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**Pakistani ESL Learners' Perspectives: Challenges in Developing  
Critical Academic Reading Skills**



**Ufaq Binte Jamal**

Senior Lecturer,  
Department of Social Science,  
Mohammad Ali Jinnah University (MAJU)  
Email: [ufaq\\_jamal@yahoo.com](mailto:ufaq_jamal@yahoo.com)

**Danish Wazeer**

Lecturer in English,  
Sindh Institute of Medical Sciences,  
SIMS, SIUT, Karachi  
Email: [danish.wazeer@sims.siut.edu.pk](mailto:danish.wazeer@sims.siut.edu.pk)

**Saqib Abbas**

Assistant professor,  
Department of English,  
Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University Lyari (BBSUL), Karachi  
Email: [Saqib.Abbas@bbsul.edu.pk](mailto:Saqib.Abbas@bbsul.edu.pk)

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### Abstract

Developing critical academic reading skills is essential for Pakistani undergraduate students, as these skills enable them to evaluate, interpret, and engage with academic texts effectively. However, many ESL learners in Pakistan struggle to acquire such competencies despite exposure through university coursework. This study investigates the specific academic reading skills that Pakistani undergraduates find most challenging and explores the factors contributing to these difficulties. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating a Likert-scale questionnaire and open-ended responses from 229 students at a public university in Pakistan. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined through content analysis. Findings reveal that only a small proportion of students demonstrated full confidence in their critical reading abilities, while the majority either partially mastered or lacked confidence in these skills. The most problematic areas identified were making inferences, analysing context, detecting assumptions, and evaluating arguments. Contributing factors included linguistic limitations, such as restricted vocabulary and inadequate proficiency, as well as non-linguistic issues like lack of confidence, confusion, and difficulty comprehending complex texts. The study highlights the need for targeted pedagogical strategies, including the explicit teaching of critical thinking and academic reading skills, to better support Pakistani ESL learners in higher education.

**Keywords:** Academic Challenges, Academic Reading Skills, Critical Readers, Critical Thinking Pedagogy.

### Introduction

Critical academic reading is a vital skill for undergraduate students as it enables them to engage with complex academic materials, interpret arguments, and construct coherent and evidence-based responses (Zaman, Chandio, & Noor, 2025). Beyond academia, these skills also enhance employability, as graduates with strong critical reading and thinking abilities are better equipped for professional problem-solving and decision-making (Zaman, Wasim, & Chandio, 2025). Higher-order reading skills, such as identifying main ideas and supporting details, making inferences, analysing context, evaluating arguments, detecting assumptions, and applying reasoning, are closely linked to higher-order thinking skills (Arifin, 2020)

Despite their inclusion in university curricula, many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners continue to struggle with mastering these skills. Prior studies highlight several difficulties: postgraduate students' struggles with analysing and deciphering academic texts (Sidhu et al., 2016), undergraduates' challenges in distinguishing fact from opinion, identifying implied meanings, or making inferences (Shahida et al., 2021), and deficiencies in analysing and evaluating texts critically ((Zaman, Majeed, & Naper, 2025). Similarly, Velayati et al. (2017) found that learners faced difficulties in recognizing authors' perspectives and reconciling opposing viewpoints. These barriers are often compounded by linguistic limitations, such as restricted vocabulary and inadequate proficiency, as well as non-linguistic challenges, including lack of confidence, confusion, and difficulties comprehending complex academic content.

In Pakistan, where English functions as both an official and academic language, such

challenges are even more pronounced. Many undergraduates enter university with limited exposure to critical reading practices due to exam-oriented schooling and traditional teaching methods that emphasize rote memorization over analytical thinking. As a result, the transition to higher education, which demands deeper engagement with academic texts, becomes difficult for many students. Despite the growing importance of critical academic reading for academic and professional success, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on the challenges faced by Pakistani ESL undergraduates.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the critical academic reading skills that Pakistani ESL learners perceive as most difficult and to uncover the underlying linguistic and non-linguistic reasons behind these struggles. By situating the problem within the local higher education context, the findings aim to contribute to targeted pedagogical strategies and provide practical implications for enhancing critical reading instruction among ESL undergraduates in Pakistan.

### **Problem Statement**

Critical academic reading is a cornerstone of higher education as it enables students to comprehend complex texts, evaluate arguments, and engage in independent thinking. However, for many Pakistani undergraduates studying in an ESL context, acquiring these skills remains a significant challenge. The country's education system often emphasizes rote memorization and exam-oriented learning, leaving students underprepared for the higher-order reading and critical thinking demands of university-level studies. As a result, students frequently struggle with essential skills such as making inferences, analysing context, detecting assumptions, and evaluating arguments.

