



TTLIC 2013

## Evaluating the Critical Literacy Practices of Tertiary Students

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### Abstract

Being able to read texts critically is a much sought after skill in today's globalised work environments. However, it is increasingly being reported that many tertiary students in Malaysia find this skill difficult to acquire and that research studies involving tertiary learners are relatively small in number (Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012). Students need to learn how to analyse a wide range of reading texts as it is seen as a response to the social construction of one's peers, culture, family, classrooms, neighbours, communities and world (Lesley, 2004). Responding to local concerns about the lack of attention accorded to the development of tertiary students' critical literacy practices, this paper examines the challenges and difficulties faced by 70 tertiary students from two public universities in Malaysia in trying to comprehend an opinion-based text. The findings show that many students still experience the following reading difficulties: understanding the author's message, distinguishing fact from opinion, understanding main ideas, guessing meaning from context and making inferences. The paper suggests that university lecturers can actively incorporate critical literacy theories into their classroom practice as it can generate more meaningful learning experiences among their learners as it encourages them to use their voices and life experiences as valid sources of knowledge (Hass-Dyson, 2001). Teaching instruction on developing readers to be more critical should be included in the pedagogical practices of undergraduate programmes given that such instruction can hone students' critical literacy practices in the higher education sector.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of TTLIC2013.

*Keywords:* Critical literacy practices; Reading comprehension difficulties; Tertiary students

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## 1. Introduction

The academic challenges faced by tertiary students today make it necessary for them to handle a wide range of information sources competently. Course lecturers acknowledge that today's students interact more frequently with social media because of the impacts of globalisation and internationalisation currently impacting higher education contexts. As such, there is an increasing need to reflect and re-visit the manner in which tertiary students handle a range of academic texts for comprehension. In reading such texts and in establishing whether they can decipher the author's message and intent accurately, educators suggest there is a need for students to comprehend with a critical edge (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004; Pescatore, 2007). Taking such a stance indicates that there are indeed ways to help train students to become critically aware, including a rationale for reading from a critical stance and ideas to foster students' engagement in critical literacy.

To many educators, the term 'critical literacy' is not easy to define. However, the concept of making students more critical in their literacy skills has been around in the field of education and psychology for many decades. Teaching students to give voice to experiences within oppressive social systems is a unifying goal of critical literacy definitions (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Rosenblatt, 2004). Within such definitions, literacy is not seen as a series of decontextualised subskills but rather, literacy is defined as a highly contextualised "emerging act of consciousness and resistance" (Giroux, 1993, p. 367). For teachers enacting critical literacy in their classrooms, the pedagogy is a complicated weaving together of student awareness of power issues, student resistance to issues of power and often student (and teacher) frustration. Critical literacy is difficult to put into practice because it embraces multiple and conflicting perspectives of learners (Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012; Kaur, 2013).

Reading has always been viewed as a challenging skill by many ESL learners. Even in the Malaysian context, there are scant research studies focusing specifically on analysing students' critical thinking in reading various types of texts, including the scope of discussion on language and literary studies in the local context (Krish, Hafizah Latif & Zalina Mohd Lazim, 2012). It has also been reported that research studies involving tertiary learners are relatively small in number (Lee, Lee, Wong & Azizah Ya'acob, 2010; Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012). These researchers lament that more research is needed to better situate the identity issues of English language learners and their learning experiences in the tertiary sector. In other studies conducted in Malaysia, several researchers have reported that tertiary learners have limited critical ability because of the didactic nature of the learning process (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007 as cited in Normazidah, Koo & Hazita Azman, 2012; Kaur, Ganapathy & Sidhu, 2012; Kaur, 2013). Nambiar (2007) also reports that Malaysian tertiary learners lack conventions of academic writing, are weak at understanding long sentences or sentences with difficult words and she contends that such limitations impose unnecessary barriers on students' comprehension abilities at institutions of higher learning. In a study conducted by Zaira Abu Hassan (2008), it was reported that many Malaysian tertiary learners struggle to locate information from a reading text and often do not engage critically or constructively to obtain meaning from text. Several researchers also corroborate this fact and report that predominantly Malaysian ESL learners are not able to operate autonomously when they engage with a range of academic reading tasks (Koo, Wong & Kemboja Ismail, 2012; Kaur, Ganapathy & Sidhu, 2012; Kaur, 2013).

This research study was carried out in order to:

- examine the specific comprehension difficulties faced by tertiary students when they read an opinion-based text
- evaluate the critical literacy practices of tertiary students

As the sample respondents are tertiary students from two public universities in Malaysia, the research findings of this study will help to further strengthen the quality of language and literacy instruction provided in various undergraduate degree programmes. The findings can provide insightful information to university course lecturers on students' levels of critical literacy practices so that future assignments and course assessments can be better tailored to enhance students' critical thinking repertoires.

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