A NON-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY ON THE ROLE OF ESL LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY IN THEIR PERFORMANCE ON DIFFERENT IELTS READING ITEMS

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Abstract: The present research study was an attempt to investigate the role of critical thinking ability of language learners in English as a Second Language)ESL context in different reading items of IELTS test (Textually-explicit items, Textually-implicit items, and Script-based items). To do this end, 100 university-level students learning English as a second language were picked out on the basis of a combination of availability sampling and snowball sampling procedures and were required to take Cornell Critical Thinking Skill Test (CCTST) and IELTS reading test. Having analyzed the gathered data through SPSS, the study finally revealed that there was a strong positive relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. To put another way, it was understood from the results that the higher the critical thinking ability, the higher the reading comprehension. Furthermore, the study also indicated that critical thinking ability significantly affect the learners' performance as far as reading comprehension is concerned. To be more detailed, the study showed that critical thinking ability did not significantly affect the learners' performance on textually explicit items; but bear a significant impact on learners' responding to textually implicit reading items script-based reading items.

Keywords: Critical thinking, IELTS

Introduction: Reading is considered to be a multifaceted process that requires students to access prior knowledge of the world and how it operates in order to extract meaning from a text. Karchmer (2004) refers to Piaget's beliefs based on which new knowledge is learned by relating it to our current knowledge base. This concept is not new and is, in fact, reinforced by numerous sources. From long ago to present, reading researchers have been studying the reading process. Based on their interpretation of the reading process they have developed models for reading and defined the reading process in an attempt to depict how an individual perceives a word, processes a clause, and comprehends a text (Ruddell& Speaker, 1985). For example, Goodman (1967) explains the reading process as a psycholinguistic guessing game (p. 126) in which the reader uses general knowledge of the world or of particular textual components to make intelligent guesses about what might come next in the text and samples only enough of the text to confirm or reject these guesses (Barnett, 1989).

Furthermore, IELTS is a high-stakes gate keeping test used by universities to screen applicants for language ability. The rapid expansion of the test has brought with it increased demand for test preparation books and courses. Performance on the test may have serious implications for the life chances of test takers. Hence, IELTS might be expected to exert a strong influence on learner and teacher behavior. Through decades of progressive change, IELTS has remained committed to assessing all four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) with a face-to-face speaking component. This continues to set IELTS apart from other English language tests.

According to Qi (2005) and Taylor (2005), one of the fruitful areas for research in recent years has been the impact of the high-stakes testing industry on L2 teaching and learning. The IELTS test is one of these high-stakes tests, which is the reflection of the target needs of prospective undergraduate and graduate students, needs identification through target situation analyses (Geoghegan, 1983; Weir, 1983). It has been designed to measure whether students have the language ability to cope with the demands of English-medium academic study and it should be made as realistic and direct as possible to reflect the performance conditions and operations that apply in the target language use domain (Weir, 1993, as cited in Green, 2007).

Given the importance of reading and its assessment, and also the importance of IELTS, as a high stake test, now the important question that might ask is what factors can be influential in positively affecting the reading performance of individuals especially in IELTS test. One of such factors could be the critical thinking ability of candidates. It is a platitude that the higher the critical thinking ability, the more likely the success in reading test performance.

In line with this, one variable that is likely to affect the second language (henceforth L2) learning skill and academic achievement of students especially on high-stake tests including IELTS is critical thinking. Bassham, Irwin, Nardone, and Wallace (2002) define *Critical thinking* as a common term attributed to a set of cognitive skills and dispositions required to effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments

and claims; to discover and cope with personal preconceptions and biases; to formulate and present cogent reasons in support of conclusions; and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do (P. 1).

