

ARTICLE

Critical Thinking Skills and Reading Proficiency among the English Language Students of Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sulu

Ma. Cecilia S. Caldoza, Nelson U. Julhamid, Masnona S. Asiri*

Graduate Studies, Sulu State College, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The sobering realization of the critical thinking and the difficulty in the language comprehension, specifically in English language piques the researcher's interest in learning more about the experiences of tertiary students majoring in English language studies at other public HEIs in Sulu. This study sought to investigate the significant difference in the extent of critical thinking skills and reading proficiency among the English language students. This study employed a variety of statistical techniques, including the adopted weighted mean, standard deviation, t-Test for independent samples, One-way ANOVA, and Pearson's r test of correlation to analyze the reading comprehension and critical thinking skills among English language learners in Sulu's public HEIs throughout the 2023–2024 academic year. A surveyed has been conducted on 200 female students aged 20-21 from public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sulu, revealing high critical thinking abilities and average reading proficiency ratings. Students' demographic profiles did not significantly influence their assessment of critical thinking or perceived reading proficiency. The study supports Anderson's Theory of Schema, which suggests that comprehension is an interactive process involving the reader's background knowledge and the text, requiring the ability to relate the material to one's own knowledge. The school administration will partner with language teachers to provide reading materials that enhance students' critical thinking skills and reading proficiency. Teachers must guide students to comprehend texts thoroughly, while parents play a crucial role in their children's future. Students will develop the ability to comprehend texts thorough through books and other reading materials provided by teachers. The objective of this study is to offer a foundation for upcoming researchers to enhance their own investigations on critical thinking abilities and reading competence within their field of study. The study will be conducted during the Academic Year 2023-2024 in Sulu province.

Keywords: Critical thinking skills; Reading proficiency; Language; Higher education; Institution

***CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

Ma. Cecilia S. Caldoza. Graduate Studies, Sulu State College, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines; Email: ceciliatsc0701@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 May 2024 | Revised: 1 June 2024 | Accepted: 14 June 2024 | Published Online: 15 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i3.6624>

CITATION

Caldoza, M.C.S., Julhamid, N.U., Asiri, M.S., 2024. Critical Thinking Skills and Reading Proficiency among the English Language Students of Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sulu. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 6(3): 656–667. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i3.6624>

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2024 by the author(s). Published by Bilingual Publishing Group. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Critical thinking entails introspection and concept investigation. An adept critical thinker may dissect a large concept into numerous smaller ones. They are able to look at every component, challenge prejudices, and reach a fair judgment. This is a challenging task that takes practice for everybody. Speaking in a second language makes critical thinking much more difficult (Brown, H. D., and Lee, H., 2015).

Marquez (2014) defined critical thinking as a questioning attitude aimed at thorough reconsideration, clarification, and validation of propositions, beliefs, or systems, leading to a personal acceptance, rejection, revision, or development of the same. This was stated in his work titled “Critical Thinking as a Questioning Attitude.” The definition includes several elements: a) questioning; b) attitude; focused on a comprehensive c) reconsideration; d) clarification; and e) validation; f) propositions; g) beliefs; or h) systems; resulting in an individual acceptance; i) rejection; j) revision; and k) development of the same. This definition does not view critical thinking as a talent because it refers to the capacity and/or expertise in using this questioning mindset. According to Marquez, the ability to think differs from critical thinking in this context. Additionally, since questioning cannot occur without thinking, thinking is implicit in his definition even though it isn’t stated explicitly. Suspension of judgment is also assumed because claiming to think critically about a subject is impossible if one has already formed preconceived notions about it.

Lastly, it should go without saying that this definition of critical thinking includes one’s own ideas, systems, and propositions as well as those held by others. The degree of fluency or proficiency a person has in speaking, writing, reading, and comprehending the English language is referred to as English proficiency. It covers a range of language proficiency areas, such as communication, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. Evaluations of a person’s accuracy and effectiveness in various circumstances using the language are commonly used to gauge their level of English proficiency. Fluence

in the language is crucial for those who must engage and communicate in English-speaking settings for business or academic reasons, travel, or cultural exchange.

