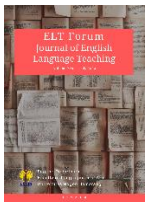
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From categorizing to evaluating: Mapping the critical reading levels of English language students

Mia Angela A. Paway[1], Krisha Mecca M. Santiago[1], Jessica S. Toralba[1], Joseph B. Quinto✉[1]

[1]Department of English, Benguet State University, Philippines

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Abstract

Critical reading is increasingly recognized as a fundamental academic literacy skill that enables learners to analyze, interpret, and evaluate textual information beyond surface comprehension. Despite its importance in higher education, limited studies have examined the critical reading competencies of English language students within the Philippine context. Addressing this gap, the present study investigated the critical reading levels of Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students in a state university in the Cordillera Administrative Region. Anchored in a quantitative descriptive design, the study utilized a validated and pilot-tested 40-item assessment tool measuring three dimensions of critical reading: categorizing, analyzing, and evaluating. A total of 241 respondents participated in the study through stratified cluster sampling. Descriptive statistics and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were employed to analyze differences according to year level and gender. Findings revealed that BAEL students demonstrated an overall high level of critical reading proficiency, with categorizing emerging as the strongest dimension, followed by evaluating and analyzing. Significant differences were found across year levels, particularly among second-year students, while no statistically significant differences were observed according to gender. Interestingly, queer students obtained the highest mean scores, suggesting the potential influence of diverse interpretive experiences on critical literacy practices. The findings underscore the multidimensional and developmental nature of critical reading and highlight the importance of pedagogical scaffolding, metacognitive reading strategies, and inclusive literacy instruction in fostering higher-order thinking skills among university learners. The study contributes to the growing discourse on critical literacy and academic reading in multilingual higher education contexts.

✉Correspondence Address:
KM. 5
La Trinidad, Benguet, 2601
E-mail: j.quinto@bsu.edu.ph

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a crucial cognitive skill enabling individuals to access and process written information in order to engage with it in an understanding manner. Reading, however, is not just passive; it is interactive, complex, intentional, and demands prolonged effort from the cognition system of the individual and the use of multiple knowledge systems. This means it is not just decoding linguistic symbols but constructing meanings through the interplay between previous knowledge, contextual clues, and strategies for interpretation. As emphasized by Anmarkrud and Bråten (2008), proficient readers are distinguished from other readers by their ability to process, synthesize, and critically evaluate texts which has led to the view that reading comprehension is one of the most important indicators of academic competence. Reading is also seen as a transformative activity where individuals connect what they have learned from text to their own experiences and thus develop analytical and argumentative skills.

Despite its importance to students' success at the university level, there remains great variability among students in terms of their reading proficiency (Chavez et al., 2025). Evidence based on empirical data challenge the assumption that advanced language students will automatically possess strong comprehensive skills. For example, Yimwilai (2008) reported that Thai students majoring in English only demonstrated moderate levels of reading comprehension specifically in relating main ideas and thematic structures. These findings suggest that reading comprehension is not an automatism that can be acquired but rather requires deliberate and continuous development. Grabe and Stoller (2012) note that effective comprehension does not just involve understanding but also analyzing and evaluating textual information. This highest level of comprehension, critical comprehension, requires readers to apply inference making, syntheses and judgment, all of which are closely tied to critical thinking (Medranda-Morales et al., 2023).

Reading comprehension has been identified by several researchers as a multifaceted skill. For example, Chou (2011) indicated four important aspects: linguistic proficiency; organizing ideas and concepts; making inferences; and recognizing authors' intentions. In addition, Woolley (2011) described reading comprehension as an ongoing and iterative process involving reciprocal use of top-down and bottom-up strategies. Students actively engage their existing knowledge base to create predictions about what they will find in a text and process the specific content of the text to build an understanding. Kendeou et al. (2016) emphasized that when students are able to successfully integrate these two types of processes, comprehension can occur effectively. This is why there is a need for instructional methods that focus on developing both cognitive and metacognitive skills. The body of literature examining the relationships among reading comprehension and critical thinking indicate that reading comprehension is directly related to critical thinking. A study conducted by Karimi and Veisi (2016) demonstrated a significant relationship between students' ability to demonstrate comprehension and their analytical reasoning. Vasay et al. (2016) defined comprehension as being able to identify, understand, and assess the meaning of written material in relation to one's personal or educational goals and prior experiences.