All taken, the current study is, in fact, an attempt to shed light on the three above-mentioned variables. To put it another way, this study aims to investigate the any probable effect of critical thinking on different reading items of IELTS test (Textually-explicit items, Textually-implicit items, and Script-based items). The two competencies (i.e. reading skill and critical thinking) which are the focus of the study are also intrinsically linked. The underlying reasons are that reading is not just identifying and decoding the phonetic symbols. It is rather a complicated process involving both lower- and higher- order thinking skills. Moreover, readers are not aimed to read just the lines and understand them. They need to read "between the lines" and "beyond the lines" as well. It means that reader should be able to not only comprehend the written text through literal meaning of words, but also infer the meaning; this ability is related to the reader's thinking ability. In other words, cognitive ability of the leader plays a crucial role in predicting the reading proficiency of L2 learners along with their linguistic knowledge. Students benefiting from higher cognitive ability better apply their knowledge and analyze, and evaluate information they encounter in texts. To put it another way, the present study, then, intended to address the following research questions:

Is there a relationship between the critical thinking ability of L2 learners and their reading comprehension?

Does critical thinking ability significantly affect the general reading performance of second language learners?

Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and low critical thinking learners as far as textually explicit reading questions are concerned?

Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and low critical thinking learners as far as textually implicit reading questions are concerned?

Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and low critical thinking learners as far as script based reading questions are concerned?

Literature Review:

Critical Thinking: The word *critical* often is considered to mean negative. This is the sense that people often have in mind, for example, when we complain about a parent or a friend who we think is unfairly critical of what we do or say. But italso means involving or exercising skilled judgment or observation. In this sense, critical thinking refers to thinking clearly and intelligently. More precisely, critical thinking is, in fact, the general term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims; to discover and overcome personal preconceptions and biases; to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions; and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do (Martin, 1992).

Crudely put, it can be considered as a kind of disciplined thinking controlled by clear intellectual standards. Among the most important of these intellectual standards are clarity(to clearly understand others and make our thoughts),precision(to be meticulous on even trivial points), accuracy (to be careful about evidence based on which we make decisions),relevance (not to be distracted), consistency(to be focused),logical correctness(to reason correctly), completeness (to think deeply not cursorily), and fairness (to be open-minded and free from bias). Additionally, Ruggiero (1998) Comments that the term simply refers to the process involved in evaluating ideas. That is, by critically thinking, we are in fact judging the precision of statements and also the soundness of the reasoning that leads to conclusions(P.10). Moore and Parker(2009) also consider critical thinking as a tool to make acceptable judgments. They further add that in critical thinking we use reasons in order to determine whether a claim is true(P.3).

In accord with the above-cited points, critical thinking contributes to second language learning and development of L2 skills. Critical thinking embraces higher order thinking skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating enabling students to supervise and control their thinking processes. Developing and enhancing critical thinking of learners improve these skills in learners and in turn facilitates learning and knowledge production. In L2 writing, for instance, any topic proposed in the writing of English proficiency exams they are either of opinion type or agree/disagree or whatsoever present a problem practically which needs to be defined and analyzed before we develop our perspective and provide it with supporting reasons. This is also applicable for most college writing that contains some argument. Learners need to think critically to analyze the essay question, identify the key issue, consider different aspects and perspectives on the issue, use their life experience for better understanding, and develop their own well-reasoned opinion before coming up to a conclusion. Likewise, L2 learners are examine the words they listen and map an outline of the argument, supporting ideas and examples brought up in one's speech spontaneously. In fact, critical

thinking instruction empowers them to identify the arguments and presented reasons consciously and accurately while they evaluate the trustworthiness of the reasons simultaneously. Given the inevitable limitations and complexities of spoken language, L2 learners tend to demonstrate linguistic limitations on contributing to a discussion and debates both in academic settings and real life situations in society. Critical thinkers are 'signposted' to appraising the arguments on the basis of the provided data (Omidvar&Shukumar, 2012) which in turn critical thinking compensates for some linguistic inadequacies of language learners in speaking. The influence of cognitive skills is more evident in reading skill.

