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EFL Students' Perspectives and Challenges in Critical Reading Skills for Postgraduate Study

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Abstract
Research reveals that EFL postgraduates from China possess limited academic literacy, especially critical reading skills. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate EFL students' perspectives and challenges in critical reading skills for postgraduate study. This study was conducted in a private university located in Peninsular Malaysia involving an intact group of 50 first-year postgraduate students from China. Data were collected through questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative findings revealed that EFL students held above-average perceptions of their ability in critical reading, but interview sessions revealed otherwise, as a majority claimed they struggled in employing critical reading skills.

Keywords: Postgraduate Study; Critical Reading Skills; EFL Students

1.0 Introduction

In today's competitive markets of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, education is the key to economic growth, and as such, it is important for countries to develop a sustainable and critical mass of knowledge workers in order to stay relevant and resilient. Since postgraduate education is seen as the heart of innovation and modernisation, there has been exponential growth in the enrolment of postgraduate students all around the world, including Malaysia. In fact, the last few years have seen a large influx of postgraduate students from China seeking education opportunities in Malaysia. These Chinese students have, however, faced several challenges in coping with postgraduate study in Malaysia, as most private universities adopt English as the medium of instruction. A review of the literature has revealed that these Chinese postgraduates have limited academic literacy skills, especially critical reading skills (Sidhu et al., 2022; Liu, 2017).

The development of critical reading skills is of paramount importance for Chinese students pursuing postgraduate studies. As these students immerse themselves in advanced academic research, they encounter intricate texts that demand a deeper level of comprehension and analysis. Critical reading skills enable EFL students to critically evaluate and interpret scholarly articles, research papers, and other academic materials, thereby enhancing their overall academic performance and facilitating their integration into the academic community (Liu, 2017; Pu & Evans, 2019). However, previous studies have documented the specific challenges faced by Chinese EFL students in acquiring critical reading skills. These challenges include language proficiency, cultural differences,

unfamiliarity with academic conventions, and limited exposure to critical reading practices in their educational backgrounds. It is essential to understand these challenges and address them effectively to support the academic and professional development of Chinese EFL students in postgraduate study. Thus, the main objective of this study is to provide valuable insights into the perspectives and challenges Chinese EFL students face with regard to critical reading skills within the context of their postgraduate study in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review
The following section provides a brief review of the literature on the main variables explored in this study.

2.1 Critical Reading Skills
Critical reading skills can be broadly defined as the ability to analyse, evaluate, and interpret written texts in a discerning and reflective manner (Brozo et al., 2018). It involves actively engaging with the content, questioning the author's perspective, identifying biases and assumptions, and assessing the credibility and relevance of the information presented (Vacca et al., 2019). Critical reading skills encompass a range of cognitive processes, including comprehension, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and inference (Mokhtari et al., 2018). In regard to postgraduate study, critical reading skills enable students to comprehend, analyse, and evaluate scholarly texts, allowing them to engage in critical thinking, synthesise information, and contribute to their field of study (Lee, 2021). These skills help students develop a deeper understanding of research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings, enhancing their ability to critically evaluate academic literature and make informed contributions to their field. Besides, research has shown that students with strong critical reading abilities demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, including better performance in coursework, examinations, and research projects (Lee, 2021). Proficient critical readers can effectively navigate disciplinary jargon, understand complex arguments, and extract key information from scholarly texts (McCarthy & McNamara, 2021). However, despite the importance of critical reading skills for postgraduate studies, it has not been taken seriously by EFL Chinese students. Studies have found that Chinese EFL postgraduate students often lack awareness of critical reading skills and struggle to apply them while reading (Wang & Qin, 2022). One key factor contributing to weak critical reading skills among Chinese EFL postgraduate students is their limited vocabulary and language proficiency. Insufficient knowledge of academic vocabulary and unfamiliarity with complex sentence structures hinder students' ability to comprehend and analyse scholarly texts (Pu & Evans, 2019; Liu, 2017). Weak language skills can lead to difficulties in extracting key information, understanding nuanced arguments, and critically evaluating the content. Other than that, Cultural influences and educational background also contribute to weaknesses in critical reading skills among Chinese EFL postgraduate students. Traditional Chinese education places more emphasis on rote memorisation and passive reading, which can impede the development of critical thinking skills. Additionally, Chinese cultural norms of respect for authority and deference to established knowledge may discourage students from questioning or challenging ideas presented in the text (Gao, 2019). These cultural factors can limit students' ability to engage critically with the text and develop independent thinking.