As a result of the complex nature of reading, numerous approaches have been developed to improve reading comprehension. Kelly (2024) stated that effective reading instruction teaches learners strategies that enable them to be actively engaged with the content of a text. Previewing is a popular method for teaching learners how to develop strategies for improving comprehension. It enables learners to utilize their prior knowledge and establish a purpose for engaging with the content of a text. Previewing also complements another type of activity known as interactive reading. Interactive reading includes using activities such as predicting, discussing, and reflecting on the content of a text. These activities allow students to collaborate to develop an interpretation of the content of a text. Kaminske (2022) explained that classroom discussion promotes learning through comprehension because it provides opportunities for students to think critically about the information presented in a text and express their own thoughts regarding the interpretation of the content of the text.

The use of multiple forms of media has become increasingly common in education. As such, video-based instruction has emerged as an effective means of developing student's prior knowledge and assisting their comprehension within both physical and virtual classrooms (Kaminske, 2022). According to Ligodon and Ildefonso (2022), students can develop reading strategies by employing two types of strategy categories. Cognitive strategies include activities such as planning, monitoring, predicting, and revising meaning. Metacognitive strategies allow for the development of self-awareness in the application of reading strategies. Both categories exemplify the active role that readers take in the construction of meaning as opposed to merely receiving information.

In higher education institutions, students will be required to read, analyze, and create logical arguments from often lengthy, complex written materials. Critical reading skills therefore have significant implications for the successful completion of courses at the post-secondary level. As students navigate increasingly challenging course loads, Wilson (2016) suggests that developing a strong foundation in critical reading skills is necessary for the achievement of academic success. Furthermore, Paul and Elder (2001) describe critical thinking as the "disciplined systematic study of issues." Consequently, critical reading can be seen as an application of critical thinking which requires readers to question assumptions, examine evidence, and construct reasonable explanations for the interpretation of texts. Although there is a direct relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking, it is reciprocal in nature and not linear. Paige et al. (2024) suggest that each area positively impacts the improvement of the other while reading comprehension and critical thinking skills improve independently. Likewise, Atabaki et al. (2015) state that students are more likely to interpret, analyze, and evaluate texts thereby producing original meanings from text when students actively participate in critical reading.

As a whole, this discussion emphasizes the need for educators to continue emphasizing reading comprehension and critical literacy. While numerous models and techniques have been developed to promote improved reading comprehension, ongoing gaps exist in advanced-level reading skills indicating the need for contextualized studies, pedagogically innovative approaches and further research related to the implementation of reading comprehension and critical literacy in educational settings. Understanding how students interact with texts and employ reading strategies in real-world classroom settings provides valuable insight into the development of both comprehension and critical thinking.

Critical reading

Critical reading is most often defined by educators as an active, evaluationary, and interpretationary process where students make meaning from what they read on a deeper level than just the words on the page. Wallace and Wray (2011) explain that it is an ongoing process with readers continually refining their understandings as they question the intent, beliefs, and values behind a text. The reader has to be able to "read between the lines" so they can find the implied meanings and critically evaluate the author's intention. From an educational viewpoint, Afanasjeva et al. (2020) believe that critical reading is one of the primary ways to develop important skills for professionals/students. They emphasize that learning to critically read will help students go beyond just being able to comprehend what was written; students will learn to critically analyze the social/cultural context in which the writer created his/her writing.