In a series of studies, researchers delved into various aspects of reading proficiency and strategies for enhancing literacy skills. Eun-Young and Day (2016) conducted a meta-analysis on extensive reading (ER) and identified a small to medium effect on reading proficiency, with adults showing higher gains than children and adolescents. Nyarko et al. (2018) explored the relationship between reading proficiency and academic performance in lower primary school children in Accra, Ghana, emphasizing the significant positive correlation between the two factors. Almutairi (2018) focused on effective reading strategies for third-grade students with learning disabilities, highlighting the importance of graphic organizers and peer-assisted strategies. Cunningham (2015) conducted a needs analysis for a developmental reading course in Cambodia, emphasizing the value of a literature-based approach. Sasikala Balan et al. (2019) investigated the influence of reading habits on academic achievement at a university in Thailand, emphasizing the significance of reading purpose. Delgadova (2015) identified reading literacy deficiencies among first-year students in Trencin, stressing the need for improved critical thinking skills in reading.

Frankel et al. (2016) proposed updated principles for literacy, highlighting its constructive and critical nature. Hiebert (2023) discussed research findings in the science of reading, emphasizing the importance of letter-sound patterns and automaticity. Suraprajit (2019) explored reading strategies among Thai university students, focusing on bottom-up and top-down approaches. Jones (2021) investigated the effects of independent reading time on reading achievement at Lester Elementary School, showcasing positive changes in student engagement and attitudes toward reading.

In line with what the authors have highlighted with regards to the importance of critical thinking, this study plays an important role in identifying

experiences, characteristics, and behaviors of the students concerning critical thinking, and reading proficiency. These two skills are considered as one of the most important 21st century skills a student must have in order to compete globally, as English has become one of the most widely used languages around the world (Chavez, et al., 2023). Additionally, a study by Chavez (2020) suggests that parents should also recognize the language as not just a language but a subject that will teach and prepare their children for the future. Parents ought to promote the importance of the subject to their children just as they value the language.

English language instruction at Mindanao State University-Sulu has revealed that a subset of BAELS students exhibit concerning deficiencies in their reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. The majority of them struggle with English comprehension to the extent that they are unable to comprehend basic narratives intended for college students or perform basic analysis. It is believed that students who struggle with understanding become anxious and unmotivated, when encountered with English-language reading materials. The experiences of students majoring in English language studies at other public HEIs in Sulu who are also enrolled in postsecondary education.

2. Materials and methods

The researcher employed a descriptive-correlational research design for this investigation. Descriptive correlational design, according to Penprase et al. (2014), is a research strategy used to characterize the relationship between variables without changing them. Furthermore, in this study, the researchers employed a descriptive survey method to collect quantitative data. This method provides a snapshot or overview of a particular phenomenon or group of individuals (Sirisilla and Sirisilla, 2023). Employing the descriptive type of research depicts the experiences and behaviors they had, as well as the characteristics they possessed. This methodology will provide the researchers with a clearer view and understanding of the results.

In this case, the researchers likely used a checklist questionnaire as their data collection tool. A checklist questionnaire typically consists of a list of items or statements, and participants indicate their responses by checking off or selecting options that best align with their experiences or opinions (Sincero, 2023). This method allows for the systematic collection of data and facilitates the analysis of quantitative information. By utilizing a descriptive survey method and employing a checklist questionnaire, the researchers were able to gather quantitative data that provided insights into the experiences of students majoring in English language studies at other public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sulu who are also enrolled in postsecondary education. This data collection approach allows for a structured and standardized assessment of various aspects related to the participants' experiences, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation.

In this study, a total of 200 respondents will be used to investigate the correlation between language comprehension and critical thinking skills of the students studying in Higher Education Institution (HEIs). A non-probability sampling design, explicitly the purposive sampling method, was employed in this study due to resources and time constraints. The use of purposive sampling technique was to ensure the representation of gender, age, parent's average monthly income, parent's educational attainment, and the year level (Nikolopoulou, 2023).

Data gathering process involved obtaining permission to administer a questionnaire from the Dean of Graduate Studies and President/Chancellor of public HEIs in Sulu, and personally starting and administering the questionnaire. The researchers were unable to proceed with the data gathering procedure until they receive approval from the Dean of Graduate Studies and the President/Chancellor. Furthermore, once the researchers obtained approval from the Dean and president/chancellor, they issued a letter of consent to the target participants, inviting them to take part in the study.