2.2 Adult Learning Theories
Adult learning theories provide valuable insights into the effective development of critical reading skills among postgraduate students. Understanding the principles and strategies associated with adult learning can inform instructional practices and support the acquisition of critical reading abilities. Andragogy, proposed by Malcolm Knowles (1968), emphasises the importance of self-directed learning in adult education. Self-directed learning enables adult learners to take ownership of their learning process and tailor it to their specific needs and interests. In the context of critical reading skills, self-directed learning encourages adults to actively seek out challenging texts, engage in reflective thinking, and independently apply critical reading strategies (Brookfield, 2017). Meanwhile, experiential learning, as outlined by Kolb (1984), suggests that learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Applying this theory to critical reading skills, postgraduate students engage in active reading, reflect on the text's content, analyse underlying concepts, and experiment with different reading strategies. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning approaches in improving critical reading skills, such as deeper comprehension, analytical thinking, and interpretation (Koray & Cetinkilic, 2020). Brookfield and Preskill (2016) highlight the importance of interaction and collaboration among learners. Postgraduate students can engage in collaborative activities, such as group discussions, peer feedback, and cooperative reading tasks, to develop critical reading skills. Collaborative learning environments foster the exchange of ideas, diverse perspectives, and critical reflection, which contribute to improved reading comprehension, critical analysis, and interpretation. Besides, metacognition, which involves monitoring and regulating one's own thinking processes, also plays a crucial role in developing critical reading skills among postgraduate students. Cognitive strategies, such as questioning, summarising, and making connections, are employed during the reading process to enhance comprehension and critical analysis. Postgraduate students who are trained in metacognitive and cognitive strategies demonstrate improved critical reading skills, including the ability to evaluate sources, synthesise information, and engage in critical reflection (Kokcu, 2023).

Henceforth, this study aimed to examine EFL PG students' perspectives on critical reading skills for postgraduate study, and it was guided by the following research objectives:
- To examine EFL students' perceived performance in critical reading skills
- To investigate the challenges faced by EFL students in critical reading skills for postgraduate study

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach as it could provide more in-depth insights into PG students' perceptions of critical reading skills. It was conducted in a private university located in Peninsular Malaysia, referred to as University S in this study. The study involved an intact group of 50 first-semester postgraduate students enrolled in the PhD (Education) by research mode programme who were chosen through convenience sampling. This group of students was selected as most senior students were out of campus working on their thesis. Data for the study were collected through a survey questionnaire and semi-structured focus-group interviews involving 25 students. The questionnaire was used to explore students' perspectives of their ability in four critical reading skills, namely summarising, making inferences, synthesising and drawing conclusions based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from weak to excellent. It was administered to the students first to investigate their perceived performance in critical reading skills. After that, focus group interviews were conducted to get better insights into the EFL PG students' perceptions.

The validity of research instruments was established through a panel of two experts with doctoral degrees in the English Language field. Furthermore, the reliability of the questionnaire was established through a pilot study that involved 35 PG students from another faculty. The Cronbach Alpha score for the questionnaire is 0.75, which was considered high based on Tavakol & Dennick (2011). The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 26, in which descriptive analyses were conducted. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were thematically analysed employing Braun & Clarke's (2019) thematic framework. Data collected from both quantitative and qualitative instruments enabled the researchers to triangulate the findings, thus establishing greater credibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The triangulation of the data was done by comparing the quantitative findings obtained from the questionnaire with the qualitative findings from the focus group interviews to verify the accuracy of the findings further. Next, keeping in line with ethics in research, prior permission and consent were obtained from both the institution and respondents involved. Besides that, the data collected was stored in a password-encrypted laptop to maintain the confidentiality of the findings.

4.0 Findings

The following section provides a brief description of the main findings obtained from the study.

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The study consisted of 50 PhD (Education) students, wherein 40% were males whilst the remaining 60% were females. Meanwhile, in terms of age, there were similar numbers of participants in the two age groups; less than 32 years old and 36 years old and above, in which both groups had 15 participants each. The remaining 20 participants were aged between 32 to 35 years old. The majority of the students were single (64.0%), while the remaining 36% were married.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n=50)

Items	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	20	40
Female	30	60
Age		
Less than 32 years old	15	30
32 to 35 years old	20	40
36 years old and above	15	30
Marital Status		
Married	18	36
Single	32	64