Extending the idea of critical reading, Baki (2020) states that critical reading incorporates several different skill areas to provide a complete understanding of a text. Those skills include: identifying the main topic and thesis statement, determining key terms/concepts, examining how the organization of the writing relates to the content, and distinguishing between fact and opinion. A critical reader should identify biases/stereotypes and assumptions that may be present in the writing, in addition to assessing whether the information presented is consistent and credible. Thus, critical reading includes not only comprehension, but interpretation, making inferences, and making judgments. Therefore, all of these definitions establish critical reading as a complex, high-level cognitive task that not only increases students' levels of understanding, but also develops students' analysis and evaluation abilities.

Critical reading levels

Categorizing is the foundational level of critical reading; it encompasses how the reader identifies and organizes the major aspects of a text. A basic aspect of categorizing, according to Kiwas (2024), is determining what the central concepts of a given piece of writing are, and distinguishing between objective statements (facts) and subjective expressions (opinions). Categorizing, from a cognitive viewpoint, represents a primary method by which people organize data for the purpose of structuring information around similarity and relevance (Győri, 2013). It provides the foundation upon which more complex types of texts can be read by providing a way to divide the text into manageable sections.

Analyzing, on the other hand, is a more sophisticated form of critical reading. Analyzing includes analyzing the structures contained within a piece of writing in order to establish meaning and understand the authors intent. Analyzing, as defined by Kiwas (2024), means to take apart the written

text to discover its meaningt Similar to Williams (2025), who defines analyzing as examining for relationships and patterns, or finding the underlying theme(s) so that one may gain a better understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, according to Anderson (2013), analysis refers to the systematic study of written information whereby readers break down each component of the written material to develop an informed opinion. Examples of subtasks at this level include forming a conclusion regarding a topic and identifying the writers intent or point-of-view.

Evaluating, at the most abstract level of critical reading, is concerned with evaluating whether or not the written information presented in a text is valid, relevant, and credible. Evaluation, as stated by Kiwas (2024), consists of identifying supportable ideas, looking for evidence, and making judgments regarding the content of a written text. Nevertheless, Mavrot et al. (2024) noted that selecting criteria for evaluation is too frequently under-examined. Tasnimi (2017) argued that critical readers should evaluate what lies beneath the literal meaning of a written text; i.e., to critically examine what are assumed to be true in a written text, implied in a written text, or invalid in a written text. Examples of subtasks at this level include identifying supporting ideas, seeking out and assessing evidence, interpreting a written text, and making judgments regarding the meaning derived from written discourse.

Reading is viewed by many researchers as a multi-faceted cognitive process by which people interactively make sense of written language. In this view, reading is a purposeful, adaptive, and highly cognitively demanding activity that draws upon both existing background knowledge, and reader-interpretation strategies (Anmarkrud & Braten, 2008; Chavez et al., 2026). The reading process also has biological, social-psychological, and emotional components. Thus, readers are able to link what they read to their own life-experiences, resulting in improved analytical and argumentative abilities. Despite the importance of reading to students' academic achievement, there is considerable evidence to indicate that not all students develop higher order reading skills. For example, Yimwilai (2008) reported that undergraduate students majoring in English in Thailand demonstrated only a moderate ability to comprehend readings, specifically regarding main ideas and general thematic patterns. Effective reading comprehension, at least at the critical level, requires the reader to be able to analyze, interpret, judge, and integrate information. This capability mirrors those needed to develop critical thinking (Grabe & Stoller, 2012; Karimi & Veisi, 2016; Vasay et al., 2016). These results emphasize the need for instructional methods and strategies designed to scaffold student learning through systematic teaching of reading strategies (including metacognitive and cognitive ones like previewing, monitoring, predicting, etc.) so that they have adequate tools for navigating complex texts.

