



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***An applied linguistic comparison of basic and critical reading skills among EFL learners**

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This study compared students' competence in basic reading skills and critical reading skills. The researcher chose a reading comprehension text entitled The Buy Nothing Movement and designed ten questions to test the competence of the basic reading skills of the students and another ten questions to test the competence of their critical reading skills. The participants in this study were forty BA English language students at the Applied Science Private University, in the English Language and Translation Department. The results revealed that the students' competence in answering the basic reading skills questions was much better than answering the critical reading skills questions; the answers to the basic questions were more complete, correct, and competent than the answers to the critical questions. In the end, the researcher recommended that English teachers must give special attention to critical reading questions while teaching reading skills.

KEYWORDS: critical reading, linguistics, English, ELT, reading skill, students, universities

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1. Introduction

Reading skill is one of the four integrated skills that the learner of the English language has to master to achieve a certain competence level. In this context, it is vital to distinguish between the basic reading skills and the critical reading skills. Duncan (2022) states many differences between reading and critical reading: the purpose of reading is to get a basic grasp of the text, while the purpose of critical reading is to form judgments about how a text works. The related activity to reading is understanding, while the related activity to critical reading is analyzing/ evaluating. Reading focuses on what a text says, while critical reading focuses on what a text does and means. The attitude of reading is to be with the text, while the attitude of critical reading is to be against it. Finally, the response after reading is a summary, while the response after critical reading is an evaluation. Kwik (2023) states the following mental advantages and reasons for reading: strengthens your brain, reduces your stress, expands your knowledge, enhances creativity and imagination, improves your memory, improves your concentration and focus, improves your vocabulary, improves your communication skills, improve your mental health, and reading is entertainment.

Besides, Basmo/Learning Center states the following benefits of critical reading: mental development, better understanding of the text, critical thinking improvement, remembering more from what you read, and better logical and problem-solving skills. According to the center, critical reading can be achieved through the following steps: reading normally, reading again more carefully, making notes, understanding every word, analyzing every word, practicing metacognition, and drawing conclusions.

2. Review of Related Literature

Within the field of applied linguistics, the distinction between basic and critical reading skills has been widely explored, particularly in EFL contexts where learners often demonstrate uneven development across these competencies. Several studies have emphasized that while learners may achieve satisfactory levels in basic comprehension, they frequently encounter difficulties when engaging in higher-order reading processes such as inference, evaluation, and critical interpretation (Fraihat, 2024; Ja'afreh, 2023; Meqdad, Al-Bayyari, & Al-Taher, 2023). From a linguistic perspective, reading is not merely a decoding process but a complex interaction between textual, contextual, and cognitive elements, which requires awareness of discourse structures and pragmatic meanings (Haider, 2019; Haider et al., 2023; Samha, Haider, & Hussein, 2023).

Moreover, corpus-based and discourse-oriented studies have highlighted that language users often struggle with implicit meanings, specialized terminology, and contextual variation, all of which are central to critical reading competence (Hussein, Haider, & Al-Sayyed, 2021; Al-Khalafat & Haider, 2022; Al-Abbas, Haider, & Saideen, 2022). In addition, research in translation and media linguistics further supports the importance of critical processing skills, as understanding meaning across languages and modalities requires deep interpretation and analytical ability (Farghal, Haider, & Abu Tair, 2023; AlOteibi, Haider, & AlSaed, 2023; Abu Rumman et al., 2023). Studies on subtitling and audiovisual translation also demonstrate how meaning is negotiated through linguistic and cultural frameworks, reinforcing the need for advanced comprehension skills (Abulawi, Al Salman, & Haider, 2022; Akasha et al., 2024; Abu-Rayyash & Haider, 2024).

Furthermore, recent applied linguistic research has explored how technological and sociolinguistic factors influence language learning and comprehension. For example, studies on AI-generated language, digital tools, and language accessibility reveal that learners must develop critical awareness to interpret and evaluate language use effectively in modern contexts (Al-Salman & Haider, 2024; AbuRumman et al., 2025; Saed et al., 2025). Similarly, earlier research has shown that integrating technology and multimedia resources can support language skill development, but it must be accompanied by strategies that promote critical engagement (Saed et al., 2021; Al-Dhuhli, Alkindi, & Al-Taani, 2022).

