

# **Identifying the Critical Reading Strategies Employed by Iranian EFL Learners**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*Critical reading refers the way in which the students and teachers interact in the classroom to practice a higher form of comprehension. The study focuses on the introduction of critical reading strategies, and attempts to show how much Iranian EFL student use the level of thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) as expounded in the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy during reading. The objective of this research is to identify the critical reading strategies employed by Iranian EFL students. In order to achieve the aim, this study employed the first phase of Stringer's Action Research Model that is Look. The qualitative approaches including observation checklists and semi-structured interviews were used for data gathering. The findings in relation to identify the critical reading strategies employed by Iranian EFL students reveal that students are generally familiar with reading strategies, however in most of the Iranian high school the reading strategies are presented as a set of isolated skills and seldom practice systematically in the actual context. Moreover, the results of the study show that critical reading strategies of skimming and scanning, as a means of processing the text, asking questions for better understanding, and taking notes are the brilliant critical reading strategies among Iranian EFL students. Therefore, students need to be exposed to reading strategies related to higher levels of knowledge in the cognitive domain.*

**Keywords:** *Critical reading, Critical reading strategies, EFL students, Bloom's Taxonomy*

## **1. Introduction**

Critical reading means the way in which the students and teachers interact in the classroom to practice a higher form of comprehension. Combs (1992) stressed that critical reading is an interactive process, which uses several levels of thought simultaneously. That is whom acknowledged being a critical reader requires background experienced for making observation and judgments. Hence, research in the area of critical reading and thinking ability may contribute to not only a better understanding of the nature of critical reading and thinking, but also help to identify the students' strengths and weaknesses that is useful for curriculum development and improving their performance in schools.

Critical reading strategies refer to strategy that encourages learners to use each of the cognitive processes in the three upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, which commonly associated with critical thinking skills. Critical reading strategies help students to read their textbooks and various reading passages systematically and critically. Before students can think critically and use higher order thinking elements to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate a text, they need to understand it, which can become difficult when they are reading complicated material. In this study strategies refer to critical reading strategies, namely Annotating, Previewing, Scan & Skimming, Facts vs. Opinions, Drawing Conclusions, Monitoring One's Own Comprehension, Summary, Paraphrase, Synthesizing and Questioning that proposed by (Singhet *al.*,1997; Tovani,2000; Axelrod &Cooper,2002). Most of critical reading strategies are often based on readers' background knowledge, what readers know from life experiences or from reading other texts.

EFL students need to engage with series of strategies to make meaning; hence, background knowledge comes first, because without it critical readers have no place to begin. Based on the previous study, extensive problems of using reading strategies among EFL students are more than ESL students and focus on effectiveness of metacognitive than cognitive reading strategies, of some problems of teaching reading strategies. In view of the lack of thorough use of critical reading strategies, the area of concern

for this study is to focus on identifying how much Iranian EFL students utilize critical reading strategies using the Cognitive Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy.

## 2. Literature Review

Iranian researchers have conducted numerous numbers of researches in the area of critical thinking (e.g. Miriet *al.*,2007; Birjandi&Bagherkazemi,2010; Fahim&Bagherkazemi,2010; Fahim&Sa'eepour,2011; Fahim&Khatib,2013; Vaseghi&Barjesteh, 2012; Assadiet *al.*,2013). Besides, cognitive strategies is considered by some others such as (Zare-ee, 2007; khorsand, 2009). Some have stressed on development of reading strategies like (Amiryousefi *et al.*, 2012; Assadiet *al.*, 2013). Throughout this research, it is found out many of Iranian EFL students are reading with weak language, and assume therefore a passive attitude towards their own reading abilities. Nevertheless, they do not have such comprehensive studies to show clearly the real situation of critical reading and higher level thinking instruction in curriculum program in Iran. Moreover, the participants in most of these studies have been limited mainly at university level. There is seldom a sequential plan for the development of these skills among high school students. However, the research studies were conducted by Iranian researchers (Birjandi&Mostafavinia, 1998; Khorsand, 2009) would be along the line of the desirability of critical reading skills of school curricula in Iran. Therefore, this research attempts to conduct a survey on employing critical reading strategies and create awareness among EFL students in the context of an Iranian classroom through an empirical study.