The study employed a survey questionnaire to

evaluate the critical thinking and reading skills of English students in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sulu. This questionnaire was modified from a standardized instrument developed by Lauz, et al., (2020). The article titled “Improving the Critical Thinking Skills of Secondary School Students using Problem-Based Learning” was authored by Cadiz-Gabejan and Quirino (2021). The assessment of students’ reading proficiency and academic performance ensures uniformity and the capacity to make quantitative analyses by ensuring consistency and comparability of replies. Surveys are a cost-effective method as they use lesser resources to reach a larger pool of respondents. In addition, they offer anonymity, which promotes candid responses from participants. The findings offer significant perspectives on the academic achievements and analytical reasoning abilities of students.

3. Results

This chapter presents data on the demographic

profiles of English language students in public Higher Education Institutions in Sulu, focusing on critical thinking skills and reading proficiency. It highlights significant differences in these skills and reading proficiency based on these profiles, as well as the significant correlation between these skills and reading proficiency.

3.1 What is the extent of critical thinking skills among the English language students of public HEIs in Sulu?

Table 1 presents the level of critical thinking proficiency among English language learners at public higher education institutions in Sulu. The responses falling under ‘Often’ rating classification, have an overall weighted mean score of 3.6143 with a standard deviation of 0.62164. According to the respondents, English language learners at Sulu’s public higher education institutions are capable of objectively analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting data in order to draw logical conclusions.

Table 1. Extent of critical thinking skills among the English language students of public HEIs in Sulu.

Statements	Mean	S.D.	Rating
1 How would you rate your overall English language proficiency?	3.6250	0.97423	Often
2 How confident do you feel in your ability to critically analyze and evaluate information in English?	3.5550	0.90613	Often
3 How often do you engage in activities that require critical thinking skills in English, such as debates and discussions?	3.5650	0.90547	Often
4 Do you actively seek out opportunities to practice critical thinking skills in English, such as reading complex texts or solving puzzles?	3.6900	0.96361	Often
5 How often do you use logical reasoning and evidence-based arguments in English conversations written assignments?	3.5450	1.01148	Often
6 Do you find it challenging to express your thoughts and ideas clearly and logically in English?	3.5750	0.99465	Often
7 How often do you engage in activities that require problem-solving skills in English?	3.5578	0.87929	Often
8 How comfortable are you with interpreting and analyzing complex texts or articles in English?	3.5750	0.92664	Often
9 Do you actively seek opportunities to engage in debates or discussions in English to enhance your critical thinking skills?	3.6150	0.97547	Often
10 Do you feel that your English language proficiency affects your ability to think critically?	3.5850	0.94192	Often
11 How often do you engage in activities that require analyzing and evaluating different perspectives in English?	3.5500	0.96548	Often
12 Do you feel that your English language proficiency affects your ability to form well-reasoned arguments or opinions?	3.6050	0.96625	Often
13 Do you actively seek out opportunities to read and analyze different genres of literature in English to enhance your critical thinking skills?	3.6550	0.98019	Often
14 How often do you engage in critical thinking activities in your daily life?	3.7400	1.0087	Often
15 Have you encountered challenges or obstacles while trying to think critically?	3.7750	0.93743	Often
Total Weighted Mean	3.6143	0.62164	Often

Note: Legend (5) 4.50-5.0= Always; (4) 3.50-4.49 = Often (O); (3) 2.5-3.49 = Sometimes (S); (2) 1.50-2.49 = Rarely (R); (1) 1.0-1.49 = Never (N).

Specifically, among the items in this category, student-respondents rated ‘Often’ for the following items: ‘How would you rate your overall English language proficiency?’, ‘How confident do you feel in your ability to critically analyze and evaluate information in English?’, ‘How often do you engage in activities that require critical thinking skills in English, such as debates and discussions?’, ‘Do you actively seek out opportunities to practice critical thinking skills in English, such as reading complex texts or solving puzzles?’, ‘How often do you use logical reasoning and evidence-based arguments in English conversations written assignments?’, ‘Do you find it challenging to express your thoughts and ideas clearly and logically in English?’, ‘How often do you engage in activities that require problem-solving skills in English?’, ‘How comfortable are you with interpreting and analyzing complex texts or articles in English?’, ‘Do you actively seek

opportunities to engage in debates or discussions in English to enhance your critical thinking skills?’, and ‘Do you feel that your English language proficiency affects your ability to think critically?’

