and experimentation.

Research Question 5: What aspects of critical thinking do ESL students wish to develop further in their L2 reading practice?

This study also aimed to ascertain which aspects of critical thinking should be further developed by the students in the Malaysian and Indian contexts. According to the Malaysian participants, the four most important aspects were: (1) applying imagination (77%), (2) sequencing information/ideas (70%), (3) reading "between the lines" (67%) and (4) recognising error in thought (67%). Likewise, the Indian participants identified four areas for improvement. These

were: (1) expressing thoughts and opinions (30%), (2) analysing arguments (25%), (3) identifying and solving problems (23%) and (4) focusing on relevant topics and issues (18%). The results are presented below (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).
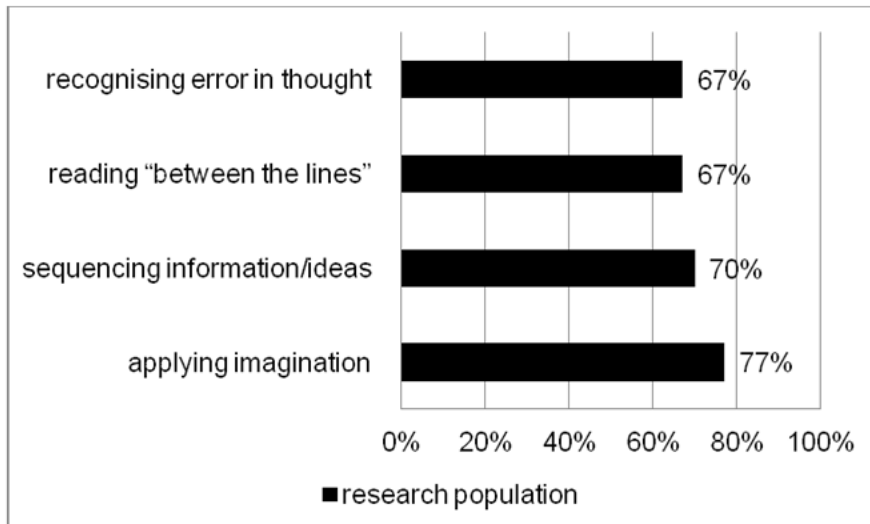

Figure 4. Critical thinking skills that need further improvement in the Malaysian ESL context
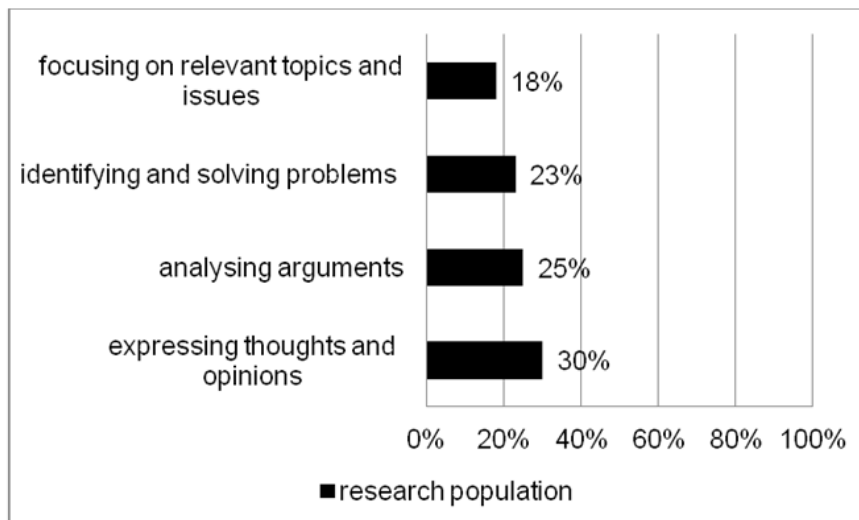

Figure 5. Critical thinking skills that need further improvement in the Indian ESL context

Very similar opinions were expressed by both Indian and Malaysian interviewees. A considerable number of them want to improve the selected skills to become more effective readers, and thus more successful students. A few also said that mastering these particular skills will increase their chances of getting better exam results in the future. Their comments were:

-I want to master these skills because I want to be a better reader and student.
-When I improve these skills, my reading will be better, and my grades in English will be higher, too.
-These skills must be mastered as soon as possible because I need good grades in my exams.