Overall, these studies collectively indicate that while basic reading skills provide a necessary foundation, the development of critical reading skills is essential for achieving advanced linguistic competence. They also highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate linguistic theory, discourse analysis, and critical literacy practices to bridge the gap between surface-level comprehension and deeper textual understanding. Yildirim and Soylemez (2018) studied the effect of reading activities with critical reading questions on critical thinking and reading skills. The study's participants were 232 students chosen randomly. It was a mixed-design study with a qualitative and quantitative dimension. The results revealed that reading activities with critical

reading questions have a statistically significant effect on students' critical thinking and reading skills. Moreover, Par (2018) studied the difference between the field-independent and the field-dependent EFL learners' critical reading skills. The study subjects were 60 undergraduate EFL students who passed the Critical Reading course. The researcher developed and administered a critical reading comprehension test that focused on determining the main idea, the purpose, the tone, and making inferences. The results showed a statistically significant difference in the critical reading skills between the two groups.

Al-Roomy (2022) investigated the role of critical reading skills in enhancing students' reading comprehension while working in groups by discussing three study questions. The researcher adopted an open-ended questionnaire and participant observation, and he found that critical reading skills have an important effect on students' reading comprehension at different levels.

Within the same context, Younis, Naeem, Ali, et al. (2023) studied the relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking. The researchers administered a questionnaire to undergraduate university students. The results revealed that students have an optimistic view of reading comprehension, but their critical thinking skills and critical reading skills are not affected by that optimistic view. The researchers gave some recommendations, primarily implanting a lifelong love of reading in children.

Le, Nguyen, Le, et al. (2024) studied the critical reading strategies adopted by English major students. The study participants were 147 students who passed a critical reading course. The researcher administered a quantitative survey and semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. The findings revealed that students depend on lower-level cognitive abilities instead of higher-level critical thinking. The study concluded that some reasons impede the use of critical reading skills include deficiencies in language proficiency and limited comprehension of critical reading strategies.

The conducted studies focused on the effect of critical reading practices on critical thinking, reading skills, and reading comprehension, the relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking, and studying the critical reading strategies adopted by students. The researcher found that there was a need to do research to compare students' basic reading skills and their critical reading skills. The researcher wanted to study the extent to which the students were able to answer the basic and critical reading questions competently.

3. Methodology

To collect the data for this study, the researcher chose a reading comprehension text entitled "The Buy Nothing Movement"- Appendix 1. In light of the related literature that distinguishes between basic and critical reading, the researcher designed twenty questions: ten questions were under basic reading skills, and the other ten questions were under critical reading skills, taking into consideration that each question under basic reading skills had its counterpart under critical reading skills. Table 1 shows the questions under the two categories: basic reading and critical reading.

Table (1): Basic reading questions and critical reading questions

Basic Reading Questions	Critical Reading Questions
1/a- What is the title of the text?	1/b- Write another suitable title for the text.
2/a- What is the buy-nothing movement?	2/b- What is your opinion about the buy-nothing trend?
3/a- How many paragraphs are in the text?	3/b- Which paragraph can be deleted with the minimum effect on the meaning and the message of the text?
4/a- What are the things that people spend money on even though they don't need them?	4/b- Why does the writer think that it is worrying that people spend money on things that they do not need?
5/a- How many pounds does the average British person spend on new clothes a year?	5/b- How many JDs does the average British person spend on new clothes a year?
6/a- How could the two friends who did the buy nothing experiment save 55,000?	6/b- If you were one of these two friends, how would you apply the trend of buy nothing?
7/a- What are the two opposite trends in the text?	7/b-Do you think the author is male or female? Justify your answer.