4.2 EFL Students' Perceived Performance in Critical Reading Skills

The first research question in this study explored postgraduate students' perceived performance in critical reading skills. The study explored students' perspectives on four main critical reading skills, i.e., summarising, making inferences, synthesising and drawing conclusions. The data for the perceived performance were obtained from the survey questionnaire wherein respondents were required to self-evaluate their critical reading skills. Students responded to the items based on a 5-point Likert scale. A score of 4 and above would demonstrate a high ability on the reading skill item. Meanwhile, a score of 3 would demonstrate moderate ability and a score of below 3 would exhibit limited to weak ability on the items. The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: EFL Students' Perceived Performance in Critical Reading Skills

	Mean	SD
Overall Summarising Skills	4.25	.761
Overall Making Inferences Skills	3.23	.765
Overall Synthesising Skills	3.50	.755
Overall Drawing Conclusion Skills	4.01	.865
Overall	3.75	.787

Scale: 1=Weak, 2= Limited, 3=Fairly, 4= Good, 5= Excellent

From the above findings, it can be seen that the EFL students rated their overall critical reading skills between fairly to good (M=3.75, SD=.787). They perceived themselves as having a good ability in summarising (M=4.25, SD=.761) and drawing conclusions (M=4.01, SD=.865). Besides, they believed that they possessed moderate ability in the other two critical reading skills, making inferences (M=3.23, SD=.765) and synthesising (M=3.50, SD=.755).

However, differing opinions were expressed during the semi-structured interviews, as majority of the students stated that they still struggled to employ critical reading skills when they read academic texts related to their study. For instance, Respondent S3G4 (Student#3, Group 4) highlighted that she found summarising the key points of what she reads in English a difficult task as she felt that "*everything in the text should be included in the summary.*" Meanwhile, Respondent S1G4 stressed on the difficulty that she faced in drawing the conclusion for the ideas that she read by mentioning, "*I feel struggle because I always have to spend a lot of time thinking, thinking and thinking and sometimes I came out with a new idea, can I try that, can I get any new information from the part I suddenly come out with, so I have to look back and reread the article and digest the full message and conclude the main ideas.*"

4.3 Challenges Faced By EFL Students in Critical Reading Skills for Postgraduate Study
The second research question explored the challenges that were faced by EFL students in critical reading skills for postgraduate study. The data for this research question was obtained through four focus-group interviews involving 25 volunteer students. Each group had about four to six students. Based on Braun & Clarke's (2018) thematic analysis, the following four (4) main themes emerged, namely, limited language proficiency, lack of motivation to read in English, limited critical thinking skills and cultural inhibitions.

The first challenge expressed by majority of Chinese EFL students was their limited language proficiency. Most of the students highlighted that they often resorted to using *Google Translate* to understand the academic text that they read. Respondent S1G1 mentioned that "*I just like to use Google when reading, and I use it for everything English as I can choose language right, English.*" Respondent S2G2 supported the claim by saying, "*Here we always use the Google Translate when we read and talk.*" Besides, Respondent S5G3 further added that "*I not know many words in English. Google is useful.*" This further shows that EFL students are highly dependent on the use of Google Translate when they read because of their limited proficiency in the English Language. This consequently leads them to be unable to employ critical reading skills when reading as they lack the basic language skills required.

The second main challenge articulated was their lack of motivation to read in English, probably because they were too dependent on Google Translate. Some of them felt that reading academic texts and lengthy journal articles was exhausting. Respondent S5G3 stressed that "*it was difficult for me to read long journal articles. Too many words to understand.*" Meanwhile, Respondent S4G2 further supported this by saying that "I get quite frustrated reading journals. Need to focus for a long time as I do not understand many words." This lack of motivation to read academic texts in English is probably due to texts being too long, but it could also probably be due to their limited vocabulary skills.

A third challenge highlighted was that EFL students lack critical thinking abilities and strategies. More than half of the students agreed that they always find it hard to understand scholarly texts that require them to think critically to comprehend the texts. Respondent S3G2 highlighted that it is hard for her to employ critical reading skills as she mentioned, "*…I don't know how to do critical thinking. I just imitate what I read*", while Respondent S4G4 reiterated that "*the difficult is to critical thinking. So, I cannot understand, really understand the author sometimes when I read.*"

The fourth challenge faced by them (10%) was cultural inhibitions. Respondent S2G4 said that when she was young, she was told by her father not to project herself too much in public as there is a Chinese proverb that highlights, *"If you are too outstanding or stand out among others, you will be hated. . ." (Line 582, S2G4).* Respondent S3G4 further supported the claim by mentioning that "*if I know something – I do not share with friends as it might be seen as boastful… I also do not ask for help as it will show that I am weak*". Henceforth due to such cultural inhibitions, students are probably torn between the two and finally resort to just staying quiet. Thus, EFL students believed that this problem affected their development of critical reading skills.