Critical thinking plays a very essential role in education. Bassham, et. Al. (2002) however maintain that it is less important in elementary levels of education where lower-order thinking is present and learners are mostly expected to passively receive a set of knowledge from their teachers; and more significant in higher levels of education in which higher-order thinking is highly appreciated. It seems to me that this statement should be looked at cautiously. To be clearer, critical thinking should not be limited to higher levels of education; rather it is necessary to prepare our learners think critically from the very beginning periods of education. Moreover, I also believe that even before the beginning of school education parent should find it an overarching burden to rear their children critically evaluate, reason, and judge about assorted things and happenings around them.

In the field of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL), some researchers in critical thinking and second language learning believe that critical thinking is a concept difficult to teach in L2 classrooms and was learned among L1 students or Westerners through their upbringing; in this view, critical thinking is considered a social practice (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan& Kaplan, 1996; Ramanathan& Atkinson, 1999). Atkinson (1997) defines critical thinking as a social practice; this originated from a set of behaviors that a person was immersed in when being raised in a particular culture. It is tacit and cannot be easily described by its users. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) claim that because ESL students come from different cultural backgrounds, attempts to teach them critical thinking skills may not be successful.

In actual practice, critical reading and critical thinking work together. Critical thinking allows us to monitor our understanding as we read. If we feel that assertions are ridiculous or irresponsible (critical thinking), we will examine the text more closely to test our understanding (critical reading). Conversely, critical thinking depends on critical reading. You can think critically about a text (critical thinking), after all, only if you have understood it (critical reading). We may choose to accept or reject a presentation, but we must know why. We have a responsibility to ourselves, as well as to others, to isolate the real issues of agreement or disagreement. Only then can we understand and respect other people's views. To recognize and understand those views, we must read critically. If critical thinking and critical reading are so closely linked, why is this still a useful distinction? The usefulness of the distinction lies in its reminder that we must read each text on its own merits, not imposing our prior knowledge or views on it. While we must evaluate ideas as we read, we must not distort the meaning within a text. We must not allow ourselves to force a text to say what we would otherwise like it to say or we will never learn anything new!

As critical readers and writers, we want to assure ourselves that these tasks have been completed in a complete, comprehensive, and consistent manner. Only once we have determined that a text is consistent and coherent can we then begin to evaluate whether or not to accept the assertions and conclusions**.**

Reading Skill: Reading comprehension has been defined in different ways over the years. Nutall (1996) suggests that the overriding purpose to reading is to get the correct message from a text the message the writer intended for the reader to receive. Floyd and Carrell (1968) also state that the idea of reading has changed from what was considered a receptive process to what is now an interactive process.

Accordingly, reading assessment has a powerful role to inform researchers, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Assessment practices can help the learning, or they can be really harmful. Reading assessment should be done carefully. It needs lots of attention, and respect as well. Teachers have the greatest responsibility to understand the uses and the effects of reading assessment and they should be aware of the consequences (emotional) of assessment. Reading assessments are used for many purposes, but it's very important to know the reading construct, assessment tasks construct, development of reading abilities, and sub-skills (micro and macro skills). Reading assessment means to provide feedback on the skills, processes, and knowledge resources that show reading abilities. Urquhart and Weir (1998, P. 91) report that "if reading itself is a skill, it must be possible to break this down into different level of component skills categories." In fact, several experts have tried to divide reading skills into component skills or sub-skills (micro-skills). The other factor to focus is the characteristics of the text used in RC test. One important feature is

grammatical and vocabulary difficulty and students' proficiency level. Another feature is the length of the text and appropriated time which makes students reluctant to read a text without knowing how fit it is to their level of proficiency in terms of grammar and vocabulary. The other feature is related to the content and students' back ground knowledge and personal experiences about the things mentioned in the text. The more they find the texts related to their life or things happening around them, the more they understand or touch the content and finally answer the reading comprehension questions.