<p>8/a- Decide whether the following statement is true or false.</p> <p>People buy clothes because they want to throw them away. T F</p>	<p>8/b- Decide whether the following statement is true or false. If it is false, correct it.</p> <p>The amount the average Briton owes on credit cards is one- third of the amount they spend on clothes each year.</p> <p>T F</p>
<p>9/a- Find a word in the text which means “a place where rubbish is buried under the ground”.</p>	<p>9/b- According to the sentence, “if everyone followed a similar plan, the results would be impressive” Do we have the chance to follow a similar plan or is it over?</p>
<p>10/a- Summarize the text in a short paragraph.</p>	<p>10/b- Evaluate the text in a short paragraph.</p>

The study participants were forty English language students at the English Language and Translation Department. The qualitative approach was adopted to analyse the collected data from the participants; the researcher was not concerned with calculating the frequency of the answers but with evaluating and analysing the nature of the answers and to what extent the students were able to answer the basic and critical reading questions competently.

4. Results and discussion of the study

The first basic reading question was “What is the title of the text?” All the participants could identify the title of the text, as this question is considered direct and straightforward. Moreover, the first critical reading question was “Write another suitable title for the text.” Most of the students were able to write their own suitable titles for the text, for example: “Buy nothing groups”, “The problem of overconsumption”, and “The buy less movement”; a few students gave irrelevant titles for example: “Online shopping”, “Know how to deal with purchases”, and “How to save money” as they depended on very specific details and generalized them to the whole text; and few students did not give any suitable title for the text.

The second basic reading question was “What is the buy-nothing movement?” Almost all the students could define the buy-nothing movement by describing it as a trend that rejects overspending and overconsumption; a few students conveyed a wrong message about the movement. Moreover, the second critical reading question was “What is your opinion about the buy nothing trend?” Most students agreed with the movement because they found it beneficial for the economy and the environment; they described it as a wise and good movement. Only a few students were against the movement; they described it as stupid, illogical, and bad.

The third basic reading question was “How many paragraphs are in the text?” Most of the students answered correctly that the text includes six paragraphs, but three of them did not provide any answer. Moreover, the third critical reading question was “Which paragraph can be deleted with the minimum effect on the meaning and the message of the text?” Several students chose paragraph three, and a few of them chose paragraph one; actually, the deletion of the first paragraph is more reasonable than the deletion of the third paragraph; paragraph one is just an introduction to the topic, while paragraph three includes a major idea that we can't go without.

The fourth basic reading question was “What are the things that people spend money on even though they don't need them?” All the participants' answers were correct. Moreover, the fourth critical reading question was “Why does the writer think that it is worrying that people spend money on things that they do not need?” Most students believe that the writer thinks that it is worrying that people spend money on unneeded things because he wants us to save money. In contrast, a few students believe that the reason is that this has negative effects on the environment. Of course, the second answer is more reasonable and related to the text than the first one.

The fifth basic reading question was “How many pounds does the average British person spend on new clothes a year?” Most of the students provided correct answers (1,000 pounds); only two students gave wrong numbers; they gave numbers that are mentioned in the text but are irrelevant to the question. Moreover, the fifth critical reading question was “How many JDs does the average British person spend on new clothes a year?” A few students gave the correct answer, which is about 850 JD; most of them gave incorrect answers.

The sixth basic reading question was “How could the two friends who did the buy-nothing experiment

save 55,000?” All the participants were able to give the correct answer that they spent a year working towards buying only food. For the first three months, they learned how to live without buying electrical goods, clothes, or things for the house. For the next stage, they gave up services. Moreover, the sixth critical reading question was “If you were one of these two friends, how would you apply the trend of buy-nothing? All the students’ answers were inspired by what the two girls in Canada did, and they added ideas like: using public transportation, using bicycles, learning how to sew, quitting makeup, and not going on vacation.