When asked how they could improve the skills in their L2 reading, the interviewees expressed a genuine willingness to talk to their peers to find out what they do in this respect and how. Many of the interviewees also wanted to refer to online sources. The recorded comments were as follows:

-I am going to talk to my class mates about it. If they know any good methods, I will try them.
-I will talk to the very good students. They know what to do. I will try to do the same.
-I will check various sources on the Internet. You can always find a lot of advice on anything there. There must be some suggestions about critical thinking and reading, too.

In general, however, the interviewees preferred the idea of being facilitated by their ESL teachers rather than independently solving the existing problem. They believed that their teachers were more experienced and knowledgeable, and would prove to be a good source of information on improving thinking skills in L2 reading. For example, one interviewee made the following comment:

-I will talk to my English teacher. She always knows how to answer my questions. She is a very good teacher and knows a lot about teaching. She will know best what I should do to succeed.

A positive point is that participants were able to critically reflect on their own L2 reading performance. They were able to identify various weaknesses that should be adequately addressed. Such a state of affairs somewhat undermines one of the teachers' common concerns about the ability of students to make accurate judgments about student learning. Self-assessment is an important lifelong learning skill (Race, 2001). It is a skill that should be systematically fostered in the classroom. The key is to appropriately guide and support students in the teaching-learning process. The above listed areas for improving critical reading are extremely useful. They clearly indicate what steps should be taken with

regard to effective instruction and successful materials design in the contexts concerned.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This article identifies several issues concerning critical thinking and reading skills in India and Malaysia. It has been observed that both Indian and Malaysian students consider critical thinking valuable and demonstrate a reasonable understanding of the concept of critical thinking in ESL reading. What is more, over fifty percent of the respondents consider themselves critical thinkers and readers since their input clearly reflects those qualities that can be associated with successful critical readers. Reflection, prediction and argument evaluation were viewed as evidence of critical analysis of the reading material. Activities to foster critical thinking are not incorporated by ESL teachers and more needs to be done in this respect.

In light of what the data from the two countries demonstrated, a number of implications should be suggested. Although limited in scope and range of respondents, this research signals various weaknesses in both critical thinking and ESL reading instruction. The following three issues should be promptly addressed in both contexts.

• Both ESL teachers and materials developers should promote tasks which combine both reading comprehension and critical analysis of texts. True/False and multiple choice exercises appear to dominate in current materials and are not always very effective. Complex tasks, in which students actively and meaningfully practice the target language both receptively and productively, should be widely advocated.

• Teacher education or professional development courses should focus more on the importance of critical thinking in reading. Teachers must effectively incorporate critical thinking skills into their practice to eventually produce critical readers. As a result, ESL teachers should be familiarised with a variety of instructional strategies and assessment types to make critical thinking/reading happen in the classroom. Also, the profile of a critical thinker/reader as well as what critical reading entails should be thoroughly discussed in such courses.

• Clear policies and guidelines relating to the systematic and accurate assessment of critical thinking in reading should be developed and properly implemented in both contexts. Teachers must be informed about which aspects of critical thinking should be taught and assessed at which level of education and through what means. It is vital that all teachers use the same guidelines to ensure uniformity of measurements and fairness in the system.

5. Further Research

There are limitations in the current study, which means the current study can act as a launching pad for future research. The first limitation to be pointed out is that the research population in the current project was rather small; it consisted of 160

participants. Quantitative measures require large populations to be regarded as representations of groups of subjects to whom research outcomes can be transferred (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Secondly, the participants represented only ESL teaching contexts. In the future, it would be worthwhile to conduct a similar study in L1 contexts in both countries, and then compare the findings. Similar and divergent patterns should be determined and proper curricular decisions made. What is more, the research population could include ESL teachers. Combining student and teacher perspectives would contribute to providing a fuller picture of critical reading in both teaching contexts. Finally, to investigate the issue in question more thoroughly, additional data collection instruments should be used in future projects. This small-scale study used only questionnaires and interviews. However, classroom observations and evaluations of instructional materials should be included in future studies to provide more extensive and reliable data.

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Acknowledgements

APPENDIX 1
CRITICAL THINKING IN ESL READING
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE
I.   QUESTIONS
1. To what extent do you agree it is important to think critically while reading? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
a. strongly disagree
b. disagree
c. uncertain
d. agree
e. strongly agree
2. Which of the following features do you think a critical thinker/reader should have? (Put a tick (✓) against each item you choose.)

