# Reading Beyond the Lines: Teaching Critical Reading in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*Reading critically in a foreign language (FL) is a fundamental skill which requires readers to go beyond literal comprehension of the texts and adopt an analytical perspective. Nevertheless, critical stance in FL reading is a newer territory and teachers' understanding and implementation of critical reading (CR) practices is crucial. Based on this need, this study aimed at exploring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' views on CR, their CR practices, and possible challenges they face when they implement such practices. For this purpose, seven university teachers in a Turkish EFL context participated in the study. In order to investigate their CR practices in depth, they answered an open-ended questionnaire, participated in semi-structured interviews, and wrote self-reflection reports. What is more, they were engaged in a hands-on practice of CR in their classrooms. Qualitative analyses in general revealed that although EFL teachers had theoretical information about CR to some extent, they did not implement CR practices to help learners interpret cultural, social, and power relations. In addition, teachers faced challenges stemming from both students and their own background while practicing CR. The results of the study proposed implications for teachers and teacher educators to enhance CR practices in EFL classes.*

## INTRODUCTION

Reading was often stigmatized as being a passive language skill which involves decoding of the written material to achieve at a certain level of comprehension. However, our current understanding of reading invalidates such passiveness and rehabilitates the reputation of reading as an active skill which involves critical interpretation and reflective inquiry (Fisher & Frey, 2020; Hovland, 2019; Kern, 2000). Within this perspective, reading in any language involves coordination and interplay among various processes on linguistic, strategic, lexical, and metalinguistic levels (Grabe, 2009). Readers are required to participate actively in those processes which require higher order thinking skills in order to interpret the texts beneath basic understanding and integrate what they read into their existing schemas. Even though comprehending a text with its linguistic components can be considered as a starting point, learners have a potential of getting meaning from the text and being engaged with a critical stance whether they read in their first language or foreign ones. In this respect, CR is an investigation into, and critique of the validity of arguments expressed in reading passages (Walz, 2001). Such a critical

approach towards reading requires learners to adopt an active and analytical stance towards what they are reading endowed with evaluation, interpretation, and synthesis abilities.

Especially in higher education contexts, EFL learners are expected to think and act as critical readers while reading various academic texts in L2 for educational purposes and academic success (Akdağ & Kırkgöz, 2020; Kurt Taşpınar & Çubukçu, 2020; Şahin & Han, 2020; Wallace & Wray, 2011). In this regard, reading in L2 language in higher education contexts requires to learn more than basic comprehension skills since understanding social relations through different cultural/ethnic backgrounds, different beliefs, and values help to use the language effectively. Therefore, having a critical competence helps learners to increase their awareness of how language works to position them. It further helps learners question the positions of writers, decide when and how to refuse to think what writers want them to think, and evaluate texts form various perspectives (Janks, 2014).

In order to understand importance of CR in L2 studies, one needs to have a broader understanding of what the concept entails. The roots of CR can be traced to critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School which focused on the social theory's role of critiquing and changing society contrary to traditional theory's function of understanding or explaining it (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Critical pedagogy, and in specific critical literacy, was based on this fundamental assumption of critical theory. Accordingly, Paulo Freire underlined the role of moving beyond 'reading the words' to 'reading the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987). That is, rather than accepting reading texts as they are, having a critical stance in understanding these texts as socially constructed entities which centre on social justice, freedom, and equity has become a fundamental concern (Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001; Thomas, Bean-Folkes & Coleman, 2020). Thus, at the core of CR there lies reading sceptically and analytically and judging the value of the text from various angles to achieve at an interpretation (Douglas, 2000). Considering these, in L2 reading, CR is closely connected to adopting a conscious awareness of language which incorporates sensitivity towards the forms and functions of language (Carter, 2003). Such sensitivity projects a holistic understanding of reading in L2 to go beyond literal comprehension of reading texts.

CR includes the capability to question assumptions, identifying logic beneath sentences, and unveil implicit values inherent in the author's line of thought. Thus, CR is not entirely about questioning facts; rather, it is searching for evidence that support a claim, weighing the importance of possible interpretations, and questioning whether the cases in a text are convincing enough to be applied for other texts (Wallace & Wray, 2011). It is not easy for novice critical readers to learn to interpret author's intended meaning and respond to it by analyzing the signals given in a text in an open-minded fashion. In this respect, teachers have an indispensable role in guiding learners to approach reading texts critically (Bean-Folkes, Browne & McGinn Luet, 2020) and to evaluate a possible match/mismatch between their own beliefs, knowledge and those of the authors of texts. The aim of this study is to have a closer look into EFL teachers' practices in their approach to CR in L2 and find out whether they adopt necessary awareness for fostering CR in EFL contexts.

*Critical Reading in EFL Contexts*

CR in EFL involves a broader sense of critical awareness with a consideration of cross-cultural aspects regarding who reads what and why in what situations (Wallace, 1992; 1995). What is more, reading is a social practice in language classrooms and having a critical stance is shaped by the understandings people have of it in different contexts (Macknish, 2011). Hence, CR is not an end product, but a process which requires metacognitive awareness with a conscious monitoring of the comprehension process. According to Bartu (2002), such process involves acknowledging the

difference of the message that is conveyed, deciphering the message of the text, comparing the thoughts and values in the text with your own, deciding on the worth of the new message as well as your knowledge, and then changing, confirming what we know, or deciding what more to read. During this CR process, metacognition aids readers' comprehension by launching monitoring and adjusting strategy use (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Wu, 2008). With the aim of identifying the frequency of critical reading strategy usage by EFL students, Larking (2017) shares the frame of critical reading strategies based on the relevant literature (Manarin, Carey, Rathburn & Ryland, 2015) as it is given in Figure1 below;