Developing the ability to read critically in a scholarly environment is especially important for postsecondary students because it can transform these individuals from passive receivers of information to "creators" of meaning (Atabaki et al., 2015; Wilson, 2016). When developing critical reading abilities, there are two main types of understanding involved: categorization of content within the text (identifying major concepts or facts versus opinion) and analytical thinking about various elements within the text such as author's purpose, logical reasoning, and use of evidence to support arguments (Paul & Elder, 2001; Kiwas, 2024; Tasnimi, 2017). Research has demonstrated that both reading comprehension and critical thinking skill development have an indirect relationship, which implies that students will be better positioned to create their own meanings and make informed decisions based on their interpretation of what they are reading if students are able to think critically while reading (Paige et al., 2024). Moreover, a number of other variables may impact students' ability to develop their critical reading abilities including level of study (for example, first year vs. third year), as well as student gender (for example, do males or females tend to participate more in academic discussions etc.) (AlSereidi, 2021; Lofranco & Luzano, 2023).

Given these considerations, this study seeks:

(1) to examine the critical reading levels of Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students; and
(2) to investigate differences the critical reading levels according to year level and gender.

These research questions aim to provide insights into how students' cognitive and demographic characteristics intersect with their ability to engage critically with texts, offering implications for inclusive pedagogy and targeted instructional strategies.

METHODS

Research design

Quantitative descriptive research design was used to find the critical reading skills level of BAEL (Bachelor of Arts in English Language) students. Descriptive research using quantitative data has been commonly utilized to allow researchers to obtain a better understanding of the research topic or phenomenon through description, as well as to explore or explain current competencies or traits (Potterie et al., 2025; Purnamasari et al., 2025).

Respondents

The study participants were BAEL (Bachelor of Arts in English Language) students at a public university in the Cordillera Administrative Region who had been selected as they focus on developing advanced communication skills in English, analyzing literature, and critical thinking. Stratification by both year level and gender was used as an additional factor to help create representative samples, which were then identified through the use of a cluster sampling approach. Cluster sampling is designed to allow researchers to identify relatively homogenous groupings. A total of 229 students made up the final sample; this number included every student enrolled as a freshman with a total of 49 students as well as other randomly sampled students from among the sophomore (60 students), junior (60 students), and senior classes (60 students). The fishbowl method was employed in selecting the latter cohort so that randomness could be assured in identifying participants.

Instruments

A 40-item test for assessing students' skills to read critically which included categorizing, analyzing, and evaluating, was developed. The test questions were based on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and other materials. The test consisted of Passage 1 (Questions 1-4), Passage 2 (Questions 5-9), Passage 3 (10-16), Passage 4 (17-23), Passage 5 (24-33), and Passage 6 (34-40). All in all, there were 6 passages with 40 questions on the test.

Three Ph.D. degree holders in English/reading education reviewed the test to assure it would be valid content-wise. Next, the test was piloted using 16 students enrolled in a Bachelor of Secondary Education-English who did not represent the majority of the population. The pilot test allowed for the refinement of items to make sure all questions were clear, and most importantly, provided evidence of the tools' ability to assess the intended cognitive construct (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data collection procedures

After having validated and tested in a pilot phase, formal approval was received by the College Chairperson for accessing information on student enrollments. The test was given as specified to the selected group of subjects and within the 50 minute-time limit. Each response was graded carefully and tabulations were created to clearly show students' critical reading abilities. The administration of this test was carried out according to established guidelines to ensure that each participant had an equal opportunity to participate, thereby reducing any possible sources of bias (Fraenkel et al., 2019) in the participation.

The researchers of this study followed all the ethical principles established by the their university's Research Ethics Committee in conducting the study. All participants were well aware of the purpose of the study, methods used, and rights to leave the study at any time with no loss or penalty. The researchers maintained confidentiality for participants' privacy by removing identifiable information from each participant; and keeping the collected data confidential. The research also ensured that the participation was non-coercive, non-threatening, non-harmful, and voluntary.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, particularly mean scores, were calculated to examine the critical reading levels of Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students, while Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to investigate differences in the critical reading levels according to year level and gender.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study. It examines the level of critical reading skills among BAEL students, categorized by year level and gender, as well as the following sub-categories of critical reading level: categorizing, analyzing, and evaluating.