According to Wright& Brown (2006) in an EFL setting, intrinsic motivation can be low, and English may not seem relevant to the students since it is not part of their daily lives. In many cases, they may be required to study English for a test or because it is a compulsory part of the curriculum. In other words, many of EFL students in a same situation can find it difficult to order their thoughts in a logical, consistent, and reasoned way. The majority of researchers such as (Paul, 1992; Ennis, 1993; Reed, 1998; Tsui, 1999; Pupovci& Taylor, 2003; Bassham, 2004; Duronet *al.*, 2006; Epstein and Kernberger, 2006; Miriet *al.*, 2007; Taglieber, 2008; Jun Zhang,2009;Vallis,2010; Lau,2011) counsel that critical reading and thinking should additionally be taught in the school curriculum in order to develop critical readers and thinkers needed by society and prepare students for their role as citizens and decision-makers in a diverse democratic society.

According to Axelrod & Cooper (2002) Annotate, Preview, Contextualize, Outline, Analyze Opposition, Summarize, Paraphrase, Synthesize, Question, and Reflect are the most important applicable strategies for reading critically. Along the same view, Hall (2004) adds, "being an effective reader means being able to evaluate your own practices, working to develop your critical reading skills". Thus, critical reading strategies are best taught by using "real" assignments. Programs to improve these skills should involve changes in the structure, not necessarily the content, of assignments (Barton-Arwoodet *al.*, 2005). They can be taught in one-to-one sessions with consultants, in classroom settings by teachers, or at home by parents, siblings, or friends. (Harvey &Chickie-Wolfe, 2007:172).In the literature, the most common type of critical reading strategies requires posing and answering questions about the text. According to (Axelrod *et al.*, 1999; Peirce, 2006; Linkon, 2008) the basic critical reading strategies include annotating means circling key words and writing comments or questions about the material in the margins; Contextualizing requires putting a text within its original historical or cultural context.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed the first phase of Stringer's Action Research Model that is Look. Action research as a simple process of systematic inquiry provides the means that assists teachers to incorporate the diverse elements of instruction into a carefully articulated program of learning for their students (Stringer, 1999). During this phase, the proposed lesson plan that was prepared based on the syllabus of teaching reading for EFL students in Iran was followed. It was cognitive oriented however it centered on the students

practice the inferior level of cognitive domain; this means that lower order thinking(knowledge, comprehension,, application). Thus, in Look phase, the researcher attempted as a teacher-researcher, to teach the reading lessons in usual way without any influence on the process of instruction.

### **Research Design**

This study undertaken is based on the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy. The researcher conducts this study in his own classroom for improving the critical reading ability of Iranian EFL students. The researcher attempts as a teacher to identify how much Iranian EFL students employ the critical reading strategies. The basic assumption is that the uses of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012).

### **Participants and Research Context**

English language is taught two hours per week in high schools in Iran, and teachers can mostly teach through their preferred methodology, for example grammar translation method (Dahmardeh, 2009; Assadiet *al.*,2013), as there is no specific teacher manual available. The purpose of teaching English in Iran, especially at high school level, is to give a basic knowledge of English to the students to enable them to read and understand different text (Ketabi, 2001:29). The reading passages are presented in each lesson and followed by some comprehension questions. These questions are basically true/ false items, multiple choice items as well as open ended or short answer questions (Dahmardeh, 2009).

The present research took place among grade 10 Iranian EFL students in the Iranian complex (Imam Khomeini) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, between the dates of 20-07-2011 and 20-3- 2012. The whole research carried out under the umbrella of Bloom's cognitive domain. There were 15 girl students. Their levels of proficiency were designated intermediate to upper-intermediate based on the national exam that they passed to enter the high school. Whereas, most of them using English language to communicate in Malaysian society, their levels of proficiency in compare with other Iranian ELF high school students in Iran was better. In addition, the structure and content of English Book (1), which they passed previous year, were similar to English book (2) that they used as their textbook in this study. Hence their reading ability was not only upper than previous year but also students were extensively familiar with reading procedure in Iranian EFL classroom.

### **Instruments**

The research study integrated two research tools as primary instruments for data collection that are observation checklists and interview protocol. The issue of reliability and validity of the research instruments was addressed with methodological triangulation. The present research also used "External Peers"-experts who were not involved in the research project-to aid in probing the researcher's thinking around all or parts of the research process. It is regarded as one of a complement of techniques used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Given, 2008). The external peers for this study were two experienced English language teachers in Imam Khomini complex in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Shahed high school in Behshahr, Iran.