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**Critical Reading Strategies**
- Distinguish main and supporting ideas.
- Evaluate the credibility of the claims.
- Make relevant inferences about the text.
- Make judgments about how the text is argued.
- Question the author's assumptions.
- Decide how to use the text for your own study.
- Identify rhetorical devices.
- Identify power relations.
- Evaluate the quality of the text.
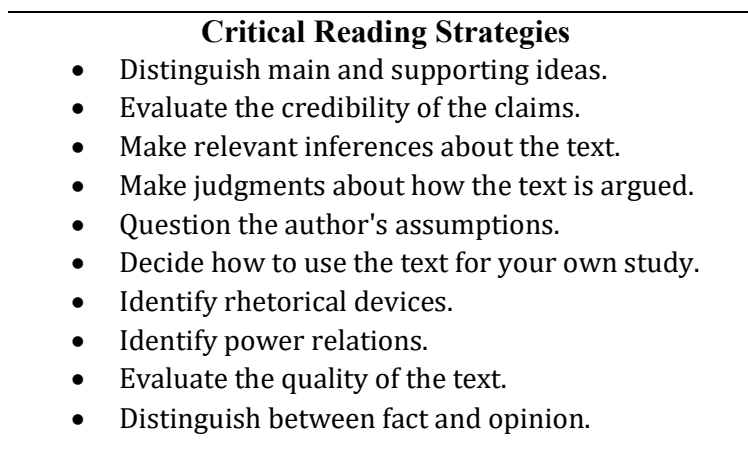- Distinguish between fact and opinion.

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Figure 1. Critical Reading Strategies

In EFL classes, reading texts generally include some question types asked before or during reading such as gap-filling, true-false or multiple-choice. Despite the variety of questions in traditional reading texts, there seems to be a scarcity of CR questions in textbooks which further asks readers elaborate on meanings, evaluate what they read, and reach decisions. According to Wilson (2016), CR pedagogy requires teachers set up a challenging environment for students to participate in independent meaning making and engage in texts and tasks to take responsibility of their own understanding instead of relying on their teacher. CR tasks preceding and following reading texts are not easy to find or prepare, and many readers or even teachers are unlikely aware of the CR process. Hence, posing questions to create the idea of criticality can be helpful for teachers in classroom.

In order to improve students' CR skills, Heberle (2000) proposed general questions (e.g. Where/when/why was the text written?, Who is the text addressed to?), lexico-grammatical questions, (e.g. What kind of vocabulary predominates in the text?, Are there words which are ideologically significant?), and questions for visual elements and gender (e.g. In what ways do the illustrations/pictures relate to the verbal text?, Does the text reinforce or reassert traditional gender ideology?). Küçükoğlu (2011) also lists similar questions that the reader uses in order to improve CR in EFL classes (e.g. What have I gained from the information given in the text?, How are the facts, examples used and interpreted?, What are the bias of the writer?). As it is evident, CR is a multifaceted concept that helps readers focus on the text, the reader, and their involvement. To cover all these aspects, Bartu (2002) presents useful questions framework to critically read a text in six categories. Sample questions in each category can be seen in Figure 2 below. The categories in Figure 2 involve personal questions about the reader inquiring the role of the reader, questions

targeting at how the text is created, specific questions regarding various characteristics of the text itself, questions regarding the people and relations evident in the text, questions posing at understanding the meaning reflected, and the ones for evaluating the function of the text with respect to readers' life and other readers.
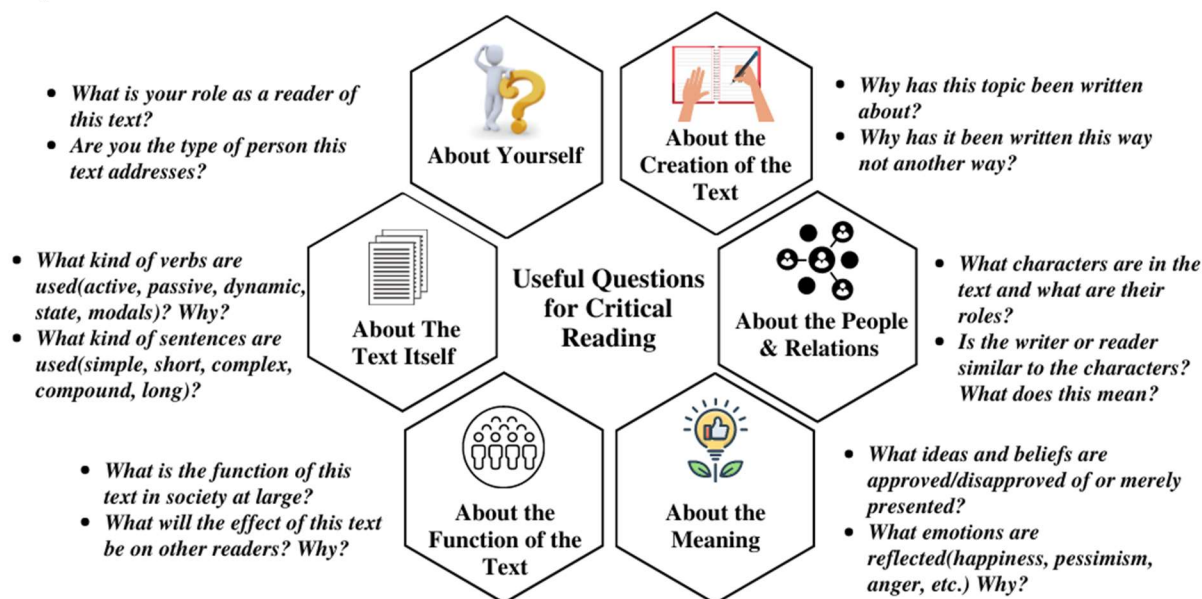