The type of the question is an influential factor in reading comprehension tests. The use of standards-based classroom assessments to test English learners' language proficiency is becoming very important in many countries. There are several advantages in using classroom assessments over standardized tests in a standard system. More evidence of student mastery of the standards scan is gathered than that which can be obtained from a standardized test administered in a short period of time because a greater number of standards can be assessed, assessments are based on a wider range of student performance, and assessments can be conducted in more authentic and meaningful ways. Also, teachers have immediate access to assessment results which they can use to improve their instruction (Popham, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Yet despite the benefits of the use of classroom assessments, the construct validity of these assessments is relatively unexplored and often questioned (Brindley, 1998; 2001; Rea-Dickins, 2001). But what is important in RC rests is the type of questions used to elicit specific answers with special features like vocabulary or grammatical difficulties, the micro and macro skills assessed by the specific type of question. Is it acceptable to assess macro skills of RC which is related to the general understanding of the text by a true /faults question which has only two short alternatives?

Method:

Participants: In order to gather the required data, about 100 university-level students learning English as a second language were picked out on the basis of a combination of availability sampling and snowball sampling procedures in the sense that first the researcher selected the students who were available to her and then asked them to introduce their other friends and classmates to participate in the study if they wish. They were both male (42) and female (58) and with the age range of 18 to 36 years old. These participants were English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and were studying in the Indian educational colleges and institutions. Table 3.1 presents the participants' characteristics more vividly.

Moreover, they were informed by the researcher about the purposes of the study so that it became possible for the researcher to receive their passive consent for their participation in the project. However, the researcher did not go into details of the study goals so that the negative effects of contaminating factors such as hawthorn effect and halo effect were minimized to the extent possible.

Table3.1*Characteristics of Participants*

Features	Male	Female
Number	42	58
Education Level	B.A 22 M.A 11 Ph.D 09	B.A 31 M.A 21 Ph.D 06
Age	18-22 14 23-25 20 26-30 06 Over 31 02	18-22 28 23-25 25 26-30 04 Over 31 01
Marital Status	Single 33 Married 09	Single 42 Married 16

Finally, another important issue to observe is that of reciprocation according to which the participants should be given something in return for their time, energy, and cooperation in the study (Ary, Jacobs, &Razavieh, 2002). To ensure it, the researcher in addition to serving them adequately, notified them that they would be informed about the final findings of the study and also if they need any help or assistance about their future projects, the researcher would wholeheartedly cooperate with them.

Instruments: All in all, two main instruments were employed to collect the intended desired data for the study.

Cornell Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), Level Z: The first instrument of the study was for the purpose of measuring the critical thinking ability of the undergraduates involved in the present study. It was an appropriate test to employ in measuring the critical thinking ability or level of the undergraduates in this study irrespective of their disciplines. The CCTT is a 76-item multiple-choice test which is to be completed within 50 minutes. 5 of the test items are sample items and the other 71 are the real test items that the test takers have to work on. Each test item has three alternative response choices, A, B, and C, respectively. The test is divided into four parts

labeled as Induction (23 items), Credibility (24 items), Deduction (14 items) and Assumption Identification (10 items). The reliability coefficient of the CCTT Level Z ranges from .67 to .90 (Ennis et al, 1985). Each of the test items that are correctly answered is given a score of 1. In this study, the individual undergraduate's total score obtained on the CCTT was used as a measure of his or her general critical thinking ability; that is, a higher score on the test indicates a better critical thinking ability. The test was also checked for reliability through Cronbach alpha it turned out to be .76 which is usually considered acceptable. Additionally, for the validity of the instrument, it was double checked by a set of university professors who had specialty in testing, assessment, and statistics. They admitted that the test is suitable for the study purpose and thus its face, content, and also construct validity were ensured.