5.0 Discussion
The findings in this study found that EFL postgraduate students perceived themselves as having between fairly to good ability in critical reading skills. They rated their critical reading high, especially for summarising and drawing conclusions skills. Similar findings were recorded in Nadia and Sidhu's (2017) study in which 30 social science postgraduate students were involved in rating their perceived performance in six skills mentioned in Bloom's Taxonomy, namely: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The results indicated that the postgraduate students had moderate to high readiness in the six skills, with the highest mean scores in synthesis (M=3.592) and lowest in evaluation (M=3.379). These results showed that the EFL postgraduate students believed that they possessed a good ability in employing critical reading skills when reading academic texts related to their study. However, the findings from the focus group interviews were contradictory to the quantitative findings as it was found that most students struggled to employ critical reading skills for postgraduate study. Similar findings were reported in Gao's (2019) study, which found that EFL Chinese postgraduate students faced difficulties in higher-order reading comprehension tasks. These challenges included difficulties in analysing and evaluating complex academic texts and synthesising information. The students expressed a need for explicit instruction and support to develop their critical reading skills. Explicit instruction on reading strategies will contribute to a positive impact on critical reading skills among EFL postgraduate students (Par, 2018). Teaching students strategies such as skimming, scanning, inferencing, and note-taking improves their ability to engage critically with academic materials (Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016).

Furthermore, this study also found several challenges faced by EFL postgraduate students in critical reading skills for postgraduate study, including limited language proficiency, lack of motivation to read, lack of critical thinking skills and cultural inhibitions. Several

studies reported similar findings in the EFL context. For instance, Liu (2017) conducted a study where EFL postgraduate students expressed their struggles with comprehending complex academic texts and analysing arguments. The students perceived these tasks as particularly challenging, citing issues related to language proficiency and limited exposure to diverse reading materials. In another study, Pu and Evans (2019) examined the critical reading abilities of Chinese EFL postgraduate students in the field of English language and literature. The students perceived their performance in critical reading skills as less proficient, particularly in tasks that required inferential and evaluative thinking. They highlighted the need for more explicit instruction and interactive discussions to enhance their critical reading abilities. This finding further supported Brookfield and Preskill's (2016) claim that interaction and collaboration are important for postgraduate students as they help foster the sharing of knowledge, ideas and perspectives among students, which contribute to developing their critical reading skills. In regard to cultural inhibition, similar findings were recorded in a study conducted by Liu (2017), who found that Chinese postgraduate students perceived cultural inhibitions related to Confucian values and the influence of traditional teaching methods, which affected their willingness to critically challenge ideas and engage in critical reading practices.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study reviewed the EFL students' perspectives and challenges in critical reading skills for postgraduate study. From the findings, it is evident that EFL Chinese international students face multiple challenges in critical reading skills for postgraduate study, including limited language proficiency, lack of motivation to read, lack of critical thinking skills and cultural inhibitions. These challenges faced are rather concerning, as it is vital for them to be proficient in critical reading to ensure the successful completion of their postgraduate study. Postgraduate educators and supervisors should consider incorporating explicit instruction on critical reading skills, providing scaffolding and support to help students navigate complex texts. Interactive discussions, peer collaboration, and exposure to diverse reading materials are crucial for promoting critical thinking and improving EFL postgraduate students' performance in critical reading. In addition, integrating metacognitive strategies into instruction can empower EFL postgraduate students to become more autonomous and reflective learners.

The researchers acknowledge the limitation of this study as it only involved 50 PG students from only one private university. Hence, future studies can involve a larger sample size and more triangulation processes. Although the findings cannot be generalised to the total population of Chinese EFL PG students, this study has shed some light on the challenges that EFL international students face in critical reading skills and the need for targeted instructional interventions. By understanding their perspectives, educators can design pedagogical approaches that address these challenges effectively. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating instructional strategies that empower EFL postgraduate students to become proficient critical readers, enabling them to succeed in their academic pursuits and contribute meaningfully to their respective fields. This has to be addressed in order to further explore how all these challenges faced by EFL PG students in critical reading skills can be overcome.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper provides both theoretical and practical implications for the field of postgraduate study, which looks into the challenges faced by EFL students in critical reading skills so that higher education providers can provide better support and quality learning environments for the success of all.

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