Figure 2. Useful questions framework for critical reading

Albeit numerous outcomes of CR in a language classroom (i.e. questioning, evaluating, gaining awareness, searching for evidence), there has been a scarcity of studies on the actual classroom practices designed specifically for fostering CR. In one of the attempts of enriching CR practices, Wallace (2003) explained a well-designed CR course for graduate language teaching practitioners, who were mainly from EFL contexts. Wallace used a wide variety of authentic materials, such as magazines, letters, posters, and travel brochures, and she analysed learners' classroom interactions, interview data, reading protocols, and journals. The findings show that learners develop CR skills individually, and they achieve this progress by sharing, negotiating, and developing opinions with peers. Hence, collaboration may be considered as another aspect of CR in the language classroom.

CR studies were mainly conducted to investigate the development of CR skills of students in various contexts. In one study, İçmez (2005) explored the effect of a CR course on high school Turkish students' reading skills. In a context in which reading was highly comprehension based, participants were offered a reading course which focused on hidden meanings, in-text references, and exploring beneath the lines for seventeen weeks. Findings of questionnaires and semi-instructed interviews revealed that students adopted a more critical approach to written texts and their motivation increased for reading lessons. Macknish (2009) conducted a study with the participation of Chinese students in a pre-university second language reading course in Singapore to see CR discourse in peer group discussions. Qualitative data gathered through interviews, observations, questionnaires, and focus group discussions showed that CR understandings of students changed throughout the course in favour of adopting a broader range of CR processes. Similarly, Sohn (2010) aimed at presenting the ways of making students critical readers in a

Korean middle school reading class. Preparing a lesson plan which focuses on a recent young adult novel, the researcher highlighted reader-response, feminism, and cultural criticism through open group discussions. In this way, students were able to shape both their own identity and their society. Teaching CR strategies was the focus of Haromi (2014)'s study in Iranian EFL context. With the help of strategy training, a great number of participants could identify the writers' position with regard to the issue and justify their answers with appropriate textual justification. As a result, the study highlighted the contribution of strategy training in fostering comprehension and CR skills in language classes. In a recent study, Din (2020) aimed at evaluating university students' critical thinking ability as reflected in their critical reading skills in Pakistani EFL context. This study revealed that although the university students had a very positive attitude towards critical thinking, they were unable to exhibit similar performance in CR test. That is, learners may need practice and training in applying CR skills and they may need assistance and support from their teachers. As a result, studies mainly stressed the importance of teaching CR skills and its contribution to learners' becoming critical readers and thinkers.

In order for students to become critical readers, teachers need to be aware of the features of CR and how to foster the ideas of CR in their classrooms. In this regard, teaching CR to in-service EFL teachers in Singapore was examined in a study by Zhang (2009). This study asserted that the CR elements in EFL reading lessons enhanced the dynamics of the reading class as well as students' active participation in the reading process. It was also suggested that teaching CR pedagogy to EFL teachers should be an important part of teacher professional development programs. In many educational contexts, teachers may lack sufficient training on CR skills. In Albeckay's (2014) study, EFL teachers in Libya suffered from inadequate knowledge on CR skills and how to foster them in their classes. Improvement in students' CR skills was closely related to teachers' capacity in teaching and applying CR practices. It was asserted that albeit their positive attitude towards CR, teachers did not teach CR in higher education contexts due to lack of training. Teachers may also have difficulty in developing appropriate pedagogy in CR due to various factors. In a Japanese secondary school context, Tanaka (2015) pinpointed that CR was generally regarded as an apolitical teaching activity which could improve students' general critical thinking and reading skills. However, CR activities could be regarded as time consuming and teachers had to design CR activities themselves since government-approved textbooks were not always suitable for CR.

How teachers approach CR is crucial in understanding the nature of CR practices in classrooms. Wilson (2016) explored teachers' conceptualization of CR in an academic reading context. In-class reading class observations, interviews with both teachers and students along with analyses of student writings and class materials indicated that critical thinking and reading skills were fundamental to academic reading pedagogy. Wilson (2016) discussed the importance of effective integration of CR into academic reading contexts and underlined teachers' responsibility in developing students' skills and dispositions for critical thinking. EFL teachers' understanding of CR, challenges they face and methods in CR practices were further investigated by Yutsevichutene (2017). Findings showed that teachers defined CR differently. Teachers' challenges in implementing CR were lack of experience, having poor access to teaching resources, and the insufficient level of students' English language to teach CR. It was concluded that more studies in various FL contexts were required to reveal difficulties teachers face and close analysis of their CR practices would shed light on how critical pedagogy can be integrated into language learning.

In the Turkish context, CR studies regarding teachers' practices are scarce. In pre-service EFL teacher education, Küçükoğlu (2008) aimed at defining the level of self-sufficiency of English teacher candidates on CR. Quantitative results indicated that the general approach of the teacher candidates towards CR was positive and that most of the student teachers thought they could successfully use CR techniques. When the actual CR reading experiences of pre-service teachers were examined, Balıkçı and Daloğlu's study (2016) revealed that student teachers were successful in understanding the main argument but not all of them could show the evidence put forward by the writer. Participants agreed with the writer more often than they disagreed; nevertheless, they did not mention word choice, language, and tone of the text as often. As for in-service EFL teachers' CR practices, Cantekin (2012) conducted a quantitative study to examine the perceptions of EFL teachers in Turkey while teaching CR in their lessons. The results revealed that although teachers were aware of CR their CR practices were mostly limited to focusing on meaning and asking reading comprehension questions given in the coursebook. Findings also showed that teachers generally focused on explanation dimension of analysing texts besides description and interpretation.