Previous international studies have highlighted similar challenges, linking them to both linguistic factors—such as limited vocabulary and insufficient proficiency in English—and non-linguistic factors, including lack of confidence, confusion, and limited exposure to analytical reading practices. Yet, there is a scarcity of empirical research that specifically investigates these issues within the Pakistani undergraduate ESL context. Without clear insights into which critical reading skills are most difficult for students and why these difficulties occur, educators and policymakers lack the evidence needed to design effective interventions.

This gap underscores the need for a systematic study that identifies the critical academic reading skills Pakistani ESL learners find most challenging and explores the reasons behind their struggles. Addressing this problem will provide valuable direction for developing targeted instructional strategies, ultimately enhancing students' academic performance and future employability.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are followings;

To identify the critical academic reading skills that Pakistani undergraduate ESL students perceive as the most challenging.

To investigate the underlying linguistic and non-linguistic factors contributing to these difficulties.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

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Which critical academic reading skills do Pakistani ESL undergraduates find most difficult to acquire?

What factors contribute to the challenges students face in developing these skills?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as it addresses a critical gap in understanding the challenges faced by Pakistani ESL undergraduates in developing critical academic reading skills. The findings will provide insights into the specific skills students find most difficult and the factors contributing to these difficulties. These insights can guide educators in designing targeted teaching strategies, support curriculum developers in integrating critical reading and thinking skills more effectively, and assist policymakers in improving higher education outcomes. Ultimately, the study contributes to enhancing students' academic performance, critical thinking abilities, and future employability.

## **Literature Review**

Proficient reading skills are considered fundamental for acquiring and applying disciplinary knowledge, as they form the foundation of intellectual growth and communication abilities (Ya'acob et al., 2020). Within an academic context, critical reading comprises several sub-skills that collectively foster independent and analytical thinking. These include developing vocabulary knowledge, identifying main ideas and supporting details, establishing topics with evidence, making inferences, interpreting implied meanings, recognising types of support and reasoning, evaluating arguments, and conducting contextual analysis to detect assumptions. Teaching these skills typically follows both top-down and bottom-up processing models, which reflect the cognitive mechanisms involved in reading.

## **Top-Down and Bottom-Up Processing in Critical Reading**

Critical reading relies on two key cognitive approaches. Bottom-up processing emphasizes decoding language components such as words and sentences to construct meaning, while top-down processing depends on readers' prior knowledge, experiences, and expectations to interpret texts (Niculescu & Dragomir, 2023; Nadea et al., 2021). Top-down strategies include predicting topics, matching headings with text sections, inferring relationships, guessing word meanings, and forming mental representations of the content. In practice, readers employ both processes simultaneously to integrate textual details with background knowledge, enhancing their comprehension and critical engagement.

## **Critical Academic Reading Skills**

Several sub-skills are central to critical academic reading. Vocabulary mastery is particularly important for ESL learners, as it allows them to interpret complex texts independently. Identifying main ideas and supporting details enables students to distinguish key information from less relevant content, thus enhancing comprehension and promoting independent thinking (Nguyen, 2020; Stevens et al., 2019). Formulating topics and evaluating evidence fosters logical reasoning and hypothesis development (Al-Ghadouni, 2021; Kintsch, 1998; Paige et al., 2024).

Making inferences and identifying implied meanings require learners to move beyond surface understanding, questioning assumptions and recognising deeper implications (Shamida et al., 2021). Similarly, recognising types of support and reasoning allows

learners to evaluate the validity of arguments and construct well-founded conclusions (Ngu & Zainal, 2017). Evaluating arguments and statements further develops students' ability to judge the reliability and coherence of academic texts, a process linked with independent critical thinking (Velayati et al., 2017). Finally, contextual analysis and assumption detection help learners situate texts within broader contexts, uncover biases, and challenge hidden assumptions, thus cultivating intellectual independence (Sobkowiak, 2016; Lai, 2011). Collectively, these sub-skills form the basis for critical thinking and equip students to navigate academic materials rigorously.

### **Challenges in Developing Critical Reading Skills Among ESL Learners**

Despite the importance of these skills, ESL undergraduates face significant challenges in acquiring them. Linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary and insufficient proficiency, as well as non-linguistic factors like lack of practice, confidence, and background knowledge, hinder their progress (Velayati et al., 2017; Castano-Roldan & Correa, 2021). Research shows that while students often manage literal comprehension, they struggle with inferential and critical levels of reading (Nguyen, 2020; De-la-Pena & Luque-Rojas, 2021). Studies also highlight difficulties in recognising implied meanings, aligning perspectives with authors, and reconciling conflicting viewpoints (Silalahi, 2018; Par, 2018).

