

AN ANALYSIS OF PASSIVE TO ACTIVE PROMOTING CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH TEXT

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ABSTRACT

Reading competence serves as a pivotal element in achieving academic excellence, as it underpins a wide array of intellectual abilities, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and the capacity to synthesize and construct new knowledge. Despite the centrality of reading in higher education, many university students remain entrenched in passive reading habits. These students tend to approach texts as repositories of facts to be memorized rather than as complex arguments to be interrogated and reflected upon. They absorb content at face value without questioning the author’s purpose, evaluating the validity of claims, or relating the material to broader academic or real-world contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current era characterized by rapid advancements in digital technology and an ever expanding reservoir of information, the ability to read critically has become not just beneficial but essential, particularly for students in higher education. Reading is no longer a passive act of consuming information; rather, it has transformed into an intellectually demanding process that involves questioning, analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing multifaceted concepts. The complexity of academic texts, coupled with the demands of modern academic inquiry, necessitates that students engage with readings on a deeper, more analytical level—

moving far beyond surface-level understanding. Today’s university learners are increasingly expected to engage with texts in a way that enables them to unpack arguments, identify assumptions, evaluate evidence, and situate information within broader academic or social contexts. This level of engagement reflects a shift in the function of reading—from a task performed to meet assignment requirements to a cognitive process that facilitates the construction of new insights and knowledge. In this framework, reading becomes an active dialogue between the reader and the text, requiring mental agility and intellectual curiosity. This article

critically examines the educational shift required to transition students from passive to active reading modes. Passive readers typically engage with texts in a mechanical fashion, focusing solely on the literal content or on completing reading tasks as a formality. They may lack the motivation or tools to interrogate the material critically. In contrast, active readers approach texts as co-constructors of meaning. They constantly engage with the material by asking probing questions, drawing logical connections, making predictions, assessing the strength of arguments, and integrating the content with their prior knowledge and academic experience. Such engagement is not merely an indicator of reading comprehension; it serves as the foundation for the development of advanced cognitive capabilities. Skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and evaluative judgment—which are indispensable for success in both academic and professional settings—are deeply rooted in the practice of active reading. Thus, fostering this ability is not optional but imperative. Importantly, the shift from passive to active reading does not occur naturally or without guidance. Active reading is a learned and practiced competency that must be deliberately cultivated through thoughtfully designed pedagogical approaches. Educators play a pivotal role in facilitating this transformation. They must reposition themselves from being sole

transmitters of information to becoming facilitators of inquiry, reflective dialogue, and independent learning. Creating classroom environments that encourage curiosity, critical questioning, collaborative interpretation, and intellectual risk-taking is crucial in promoting an active reading culture. In summary, this paper underscores the urgent need for educational institutions to implement instructional strategies that prioritize deep engagement with texts. By equipping students with the tools and mindset necessary for active reading, educators not only enhance reading comprehension but also prepare students to become independent thinkers capable of navigating and contributing meaningfully to the complexities of contemporary academic and societal life.

In recent years, the importance of critical reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has gained increasing attention. Many students, however, continue to engage in passive reading—where they read simply to complete assignments without actively interpreting or questioning the content. This passive approach limits comprehension, stifles creativity, and impairs students' ability to develop higher-order thinking skills. Instead of interacting with the ideas presented in a text, students often rely on surface-level understanding, resulting in a lack of engagement and personal connection with the reading material.

The core problem addressed in this study is the low level of critical engagement demonstrated by EFL students during reading activities. When students are not guided to question, analyze, and respond to texts, their understanding remains superficial. This hinders their ability to develop critical thinking and reflective abilities, both of which are essential for academic success and real-world communication.

The aim of this research is to promote a shift from passive reading behavior to active and meaningful engagement with texts through the application of specific reading strategies. These include annotation, questioning, summarizing, prediction, and reflective response. By implementing these strategies in classroom reading activities, the study hopes to improve students' comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking skills.

This research was conducted in a senior high school in Indonesia, specifically in an 11th-grade English class. The school was selected due to observable challenges in reading comprehension and student participation during reading sessions. Through classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of student work, the research evaluates the effectiveness of transitioning from passive to active reading methods.