As it can be traced with the review of literature reported above, exploring in-service teachers' practices is an underestimated area open to investigation. Revealing EFL teachers' line of thought in how they practice CR in their classes and difficulties they face would offer suggestions to improve CR in language classrooms.

*Significance and Aim of the Study*

Systematic research on CR is required to enhance the understanding of the literacy required in the 21$^{st}$ century and to guide students become critical readers instead of being passive consumers of the information resources they confront (Bråten & Braasch, 2017). While focusing on students' performance on CR, teachers' views and practices are mostly ignored. However, teacher is an indispensable aspect of CR, and unless teachers are aware of how to implement CR, students cannot apply strategies to become critical readers. In the context of the study, students' reading practices in both their native language (Turkish) and foreign language (English) are mainly comprehension oriented (İçmez, 2005; 2009). That is, reading is generally viewed as answering comprehension questions of various types (i.e. multiple choice, fill-in the blanks) deprived of practices including personal evaluation of the texts with a critical stance. Based on the noticeable need to explore EFL teachers' classroom practices for CR in language teaching, the aim of this study was to find out EFL teachers' views on the concept of CR, to guide them design and implement CR practices within their actual teaching experience, and to explore their opinions regarding this experience. What is more, regarding the scarcity of studies on exploring EFL teachers' CR teaching practices (Thomas et al., 2020), this study would provide insight into language teacher education and offer suggestions in improving CR in language classroom. Guided with these aims, this study seeks the answers for the following questions:

1) How do EFL teachers define the concept of critical reading?
2) Do EFL teachers employ critical reading practices in their own classes? If yes, how?
3) What are the challenges/difficulties EFL teachers face while implementing critical reading?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative study design in order to explore participants' perceptions on CR, their CR practices, and any challenge they face in their reading classes. In this respect, qualitative data collection instruments such as an open-ended questionnaire, interviews, and self-reflections were employed.

**Participants and Setting**

The study was carried out at a Foreign Languages School of a state university in Turkey with seven EFL teachers. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling strategy which assures that the participants are willing, available, and easily accessible for the purposes of the study (Creswell, 2012). All participants signed consent form prior to the study to ensure confidentiality of their voluntary participation, and they were assured to opt out of the study upon their request. Teachers in the study were coded as T1, T2 and so forth to ensure the anonymity of their responses. The age of the teachers ranged between 30 and 40 years. Six of the participant teachers were females and one of them was male. Among the participants, one teacher was graduated from American Culture and Literature (ACL) department, the other one was a graduate of English Language and Literature (ELL), and other five teachers were graduated from English Language Teaching (ELT) departments of several Turkish state universities. Their experience in ELT ranged between 8 and 20 years. Five participants were studying at MA programs and one of them had expertise certificates in ELT. Table 1 below demonstrates essential information about the participants.

Table 1. Information about the participants

| Teacher | Age | BA | MA /Certificates | Experience |
|---------|-----|-----|------------------|------------|
| T1 | 30 | ELT | ELT (continue) | 8 years |
| T2 | 30 | ELT | ELT (continue) | 8 years |
| T3 | 30 | ELT | ELT (continue) | 8 years |
| T4 | 32 | ACL | Turkish Language and Literature (continue) | 10 years |
| T5 | 33 | ELT | --- | 11 years |
| T6 | 39 | ELL | ELT (continue) | 16 years |
| T7 | 43 | ELT | CELTA + DELTA | 20 years |

The study context was a language preparatory program which provided one-year obligatory English study for students of various departments. Students' proficiency level varied from A1 to B2 levels based on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It provided 22-20 hours of English lessons in a week. Students at the program took a main course which followed an integrated course book study regarding various aspects of language study. There was a separate reading/writing course aimed at fostering comprehension skills and reading and writing strategies. Within this course, there was no specific focus on CR or CR related practices.

Participants were administered a background questionnaire concerning their CR learning and teaching practices. All of them stated that they did not take any course related to CR during their undergraduate years or as part of their teacher training; however, two of the participants graduated from literature departments highlighted the involvement of CR in their literary studies.

Even though they were all familiar with the concept or acknowledge the importance of CR skills, they did not foster CR in a conscious way, and they stated that their CR practices were mainly limited to occasional activities in course materials. In the study context, reading and writing skills were conducted together in a single course and EFL teachers in the study asserted that more class time was allocated to teaching writing rather than reading.

**Instruments**

In order to find out EFL teachers' perspectives for teaching CR, three qualitative data collection instruments were used: CR questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and teacher self-reflections. Table 2 below shows the related instruments used to answer the research questions.