These challenges are not confined to one region. Similar findings across Malaysia and other contexts confirm that ESL learners commonly struggle with inadequate training, poor awareness of critical reading demands, and limited exposure to analytical practices (Arifin, 2020). Such shared difficulties highlight the universal need for targeted pedagogical interventions that promote critical academic reading and equip ESL students with the skills required to succeed in higher education.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners in acquiring critical academic reading skills. A total of 229 students from a public university in Pakistan were selected through purposive sampling.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed based on the *English for Critical Academic Reading Skills* course syllabus, which outlines essential critical reading skills expected of university students. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section A gathered demographic information of the respondents, Section B focused on students' perceptions of the most challenging critical reading skills, and Section C included open-ended questions to explore the reasons behind these perceived difficulties.

In Section B, students rated their level of confidence in each skill using a five-point Likert scale: *Completely Confident*, *Fairly Confident*, *Somewhat Confident*, *Slightly Confident*, and *Not at all Confident*. Section C required respondents to provide written explanations for why they found certain skills difficult to acquire.

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and percentages, to determine the skills most frequently reported as difficult. For the qualitative data, content analysis was conducted to categorise recurring themes behind students' challenges. Bryman's (2012) four-stage analysis process was adopted to

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systematically code and interpret the open-ended responses. Findings were reported in two parts: (i) a summary of percentages reflecting students' perceived confidence levels across various skills, and (ii) frequency counts of coded themes representing the linguistic and non-linguistic reasons for these difficulties. This approach provided both a broad statistical overview and an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by Pakistani ESL undergraduates in developing critical academic reading skills.

**Table 1: Coding Guideline: Four Stages of Analysis (Bryman, 2012)**

Stage	Steps	Description
<b>Stage 1: Initial Analysis</b>	Read responses	Carefully read the reasons provided by respondents regarding the skills they found difficult to acquire.
<b>Stage 2: Re-Reading</b>	Review responses	Re-read the responses to gain deeper understanding and ensure no details are overlooked.
<b>Stage 3: Coding</b>	Categorize themes	Assign codes and group the reasons into categories based on recurring patterns and themes.
<b>Stage 4: Theoretical Connection</b>	Relate to skills	Connect the coded themes to broader theoretical concepts and link them to specific critical academic reading skills.

## Results and Discussion

This study explored the critical academic reading skills that students perceived as most difficult to acquire. To assess this, a survey was conducted one week prior to the students' critical reading test, aimed at examining their level of mastery in these skills. The survey focused on seven core aspects of critical academic reading: understanding word meanings, identifying main ideas and supporting details, formulating topics and providing evidence, making inferences and identifying implied main ideas, recognising types of support and reasoning, evaluating authors' arguments, and conducting contextual analysis including the detection of assumptions. Table 2 presents

**Table 2: Respondents' Confidence in Mastering Critical Reading Skills**

Critical Reading Skills	Completely Confident	Fairly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Slightly Confident	Not at all Confident	Highest Reported Category
Understanding meanings of words	8.0%	48.8%	38.4%	4.2%	0.6%	Fairly Confident
Identifying main ideas & supporting details	15.9%	47.7%	34.9%	1.3%	0.1%	Fairly Confident

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Critical Reading Skills	Completely Confident	Fairly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Slightly Confident	Not at all Confident	Highest Reported Category
Formulating topic & provisioning evidence	8.4%	44.3%	41.0%	5.4%	0.9%	Fairly Confident
Making inferences & implied main ideas	7.7%	45.4%	41.0%	5.9%	0.0%	Fairly Confident
Determining types of support & reasoning	13.0%	46.7%	39.4%	0.7%	0.1%	Fairly Confident
Evaluating authors' arguments	13.7%	43.1%	41.2%	1.6%	0.2%	Fairly Confident
Analysing contexts & detecting assumptions	8.5%	48.1%	41.6%	1.6%	0.2%	Fairly Confident

Overall, most students rated themselves as *Somewhat Confident* to *Fairly Confident* across all skills. Only a small proportion considered themselves *Completely Confident*, while very few reported being *Slightly Confident* or *Not at all Confident*. This suggests that although students demonstrated some level of mastery, only a minority felt fully secure in their abilities.