To frame this study, several theoretical perspectives support the need for active reading: Reader-Response Theory

(Rosenblatt, 1995) highlights the interaction between reader and text as central to meaning-making. It suggests that reading should be a dynamic process where readers construct meaning based on their personal experiences and emotions.

Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes that learners build knowledge through interaction and reflection. In this view, reading becomes an active process of constructing understanding, rather than passively absorbing information.

Critical Literacy (Freire, 1970) argues that reading is a political act in which readers must question and challenge the messages within a text. Freire encourages students to become aware of bias, perspective, and power relations embedded in language.

Metacognitive Reading Strategies (Flavell, 1976) suggest that awareness and regulation of one's own reading process is key to comprehension. Students who think about how they read—monitoring, clarifying, and evaluating—become more active and effective readers.

Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1980) posits that readers interpret texts by connecting new information to existing mental frameworks (schemas). Active reading involves predicting, making inferences, and continuously integrating knowledge to build understanding.

Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) supports instructional strategies that move students from remembering and understanding toward applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating—skills that depend on active engagement.

Together, these theories provide a foundation for promoting active reading and critical engagement. This research argues that transforming reading into an active, participatory process can significantly enhance students' learning outcomes, encourage independent thinking, and prepare learners to interact thoughtfully with the world of texts around them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in a diverse and well-established corpus of educational theory, particularly those focusing on critical literacy and student-centered learning approaches. The transition from passive reading to active engagement is not a novel idea but rather a continuation of pedagogical paradigms that emphasize the reader's agency, social context, and cognitive development. This section explores several influential theorists and instructional models that inform the development and implementation of active reading practices in academic settings. A foundational perspective is offered by Louise Rosenblatt through her Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing (1995), which proposes that reading is not a

one-way process of extracting meaning from a text, but a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the reader and the written material. According to Rosenblatt, readers bring their prior knowledge, emotions, cultural backgrounds, and experiences into the reading process. Thus, meaning is not inherent within the text alone; it is constructed through the reader's active involvement. This interpretative interaction underscores the subjective and contextual nature of reading, where each reading experience is unique and shaped by personal perspectives. Complementing this view is Paulo Freire's groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which reconceptualizes literacy as a transformative and emancipatory act. Freire argues that genuine literacy involves the capacity to "read the word and the world," highlighting that education should encourage individuals to question dominant ideologies and become agents of social change. He asserts that reading must go beyond decoding symbols and should involve a critical awareness (*conscientização*) of the socio-political realities that surround the reader. In this sense, literacy becomes a means of liberation, empowering individuals to challenge oppression and reconstruct meaning in pursuit of justice and equity. Another significant contribution comes from Lev Vygotsky, whose *Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development* (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction in intellectual

growth. Vygotsky contends that learning is fundamentally a social process, wherein individuals internalize knowledge through collaborative dialogue and guided participation. Central to his theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable peer or instructor. In the context of reading, this suggests that comprehension and critical engagement are best developed through shared reading experiences, peer discussions, and scaffolded support from educators. Building on these theoretical insights, this study also explores a variety of pedagogical strategies that have been shown to promote active and critical reading in academic contexts. Among the most widely used is the SQ3R strategy—Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. This structured method encourages readers to approach texts systematically: first gaining an overview, then generating questions, followed by careful reading, verbal summarization, and final review. By engaging multiple cognitive processes, SQ3R enhances retention, understanding, and metacognitive awareness. Another effective tool is concept mapping, which involves the visual representation of ideas and their interrelationships. This technique helps learners organize information logically, identify key themes, and recognize connections between concepts. Concept maps