The seventh basic reading question was “What are the two opposite trends in the text?” Almost half of the students could identify the two opposite trends: the buy-nothing movement and consumerism. The other half gave no answers or irrelevant answers. Moreover, the seventh critical question was “Do you think the author is male or female? Justify your answer.” Almost half of the students think the author is male because they think that males are more concerned with saving and money management, while females are more concerned with fashion and shopping. On the other hand, almost half of the students think the author is female because they think that females are victims of fast fashion, and they are more concerned with accessories, makeup, and unneeded items. Only two students think that it is not reasonable to judge whether the author is male or female, as the text is informative and stands on facts and statistics, and it is not argumentative, so one can’t catch any evidence of whether the author is male or female. The researcher goes with the answer of the minority, as this text is purely informative and not argumentative, so one can’t judge whether the one who is reporting is male or female.

The eighth basic reading question was “Decide whether the following statement is true or false. People buy clothes because they want to throw them away.” All the students gave the correct answer, which is False. Moreover, the eighth critical reading question was “Decide whether the following statement is true or false. If it is false, correct it. The amount the average Briton owes on credit cards is one-third of the amount they spend on clothes each year.” A few students were able to give the correct answer, which is False, and were able to correct the statement as requested. Most of the students answered that the sentence was False, but they were unable to correct it, and finally, a few students gave the wrong answer.

The ninth basic reading question was “Find a word in the text that means a place where rubbish is buried under the ground.” Most students could find the equivalent, which is landfill sites. A few students give wrong answers. Moreover, the ninth critical reading question was “According to the sentence, ‘If everyone followed a similar plan, the results would be impressive.’ Do we have the chance to follow a similar plan, or is it over?” Half of the students answered that we still have the chance to follow a similar plan. The other half gave personal answers, which indicate that they haven’t recognised that, according to the use of conditional clause type two, we do have the chance to follow a similar plan in the present and make the requested change.

The tenth basic reading question was “Summarise the text in a short paragraph.” Half of the participants were able to give a good summary of the text, and the other half either gave bad summaries or no summary at all. Moreover, the tenth critical reading question was “Evaluate the text in a short paragraph.” Almost half of the students gave a short evaluation of the text; they wrote that this is an important trend that helps people save money and protect the environment, and that everyone has to follow this trend, and the rest of the students gave no evaluation.

In light of the students’ answers to both the basic and critical reading questions, it is noticed that the students’ answers to the ten basic questions are more informative and much better than the answers to their counterparts’ ten critical questions; the students were able to answer the basic questions more efficiently and competently than the critical questions. The basic questions are relatively direct, and they are of a nature that the students are familiar with, but the critical questions are relatively indirect, and they are of a nature that the students are not familiar with. The students faced more obstacles in answering the critical questions, which are related somehow to a high level of thinking, than the basic ones that are related somehow to a low level of thinking. This went with Le, Nguyen, Le, et al. (2024), who revealed that students depend on lower-level cognitive abilities instead of higher-level critical thinking.

Accordingly, the researcher believes that critical reading skills must be integrated into the reading and language skills courses to develop the students’ competence in dealing with critical questions. This went with Norbaiyah, Roose, Farah, and Juhaidah (2014), who discussed that reading skills, reading strategies, and metacognitive skills and strategies should be adopted while teaching reading to enable students to acquire

critical reading skills. According to the researchers, critical reading skills lead to critical thinking, so students can be critical readers and critical thinkers. Besides, Yildirim and Soylemez (2018) and Al-Roomy (2022) found that critical reading skills have an important role in developing students' critical thinking.

5. Conclusion

The researcher found that the students were able to deal with the basic reading skills questions in a more competent way than the critical reading skills questions. The students were able to answer the direct questions better than the questions that required a high level of thinking. In light of the results of the study, the researcher highly recommends that critical questions must be raised all the time in the reading courses; the teachers have to motivate students to think, analyse, criticise, and evaluate; students must be encouraged to develop their own judgments and opinions.

Based on this article's findings, several pedagogical and research-based recommendations can be proposed. First, English language curricula should adopt a more balanced approach that integrates both basic and critical reading skills. Instruction should extend beyond literal comprehension to include tasks that promote analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, enabling students to develop a more comprehensive understanding of texts.