Among the skills, the highest confidence was reported for identifying main ideas and supporting details (15.9% completely confident), followed by evaluating authors' arguments (13.7%) and determining types of support and reasoning (13%). Lower levels of complete confidence were noted for analysing contexts and detecting assumptions (8.5%), formulating topics and providing evidence (8.4%), and understanding word meanings (8.0%).

Interestingly, nearly half of the respondents indicated only *Somewhat Confident* for the more complex skills such as making inferences and formulating implied main ideas (48.2%), analysing contexts and detecting assumptions (48.1%), and formulating topics and providing evidence (45.4%). These results suggest that while basic comprehension skills were moderately developed, higher-order analytical skills remained particularly challenging.

A closer look revealed that vocabulary knowledge, though relatively well-perceived, still posed difficulties for many students. Over 40% reported being less confident in understanding word meanings from context, echoing earlier findings that limited vocabulary impedes reading comprehension (Velayati et al., 2017). Similarly, while main ideas and supporting details were assumed to be easier, over one-third of students placed themselves on the lower end of confidence, indicating that this skill is

not as straightforward as commonly believed (Par, 2018; Nguyen, 2020).

Formulating appropriate topics and providing evidence also emerged as a challenge, with nearly half of the respondents expressing low confidence. This finding aligns with Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016), who identified supporting details and examples as a major reading difficulty. The same trend was observed with inference-making and implied meanings, reinforcing previous studies that highlight these as persistent obstacles (Shamida et al., 2021).

Evaluation skills presented mixed results. While some students felt confident in their ability to assess authors' arguments, a substantial portion reported lower confidence, suggesting they struggled to judge validity or distinguish fact from opinion. This reflects earlier findings that students often lack the ability to analyse and evaluate texts effectively (Zin et al., 2014).

Finally, contextual analysis and assumption detection were among the most difficult skills, with more than half of the respondents rating themselves at the lower end of confidence. Although some students felt comfortable classifying ideas into main and supporting details, many found it challenging to go beyond surface meaning.

To further explore these difficulties, the open-ended section of the questionnaire provided insights into underlying causes. Out of 229 participants, 169 provided responses that were categorized into two broad domains: linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors.

**Linguistic factors** included limited vocabulary, insufficient language proficiency, text complexity, and weak analytical skills such as inference-making, evaluation, and interpretation.

**Non-linguistic factors** included psychological barriers (confusion, lack of confidence, fear of misinterpretation), contextual challenges (limited background knowledge, unfamiliar topics, lack of practice), and cognitive issues (slow reading pace, difficulties with comprehension, and limited awareness of text structures).

Table 3 presents the categorization of these reasons, illustrating how both linguistic and non-linguistic challenges contribute to students' struggles in acquiring critical academic reading skills.

**Table 3: Reasons for Perceived Difficulty in Academic Reading**

<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>%</b>	
<b>Linguistic</b>	<b>Language Proficiency</b>	Limited vocabulary	4	15	8.9	
		Insufficient proficiency	7	7	4.1	
		Text complexity	9	4	2.4	
			Lack of ability to grasp implied ideas	10	3	1.8
		<b>Analytical Skills</b>	Lack of interpretation skills	5	10	5.9
			Lack of evaluation skills	12	1	0.6
			Lack of analysis skills	12	1	0.6



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Major Categories	Main Themes	Reasons	Rank	Freq	%
		Lack of critical thinking	6	9	5.3
Non-Linguistic	Psychological Factors	Confusion / lack of confidence	1	40	23.7
		Fear of wrong answers / anxiety	8,12	6	3.6
	Contextual Factors	No background knowledge	11	2	1.2
		Inadequate practice	6	5	3.0
		Unfamiliar topics / slow reading	11	4	2.4
		Lack of surface-structure awareness	11	2	1.2
Cognitive	Comprehension Issues	Unable to comprehend texts	3	20	11.8
		Responses do not match questions	2	35	20.7
<b>Total</b>			—	169	100

The findings of Table 3 highlight that Pakistani ESL learners encounter multi-layered challenges in academic reading, which can be broadly grouped into linguistic, non-linguistic, and cognitive domains.

## 1. Linguistic Challenges

### Limited Vocabulary (8.9%)

Vocabulary deficiency stands out as a core problem. Students reported difficulty understanding texts because many English words were unfamiliar. Limited vocabulary not only restricted their ability to answer direct vocabulary-related questions but also affected their capacity to formulate topics, identify implied ideas, and construct original responses. This suggests that vocabulary gaps extend beyond surface comprehension and directly impact higher-order skills such as summarization and inference-making.