IELTS reading Test: The second instrument that was used in this study was IELTS reading tests. It was three passages along with their reading items that test-takers were required to take. The questions required the test-takers to read the text both for specific information and inferring form the text. In all, about 40 questions were included in these three texts and the test takers gained 1 score for each correct answer and no score for wrong responses. Moreover, no negative point was intended for the wrong answers. The tests were selected from the IETS Examination Book 8 published by Cambridge University. Lastly, for checking the reliability of them, like the previous tool, Cronbach alpha formula was calculated which finally turned out to be .73 and for ensuring about the validity of the test, the face validity, content validity, and also construct validity were approved by the above-mentioned experts.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures: Having selected the participants and also the appropriate instruments (as above-explained), the researcher then administered the CCTST instrument to determine the critical thinking level of the students based on the above-cited criteria. However, before distributing the instrument, the researcher briefly explained about the instrument, its goal, and also the way that they were expected to take it. No time limit was set for taking this instrument so that the participants would take it carefully and without any negative feeling such as anxiety. Then after dividing them into two groups of high and low critical thinkers, she seated them for the IELTS reading test. Unlike the previous stage, in this stage time limit was set (depending on the reading tests and their items). Their reading performance were scored based on the IELTS bands in which the range of score is from 0 to 9 and each item is score dichotomously (either right or wrong). The point that needs to be mentioned here is that IELTS reading section usually entails 11 types of questions that considering them, they were divided into three main types of textually-explicit items (in which the answers are explicitly included in the text), textually-implicit items (meaning that answers should be implied from the information included in the text), and script-based items (in which the test takers should not only read and make use of the text information, but also use their background knowledge to answer them) proposed by Pearson and Johnson (1978).

Finally, in order to analyze the gathered data, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) in general, and descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, and Pearson correlations in particular were run to respond the research questions posed in the study.

Results & Discussion:RQ1: Is there a relationship between the critical thinking ability of L2 learners and their reading comprehension?

The first research question of the study deals with the existence or lack of existence of any interplay between critical thinking ability of the learners and their reading comprehension. To determine the degree of relationships among the variables, correlational analysis was run. Table 4.1 shows the relationships between critical thinking and the reading comprehension of the learners. Table 4.1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the obtained scores.

4.1. Correlation of critical thinking & reading

	N	Sig. (2-tailed)	Correlation coefficient
Critical thinking &Reading	100	.000	.78

The table shows the Pearson correlation coefficient along with its p-value. As it can be seen from the Table, the correlation coefficient is 0.78 and the p-value is 0.000. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between these two variables of the study.

RQ2:Does critical thinking ability significantly affect the general reading performance of second language learners?

The second research question of the study addresses the any probable impact of critical ability of learners on their reading comprehension ability. To respond to this question, an independent t-test was run. Table 4.2 reveals the descriptive statistics of the test.

Table 4.2. Descriptive statistics

	Codes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading	Low critical thinkers	54	12.37	3.84	.46

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	Codes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading	Low critical thinkers	54	12.37	3.84	.46
	High critical thinkers	46	27.03	2.53	.68

According to the above table, the mean of the High critical thinkers group (M=27.03) is remarkably higher than the mean of the Low critical thinkers group (M=12.37). Furthermore,Table 4.3 shows that the difference between the High and Low critical thinkers groups is significant (t= -17.58, *p*< 0.001) as far as reading comprehension ability is concerned. Therefore, it can be stated that critical thinking ability significantly influences the learners' reading comprehension ability.

Table 4.3. Independent Sample Test

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Critical Thinkers & Reading	-17.58	60	.000	-14.66	.83	-16.33	-12.99

RQ3: Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and low critical thinking learners as far as textually explicit reading questions areconcerned?