### **Observation Checklists**

Observation tools are instruments and techniques that help teachers to focus and to record useful data about students' learning in a systematic way (Musialet *al.*, 2008). Furthermore, observation checklists provide a roadmap that helps teachers give students consistent feedback related to the task. To select and develop the observation checklists for the current study the researcher turned to some books and sample thesis in UKM, UM and UPM Main Library. The researcher tried out several books (e.g. Sagor, 2005; Bergeron *et al.*, 2003; Axelrod & Cooper, 2002) to find the checklist for recording strategies students use in reading classes. Furthermore, researcher through reading books such as (Musial *et al.*, 2008; Aryet *al.*, 2010; Creswell, 2003, 2012) learned basic information about the observation checklists, such as its purpose, the population for its use, publication date and features of observation checklists. These helped

the researcher generally indicated whether the selected observation checklists worked well or whether other procedures might be better. Creswell (2003) also justified that using an instrument already developed by someone else, finding one with good validity and reliability scores, and locating a manual for using the instrument led to the early identification of means for collecting data.

### **Interview Protocol**

Interviews were chosen as one of the main methods of data collection in this study, to enable researcher to follow up points that were raised in the teacher's journals. They were also chosen because they appear to offer a way of accessing the students' feelings, and reactions to, the activities in which they were involved. Dawson (2009) acknowledges semi-structured interview is the most common type of interview used in qualitative social research. In this study, to answer the research questions a semi-structured interview technique was used to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the answers to the research questions.

The interview process took place in the classroom on a one-on-one basis. When working with high school students, the researcher began the interview through "Grand tour questions" that enabled participants to describe the situation in their own term and to assist students in extending their understanding of their situations and the issues investigated. The interview would begin with using the predetermined semi-structured interview guide, and then other questions would be developed through interview progress. More questions were asked to help elaborate on answers given by students. These questions were prompted if a student did not seem to understand the question or were not clear in their answer. As the students respond to the questions, the researcher recorded the students' responses on paper as well as audiotape.

### **Research Procedures**

Gathering data in the present action research study followed the first phase of Stringer's (2010) Action Research Model that was based on the quantitative method. During the Look or observation phase, the researcher gathered the information from a variety of sources and built a picture to clarify the nature of the research problem. Through the qualitative data, the researcher introduced an insight into how students responded to the critical reading strategies. The data will be gathered through observation checklists and interviews.

### **Data Analysis Method**

In the Look phase of this action research, researcher gathered large quantities of information (data) that must be analyzed. In present study, the researcher analyzed the collected data in two ways: the qualitative data were analyzed through Stringer's (2004) method of analyzing data, i.e. "The Categorizing and Coding Method". According to Stringer (2004), procedures for categorizing and coding involve reviewing the collected data, unitizing the data, categorizing and coding, identifying themes, organizing a category system, developing a report framework.

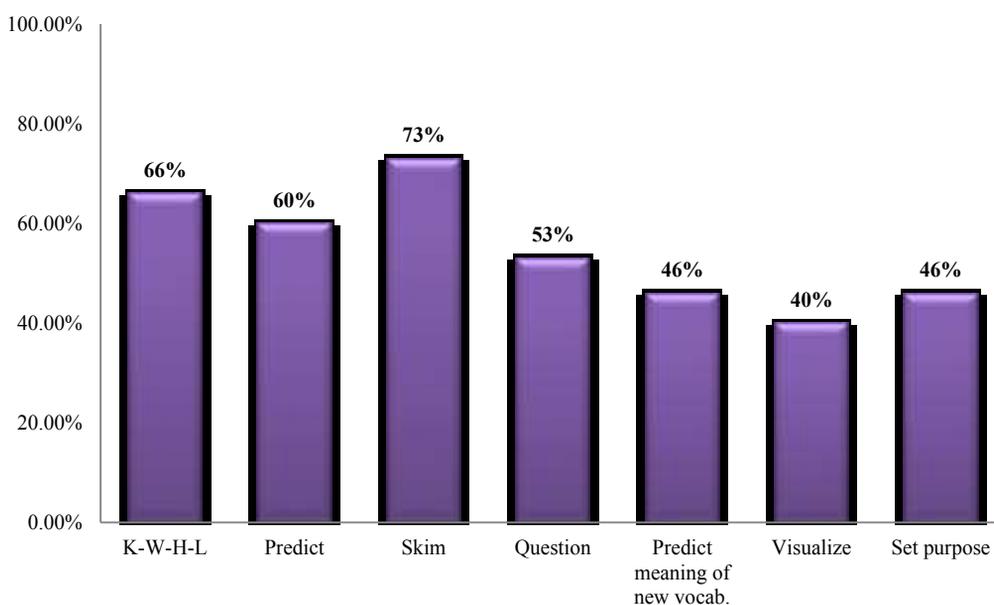
First, the researcher utilized the categorizing and coding method to divide the large amount of data from each participant's interview and observation into units of meaning. Then the researcher placed these units of meaning into the appropriate categories, subcategories, and themes that have been established by the researcher or participants involved. Organizing the information into a system of categories allowed the researcher to understand and interpret all the information and explains the significant features of the experiences appearing from the investigation (Stringer, 2004). In addition, once the data were organized; the researcher developed the descriptions of the students' responses. The final interpretations were made once all the organized data was analyzed.