3.2 What is the extent of reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs in Sulu?

The level of reading competency among English language learners in Sulu’s public higher education institutions’ is displayed in **Table 2**. The overall weighted mean score of the students’ assessment in this category is 3.7003 with a standard deviation of 0.62721, classed as ‘Often’. The findings of this study suggest that respondents believe that English language classes in Sulu’s public higher education institutions’ can determine their students’ degree of fluency or competency in speaking, writing, reading, and understanding the language.

Table 2. Extent of reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs in Sulu.

Statements	Mean	S.D.	Rating
1 How often do you read for pleasure?	3.7550	0.98480	Often
2 How confident do you feel in your ability to understand and retain information while reading?	3.7900	0.89997	Often
3 Do you prefer reading physical books or using e-readers?	3.9200	0.92622	Often
4 Do you take notes or highlight important points while reading?	3.7600	0.99365	Often
5 How often do you find yourself re-reading sections of a book or passage?	3.6750	0.96646	Often
6 Do you actively try to make connections between what you’re reading in your own experience or prior knowledge?	3.5950	0.97247	Often
7 How often do you ask yourself questions while reading to check your understanding?	3.6750	1.03184	Often
8 How often do you summarize what you’ve read in your own words?	3.5950	1.03748	Often
9 Do you actively look up unfamiliar words or concepts while reading?	3.6450	0.96104	Often
10 How often do you engage in reading activities (books, articles, etc.) on a weekly basis?	3.6900	0.96881	Often
11 Do you seek out additional resources or supplementary materials to help you better comprehend what you’re reading?	3.6400	0.94598	Often
12 Do you take breaks while reading to process and reflect on what you’ve read?	3.6900	0.88760	Often
13 How often do you use active reading strategies, such as underlining or annotating key points?	3.7500	0.91745	Often
14 How do you approach reading challenging or unfamiliar topics or subjects?	3.6450	0.94522	Often
15 Do you actively engage in critical analysis and interpretation while reading?	3.6800	0.96554	Often
Total Weighted Mean	3.7003	0.62721	Often

Note: Legend (5) 4.50-5.0= Always; (4) 3.50-4.49 = Often (O); (3) 2.5-3.49 = Sometimes (S); (2) 1.50-2.49 = Rarely (R); (1) 1.0-1.49 = Never (N).

Specifically, among the items in this category, student-respondents rated the following items with ‘Often’: ‘How often do you read for pleasure?’, ‘How confident do you feel in your ability to understand

and retain information while reading?’, ‘Do you prefer reading physical books or using e-readers?’, ‘Do you take notes or highlight important points while reading?’, ‘How often do you find yourself re-read-

ing sections of a book or passage?', 'Do you actively try to make connections between what you're reading in your own experience or prior knowledge?', 'How often do you ask yourself questions while reading to check your understanding?', 'How often do you summarize what you've read in your own words?', 'Do you actively look up unfamiliar words or concepts while reading?', and 'How often do you engage in reading activities (books, articles, etc.) on a weekly basis?'

3.3 Analysis on the respondent's critical thinking based on Demographics Factors

Is there a significant difference in the extent of critical thinking among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to; **3.3.1 Gender**; **3.3.2 Age**; **3.3.3 Parent's average monthly income**; **3.3.4 Parent's educational attainment** and **3.3.5 Year level**?

Table 3. Differences in the extent of critical thinking among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to gender.