are particularly valuable for processing dense academic texts, as they prompt readers to actively categorize and synthesize content, thereby deepening their comprehension. In addition, the use of literature circles—small, student-led discussion groups focused on a shared text—has been widely recognized for fostering collaborative learning. These circles create a space for interpretive dialogue, allowing participants to exchange viewpoints, clarify misunderstandings, and co-construct meaning through discourse. Literature circles not only promote critical thinking but also support the development of communication skills and intellectual empathy. Together, these theoretical perspectives and instructional models converge on a central principle: that meaningful reading is an active, dialogic, and contextually situated process. By implementing strategies rooted in interaction, reflection, and inquiry, educators can shift the classroom reading culture from one of passive information intake to one of active, critical exploration. Such an approach not only enhances students' academic performance but also empowers them to engage more thoughtfully and responsibly with the world around them.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, which is particularly well-suited for investigating educational phenomena in naturalistic settings. The primary objective was to examine how active

reading strategies are implemented in higher education environments and to evaluate their impact on students' reading behaviors, cognitive engagement, and academic performance. By employing a qualitative approach, the research prioritized depth of understanding over generalizability, allowing for a nuanced exploration of both instructional practices and student experiences. To ensure data credibility and triangulation, multiple sources and methods of data collection were utilized. This multi-method approach enabled the researchers to capture a more holistic picture of how active reading is enacted and perceived across various contexts. The following instruments and procedures were employed:

- 1. Classroom Observations** Systematic observations were conducted in several undergraduate academic writing classes where active reading strategies were being integrated into the curriculum. Researchers took detailed field notes focusing on students' behaviors during reading-related activities such as annotation, peer discussions, and questioning sessions. These observations provided real time insights into students' levels of participation, the nature of their engagement with texts, and the instructional methods used by lecturers to facilitate active reading.
- 2. Semi-Structured Interviews** To complement the observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both instructors and students. These interviews were designed to elicit

participants' perspectives on the value, challenges, and outcomes of using active reading strategies. Instructors were asked about the design and implementation of their pedagogical approaches, while students were encouraged to reflect on how their reading habits, comprehension, and critical thinking had evolved over time. The use of open-ended questions allowed for the emergence of rich, detailed narratives that illuminated the internal cognitive shifts accompanying the external behavioral changes.- 3. Document and Artifact Analysis** A variety of student-generated documents were collected and analyzed to assess evidence of critical engagement with texts. These artifacts included annotated readings, where students highlighted and commented on key ideas; reflective journals, which contained personal insights and responses to the readings; and analytical essays, in which students synthesized information, presented arguments, and engaged with multiple perspectives. Through thematic analysis, the researchers examined how students applied active reading techniques and how these practices influenced their analytical depth and intellectual autonomy. Collectively, these methods provided a comprehensive and layered understanding of the research phenomenon. By observing behaviors, listening to reflections, and examining academic outputs, the study captured both the external practices and the internal cognitive

processes associated with the transition from passive to active reading. Emphasis was placed on identifying patterns of change in how students approached texts—particularly in terms of questioning, interpretation, and critical evaluation. The research also accounted for contextual variables such as instructional style, disciplinary focus, and class dynamics, which may influence the efficacy of active reading strategies. By embedding the study in authentic classroom environments, the findings reflect the complexity and variability of real-world educational settings, thereby offering practical insights for educators seeking to foster deeper reading engagement in their own teaching practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis revealed notable distinctions in both cognitive engagement and behavioral patterns between students who consistently practiced active reading strategies and those who relied on more traditional, passive approaches. These differences were evident across several dimensions of academic performance and intellectual participation, highlighting the transformative impact of intentional, structured reading practices. One of the most prominent findings was the enhancement in reading comprehension and textual analysis among active readers. These students demonstrated a heightened ability to

deconstruct texts, readily identifying central claims, supporting arguments, and rhetorical structures. They were also more capable of discerning the author's purpose, tone, and use of persuasive techniques, indicating a shift from surface-level understanding to a more layered, critical interpretation of academic materials. Furthermore, students engaged in active reading exhibited a marked improvement in generating thoughtful, higher-order questions. Rather than asking factual or clarification-based questions, they began to formulate inquiries that probed underlying assumptions, examined implications, and challenged the validity of arguments presented in the text. This ability to question not only deepened their own engagement but also enriched classroom discourse. The comprehensive analysis of the study's findings affirms that the adoption of active reading strategies exerts a profound and positive influence on students' academic development. This impact is particularly evident in the cultivation of critical literacy—the capacity not merely to comprehend texts at a surface level, but to interrogate, interpret, and respond to them in an intellectually meaningful way. By incorporating pedagogical tools such as textual annotation, reflective questioning, peer collaboration, and dialogic exploration, students are gradually trained to approach academic texts not as inert containers of information but as interactive, meaning-rich discourses that demand critical