This research question deals with the probable difference between high and low critical thinkers on textually explicit reading items. The descriptive statistics of this test appears in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Descriptive statistics

	Codes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Explicit reading items	Low critical thinkers	54	11.73	2.18	.39

This research question deals with the probable difference between high and low critical thinkers on textually explicit reading items. The descriptive statistics of this test appears in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Descriptive statistics

	Codes	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Explicit reading items	Low critical thinkers	54	11.73	2.18	.39
	High critical thinkers	46	12.06	2.27	.40

According to the above table, the mean of the High critical thinkers group (M=12.06) in the is slightly higher than the mean of the Low critical thinkers group (M=11.73) but the difference is very marginal. An independent t-test was then run to see if the two groups performed significantly different on the textually explicit reading items or not. Table 4.6 displaying the results obtained from this statistical analysis reveals that the two groups did not differ significantly in their performance on this type of items (t = -.58, *p*> 0.05).

Table 4.5. Independent Sample Test of critical thinking and textually explicit reading items

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
High& Low critical thinkers & textually explicit items	-.581	60	.56	-.32	.56	-1.46	.80

RQ4: Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and lowcritical thinking learners as far as textually implicit reading questions areconcerned?

The fourth research question examines whether there is any significant difference between the High and Low critical thinkers groups as far as implicit reading questions is concerned. To put it another way, it

seeks the any probable impact of critical thinking ability on the learners' ability to respond correctly to the implicit reading items of IELTS. Table 4.6 shows the descriptive statistics related to this test.

Table 4.6. Descriptive statistics

	Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Implicit reading items	Low critical thinkers	54	10.63	2.52	.46
	High critical thinkers	46	19.81	2.24	.39

As it can be seen from the above table, the learners in High critical thinkers group (M=19.81) outperformed those in the Low critical thinkers group (M=10.63). In addition, the results of the independent t-test related to this research question are presented in Table 4.7. As it can be seen, there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups' performance on the implicit reading questions (t = -15.13, p< 0.001). It means that the High critical thinkers group had a better performance in answering implicit reading items compared to the Low critical thinkers group

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Table 4.7. Independent Samples Test

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
High& Low critical thinkers & Implicit items	-15.13	60	.000	-9.17	.60	-10.39	-7.96

RQ5: Is there a significant difference between the performance of high and low critical thinking learners as far as script based reading questions are concerned?

Lastly, the fifth research question of this study touches upon the any effect of critical thinking ability on the third type of reading items that is, script based questions. It, in fact, seeks if high and low critical thinkers perform differently on this type of reading items or not. Like the previous research questions, an independent t-test was run to answer such a question. Table 4.8 presents the primary descriptive statistics for the data.

Table 4.8. Descriptive Statistics

	Code	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Script based items	Low critical thinkers	54	14.17	1.03	.16
	High critical thinkers	46	19.33	3.14	.28

The table reveals that it is the High critical thinkers group (M= 19.33) that had a better performance on script-based reading items in comparison with the Low critical thinkers group (M= 14.17). Moreover, Table 4.9 reveals the main results of the test.

Table 4.9. Independent T-Test for critical thinking and script-based item

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
High& Low critical thinkers & Script-based items	13.14	58	.00	18.17	.68	12.24	8.27

As it is obvious from the table, the performance of high critical thinkers' learners is significantly better as far as script-based reading questions is concerned. This finding is easily drawn by examining the p and t values of the table (t= 13.14, p< 0.00).

4.3. Discussion

Having presented and explained the main findings of the study, this section discusses them and tries to integrate them with the relevant literature. The first finding of the study was that there is a strong positive interlink between critical thinking and reading comprehension. To put another way, it was understood from the results that the higher the critical thinking ability, the higher the reading comprehension. In accordance with this finding, the second finding of the study was that critical thinking ability significantly affect the learners' performance