Grouping	VARIABLES	Mean	S. D.	Mean Difference	t	Sig.	Description
Critical Thinking	Male	3.4821	0.68141	-0.18353	-1.887	0.061	Not Significant
	Female	3.6657	0.59134				

Note: *Significant at alpha 0.05

3.3.2 By Age, Parents' Average Monthly Income, and Educational Attainment, and Year Level

Presented in **Table 4**, the study investigates the extent of critical thinking skills among English language learners enrolled in public higher education institutions in Sulu. According to the research, regardless of age differences, all students assess critical thinking to the same extent. First-year college students may not necessarily be at a disadvantage in terms of assessing the level of critical thinking as compared to younger students. The study also discovered that the F-ratio and P-values for critical

3.3.1 By Gender

The gender-based grouping of data in **Table 3** illustrates the variations in the degree of critical thinking among English language learners at public higher education institutions. The information provided in the table indicates that, at a significance level of 0.05, there is no notable distinction in the mean differences, t-values, and p-values concerning the degree of critical thinking. Thus, it is evident that male and female student respondents at public higher education institutions in Sulu generally concur in terms of the level of critical thinking displayed by English language students. The aforementioned discovery suggests that a male student respondent's gender may not always provide him with an advantage when evaluating the degree of critical thinking as compared to a female student, or vice versa. Hence, it is safe to say that variable gender has not significantly mediate how student-respondents assess the extent of critical thinking of English language students of public HEIs.

thinking were not statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05. This implies that parents of students with higher monthly incomes may not necessarily possess superior abilities to assess the level of critical thinking. Additionally, the study revealed that the educational background of parents had no substantial impact on the adolescents' evaluations of critical thinking. Finally, the study concluded that the F-ratio and P-values for critical thinking were not statistically significant at the alpha level of 0.05. This implies that the grade level does not have a substantial influence on students' evaluation of their level of critical thinking.

Table 4. Differences in the extent of critical thinking among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to the different variables.

Variables	SOURCES OF VARIATION	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Description
Age	Between Groups	0.389	2	0.194	0.500	0.607	Not Significant
	Within Groups	76.512	197	0.388			
	Total	76.901	199				
Parent's Average Monthly Family Income	Between Groups	2.213	3	0.738	1.936	0.125	Not Significant
	Within Groups	74.688	196	0.381			
	Total	76.901	199				
Parents' Educational Attainment	Critical Thinking				0.239	0.916	Not Significant
	Between Groups	0.376	4	0.094			
	Within Groups	76.525	195	0.392			
Year Level	Total	76.901	199		0.401	0.808	Not Significant
	Between Groups	0.627	4	0.157			
	Within Groups	76.274	195	0.391			
	Total	76.901	199				

Note: *Significant alpha 0.05

3.4 Analysis on the respondent's reading proficiency based on Demographics factors

Is there a significant difference in the extent of reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to: 3.4.1 Gender; 3.4.2 Age; 3.4.3 Parent's average monthly income; 3.4.4 Parent's educational attainment; and 3.4.5 Year level?

3.4.1 Gender

The gender-based grouping of data in **Table 5** illustrates the variations in reading competence levels among English language learners at public higher

education institutions. This table shows that the degree of reading proficiency's mean differences, t-values, and p-values are significant at alpha .05. This indicates that, overall, both male and female students' do not agree about proficiency of English language learners at Sulu's public higher education institutions are in the reading domain. According to this research, a male student respondent may have an advantage over a female student when it comes to evaluating the level of reading proficiency, or vice versa. Therefore, the assessment of reading competency among the English language learners at public HEIs is notably influenced by gender.

Table 5. Differences in the extent of reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to gender.

Grouping	VARIABLES	Mean	S. D.	Mean Difference	t	Sig.	Description
	Reading Proficiency	Male	3.5179	0.64184	-0.25344*	-2.603	0.010
Female		3.7713	0.60901				

Note: *Significant at alpha 0.05

3.4.2 By Age, parent's average monthly income, parents' educational attainment, and year level

In **Table 6**, the study shows that age and income do not play a significant role in determining the evaluation of reading skills among English language learners at public higher education institutions in

Sulu. Additionally, the average monthly income of parents does not have a significant impact on the assessment of reading proficiency. Students from higher socioeconomic status may not possess superior abilities to assess their child's reading competency compared to those with lower socioeconomic status. The study also discovered that there was no

substantial interaction between the parent’s educational background and the degree of reading competency evaluated by students. Furthermore, the study revealed that there was no notable disparity in the assessment of reading aptitude between fourth-year students and those in their first, second, or third year. Therefore, the study indicates that different grade levels have no substantial impact on students’ evaluations of their reading skills. Generally, the results

indicate that students’ assessments of their reading skills remain consistent regardless of their age groups and educational levels.