Table 1. Critical reading level

Categories	Mean	Qualitative Description
CATEGORIZING		
Identifying Main Point	3.91	High Level
Distinguishing Facts from Opinion	3.92	High Level
Mean for categorizing	3.92	High Level
ANALYZING		
Making a Conclusion	3.39	High Level
Recognizing the author's purpose or point of view	3.04	High Level
Mean for analyzing	3.22	High Level
EVALUATING		
Finding supporting ideas	3.17	High Level
Seeking evidence	3.80	High Level
Interpreting the text	3.83	High Level
Judging the meaning of discourse	3.65	High Level
Mean for evaluating	3.61	High Level
Overall Mean	3.58	High Level

Table 1 shows the results of the critical reading level test conducted to identify the critical reading levels of BAEL students through categorizing, analyzing, and evaluating with their sub-categories.

The study results revealed that the critical reading level of students is at high level, with an overall mean of 3.58. Under categorizing, the total mean is 3.92, interpreted as a high level, which indicates that they can identify the main idea or main point of a text. Under analyzing, the total mean is 3.22, interpreted as a high level, which indicates that they can draw conclusions and determine an author's point of view from the opinion. Under evaluating, the total mean is 3.61, which indicates that they can find supporting ideas, seek evidence, interpret the text, and judge the meaning of discourse.

Categorizing has two sub-categories, namely distinguishing between facts and opinions with a mean of 3.92, interpreted high level, and identifying main points with a mean of 3.91, interpreted as high level. Analyzing has two sub-categories, namely making conclusions with a mean of 3.22, interpreted as high level, and recognizing the author's purpose or point of view with a mean of 3.04, interpreted as high level. Evaluating has four sub-categories, namely interpreting the text with a mean of 3.83, seeking evidence with a mean of 3.80, judging the meaning of discourse with a mean of 3.65, and finding supporting ideas with a mean of 3.61, interpreted as a high level.

Table 2 presents the results of the Critical Reading Level Test, showing the critical reading levels of BAEL students by their year level.

Table 2. Year level

Year Level	Sample	Mean	Qualitative Description	Standard Deviation	F	p-value
First Year	46	28.96	High Level	5.53	6.998	0.000**
Second Year	65	26.57	High Level	4.48		
Third Year	65	29.92	High Level	3.85		
Fourth Year	65	29.46	High Level	4.47		
Overall	241	28.71	High Level	4.71		

The study revealed that the critical reading levels of BAEL students based on their year-level is at high level with an overall mean score of 28.71. Third-year level obtained the highest mean score of 29.92, interpreted as high, followed by fourth-year level with a mean score of 29.46. The first-year level ranked next with a mean score of 28.96, followed by second-year level with a mean of 26.57. Based on their gender, the study revealed that their critical reading level is at high level with an overall mean score of 28.71. Queer obtained the highest mean score of 29.19, interpreted as high, followed by women with a mean score of 29.01, interpreted as high, and men with a mean of 27.61, interpreted as high.

With a p-value of 0.000, there is sufficient statistical evidence to suggest that there is a significant difference in the mean of the groups across each year level. To determine where the difference lies, a post-hoc analysis was conducted. As a result, the researchers accepted the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the critical reading levels of BAEL students according to year levels.

Table 3 presents the results of the Critical Reading Level Test, showing the critical reading levels of BAEL students by their gender.

Table 3. Gender

Gender	Sample	Mean	Qualitative Description	Standard Deviation	F	p-value
Woman	149	29.01	High Level	4.64	2.04	0.13233ns
Man	56	27.61	High Level	4.54		
Queer	36	29.19	High Level	5.10		
Overall	241	28.71	High Level	4.71		

Since the p-value is not less than the 0.05 level of significance, there is enough statistical evidence to conclude that the critical reading level of the respondents, regardless of gender, is statistically the same. In this case, there is no significant difference in the critical reading levels of the respondents when compared according to gender. Then, the researchers rejected the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the critical reading levels of BAEL students according to their gender.