scrutiny and interpretation. One of the most compelling contributions of active reading is its role in helping students develop a keen sensitivity to the author's intent, positionality, and rhetorical strategies. Through close reading and reflection, learners begin to identify implicit assumptions, ideological standpoints, and the underlying motivations behind a writer's claims. This metacognitive awareness enables students to detect not only what is said, but also what is omitted, exaggerated, or framed in particular ways—an essential component of critical literacy. Another dimension enhanced through active reading is students' ability to critically evaluate evidence. Rather than accepting supporting data at face value, students are guided to assess the validity, relevance, and reliability of the sources and arguments presented. This evaluative skill empowers them to distinguish between strong and weak arguments, recognize logical fallacies, and make informed judgments based on nuanced textual analysis. Perhaps most importantly, active reading facilitates the emergence of independent, well-founded viewpoints. By engaging deeply with texts, and through iterative processes of questioning, reflecting, and discussing, students are encouraged to formulate their own interpretations. These interpretations are not arbitrary but are rooted in textual evidence and shaped by the broader academic or social context in which the reading occurs. The ability to construct

original arguments supported by credible evidence is a hallmark of advanced academic competence and intellectual autonomy. Despite these clear advantages, the shift from passive to active reading is not inherently smooth or immediate. Many students face initial resistance or difficulty, as they may be unaccustomed to questioning texts or articulating critical responses. This hesitancy often stems from years of educational experiences that prioritized rote memorization and passive reception over analytical engagement. Overcoming these deeply ingrained habits requires intentional pedagogical intervention. To support students through this transition, educators must play an active role in modeling critical reading behaviors, providing scaffolded instruction, and creating learning environments that normalize inquiry and intellectual risk-taking. Instructional practices should move beyond the simple transmission of knowledge and instead focus on developing reading as a recursive and dialogic process. This includes designing tasks that challenge students to engage with complexity, supporting them as they encounter cognitive dissonance, and affirming their efforts to construct meaning independently. Ultimately, the discussion highlights that promoting active reading is not solely a matter of skill acquisition; it is a transformational process that reshapes how students relate to texts, ideas, and their own learning. As students become more

comfortable and proficient in active reading, they begin to internalize critical habits of mind that extend beyond the classroom, preparing them for lifelong learning, civic engagement, and professional success.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a meaningful contribution to the ongoing conversation surrounding academic literacy by underscoring the vital role that active reading plays in the development of effective learners within higher education contexts. The shift from passive reception—where students merely absorb information without questioning—to active, critical engagement represents a complex and gradual developmental process. This transition necessitates careful, intentional pedagogical design and persistent encouragement from educators and institutions alike. Active reading is characterized not simply by the ability to recall facts or summarize content, but by the capacity to interrogate texts, interpret nuanced meanings, and reconstruct knowledge in ways that reflect deep cognitive involvement. Students who cultivate these skills become autonomous thinkers who are better prepared to face the multifaceted intellectual, professional, and social challenges that await them beyond the classroom. Therefore, embedding active reading strategies systematically within academic curricula is not merely beneficial but essential for nurturing critical, independent learners.

Moreover, the promotion of active reading transcends individual academic success; it fosters a culture of critical inquiry and reflective dialogue that is indispensable for the healthy functioning of democratic societies and global knowledge economies. By empowering students to engage thoughtfully and critically with texts, educational institutions contribute to the formation of informed citizens capable of participating meaningfully in broader societal conversations and decision-making processes. In conclusion, this study affirms that fostering active reading practices is a pivotal educational goal. It demands sustained commitment from educators to provide structured guidance, scaffolding, and opportunities for reflective practice. With such support, students can develop lifelong reading habits that enhance their intellectual growth and enable them to become proactive contributors in both academic and real-world contexts.

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