Secondly, the entire quantitative data were analyzed, through SPSS software, at the end of the study, to answer the research question "what critical reading strategies do Iranian EFL students use?". The analysis of qualitative data on this research question involved searching for themes in students' behavior during

the observation process and their responses to the interviews. The students' behavior and responses were reported using frequency analysis. Analyzing the quantitative data assisted the researcher to understand the whole research results, as well the different types of outcomes for different students.

#### 4. Results and Findings

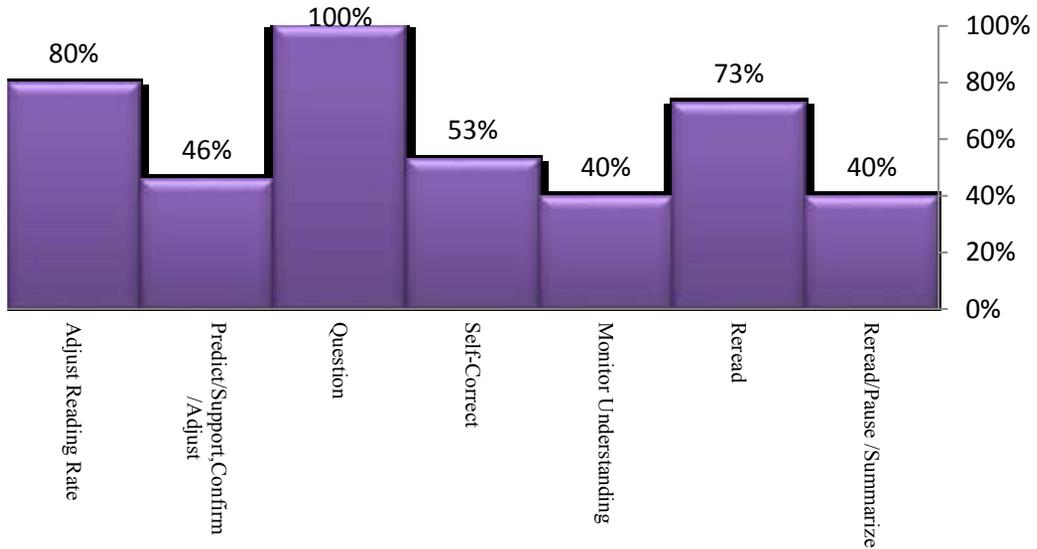
During the Look phase of Stringer's Action Research Model, the researcher actively engaged in the process of describing the nature of the problem and gathering information. Researcher analyzed and discussed in detail the reading strategies that Iranian EFL students took advantage of throughout before, while and after reading habitually. In second step, the researcher will analyze and discuss the most common types of the critical reading strategies among Iranian EFL students in general, during the first cycle of Stringer's model of action research, i.e. Look. The distribution of types of reading strategies employed by students based on analysis of the formative observation checklists were as follow.



**Figure 1:**Types of Pre-Reading Strategies

The results in Fig.1 shows 73% took advantage of skimming that involved in reading captions, boldface headings, words, charts and graphs ; approximately 66% students utilized K-W-H-L that related to prior knowledge activities ; and 60% applied prediction that support the student prediction through using pictures ,title and some text , than other reading strategies. As pre-reading activities help students think about what they are going to read ,students' dominance in the most effective pre-reading strategies help them focus on the text and begin thinking in terms of what they already know about the subject. As a result, the familiarity of quite most of Iranian EFL students help the text become more meaningful to them, which, in turn, increases their level of understanding.