as far as reading comprehension is concerned. This close interrelationship and significant influence might be justified from different perspectives. For example, as it is rightly pointed out by Nutall (1996), reading comprehension is a complex process in which readers are expected to construct meaning from a text based on their own understanding of the text. It means that different readers might receive different meanings and understandings from a same text. According to this definition, learners and readers who can make a better relationship between their back ground knowledge and the information included in the reading text might be more successful in getting across the text message and this is tightly linked to critical thinking of learners. Additionally, learners who are more critical thinkers and read between the lines of texts more than others are more likely to perform successfully in a reading comprehension test. In line with this, in actual practice, critical reading and critical thinking are closely related to each other (Elder & Paul, 2001). In other words, critical thinking makes it possible to guide and control our understanding while reading a text. For example, if a reader thinks that the intended information is meaningless or ambiguous (critical thinking), he/she will double check the text to ensure about his/her understanding (critical reading). Inversely, critical thinking hinges on critical reading. For example, we might think critically about a text (critical thinking), only if we have been able to make a meaning out of it (critical reading). We may also decide to agree or disagree about a point, but we must try to know about our reasons. To correctly know and perceive a text's view, readers and learners are expected to read critically (Elder & Paul, 2001; Siegel, 1990).

The third finding of the study was that critical thinking ability does not significantly affect the learners' performance on textually explicit items. As it was already illuminated, by textually reading items it means those reading questions in which learners should respond to them by just seeking information explicitly mentioned in the text and no deep inferencing is required to answer them. To justify this finding it could be contended that textually explicit items and their responses are explicitly mentioned in the text and learners do not require reading between the lines of text to understand and answer them correctly. In other words, these types of items do not push learners to critically think and make use of their background knowledge and make them only find the part in which the item and its response is included. Therefore, learners with high and low critical thinking skill do not largely differ in answering these items. Reading to see what a text says may suffice when the goal is to learn specific information or to understand someone else's ideas. These are, in fact, textually explicit items which can be easily answered.

The other finding that was understood from this study was the fact that critical thinking might bear a significant impact on learners' responding to textually implicit reading items. Textually implicit items are those in which learners need to read the text, understand the text information and then infer the response from those information mentioned in the text. In these types of items, answers are not explicitly mentioned in the text and the answer is indirectly implied in the text. It goes without saying that critical thinking is of great importance in responding to this type reading items as learners are expected to infer the response of items by reading the information of text and understanding the intended meaning of them. In line with this, Beyer (1995) identified six elements of critical thinking based on the literature, which include dispositions, criteria to make judgments, argument, reasoning, point of view, and procedures for applying criteria and judging (p.10). For instance, dispositions describe expert critical thinkers' habitual way of thinking such as being 'skeptical' and 'open-minded,' 'respecting evidence, reasoning, and clarity, 'considering different points of views', and so on (Beyer, 1995, P. 11, Ruggiero, 1998). Criteria describe certain standards or values that need to be applied for making judgments, which are part of critical thinking (Beyer, 1995, P. 11). Possin (2008) also states that critical thinking can be further broken into the following competencies: (a) identifying reasons or arguments, (b) dissecting arguments into premises, conclusions, and sub conclusions, (c) taxonomizing arguments as deductive or inductive, (d) assessing the cogency of arguments, (e) identifying formal and informal fallacies, (f) critically reviewing definitions and analyzing concepts, and (g) assembling these competencies so as to select and argue for positions on a diversity of issues and critically review competing positions and their arguments, all in a cogent and intellectually honest manner (p. 205).

Finally, the study revealed that critical thinking also significantly influences the learners' performance on script-based reading items in which learners should not only read the information mentioned in the text directly and indirectly, but also make use of their own background knowledge and integrate them to reach the correct response of such items. For these items, learners are asked to solve problems, infer, evaluate, or even judge about a text, critical thinking is of great importance. In these cases, learners are, in essence, expected to evaluate what they have read and to integrate their understanding with their prior understanding of the world. They must decide what to accept as true and useful. Furthermore, to answer such items correctly, reflection and reflective thinking is also very important. Likewise, one important feature of critical thinking is reflection and

reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is thinking that is aware of its own assumptions and implications as well as being conscious of the reasons and evidence that support this or that conclusion. Reflective thinking takes into consideration its own methodology, its own procedures, its own perspective and point of view. Reflective thinking is prepared to recognize the factors that make for bias, prejudice, and self-deception. It involves thinking about its proceduresat the same time as it involves thinking about its subject matter.