In **Table 7**, correlation analysis indicates that there is significant high correlation ($r=0.710$; $p=0.000$) between critical thinking and reading comprehension. This means that higher level of critical thinking skills might induce high reading comprehension outcome to students.

Table 6. Differences in the extent of reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs when data are grouped according to the different variables.

Variables	SOURCES OF VARIATION	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Description
Age	Between Groups	0.224	2	0.112	0.282	0.754	Not Significant
	Within Groups	78.061	197	0.396			
	Total	78.284	199				
Parent’s Average Monthly Family Income	Between Groups	0.224	2	0.112	1.424	0.237	Not Significant
	Within Groups	78.061	197	0.396			
	Total	78.284	199				
Parents’ Educational Attainment	Between Groups	0.333	4	0.083	0.208	0.934	Not Significant
	Within Groups	77.952	195	0.400			
	Total	78.284	199				
Year Level	Between Groups	1.714	4	0.428	1.091	0.362	Not Significant
	Within Groups	76.571	195	0.393			
	Total	78.284	199				

Note: *Significant alpha 0.05

Table 7. Correlation between the extent of critical thinking and reading proficiency among the English language students of public HEIs in Sulu.

Variables		Pearson r	Sig	N	Description
Dependent	Independent				
Critical Thinking	Reading Comprehension	0.710**	0.000	200	Very High

Note: *Correlation Coefficient is significant at alpha 0.05.

Correlation Coefficient Scales Adopted from Hopkins, Will (2002):

0.0-0.1 = Nearly Zero; 0.1-0.30 = Low; 0.3-0.5 0 = Moderate; 0.5-0.7-0 = High; 0.7-0.9 = Very High; 0.9-1 = Nearly Perfect.

4. Discussion

The research conducted a survey of 200 university students in Sulu, on the academic year 2023-2024. The majority of the individuals were female. Among them, 22.5% were between the ages of 19 and 21, 46.5% were between the ages of 20 and 21, and the remaining 31.0% were 22 years old or older. The majority of individuals came from households with modest monthly earnings, suggesting a lack of suffi-

cient access to educational assistance. Additionally, the majority of parents possessed only a basic level of education, suggesting limited academic assistance. The majority of the students were in their first year of study, and rated “Often” for critical thinking and reading proficiency.

The study concluded that age and income had no significant impact on the reading proficiency among individuals learning English language. The reading proficiency exam was not considerably affected by

the monthly income of parents. There was no notable correlation between the educational background of parents and the assessment of reading proficiency. The study also found no notable discrepancy in the reading ability between fourth-year students and students in their first, second, or third year. Overall, the students reading proficiency remains consistent irrespective of age and educational attainment.

5. Conclusions

The study conducted on first-year college students in Sulu yielded noteworthy findings. It was discovered that these students exhibit a balanced representation in terms of gender, age, and parental income. Moreover, students attending public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sulu demonstrate commendable levels of critical thinking and reading proficiency on average. Interestingly, the study revealed that demographic factors such as gender, age, and parental education do not significantly influence their assessment of critical thinking and reading abilities. These results align with Anderson's Theory of Schema, which posits that comprehension is an interactive process that incorporates both background knowledge and personal understanding. Overall, the findings from this study provide support for Anderson's theory, emphasizing that comprehension entails making connections between textual material and one's own knowledge. This underscores the importance of integrating prior knowledge and experiences into the process of understanding information. This study recommends that English language teachers at public HEIs in Sulu focus on promoting students' questioning skills, logical thinking, and reading proficiency. Strategies suggested include open discussions, thought-provoking readings, analytical writing lessons, multimedia sources, real-life case studies, structured debates, inquiry-based learning, and daily reading habits. Teachers should also consider individual learner variables and create a supportive environment that values reading.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the research paper. They collaboratively designed the survey and were involved in collecting data from the participants. Each author took part in analyzing the data, examining various factors like socioeconomic background and reading proficiency. Writing responsibilities were shared, with each author contributing to different sections of the paper such as the introduction, methodology, and conclusion. They also jointly reviewed and edited the paper to ensure clarity and coherence. Overall, the authors worked together throughout the entire process, ensuring equal participation in the development of the research paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the authors upon request. Interested parties should contact the corresponding author to access the data. Although the data are not publicly accessible, they can be provided for research purposes upon reasonable request. The authors will communicate any restrictions or conditions on data use, ensuring it is used appropriately and ethically, in line with the study's objectives and confidentiality requirements.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank the faculty and staff of HEIs in Sulu, Philippines, for their crucial administrative and technical support during this study. Special thanks to the Education Department for supplying the necessary resources and materials for the grammatical tests. We also appreciate the cooperation and

participation of the English language students who dedicated their time and effort to this research. Their enthusiastic involvement made this study possible. Lastly, we are grateful to the research office for assisting with the ethical review and approval process.