### Insufficient Proficiency (4.1%) & Text Complexity (2.4%)

Students noted that difficult sentence structures, unfamiliar genres, and academic discourse hindered their comprehension. For Pakistani ESL learners, who are often exposed to rote-based learning and limited exposure to academic English, the gap between everyday English and academic English becomes particularly evident.

### Analytical and Critical Skills (Approx. 12%)

A notable proportion of students struggled with interpretation (5.9%), critical thinking (5.3%), and to a lesser degree, evaluation and analysis (1.2%). These skills are crucial for making inferences, identifying reasoning patterns, and detecting assumptions within texts. The weakness suggests that Pakistani ESL students are trained to reproduce knowledge rather than critically engage with it. Earlier studies (e.g.,

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Shamida et al., 2021; Silalahi, 2018) confirm that critical reading remains underdeveloped in ESL contexts, often due to exam-focused curricula.

## **Non-Linguistic Challenges**

### **Psychological Barriers (23.7%)**

The highest reported difficulty was confusion and lack of confidence. Students expressed uncertainty about how to answer, fear of giving wrong responses, and a general lack of assurance when interacting with academic texts. This shows that affective factors—fear, anxiety, and self-doubt—are as influential as language barriers in shaping reading performance.

### **Fear of Wrong Interpretation (3.6%)**

Fear of misinterpreting texts reflects students' low tolerance for ambiguity, which is common in contexts where teachers emphasize “one correct answer” instead of multiple interpretations. This inhibits risk-taking and creative thinking in reading tasks.

### **Contextual Barriers (5.4%)**

Students also struggled with unfamiliar topics, lack of background knowledge, inadequate practice, and difficulty recognizing surface structures of texts. In Pakistan, where many students are first-generation English learners and lack exposure to diverse academic materials, such challenges are amplified.

## **Cognitive Challenges**

### **Inability to Comprehend Texts (11.8%)**

Many students admitted that they simply “could not understand the text,” which reflects a deeper processing difficulty. Their challenges go beyond vocabulary—they struggle with connecting ideas, recognizing coherence, and identifying key arguments.

### **Mismatch Between Responses and Questions (20.7%)**

A large number of students produced answers that did not align with the given questions. This points to a gap in task awareness and question interpretation skills. In Pakistani classrooms, where reading is often tested through factual recall, students may lack training in aligning responses with critical or analytical reading tasks.

## **Integrated Understanding**

The findings demonstrate that academic reading difficulties in Pakistani ESL learners are not purely linguistic. Instead, they are shaped by a synergistic interaction of language gaps, psychological barriers, and cognitive processing limitations. Linguistic issues (limited vocabulary, weak critical thinking) restrict comprehension. Non-linguistic issues (low confidence, fear, anxiety) discourage risk-taking in interpretation. Cognitive issues (misalignment of answers, lack of comprehension) weaken performance in tasks requiring synthesis and evaluation.

## **Implications for Pakistani ESL Context**

**Teaching Focus:** Instruction should integrate vocabulary building, critical reading strategies, and explicit training in interpretation and inference-making.

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**Affective Support:** Teachers must create confidence-building environments by encouraging multiple interpretations, minimizing fear of failure, and fostering peer-learning activities.

**Curriculum Design:** Academic reading materials should gradually increase in complexity, with scaffolding and background knowledge activation to help students navigate unfamiliar texts.

**Assessment Reform:** Moving away from rote memorization toward critical and interpretive tasks can strengthen reading habits aligned with global academic standards.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that a significant number of students struggle with acquiring critical academic reading skills, with many expressing uncertainty or lack of confidence even in foundational areas such as vocabulary knowledge and identifying main ideas. The challenges become more pronounced with higher-order skills, such as making inferences, evaluating arguments, and analysing contexts, indicating that students perceive advanced critical reading tasks as particularly difficult.

Both linguistic and non-linguistic factors contribute to these difficulties. While limited vocabulary and insufficient language proficiency hinder comprehension and interpretation, psychological barriers—especially confusion, fear of being wrong, and lack of confidence—emerged as the most dominant causes of difficulty. This highlights that critical reading challenges are not only a matter of language ability but also of cognitive and affective dimensions.

To effectively address these issues, it is crucial for educators to provide explicit instruction in critical thinking as a distinct component of the curriculum. Enhancing language proficiency alone is insufficient; instead, targeted strategies are needed to strengthen analytical and interpretive skills, while also reducing students' anxiety and confusion when engaging with academic texts. Carefully designed textbooks and thoughtfully selected reading materials can further support learners by keeping them focused and gradually building confidence in their ability to read critically.

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