Discussion

Critical reading levels of students

The current study presents empirical support for the fact that Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students at a public university in the Northern Philippines have critical reading abilities as demonstrated by their total mean scores. The findings presented contradict the generalization found in one study concerning the notion that more proficient language users will naturally attain sophisticated reading skills (Yimwilai, 2008). Rather, this supports the idea that students are able to obtain critical reading through structured curricula and other pedagogical approaches (Afanasjeva et al., 2020; Roomy, 2022). By being exposed to various texts, BAEL students are not simply decoding language but are evaluating argumentation, detecting bias, and synthesizing information, therefore demonstrating an evolution of the students' passively comprehending to an analytically and generatively understanding of the reading process (Al Roomy, 2022; Fajutagana, 2024). The results of this study are congruent with the theory of top-down and bottom-up processing in reading comprehension and indicate that the reader integrates his or her prior knowledge with textual data in order to create a coherent mental model (Woolley, 2011).

When examining critical reading sub-categories, this research indicates a more complex picture of performance. Specifically, based on mean scores, BAEL students performed best in categorizing, and secondly in evaluating, while third was analyzing. This ranking reflects the fact that categorizing is identified as a lower-order skill under Bloom's Taxonomy, representing the ability to recognize and classify material without synthesizing or creatively applying it (Haataja et al., 2022). A science-based interpretation of these findings would suggest that students possess strong foundational processes (i.e., identifying the central ideas of an article and differentiating between fact and opinion) which represent necessary precursors to more advanced forms of critical thinking (Győri, 2013). While this same level of proficiency in categorizing might be seen as indicative of developing cognitive demands associated with high-level skills like analysis and evaluation (Williams, 2025), there remains a possibility that even when they have reached levels of proficiency sufficient to perform well on tasks of evaluation and analysis, they continue to struggle with them.

Evaluating, which has traditionally been viewed as a higher-level skill, was determined to be the second highest critical reading level. Therefore, it can be inferred that students have developed sufficient abilities in terms of evaluating text-based information, forming opinions/decisions regarding such information, and "reading beyond" the explicit content (Tasnimi, 2017). This study found significant support for the idea that pedagogy that incorporates critical thinking-based tasks results in better evaluative abilities (Maab et al., 2024). Although the mean score for "analyzing" was slightly less than that for "evaluating," it appears to reflect the inherent complexities associated with

cognitively deconstructing text, identifying patterns within said text, and drawing inferences based upon an understanding of the implied content. Analysis as described by Van Le et al. (2024) represents the simultaneous interplay among three primary areas: linguistically-related knowledge; conceptual reasoning; and inferentially-based skills, each of which could contribute to students' challenges in developing analysis skills.

Differences in the critical reading levels according to year and gender

Statistical analysis revealed that there were significant differences in Critical Reading by year level; the mean score was significantly lower for second-year students than for first-, third- and fourth-year students. Based upon cognitive-load theory, second-year BAEL students are carrying a heavy course-load, which limits both the time they have to engage deeply with texts and the amount of cognitive energy they can devote to such engagement (Hameed, 2024; Velayati et al., 2017). These empirical findings thus provide direct evidence supporting theoretical claims that reading ability is not simply a matter of growing older or passing from one grade level to another, but is very much influenced by how well the curriculum has been designed, how frequently students practice reading, and what kinds of learning opportunities are provided.

The study did not find a statistically significant difference in critical reading skills for male, female, and queer. All three groups of students demonstrated similar competency levels (Pun & Jin, 2021). On another note, the queer group scored the highest average. As such, it appears that being exposed to a variety of experiences, both personally and through multiple viewpoints can be beneficial when developing interpretative flexibility and literacy (Storm & Jones, 2021; Uys et al., 2021). The findings from this research support theoretical models of Queer Pedagogy which suggest that learning to navigate complex social norms, along with complex textual norms will develop analytical ability and enable one to begin questioning their own assumptions (Helmer, 2015). Additionally, the females' performance was just above that of the males' and supports other research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studies where there has been evidence showing that gender differences in reading comprehension (Lingfeng & Nair, 2021; Saidi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). In total, the collective results of this research support the theory that critical reading skill development is multi-dimensional and impacted by instructional methodology, experiential learning, and sociocultural positionality rather than solely demographic characteristics.

