

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING AND CRITICAL READING AMONG UZBEK EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**Axmedova Malikaxon**

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mdahmedova@kokanduni.uz**Abstract**

For Uzbek university students studying English as a second language academic writing continues to be one of the most challenging abilities. Despite reading academic texts in English on a regular basis many students find it difficult to formulate cogent arguments, incorporate sources and articulate critical opinions in their writing. This implies that students' ability to read texts critically may be a problem in addition to their language skills.

This study examines how academic essay writing performance among EFL university students in Uzbekistan is related to critical reading abilities. A quantitative correlational research design was used to gather information from sixty undergraduate students in their second and third years at a public university. In addition to writing an argumentative essay that required the use of source material participants finished a critical reading test based on academic texts. An analytical academic writing rubric was used to evaluate the essays and the relationship between the two variables was examined using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

The quality of students' academic writing is strongly positively correlated with their critical reading skills according to the findings. Essays written by students who were more adept at identifying arguments, assessing supporting data and identifying author perspectives were more analytically developed, coherent and well-supported. These results support the idea that critical reading is a crucial cognitive basis for successful academic writing in EFL settings.

The study emphasizes the necessity of incorporating critical reading instruction into academic writing courses at Uzbek universities in order to raise students' writing proficiency and academic literacy.

Keywords

Uzbek EFL students, academic writing, academic literacy, the relationship between reading and writing and critical thinking.

Introduction. One of the most crucial measures of students' academic achievement and intellectual growth in higher education is academic writing. It is expected of university students to create logical arguments, combine data from several sources and write clearly and formally. These requirements are even more difficult for students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). University students in Uzbekistan are increasingly expected to read academic texts and complete written assignments in English because the language is becoming more and more important in both academic and professional contexts. Even after years of English instruction many of them still find it difficult to write cohesive persuasive and critically informed essays.

The fact that academic writing demands more than just vocabulary and grammatical correctness is one of the main causes of this challenge. The ability of students to comprehend, assess and react to written texts is crucial. Ideas from books, articles and other scholarly sources are the foundation of academic essays; they are not created in a vacuum. Grabe and Zhang (2016) claim that because reading exposes students to the structure of arguments, the use of evidence

and the operation of academic language it provides the conceptual and rhetorical foundation for writing. Instead of turning information into unique and insightful arguments students who are unable to interact deeply with texts may simply copy facts.

Reading instruction in the Uzbek EFL context has historically prioritized comprehension and translation over critical engagement. Pupils are rarely encouraged to challenge authors' opinions, assess the evidence or contrast various viewpoints; instead they are frequently taught to recognize right answers or translate passages. Because of this a lot of students take a passive approach to academic texts. They find it difficult to formulate their own opinions properly, incorporate sources or create coherent arguments when they are later required to write essays. Academic literacy development is severely hampered by this discrepancy between writing expectations and reading habits.

Higher-level abilities like critical reading allow students to comprehend texts on a deeper level. It entails assessing the author's intent, identifying presumptions, judging the persuasiveness of arguments and determining the accuracy and applicability of the data (Wallace and Wray 2011). These procedures are very similar to what students have to do when composing academic essays. They must choose pertinent concepts from sources, assess their reliability and apply them to bolster their own claims. From a cognitive standpoint critical reading and academic writing both depend on higher-order cognitive abilities like synthesis analysis and evaluation (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001). Thus students are more likely to become proficient academic writers if they acquire strong critical reading abilities.

Relatively little research has looked at the precise function of critical reading in the development of academic writing especially in EFL contexts like Uzbekistan despite earlier studies establishing a general link between reading and writing. Numerous current studies concentrate on reading comprehension or extensive reading which assess students' comprehension of texts but not their critical engagement with them. Understanding the value of critical reading is particularly important in educational systems where memorization and test-oriented learning are prevalent.

Because of this, the current study looks into the connection between academic essay writing performance and critical reading abilities among EFL university students in Uzbekistan. This study attempts to offer empirical support for more integrated and cognitively informed approaches to academic literacy instruction by investigating the relationship between students' capacity to analyze and assess academic texts and the caliber of their written essays. It is anticipated that the results will have an impact on teacher training programs teaching methods and curriculum development in Uzbek higher education.

Literature Review. 1. Academic writing and academic reading are related processes

In academic settings, writing and reading are mutually reinforcing processes rather than separate skills. Both entail organizing concepts creating meaning and interacting with information via language. Grabe and Zhang (2016) claim that academic reading gives students access to linguistic patterns, rhetorical devices and disciplinary content that directly affect their writing. When students read academic texts they come across examples of how writers position themselves in relation to other scholars, how claims are supported and how arguments are developed.

Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) contend that cognitive functions like planning monitoring and meaning revision are shared by writing and reading. Improvements in reading frequently result in improvements in writing which is explained by these common processes. This view is supported by empirical research. For instance Zhang (2018) discovered that EFL students who

excelled in academic reading assignments generated written texts that were more logical and coherent. In a similar vein Hirvela (2004) stressed that reading gives writers the discourse and content resources they need to write academic essays.

Because learners heavily rely on written sources to make up for their limited exposure to spoken academic English, the reading-writing relationship is especially crucial in EFL contexts. Students learn grammar and vocabulary through reading but they also learn the structure of scholarly arguments. However, how well students engage with texts determines how effective this process is.

2. Reading critically in academic settings

Critical reading is the capacity to assess a text's intent, logic, and reliability in addition to its literal comprehension. According to Wallace and Wray (2011) critical reading is an active process in which readers evaluate the validity of the evidence, examine arguments, and challenge the authors' presumptions. Instead of passively absorbing information, this kind of reading necessitates that readers interact intellectually with texts.

Cognitively speaking, critical reading calls for higher-order thinking abilities. Analysis, evaluation, and creation are ranked at the highest levels of thought in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), which was later updated by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). Because readers must recognize important claims, contrast concepts, and evaluate the persuasiveness of arguments, these abilities are essential to critical reading. These cognitive processes allow students to do more than just memorize facts when learning academically.

Critical reading strategies are rarely taught to students in many EFL contexts, including Uzbekistan. Instruction frequently focuses on translating texts or responding to comprehension questions, which encourages superficial processing. Nonetheless, studies indicate that students' academic literacy can be greatly enhanced by explicit instruction in critical reading, such as identifying argument structures, identifying bias, and assessing sources (Kurland, 2000; Wallace & Wray, 2011).

3. The function of critical reading in scholarly writing

The connection between academic writing and critical reading is based on both theoretical and empirical research. In academic writing, authors must formulate arguments, provide evidence to back up assertions, and place themselves in the context of previous research. These abilities are very similar to those needed for critical reading. Hirvela (2004) asserts that reading and writing are dialogic processes in which authors react to texts by approving, disapproving, or changing concepts, and their written work reflects this reaction.

Numerous studies have shown that students who read critically generate better academic writing. Students who participated in critical reading exercises strengthened their arguments and employed evidence more skillfully in their essays, according to Lee and Schallert (2016). Additionally, Grabe and Zhang (2013) discovered a strong correlation between academic writing task success and the capacity to synthesize information from multiple texts, a crucial component of critical reading.

Because students must rely on source texts when writing, critical reading is particularly crucial in EFL settings. Students may copy information summarized without analysis or fail to develop original arguments if they are unable to assess and analyze these sources. Zhang (2018) demonstrated that EFL students with higher critical reading proficiency were more adept at

integrating sources and avoiding plagiarism producing writing that was more suitable for academic settings.

4. Investigation of the connections between writing and reading in EFL contexts

Reading proficiency and writing performance are positively correlated according to research conducted in EFL contexts. However rather than emphasizing critical reading the majority of studies concentrate on general reading comprehension. For instance, research by Grabe (2009) and Alderson (2000) highlights vocabulary comprehension and knowledge as indicators of writing quality. Although these elements are significant they fall short of explaining students' capacity to formulate arguments and assess sources.

Students may achieve high comprehension scores but still have difficulty producing analytical writing in environments where memorization-based learning is prevalent such as many post-Soviet educational systems. This emphasizes the necessity of looking at critical reading as a separate concept. There is a large research gap because few studies have examined this relationship in Uzbek or Central Asian EFL contexts.

5. Synopsis and Research Gap

The literature makes it abundantly evident that reading and writing are closely related and that critical reading is essential to the development of academic writing. Students are better equipped to write cohesive well-supported academic essays when they are able to analyze, evaluate and synthesize texts. Nevertheless there is a dearth of empirical studies that specifically assess the connection between academic writing and critical reading among EFL university students in Uzbekistan. By presenting quantitative data on the relationship between these two crucial academic literacy skills this study aims to close this gap.

Methodology

1. Research Methodology.

This study used a quantitative correlational research design to investigate the connection between academic essay writing performance and critical reading abilities among Uzbek EFL university students. Without changing the teaching environment this design enables the researcher to ascertain whether differences in students' critical reading proficiency are consistently linked to differences in the caliber of their academic writing (Creswell 2014).