Moreover, as it was already pointed out, in the field of education, critical thinking can be seen as an exercise in higher order thinking skills, associated with the ability to think logically based on evaluated information according to certain criteria. Bloom (1956) proposed a framework which defines cognitive presence in education; this has been widely used among educators. It describes six types of cognitive operations, namely knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The last three levels -- analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are considered higher order thinking skills. Higher order thinking can also be thought of as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generalized by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, as a guide to belief or action (Scriven& Paul, 2001).

Conclusion: Having discussed the main findings of the study, it is time to present the conclusions which could be cited based on the results of the study.

There is a strong positive interrelationship between the critical thinking ability of language learners and their reading comprehension performance of IELTS exam.

Critical thinking ability significantly affects the reading performance of ESL IELTS candidates.

Critical thinking ability does not significantly influence the reading performance of ESL IELTS candidates as far as textually explicit items are concerned.

Critical thinking ability does significantly influence the reading performance of ESL IELTS candidates as far as textually implicit items are concerned.

Critical thinking ability does significantly influence the reading performance of ESL IELTS candidates as far as script based items are concerned.

The study also enjoys a set of implications the most important of which are as follows:

Amid different aspects to be considered while teaching and learning a language, reading skill and critical thinking are of great importance. Therefore, language teachers and language learners need to pay special attention to these almost neglected facets of language learning.

Language teachers should also keep in mind the above-mentioned results obtained through the study; so that, they can utilize the best possible methods with the best possible conditions for optimal learning of language.

Another implication which may be drawn from the study findings is that critical thinking has a meaningful and significant role in improving not only the learning processes of language, but also in successful performing on different high-stake tests including IELTS.

Besides, learning a language and critical thinking have a lot of room for improvement. Critical thinking skill activation and using it in performance on different exams is not an easy task and it is demanding for the learners, and they will need more guidance on how to make use of their critical thinking ability. One of the key issues that we found in this study is how to effectively guide learners to know about this type of ability. Students need to know how to make optimal use of their critical thinking ability to improve their language learning and performance. They also need to know how to better manage their time and energy in the new learning context.

Due to the point that critical thinking and reading skills are considered grey areas, littered with plenty of facets and ambiguous points, its pedagogically relevant findings need to be treated cautiously. Likewise, the findings of this empirical study are no exception. In order for the findings of this study to be pedagogically valid and applicable, they must be first subjected to replication and empirical validation. It is then and only then that the results and findings can be generalized to other populations. This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of critical thinking ability of ESL learners on reading skill in general and three different types of IELTS reading items (textually explicit items, textually implicit items, and script based items) in particular. In order to complement the findings of the present study, this topic needs to be further explored in some other areas. One area could be comparing the findings of the present study in ESL context with those of EFL contexts. Another suggestion might be to carry out studies in which the effect of critical thinking ability on other language skills of language is taken into consideration. Furthermore, conducting cross-cultural comparisons on the impoliteness is also a good topic of study. To put it clearly, further research studies could be conducted in various cultures and their findings are compared and discussed.

Although the researcher will do her best to conduct a flawless research project as much as possible, the study is not without limitations however. As an example, one limitation could be the limited number of participants who took part in the study. In order to

reach more conclusive findings, further studies are needed to address the same issue with more subjects. Another limitation that might be ascribed to the study is also pertinent to the participants. Put it clearly, the participants of the current study were selected from a limited context and therefore, generalizing its findings should be done cautiously. Finally, because the sampling method used in the current study was based on the availability of the participants and not the random selection way, the scope of the generalizability of its results could be limited to some extent and as a result, need to be approached cautiously. Similar studies with more representative learners can provide more generalizable results.

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