Structural curricular support and individual developmental processes combine to produce the ability of BAEL students to critically read. The high levels of performance by students in evaluating and categorizing indicate that students have developed the basic frameworks needed for analysis, but the relatively lower performance on analyzing demonstrate that continued pedagogical support will be required to develop their deeper inferential/interpretative capabilities (Kiwas, 2024; Van Le et al., 2024). Differences based upon year level further illustrate how exposure, practice, and cognitive load affect the level of critical reading levels of students. The fact that there were no gender-based differences found in this study suggest that equal educational opportunities may create equivalent performance among different subpopulations of students. In summary, this study provided empirical evidence to support a hierarchical model of developing critical reading in post-secondary education, which indicates that all cognitive skills require experiential experiences, as well as some form of pedagogical support.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the critical reading levels of Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students at Benguet State University, focusing on their abilities to categorize, analyze, and evaluate texts. Findings suggest that these students have high level of critical reading competences, as well as an understanding of how to determine the main idea(s), differentiating between fact and opinion, interpreting author's viewpoint(s), and developing reasonable assessments or opinions. More specifically, students demonstrated a significant capability to draw conclusions based upon analysis of text, assess the validity of textual arguments, and utilize evidence to develop a conceptualization of meaning. Therefore, it would appear that the way in which students interact with written text extends beyond basic comprehension. As previously reported by Roomy (2022) and Afanasjeva et al. (2020), successful critical readers require not only analytical thinking and interpretation of ideas, but also evaluation of those ideas. Both of these components are considered necessary for both academic success and professional competence. The ability of BAEL students to process complex written texts suggests that students who pursue BAEL do not simply consume information; rather, they produce

knowledge through synthesis of concepts and use of critical thinking (Atabaki et al., 2015; Paige et al., 2024).

In the comparison of year level and gender, Pun and Jin (2021) and Lingfeng and Nair (2021) demonstrated through this research that all year levels were shown to be proficient in developing a strong base for critical reading through structured curriculum-based learning activities, although there are some slight variations in performance among each group regarding critical reading levels. Second year students had a slightly lower average score then their first year counterparts. This could have been due to an increase in the amount of material covered in courses and less time to continue reading and engaging with texts. The cognitive load theory suggests that students will perform at a lower level when students are presented with a large amount of information to process. There was also no statistical difference in the test results based on gender, but queer students scored higher than other groups of students. This suggests that students who live through or engage with a variety of different perspectives may experience greater ability to understand the meanings behind the words of others. Overall, it can be concluded that critical reading development is influenced by both the design of instruction and students' real world engagement as opposed to demographics only.

As evidenced by the findings of this study, there are a number of implications for future research and practice. For example, it would be valuable to continue to investigate the relationship between the level of reading required for students at various degree levels as well as degree majors. This is in an effort to understand if the results found in this study hold true in varying educational environments. In addition, workshops, seminars, or collaborative reading opportunities could be developed to enhance critical reading skills. These opportunities will specifically target those student populations which have been identified as having some of the lowest performance levels, specifically, students in their second year of college. The students involved in developing these types of workshops or programs may also benefit from engaging in interdisciplinary discussions, collaborating with peers and being exposed to a variety of reading strategies to enhance both analytical and evaluative abilities within students.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide additional information regarding the evolution of students' critical reading levels through the tracking of students' critical reading skills over time. Additionally, longitudinal studies could help inform curriculum design and support evidence-based practices. Studies utilizing contextually relevant local literature, including Filipino literary works, indigenous narratives, and culturally situated materials, could assist in fostering critical engagement among students while linking students' analytical skills to their identity and community (Paige et al., 2024; Vasay et al., 2016). Finally, these results could provide the foundation for developing curricula that require the intentional scaffolding of critical reading and thinking skills so that graduates are not only proficient in comprehending content, but also capable of sophisticated interpretations, evaluations, and knowledge creation.

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