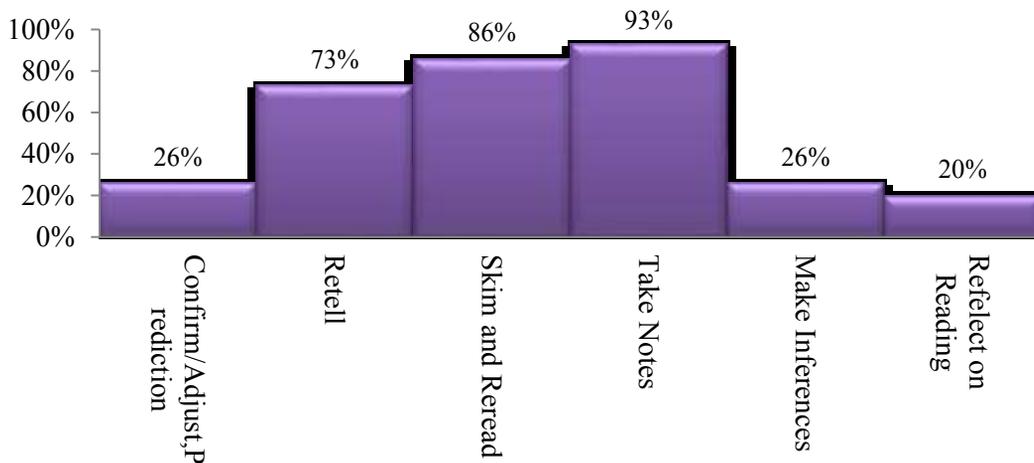
Moreover, the researcher persuaded the students' attention towards reading passage components for observing their utilizable reading strategies. The distribution of the most common while reading strategies depend upon the analysis of the formative observations was as follows.



**Figure 2:** Types of While-Reading Strategies

Fig.2 exhibited the most common accustomed while reading strategies by Iranian EFL students were “Adjust Reading Rate”, around 80% students applied it, with purposes such as skimming.”Reread “73% students utilized this strategy to improve recall and to revisit favorite parts of the text, and the most spread while reading strategy among Iranian EFL students with 100% usage was questioning. It can be concluded that the Iranian EFL students want to read with curiosity for deeper understanding. Therefore, they question the text, their own reactions to what is in the book, and even the author’s decisions of what to include and what not to.

The various types and levels of comprehension questions constituted the post reading activities in students’ textbook. After taking advantage of habitual reading skills, students appeared more curiosity to be engaged with exercises in various levels of comprehension. The distribution of the most common after reading strategies based on the analysis of the formative observations was as follows.



**Figure 3:** Types of Post-Reading Strategies

The Fig.3 showed the most common after reading strategies that Iranian EFL students used in reading classes. Three distinguished strategies were: Retelling the story orally or in written form that was utilized by 73% of the students.; Skim and Reread through returning to the text to prove the point during discussions that was used by 86% of the students, and ultimately “ Take Notes “the important parts independently was applied by 93% of the students.

The analysis of students’ behavior throughout the reading process also revealed that they utilized almost all strategies related to the components and exercises in their textbook. “Take Notes, Question and Skim” were among the reading strategies highly utilized by Iranian EFL students. The findings revealed that the reading strategy that pervades among Iranian EFL students are “while reading strategies”.

A comparison of the utilized reading strategies by Iranian EFL students through process of reading also demonstrated a meaningful relation between various levels of cognitive domains of Bloom’s taxonomy and the types of strategies (Table 1).

**Table 1: Cognitive Levels of Reading Strategies**

	Reading Strategies	Cognitive Domain of Bloom ‘s Taxonomy					
		Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Before Reading	Predict	√					
	K-W-H-L			√			
	Skim		√				
While Reading	Reread		√				
	Adjust Reading Rate			√			
	Question			√			
After Reading	Retell		√				
	Skim & Reread			√			
	Take Notes		√				

The results in Table 1 displays the homogeneity of strategies were utilized by Iranian EFL students. In addition, their revealing behavior through carrying out reading skills indicated that cognitive habits were the dominant domain. Moreover, among the six levels of cognitive domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy, application and comprehension had the most prevalent similarity with strategies the students used during the reading process.