2. Research Background.

English is taught as a foreign language at a public university in Uzbekistan where the study was carried out. In this setting students must write essays, reports and research papers in addition to reading academic texts in English. However grammar translation and vocabulary are typically given more attention in instruction than argument-based writing and critical reading. For examining the relationship between reading and writing this makes the Uzbek EFL context especially appropriate.

3. Individuals.

Sixty second- and third-year undergraduate students majoring in English and related subjects participated in the study. Each participant had taken basic academic writing and reading courses at university and had studied English for at least seven years in school. From intact classes convenience sampling was used to choose participants. The students' accessibility and

representation of typical Uzbek EFL learners in higher education made this sampling technique suitable.

4. Tools.

4.1 Critical Reading Test

For this study a contextualized critical reading test was created based on academic subjects that Uzbek students are familiar with including social issues, technology and education. The test comprised 25 items measuring the following after two brief academic texts.

- determining the primary arguments.
- acknowledgment of the evidence that supports it.
- analysis of assertions. identification of bias
- presumptions made by the author.

The test was created using the critical reading guidelines put forth by Wallace and Wray (2011). 50 was the highest score that could be obtained.

4.2 Academic Writing Task

A 300–350 word academic argumentative essay on the subject was written by the participants. “Should university education in Uzbekistan place more emphasis on critical thinking rather than memorization?”. Two short reading passages were provided so that students had to refer to and integrate source ideas into their writing. The essays were evaluated using an analytic rubric adapted from IELTS Academic and Weigle’s (2002) writing assessment framework. The rubric assessed: Task response. Coherence and cohesion. Lexical resource. grammatical precision. Use of source evidence. Each category was scored on a 9-point scale.

5. Data Collection Procedure.

Data collection took place over two class sessions. In the first session students completed the critical reading test in 45 minutes. They completed the academic essay under exam supervision in the second session which lasted 60 minutes. This process made sure that students writing performances accurately represented their abilities rather than outside help.

6. Data Analysis

A statistical program was used to enter the students' writing and critical reading scores. To find out if the two variables had a statistically significant relationship Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was computed. According to Field (2018) a significance level of $p < .05$ was applied.

7. Ethical issues

Students were told that participation was completely voluntary and that their grades would not be impacted by their results. All information was made anonymous.

1. Descriptive statistics.

The results of the academic writing assignment and the critical reading exam that the sixty Uzbek EFL university students completed are shown in this section. For both variables Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Critical Reading Score	60	32.48	6.15	18	46
Academic Writing Score	60	6.42	1.21	3.5	8.5

The participants' critical reading proficiency was found to be moderate as evidenced by their mean score of 32.48 out of 50. Nonetheless there is discernible variation among students as indicated by the comparatively high standard deviation (6.15) indicating that some students had significantly better critical reading abilities than others. On a 9-point scale the average academic writing score was 6.42 which roughly translates to an upper-intermediate to lower-advanced level of academic writing. Once more the 1.21 standard deviation shows that students' writing performance varies significantly.

2. The relationship between academic writing and critical reading

Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was computed to investigate the connection between students' academic writing performance and their capacity for critical reading.

Table 2

Correlation between critical reading and academic writing

Variables	r	p
Critical Reading & Academic Writing	0.71	< .001

This indicates that students who performed better on the academic writing task also tended to do better on the critical reading test. A correlation above **0.50** indicates a large effect size per

Cohens (1988) recommendations. As a result the relationship found in this study has both practical significance and statistical significance.

3. The connection between the elements of writing and critical reading

Correlations between critical reading scores and specific writing components were also computed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the relationship between critical reading and various aspects of academic writing.

Table 3

Correlation between writing and critical reading subskills

Writing Component	r
Task response	0.68
Coherence and cohesion	0.74
Lexical resource	0.61
Grammatical accuracy	0.49
Use of source evidence	0.77

This suggests that students who were more adept at analyzing and interpreting texts were also more adept at combining concepts from various sources and logically structuring their arguments.

Grammatical accuracy showed the **weakest relationship ($r = 0.49$)** indicating that grammar is more dependent on formal instruction and language proficiency than critical reading which supports higher-level writing abilities.

4. Results

The findings unequivocally show that academic writing and critical reading are strongly and statistically significantly correlated among Uzbek EFL university students. Essays written by students with higher critical reading proficiency were more analytically developed, coherent and better supported by evidence.

These results demonstrate that in this particular context critical reading is a significant predictor of academic writing quality.