Ethics statement

This study, focused on critical thinking skills and reading proficiency, was conducted with English language students from public Higher Education Institutions in Sulu. Throughout the research process, we adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the well-being and rights of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from all students involved, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their voluntary participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal data, and the information collected was used solely for research purposes. The study was reviewed and approved by the relevant ethical review board, ensuring compliance with ethical standards in educational research. Our commitment to ethical principles ensured that the study was conducted with integrity, respect, and transparency.

References

- Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R. M., Borokhovski, E., et al., 2015. Strategies for teaching students to think critically: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*. 85(2), 275-314.
- Adams, M.J., Foorman, B.R., Lundberg, I., et al., 2018. *Phonemic awareness in young children: Classroom curriculum*. Brookes Publishing: Baltimore.
- Alampay, G.P., Jocson, R.M., 2016. Reading proficiency and its predictors among Filipino children: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Research in Reading*. 39(2), 131-150.
- Cunningham, R.C., 2018. Effective reading strategies for increasing the reading comprehension level of third-grade students with learning disabilities. *Second Language Studies*. 34(1), 1-68.
- Alvermann, D., Fitzgerald, J., Simpson, M.L., 2006. *Research in teaching and learning in reading*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280625687_Research_in_teaching_and_learning_in_reading (cited 1 January 2024).
- Bautista, A., 2015. Critical thinking in Philippine higher education. *Philippine Journal of Education*. 94(1), 1-19.
- Bernardo, A.B.I., Abad, M.C., 2015. Reading proficiency and academic achievement among Filipino elementary students. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. 16(3), 383-396.
- Brown, H.D., Lee, H., 2015. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Pearson Longman: New York.
- Chavez, J.V., 2022. Narratives of bilingual parents on the Real-life use of english language: materials for english language teaching curriculum. *Arab World English Journal*. 13(3), 325-338.
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol-13no3.21>
- Chavez, J., Adalia, H., Alberto, J.P., 2023. Parental support strategies and motivation in aiding their children learn the English language. *Forum for Linguistics Studies*. 5(2), 1-16.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59400/fls.v5i2.1541>
- Cadiz-Gabejan, A.M., Quirino, M.C., 2021. Students' reading proficiency and academic performance. *International Journal of English Language Studies*. 3(6), 30-40.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijels.2021.3.6.4>
- Chua, Y.P., 2018. Enhancing reading proficiency through culturally responsive approach: A case study of Filipino students. *Reading Psychology*. 39(1), 1-23.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57092/ijetz.v2i2.12>
- Cunningham, R.C., 2015. Needs analysis for a developmental reading, writing, and grammar