Second, teachers should provide explicit instruction in critical reading strategies. Skills such as inference-making, identifying bias, recognizing tone, and evaluating arguments should be clearly taught, modeled, and practiced regularly. This structured approach can help students gradually build the cognitive and linguistic abilities necessary for critical reading.

Third, the use of diverse and authentic texts should be encouraged. Materials such as articles, essays, and opinion-based texts expose students to real-life language use and require them to engage with texts at a deeper level. This exposure supports the development of critical literacy and enhances students' interpretive skills.

In addition, interactive and reflective learning practices should be incorporated into the classroom. Activities such as group discussions, debates, and reflective writing can foster critical thinking and allow students to articulate and defend their interpretations. These methods create a more engaging learning environment and promote deeper comprehension.

Furthermore, teacher training and professional development are essential for improving the teaching of critical reading skills. Instructors should be equipped with effective strategies and a solid understanding of linguistic and discourse-based approaches to reading instruction. Well-prepared teachers are better able to guide students toward higher levels of textual analysis.

Finally, further research is recommended to expand on the findings of this study. Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions in improving critical reading skills or explore how different linguistic theories, such as discourse analysis, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics, can inform teaching practices.

In conclusion, while students demonstrate satisfactory competence in basic reading skills, there is a clear need to strengthen their critical reading abilities. Addressing this gap is essential for enhancing students' overall language proficiency and enabling them to engage more effectively with complex texts in both academic and real-world contexts.

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Appendix 1:

The Buy Nothing Movement

Social media, magazines and shop windows bombard people daily with things to buy, and British consumers are buying more clothes and shoes than ever before. Online shopping means it is easy for customers to buy without thinking, while major brands offer such cheap clothes that they can be treated like disposable items – worn two or three times and then thrown away.

In Britain, the average person spends more than £1,000 on new clothes a year, which is around four per cent of their income. That might not sound like much, but that figure hides two far more worrying trends for society and for the environment. First, a lot of that consumer spending is via credit cards. British people currently owe approximately £670 per adult to credit card companies. That's 66 per cent of the average wardrobe budget. Also, not only are people spending money they don't have, they're using it to buy things they don't need. Britain throws away 300,000 tons of clothing a year, most of which goes into landfill sites.

People might not realize they are part of the disposable clothing problem because they donate their unwanted clothes to charities. But charity shops can't sell all those unwanted clothes. 'Fast fashion' goes out of fashion as quickly as it came in and is often too poor quality to recycle; people don't want to buy it second-hand. Huge quantities end up being thrown away, and a lot of clothes that charities can't sell are sent abroad, causing even more economic and environmental problems.

However, a different trend is springing up in opposition to consumerism – the 'buy nothing' trend. The idea originated in Canada in the early 1990s and then moved to the US, where it became a rejection of the overspending and overconsumption of Black Friday and Cyber Monday during Thanksgiving weekend. On Buy Nothing Day people organize various types of protests and cut up their credit cards. Throughout the year, Buy Nothing groups organize the exchange and repair of items they already own.

The trend has now reached influencers on social media who usually share posts of clothing and make-up that they recommend for people to buy. Some YouTube stars now encourage their viewers not to buy anything at all for periods as long as a year. Two friends in Canada spent a year working towards buying only food. For the first three months they learned how to live without buying electrical goods, clothes or things for the house. For the next stage, they gave up services, for example haircuts, eating out at restaurants or buying petrol for their cars. In one year, they'd saved \$55,000.

The changes they made meant two fewer cars on the roads, a reduction in plastic and paper packaging and a positive impact on the environment from all the energy saved. If everyone followed a similar plan, the results would be impressive. But even if you can't manage a full year without going shopping, you can participate in the anti-consumerist movement by refusing to buy things you don't need. Buy Nothing groups send a clear message to companies that people are no longer willing to accept the environmental and human cost of overconsumption. <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/reading/b2-reading/buy-nothing-movement>