Discussion. This study sought to determine how academic essay writing performance among EFL university students in Uzbekistan related to critical reading abilities. The findings showed a significant positive correlation between the two variables suggesting that students who were more proficient critical readers also tended to be more successful academic writers. The theoretical premise that writing and reading are closely related processes that depend on similar cognitive and rhetorical abilities is empirically supported by this finding.

The substantial overall correlation ($r = 0.71$) is consistent with earlier studies that highlight the relationship between reading and writing. According to Grabe and Zhang (2016) academic reading provides writers with models of language use, argumentation and discourse organization—all of which are crucial for successful writing. The current research supports this assertion by showing that critical reading—rather than just reading comprehension—is crucial to the caliber of academic writing. Students' essays were more cohesive and analytically developed when they were able to assess arguments, assess supporting data and identify author viewpoints.

The strong correlation between critical reading and the use of source evidence in writing ($r = 0.77$) is one of the study's most important findings. This finding corroborates the findings of Hirvela (2004) and Zhang (2018) who contended that students' capacity for text interpretation and evaluation directly influences how well they incorporate sources into their writing. Critical reading enables students to go beyond simply copying or summarizing information and instead use sources to support their own arguments in the Uzbek EFL context where students frequently rely heavily on reading materials to construct essays. This finding is especially significant because poor source usage frequently results in shoddy argumentation or inadvertent plagiarism in EFL academic writing.

Previous research is further supported by the strong correlation ($r = 0.74$) between critical reading and coherence and cohesion. According to Lee and Schallert (2016) students who participated in critical reading exercises were more adept at structuring their thoughts and keeping their writing coherent. Students who read critically are better able to organize their own essays because they understand how arguments are organized in academic texts. This explains why writing produced by Uzbek students with better critical reading abilities was easier to read and more logically connected.

On the other hand the lower correlation ($r = 0.49$) between critical reading and grammatical accuracy indicates that formal language exposure and instruction have a greater impact on grammar than critical reading. This result is in line with Weigles (2002) differentiation between higher-level discourse skills and lower-level linguistic skills. Grammar accuracy is more dependent on practice feedback and clear instruction whereas critical reading improves students capacity to reason organize and support ideas.

These results are especially pertinent to the Uzbek higher education system from a pedagogical standpoint. Memorization translation and grammar-based exercises are frequently prioritized in traditional instruction. These techniques might increase students' linguistic accuracy but they do not adequately foster the analytical abilities needed for academic writing. The results of this study suggest that without explicit training in critical reading students may continue to struggle with constructing strong academic arguments even if their grammar is relatively good.

Overall, the results show that critical reading is an essential part of academic writing proficiency rather than merely an extra skill. By helping students evaluate, interpret and synthesize academic texts, critical reading provides the cognitive foundation for producing well-structured evidence-based and coherent academic essays.

Recommendations. Several suggestions for EFL instruction curriculum development and teacher preparation in Uzbek universities can be made in light of the study's findings.

First academic writing courses should specifically incorporate critical reading. Grammar sentence construction and paragraph structure should not be the only topics covered in writing classes; students should also be required to analyze and assess texts. For instance, students should be taught to recognize the arguments made by authors, evaluate the quality of the supporting evidence and contrast various points of view in the reading materials before beginning to write an essay. Instead of just copying facts this will assist students in creating concepts.

Second, there should be a stronger connection between writing and reading instruction. Universities should use an integrated academic literacy approach rather than teaching reading and writing as distinct subjects. After reading scholarly texts students should utilize those texts as the foundation for writing assignments like argumentative essays, summaries and critiques. Students will be able to practice incorporating what they read into their own scholarly discourse as a result.

Third critical reading pedagogy should be taught to teachers through professional training. Higher-order academic literacy skills may not be adequately addressed by the grammar-translation or communicative language teaching approaches that many English instructors in Uzbekistan were trained in. Modules on teaching critical reading techniques such as assessing sources spotting bias and combining concepts from several texts ought to be included in teacher preparation programs.

Fourth, rather than only rewarding language accuracy, assessment procedures should also reward critical engagement. Argument quality, the use of evidence and logical organization should be given a lot of weight in writing rubrics used in Uzbek universities. Students are more likely to interact critically with texts when they understand the importance of their capacity for idea analysis and evaluation.

Lastly, texts that are both academically demanding and culturally relevant should be included in textbooks and reading materials. Critical reading and academic writing can be strengthened by encouraging students to think more deeply and write more meaningfully through the use of texts that represent problems in Uzbek society education and development.

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