1.	a keen sense of curiosity	
2.	identify and solve problems	
3.	focus on relevant topics and issues	
4.	make predictions	
5.	apply imagination	
6.	sequence information/ideas	
7	classify information/ideas	

8.	re-read when the reader thinks they have missed something	
9.	search texts for authors' purposes	
10.	analyse arguments	
11.	easily express thoughts and opinions	
12.	develop and present reasoned and persuasive arguments	
13.	ask thought-provoking questions	
14.	distinguish between theory, facts and opinions	
15.	distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information	
16.	distinguish emotive and neutral vocabulary	
17.	pick out the key points from background information	
18.	identify the line of reasoning in a text	
19.	think logically, basing judgments on ideas and evidence	
20.	reassess views when new evidence is introduced	
21.	compare different points of view	
22.	use knowledge from other disciplines to enhance their reading	
23.	relate new problems to already known ones	
24.	understand what is meant by something that is not openly written; read "between the lines"	
25.	reflect on reading experiences	
26.	recognise error in thought	
27.	recognise and resist manipulation	
28.	self-critical about own understanding and interpretation of texts	
29.	understand that not everything in print is right	

3. To what extent do you agree you are a critical thinker when you read in English? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
a. strongly disagree
b. disagree
c. uncertain
d. agree
e. strongly agree
4. To what extent do you agree that English language teachers in your country help students to become critical thinkers? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
a. strongly disagree
b. disagree
c. uncertain
d. agree
e. strongly agree
5. How do English language teachers in your country help students to develop critical thinking skills? (Please circle appropriate letters from **a** to **j**.)
a. appropriate reading tasks
b. presentations
c. debates, forums, discussions
d. workshops

e.   teacher feedback
f.   teaching through questioning
g.   teaching through writing
h.   teaching through problem-solving (e.g. classroom projects)
i.   involving students in self- and peer-assessment
j.   other
_____

6.   How would you like English language teachers in your country to help students to develop critical thinking skills? (Please circle appropriate letters from **a** to **j**.)
a.   appropriate reading tasks
b.   presentations
c.   debates, forums, discussions
d.   workshops
e.   teacher feedback
f.   teaching through questioning
g.   teaching through writing
h.   teaching through problem-solving (e.g. classroom projects)
i.   involving students in self- and peer-assessment
j.   other
_____

7.   What aspects of critical thinking do you think you should develop further to be a more successful L2 learner? (Put a tick (✔) against each item you choose.)

1.	identifying and solving problems	
2.	focusing on relevant topics and issues	
3.	expressing thoughts and opinions	
4.	making predictions	
5.	applying imagination	
6.	sequencing information/ideas	
7	classifying information/ideas	
8.	re-reading when I think I have missed something	
9.	searching texts for authors' purposes	
10.	analyzing arguments	
11.	identifying the line of reasoning in texts	
12.	thinking logically, basing judgments on ideas and evidence	
13.	reassessing views when new evidence is introduced	
14.	comparing different points of view	
15.	seeing connections between topics and texts	
16.	using knowledge from other disciplines to enhance reading;	
17.	relating new problems to ones I already know or have solved	
18.	understanding what is meant by something that is not openly written; reading "between the lines"	
19.	reflecting on reading experiences	
20.	recognising error in thought	

| 21. | recognising and resisting manipulation | |
| 22. | being self-critical about own understanding and interpretation of texts | |

II.   PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENT

1.   How old are you? (Please put the number in the space provided below.)

_____

2.   What is your gender? (Please highlight one letter below.)
a. male **b.** female

3.   What is your native language(s)? (Please put the answer in the space provided below.)

_____

4.   What is your nationality? (Please put the answer in the space provided below.)

_____

5.   How long have you been learning English? (Please put the number in the space provided below.)

_____

6.   What's your level of English? (Please tick (✔) the right box below?)

pre-intermediate	intermediate	upper-intermediate	advanced	proficiency
…..	…..	…..	…..	…..

7.   Are you planning to study abroad? If so, please provide the name of the country below.

_____

Appendix 2
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. Do you reflect on what you read in your L2? If yes, provide an example.
2. Do you make predictions when you read in your L2? If yes, provide an example.
3. Do you analyse and evaluate arguments in L2 texts? How do you do this?
4. Have a look at the list of thinking skills and tell which of them you need to improve to become a more successful L2 learner.
•   Why do you want to improve these particular skills? Explain.
•   How do you think you could improve these skills in your reading?
•   Do you expect your English language teacher to help you? Why? How?
•   Do you think you can do it on your own? Why? How?

❑❑❑