Table 2. Research questions and related instruments

| Research Questions | Instruments |
| --- | --- |
| How do EFL teachers define the concept of critical reading? | CR Questionnaire (Part 1) |
| Do EFL teachers employ critical reading practices in their own classes? If yes, how? | CR Questionnaire (Part 2-3) Self-reflection Report |
| What are the challenges/difficulties EFL teachers face while implementing critical reading? | CR Questionnaire (Part 1) Semi-Structured Interviews Self-reflection Report |

*CR Questionnaire*

CR questionnaire was designed according to the relevant literature on CR. There were three main parts in the questionnaire. In the first part, the participants were asked to answer six open-ended questions regarding their own definition of CR, their educational background on CR, CR practices in their teaching context, and awareness on materials use. The second part of the questionnaire focused on teachers' daily teaching practices in asking CR questions to their students. The last part of the questionnaire aimed at eliciting hands-on practices of the participants by asking them to design a CR activity. For this purpose, the teachers were given a text from a coursebook which specifically focused on CR in the digital age (Goatly & Hiradhar, 2016) and they were asked to prepare a CR activity for B2 level students. A guidance was provided to focus their attention on the aim of the activity, how it fostered CR, specific instructions to be included, and the questions they would ask while they were using the given text. The text was about the advertisement of a credit card and was appropriate to the level of the students. The validity of the questionnaire regarding the purposes of the study was checked by six experts in the field of EFL teaching. After taking expert opinions, a careful revision was carried out to finalize the questionnaire (you may contact the corresponding author for the questionnaire).

*Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the challenges and difficulties EFL teachers encountered during their CR practices. Semi-structured interview is suggested to allow in-depth investigation of an issue from the participants' perspective by probing and expanding the interviewee's responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with a checklist or guidance to track the issue

(Berg, 2007). The following open-ended questions were prepared for the purposes of the study aiming at unveiling detailed information about CR practices of teachers, their perspective towards CR, and difficulties they experience:

- Do you think that the activity you prepared is appropriate for critical reading? Why / Why not?
- Have you encountered any problems while preparing this critical reading activity? If yes, please explain.
- Do you face problems/challenges while teaching critical reading?
  - If yes, what are the sources of problems/challenges you face during teaching critical reading?
  - How do you manage\solve these problems? Please explain.
- Most students do not know how to read critically since they haven't experienced it before in their education life. Do you have any suggestions to solve this problem?

Appropriacy of these questions aligned with the aims of the study was checked by a group of experts in the field for validity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant separately in participants' native language to make them feel relaxed and intimate while expressing themselves. The interview data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

*Self-reflection on CR teaching*

In order to explore CR practices in teachers' actual teaching context, the participants were asked to write a self-reflection report on one of their reading courses regarding their CR practices. In this way, we aimed to triangulate the data gathered through the questionnaire and interviews. The participants wrote a guided self-reflection report aimed at identifying their reading practices in their classes, whether they faced any difficulty in a particular class related to CR, and how they would foster CR next time. The questions were in their native language and participants were free to express themselves by reflecting on their actual classroom practices.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected following the steps below:
- Participants were informed about the study and they signed consent forms.
- The participant EFL teachers answered the CR questionnaire regarding their ideas and practices related to CR. They were also asked to prepare a CR activity using the material presented by the researcher.
- Participants wrote a self-reflection report on their CR practices in one of their reading courses.
- Semi-structured interviews were carried about with all participants at appropriate times both for one of the researchers and the participants. Interviews lasted approximately 7 to 12 minutes.

Qualitative data collected through CR questionnaire, guided self-reflection reflection report, and semi-structured interviews were analysed using Constant Comparison Method (CCM) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Accordingly, emerging patterns and themes were identified from the data rather than starting with preconceived categories (Boeije, 2002; Charmaz, 2006, Fram, 2013; Leong, Joseph & Boulay, 2010). A three-step procedure was followed in qualitative analysis via CCM. In the first step, all data were segmented into codes and any idea, thought, and feeling associated with

the aims of the study was considered as a code in the study. In the second step, codes were constantly compared and contrasted with each other to group similar codes together until they form sub-themes. In the last step, sub-themes were compared and contrasted once again to generate main themes. All segmentation, coding, delineation and formation process was carried out by two separated raters experienced in qualitative data analysis to ensure the reliability of the findings. The inter-rater reliability was calculated by using "[agreement / (agreement + disagreement)] X 100" formula (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Accordingly, agreement between raters was found .89, which indicated high level of reliability (Creswell, 2012).

## RESULTS

**RQ 1: How do EFL teachers define the concept of CR?**

Qualitative analyses of the questionnaire and guided interviews revealed a total of 40 codes regarding EFL teachers' own definition of CR. These codes were grouped under two main themes and four sub-themes. CR was defined in terms of *text engagement* (22 codes) and *analysis and evaluation* (18 codes). Table 3 shows the distribution of codes according to main themes and sub-themes.

Table 3. Distribution of codes related to teachers' definition of CR

| Main Themes | N* | Sub-themes | N* |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Teachers defined CR in terms of… | |
| Engagement with the text | 22 | *paying attention to the text* | 13 |
| | | *reading actively* | 9 |
| Evaluation and analysis | 18 | *evaluating information* | 11 |
| | | *analysing details* | 7 |
| | | TOTAL | 40 |

*Number of codes

As displayed in Table 3, the participants defined CR in terms of engagement with the text (22 codes). That is, CR required learners to pay attention to various parts of the text, the ideas presented in it, the form and word selection, and its organization. It also involved paying attention to identifying author's perspective, message, and background information related to the text (i.e., social, historical facts and events, time and place of publication, readership). In this respect, to be engaged in the text learners had to interact with the text actively to interpret deeper meanings presented. That is, leaners not just read the text passively by focusing on surface meaning, rather they need to read between the lines and grasp any hidden meanings or messages the text conveys. What is more, apart from engagement with the text and its features, CR was defined as analysing and evaluating (18 codes) information in the text. The participants' responses indicated that CR was about moving beyond basic comprehension of the text and it was rather a process of questioning information from various perspectives and evaluating and analysing the text with a critical stance. The following excerpts exemplify teachers' opinions on the definition of CR:

> *Critical reading is about questioning the text and evaluating the information and ideas presented in it. (T1-Guided Reflection)*
> *Critical reading requires to be mentally more active during a while-reading and post-reading activity. It is a deeper engagement with a text by spending more time, showing more attention, making more effort. (T5-Questionnaire)*

*Critical reading activities are the ones which lead the readers to read critically, in other words, which make them comment on the content or the quality of a piece of writing and its writer/author and put themselves in the writer's/author's or the characters' (in an article or story) shoes through their own understanding. (T2-Questionnaire)*
*If a student sees the aim of the author and identifies the target reader, then critical reading can be practised. (T1-Interview)*

As evident from the extracts above, teachers mostly associated CR with close inspection of any given text and further analysis by considering various features of texts. In this case, CR was portrayed differently from reading for answering comprehension questions or simple understanding of texts. Thus, CR was defined as a process that required employment of skills and strategies rather than a mere product. It is then essential to question whether teachers employ these skills and strategies in their classes.

**RQ 2: Do EFL teachers employ CR practices in their own classes? If yes, how?**

Participant teachers were asked whether they employed CR practices/strategies in their classrooms and if they did, how they managed these practices. What is more, teachers were engaged in a hands-on CR practice (CR Questionnaire Part 3) in which they were asked to design a CR practice using the given text and note down their experiences. Qualitative analyses of the questionnaire and self-reflection reports revealed a total of 300 codes regarding EFL teachers' practices and uses of CR strategies in their classes. 76 of these codes were about whether teachers employed CR in their classes. Teachers reported that they tried to encourage their students to read critically by guiding them question information and ideas presented in the texts. Some teachers further stated that in general Turkish EFL students were not used to read critically, and main attitude was to read the texts and answer comprehension questions without further referring to underlying meanings in the texts. What is more, when the proficiency level was low it was not possible to lead students read in a critical manner since the main aim was to ensure basic understanding. Some teachers also reported that they were not able to encourage students to read critically due to various reasons and these will be presented in the section related to the third research question.

A total of 224 codes were identified related to how teachers implemented CR in their classes. All codes were related to the questions teachers asked as part of CR strategies while dealing with L2 texts. Hence, *asking questions to foster CR* was identified as the main theme and these questions were grouped under four sub-themes as presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Distribution of codes related to teachers' CR practices in the classroom

| Main Theme | N* | Sub-themes | N* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asking questions to foster CR | 224 | While implementing CR, teachers ask questions about… | |
| | | *the reader and the background* | 82 |
| | | *the features of the text* | 60 |
| | | *providing rationale* | 53 |
| | | *the author related issues* | 29 |
| | | TOTAL | 224 |

*Number of codes

As evident in Table 4, while implementing CR, teachers employed several strategies related to asking questions. The questions were mostly about the reader and background information (82 codes). These questions aimed at query related to making connections with reader's world knowledge, background issues such as social, historical, political events related to the text, connecting any personal experience that might be related to the text, and identifying target readership to better understand the purpose of the text. Teachers also asked questions about the features of text itself (60 codes) highlighting the language, topic, characters, and word choice evident in the text. These issues were regarded as crucial to analyze the text and inquire the effects of language related choices presented. In addition, questions guiding students to provide rationale for ideas and meanings given in the texts were asked (53 codes). In this respect, students were expected to engage in answering 'why, why not and how' questions by giving their reasons and answering questions about providing evidence in terms of supporting details and convincing information. Lastly, teachers asked CR questions about the author (29 codes). This type of question aimed at investigating the author's purpose, message, and attitude. In the third part of the CR questionnaire, the participants prepared a CR activity about a text on credit card use and asked some questions to foster CR. This activity preparation was aimed to see which CR questions the participants asked during their actual practices. Some of the CR questions prepared by teachers on the presented material were;

- *Are you affected by the text? Did it convince you to get a credit card if you are against using it? (T3)*
- *Who is the target reader of this text? (T1)*
- *Is the given information convincing? Would you like to apply for it and get one? (T5)*
- *The advertisement mentions protection against fraud. Why do you think it is important? (T6)*

At a close look at these questions, it was revealed that teachers did not ask CR questions related to some certain points including the way the text was organized, verb use (i.e. active, passive, dynamic, state, modals), writer's or reader's similarity to the characters, reflected emotions (i.e. happiness, pessimism, anger, etc.), validity of the ideas, or effect of the text on other readers. Thus, it can be inferred that the participants in general had an idea for CR in theory; however, when it comes to actual practices regarding their material/course plan, their questions targeted at fostering limited features of CR. They mostly avoided asking questions to explore cultural, social, and power relations, or ideological messages to see how language worked to position the reader. Teachers' self-reports revealed that they believed in the importance and effectiveness of CR; however, they experienced certain problems and challenges which in turn appeared as their excuses for not implementing CR in their classes.

**RQ 3: What are the challenges/difficulties EFL teachers face while implementing CR?**

Qualitative analysis of CR questionnaire, self-reflection reports, and interviews revealed a total of 253 codes regarding the challenges EFL teachers encountered while implementing CR in their classes. These codes were grouped under two main themes and five sub-themes. The main themes were identified as *student-related challenges* (178 codes), and *teacher-related challenges* (75 codes) displayed in Table 5 below with related sub-themes.