- course at a private language school in Cambodia. Available from: <https://www.hawaii.edu/sls/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Cunningham.pdf> (cited 15 March 2024).
- De Gusman, A.B., De Gusman, M.R., 2019. Critical thinking skills of Filipino college students: An exploratory study. *Journal of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving*, 7(1), 19-32.
- Dela Cruz, R.R., Magno, C., 2019. Factors influencing reading among Filipino college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 49(2), 165-185.
- Delgadová, Elena., 2015. Reading literacy as one of the most significant academic competencies for the university students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 178. 48-53.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.03.145>
- Duke, N.K., Pearson, P.D., 2016. Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. In L.C. Moll (Ed.), *Literacy research methodologies* (pp. 63-94). Guilford Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42748663>
- Ennis, R.H., 2015. Critical thinking: A streamlined conception. *Teaching Philosophy*, 38(2), 129-151.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137378057_2
- Estolas, R.B., 2017. Enhancing critical thinking skills through problem-based learning in the Philippines. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 7(12), 885-889.
- Facione, P.A., 2015. Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts. *Insight Assessment*. 2-28. Available from: <https://www.law.uh.edu/blakely/advocacy-survey/Critical%20Thinking%20Skills.pdf> (cited 12 10 March).
- Frankel, K., Becker, B., Rowe, M. W., et al., 2016. From “What is Reading?” to What is Literacy?. *Journal of Education*. 196. 7-17.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205741619600303>
- Gabinete, A.C., Macasaet, M.M., 2016. Critical thinking disposition and skills of Filipino college students. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences*, 3(4), 19-26.
- Halpern, D.F., 2015. Teaching critical thinking for transfer across domains: disposition, skills, structure training, and metacognitive monitoring. *American Psychologist*, 70(9), 1-14.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.53.4.449>
- Hiebert, E., 2023. Thinking through research and the science of reading. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 105. 37-41.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00317217231205940>
- Jones, S., 2021. Increasing reading achievement: An applied research study on the effects of implementing an independent reading time at lester elementary school. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1-43.
- Hoffman, J.V., Schallert, D.L., 2004. *The Texts in Elementary Classrooms*, 1st ed. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc: Mahwah.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410611086>
- Marquez, L.P., 2017. Critical thinking in Philippine education: What we have and what we need. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*. 15(2). 272-303.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2019. Reading and reading instruction: Research-based practices. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available from: <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/factsheets/reading> (cited 1 March 2024).
- Nyarko, K., Kugbey, N., Kofi, C.C., et al., 2018. English reading proficiency and academic performance among lower primary school children in Ghana. *SAGE Open*, 8(3). 215824401879701.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018797019>

- Nikolopoulou, K., 2023. What is purposive sampling? definition & examples. Scribbr. Available from: <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/purposive-sampling/> (cited 22 March 2024).
- Paul, R., Elder, L., 2016. Critical thinking: The nature of critical and creative thought. *Journal of Development education*. 40(2), 34-35.
- Penprase, B., Oakley, B., Ternes, R., et al., 2014. Do higher dispositions for empathy predispose males toward careers in nursing? A descriptive correlational design. *Nursing Forum*. 50(1), 1-8.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12058>
- Salazar, E.M., Alfonso, M.L., 2017. The relationship between reading proficiency and academic achievement among high school students. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. 33(4), 327-342.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10763-018-9905-z>
- Balan, S., Katenga, J., Simon, A., 2019. Reading Habits and Their Influence on Academic Achievement Among Students at Asia Pacific International University. *Abstract Proceedings International Scholars Conference*. 7(1), 1490-1516.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35974/isc.v7i1.928>
- Shanahan, T., Shanahan, C., 2017. What is disciplinary literacy and why does it matter? *Topic in Language Disorders*. 37(3), 271-282.
- Siegel, H., 1988. *Educating reason: Rationality, critical thinking, and education*. Available from: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Educating-Reason%3A-Rationality%2C-Critical-Thinking-Siegel/e2a00dc20e730896e-ba7bacdb4014a56965b4f56> (cited 11 February 2023).
- Sincero, S. M., 2024. A Questionnaire checklist - important things to check before a launch. Available from: <https://explorable.com/questionnaire-checklist> (cited 12 March 2024).
- Sirisilla, S., Sirisilla, S., 2023. Bridging the gap: overcome these 7 flaws in descriptive research design. *Enago Academy*. Available from: <https://www.enago.com/academy/descriptive-research-design/> (cited 1 April 2024).
- Snow, C.E., Uccelli, P., 2009. The challenge of academic language. In: Dickinson, D.K., Neuman, S.B. (Eds.). *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. pp:112-133
- Suraprajit, P., 2019. Bottom-up vs top-down model: The perception of reading strategies among Thai university students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.454.10.17507/jltr.1003.07>.
- Torgesen, J.K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L.M., et al., 2007. Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction. NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction:Portsmouth. pp, 1-180.
- Twardy, C.R., 2015. Argument maps improve critical thinking. *Teaching Philosophy*, 38(2), 213-230.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil200427213>
- Young Jeon, E., Day, R., 2016. The effectiveness of ER on reading proficiency: A meta-analysis. *Reading in a Foreign Language*. 28(2), 246-265.