Table 5. Distribution of codes related to challenges/difficulties EFL teachers experience

| Main Themes | N* | Sub-themes | N* |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | The challenges/difficulties are related to… | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student-related challenges | 178 | *previous learning experience* | 70 |
| | | *proficiency level in L2* | 64 |
| | | *familiarity with CR* | 44 |
| Teacher-related challenges | 75 | *lack of awareness on CR and its importance* | 51 |
| | | *previous learning/teaching experience* | 24 |
| | | TOTAL | 253 |

*Number of codes

Teachers in general expressed that they favoured CR and considered it as an effective practice in L2 learning. Even though they had positive views on CR, they admitted that CR was quite challenging due to various reasons. One of these reasons stemmed from student-related challenges (178 codes). Teachers stated that students did not have sufficient previous experience related to CR (70 codes). The national education policy of the country was demonstrated as the biggest reason for this problem. That is, students were mostly experiencing a wash-back effect of high stakes tests. The primary goal was to pass the national university entrance exam and L2 learning was not given priority. Thus, CR skills and strategies were not taught, instead students learned test taking strategies in general. Besides, it was also stated that students could not read critically even in their native language. Students' poor reading habits and experiences both in L1 and L2 were also stated as another reason for the challenges teachers faced in their classes.

Low proficiency level of the students (64 codes) was another factor affecting the lack of CR practices in the context of the study. Teachers pinpointed that students did not have enough proficiency level for practicing CR, and most of the time they had difficulty in understanding the topic and main idea of the text let alone the details and the inferred meanings. According to teachers, students even experienced difficulties in sharing their ideas related to the texts due to low proficiency level. Another sub-theme of student-related challenges was reported as students' lack of familiarity with CR elements (44 codes) like different question types (i.e. inference, reference, opinion questions) and authentic texts that require background information and/or understanding the position of the author. The following excerpts illustrate student-related challenges teachers faced related to CR practices:

*If there was no education system based on rote-learning, if the students knew autonomous learning, they would have a higher proficiency level when they enter university. However, there is no time for the students who start as A1 to teach CR skills as we prioritize improving their level to B2. (T4-Questionnaire)*

*Reading is a unified skill, but we disintegrate reading by taking CR out. In elementary school, we teach essential parts of reading, but we do not teach CR skills. In doing so, we underestimate an important skill. When they come to higher education we say 'oh we have CR here'. But that student cannot do anything about CR since s/he doesn't know it until that time and he hasn't done anything related to it even in her/his native language, Turkish. (T1-Interview)*

In addition to student-related challenges, some teacher-related challenges (75 codes) were also reported. The results indicated that teacher-related difficulties mostly stemmed from lack of awareness on the importance of CR (51 codes). Some teachers underlined the effect of tight curriculum and course planning for not having enough room to implement CR practices. Furthermore, they avoided making effort in teaching and fostering CR and they were mainly affected by students' demotivation in this respect. Teachers also admitted that they did not have

sufficient experience in CR practices themselves and that they did not learn or teach them previously (24 codes). Teachers were also not familiar enough with texts mostly used to implement CR (i.e. texts with controversial topics). In addition, teachers noted difficulties in planning lessons which included CR as most course books did not have such specific practices. They also mentioned problems in encouraging students who had low CR skills. Difficulties that stemmed from teachers can be traced in the following excerpts:

> *Both as a learner and as a teacher I have never taken a course on CR before because the curriculum applied in the Turkish education system does not involve this skill. (T1-Questionnaire)*
>
> *Teachers do not usually meet or use these kinds of activities. When they encounter such activities, they generally avoid these activities and find them time-consuming. (T2-Interview)*
>
> *Rather than critical reading, firstly I focus on how to read the given text. At first, I need to understand it so that I can prepare a CR activity for students. Indeed, I may still don't know what is required for CR myself and I may have a limited schema related to it. (T1-Interview)*

As evident from the excerpts above, teachers' awareness on CR was not high since they did not receive formal education on CR or did not have a chance to practice CR themselves before. Since they did not have previous experience related to CR, they reported having difficulty in implementing CR. The findings in general displayed that while teachers were aware of their lack of knowledge and experience for CR, they mentioned more student-related reasons for not performing CR. All in all, this study yielded that CR was considered as an effective practice in L2 class; however, there were reported challenges and difficulties which deprived teachers of practicing benefits of CR to enhance language learning and teaching.

## DISCUSSION

As part of the 21st century skills, reading critically is a popular yet not much investigated concept that is not adequately developed through schooling (Bråten & Braasch, 2017). This study aimed at shedding light into EFL classrooms in terms of CR practices employed by the teachers, and identifying possible challenges related to implementing CR in the language classroom. The findings of the current study suggest that teachers define CR based on the general principles of CR. That is, teachers associated the concept of CR with evaluation and interpretation skills, reading with an analytical stance considering various aspects of reading texts such as the underlying meanings, author's perspective, and being sensitive in terms of language choice and use. Such conceptualization of CR by the participant teachers showed similarities with teachers in other contexts as in general teachers might have a basic understanding of fundamental considerations underlying CR practices (Tanaka 2015; Wilson, 2016) However, knowing what CR is and applying this knowledge into practice are different. In this respect, teachers might have different attitudes, contextual realities, and lack of sufficient training in CR (Abednia & Crookes, 2019; Fajardo, 2015).

The findings revealed that CR involved mental activation and conscious attention which helped the students take a step beyond simple comprehension. Endowed with group work and discussions, teachers pinpointed the collaborative nature of CR similar to those teachers in Japanese EFL context (Tanaka, 2015). One reason of this may be related to the cultures which prioritize collaboration rather than individuality. Similar to Japanese teachers, teachers in the study

complained about time constraints in integrating CR into their classes and found such practices time consuming. In Turkish context, washback effect is quite important in teachers' decision making and high stake or exit exams in programs might affect teachers in ignoring CR practices and instead tending to work on strategies and tips to pass the exams. In this study, CR practices were mostly associated with asking questions about the reader and background, the features of the text (i.e. language use, word choice, style), and the author related issues. Hong and Zhiyuan (2014) underline that students are taught how to make use of background knowledge to understand the implied meaning and to differentiate opinions from facts. However, they are not taught how to evaluate whether the writer's viewpoint was biased or not, nor they are instructed in how to justify the writer's views by the evidence at hand. Likewise, in the current study, EFL teachers asked CR questions about reader and reader's background information mostly, but strategies like recognising biased views and getting evidence from the text were not prominent. That is, even though the teachers acknowledge the nature of CR, their actual CR practices did not move beyond asking certain types of questions.

One of the prominent contributions of the current study was that it did not only aim at revealing teachers' thoughts about CR, but it also tried to shed light on the actual practices of CR. In this respect, teachers used a sample text to foster CR practices in their classrooms and certain challenges/problems were identified. The findings revealed challenges stemming from both teachers and students. Students' previous learning experiences generally dominated by the washback effect, their familiarity with rote learning, low proficiency levels, and lack of knowledge related to CR deprived students of experiencing benefits of CR. The findings related to student-based challenges are in line with the study of Yutsevechutene (2017) who found that students' level of academic language was not advanced enough to support the teaching of CR, and students mostly had basic reading skills both in English and in their native language. Similarly, in the current study, students were not able to transfer necessary skills to integrate CR as they did not possess them. Such inability requires teachers to pay specific attention to teaching CR skills in their classrooms.

Teachers' lack of awareness on implementing CR practices and their previous teaching experiences which did not give importance to CR appeared as the challenging factors. Likewise, Albeckay (2014) found out that the Libyan teachers had not been formally taught or studied CR and they did not teach CR, although they thought it was an important skill for students in higher education English departments. In a study conducted by Ko (2010), posing critical questions and having a critical dialogue presented a challenge to the participant teachers. The reason for this was that students were used to a traditional style of reading course instruction, and they valued the teacher's thoughts more than their own opinions. This was also true for the current study as most students depended on their teachers and teachers in general suffered from tight schedules with almost no room for CR. One solution to eliminate this problem may be that teachers can adopt some CR related strategies (i.e. valuing different interpretations, connecting the text with real life) (Thomas et al., 2020; Weng, 2021) and model their students during reading practices (Liu, 2017). Employment of CR skills can also become part of extensive reading practices outside the classroom. Brown (1999) suggests four principles to engage students in critical literacy; allowing students to express themselves openly, showing respect to students' points of view, encouraging both/many sides of an issue by welcoming all seriously offered opinions, and not forcing students to think just like the teacher. Thus, the teacher can provide a supportive environment in which students care and respect each other to foster CR skills (Coiro, 2017; Jiménez & Gutiérrez 2019). This can be further fostered by overcoming certain challenges identified in this study. As a result,

the current study provided valuable insights into understanding teachers' approach to CR by identifying the realities of EFL classes with respect to CR practices.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Reading critically is undeniably an important skill that needs to be implemented in FL classes due to numerous benefits (i.e. questioning ideas, various interpretations, position of the writers, and evaluating texts from many aspects), and teachers have a pivotal role in fostering CR practices. This study aimed at investigating EFL teachers' views on CR and exploring their actual CR practices in a Turkish higher education EFL context. It was revealed that while the teachers had a general understanding of CR as it entailed higher order skills of analysing and interpreting, they were unable to define CR with distinctive concepts of identifying power relations, reflected ideologies, or text's positioning of the reader. When actual CR practices were inspected closely, the results further yielded that teachers did not employ various types of questioning skills albeit having theoretical knowledge about CR and its advantages. Lastly, possible challenges stemming from teachers and students were identified, and this study concluded that CR practices require teachers' and students' awareness of what CR entails, knowledge about how to implement CR practices, opportunities for integrating CR in language practice, and guidance in integrating CR in language classes. In this respect, this study offers valuable implications for FL students, teachers, and teacher educators.

The source of both student and teacher-based difficulties stem from not knowing how to read critically since they were not taught in language classes or as part of language teacher education. It was also evident that students were not reading critically in their L1 as well; thus, they were not able to transfer CR skills into L2 reading. In this respect, the current study suggests that CR can become a part of both L1 and L2 education. Reading lessons both in L1 and L2 may include CR practices and hands-on reading activities of how to foster a critical stance. Education program designers can take this lack into consideration while designing course materials and forming the curriculum. In EFL contexts, language teacher training programs can include well-designed and effective CR courses to train teachers first on how to read critically and then on how to teach CR skills. Training programs with careful guidance and tasks can help to elevate motivation on applying CR principles in actual teaching situations. As a result, it is crucial to train EFL teachers to raise language learners' awareness on the roles language plays in conveying not just a propositional message but an ideological one as well (Wallace, 1992). Teachers' awareness and willingness in promoting CR practices would have a high impact in their students' attitude towards reading in FL.

The present study was carried out in a higher education context that offered one-year English education for tertiary level FL learners. Further studies may be conducted in different settings of higher education contexts. What is more, the study was limited to the experiences and ideas of seven teachers. Further studies may include a higher number of teachers and students with various hands-on tasks. Teachers in different EFL contexts may benefit from long-term training on CR skills and how to foster CR ideals in their classroom. Hence, they may guide their students in becoming active readers who do not take granted for what they read but rather who question and weigh all considerations.

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