The findings of the study in relation to the Bloom’s taxonomy also revealed an abundant numbers of students appeared to function very well at a satisfactory level in the usage of reading skills. However, they had not enforced a systematic approach that integrates their pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies, for fostering them to use strategies related to higher level of cognitive domain.

In agreement with Stringer’s model of action research during the first phase i.e. Look, the interview was done. Table 2 refers briefly to the students’ responses to the Grand Tour Questions about their Knowledge, Experiences, Interests, and Capacity of reading strategies.

**Table 2: Students’ Responses to the Grand Tour Questions (Interview)**

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Students ‘Responses</b>                      From interview at the end each week of first cycle (LOOK) planning phase                      How do you usually read a reading passage? Please describe through a typical passage and explain about your behavior.</p>	Cognitive Domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy					
		Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
<b>Before Reading</b>	<p><b>I study the new words before reading</b>  <b>I practice the new words through new sentences</b>  <b>I use pictures ,underline words and sentences to predict</b>  <b>I focus on headings, clause , phrase, words, and pictures to accustom generally</b>  <b>I try to ask meaningful questions</b></p>	13	11	11 8 6			
<b>While Reading</b>	<p><b>I divided the text passage to meaningful part</b>  <b>I draw a circle around the words I knew before</b>  <b>I ask questions about new concepts in text</b>  <b>I check the odd words ,phrases, clauses in dictionary or ask from teacher</b>  <b>I reread for better understanding</b>  <b>I can summarize the main concept</b>  <b>I take notes the main point, synonym, antonym, and so on</b></p>	12	12	9 11	7 6		
<b>After Reading</b>	<p><b>I can retell what happened in story</b>  <b>I can mention briefly the story (skim)</b>  <b>I try to find fact and opinion</b>  <b>I tell my point of view about reading passage</b></p>	7	9		6		5

The students’ responses reported in Table 2 showed that how they employed general reading strategies throughout the reading session. The analysis displayed the utilized strategies have numerous features to enable them to read, study, and learn the reading passages as efficiently as possible, even though they were found to tap more the lowest level of cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy. On the other, the analysis of the Iranian EFL students’ answers referred students attempted to utilize the strategy that match

to them, and to some extent, match to their textbook that would help students become independent on their own more quickly. The students' explanation about their behaviors in a typical reading class and some of their responses that were under the umbrella of the highest level of cognitive domain indicated that utilizing systematic strategies and varying practical exercises encouraged them to use their own skills to construct the scope meaning. Almost all students, mentioned some weakness and strength of their typical reading classes. They affirmed the contemporary learning procedures in reading classes, contained a series of inherent strategies; they acquired since the beginning of the study of English in junior high school. Indeed, they utilized the strategies unconsciously as their routine skills for understanding the reading passages.

The analysis of the students' answers exposed that students did not make an effort to read and use the strategies in highest level of cognitive domain unless they were required to do so. It also indicated that if students were unable to do this, they obviously would be persuaded to apply the strategies and then skills, which were not desired and needed. Ultimately, the students rarely attempted to develop their reading strategies to obtain autonomy.

According to Saha and Dworkin (2009) summative assessment means gathering and using information about student achievement for "final" judgments – at least, for judgments that are final for a certain point in time. Thus, Table 3 shows the average scores of competency of Iranian EFL students in reading strategies.

**Table 3: Summative Assessment of utilized Critical Reading Strategies among Iranian EFL Students**

Reading Strategies	No. of Students	Level of Competency
Skim	13	39
question	15	45
Set purpose	8	8
visualize	7	7
Monitor understanding	7	14
Read/pause/summarize	7	14
Take notes	12	36
retell	11	33
Make reference	7	7
Reflect on reading	5	5

Saha and Dworkin (2009)

As Saha and Dworkin (2009) referred, the "Summative Assessment" in current study help the researcher to gather and use information about student achievement for "final" judgments. The scores of competency for summative assessment include "Exemplary" as Exceeds the standard; response is excellent/skilled; "Satisfactory" means meets the standard; response is competent/effective; "Below Satisfactory" refers approaches the standard; response shows a lack of consistent competence, and "Unsatisfactory" means below the standard; response is unskilled and insufficient.

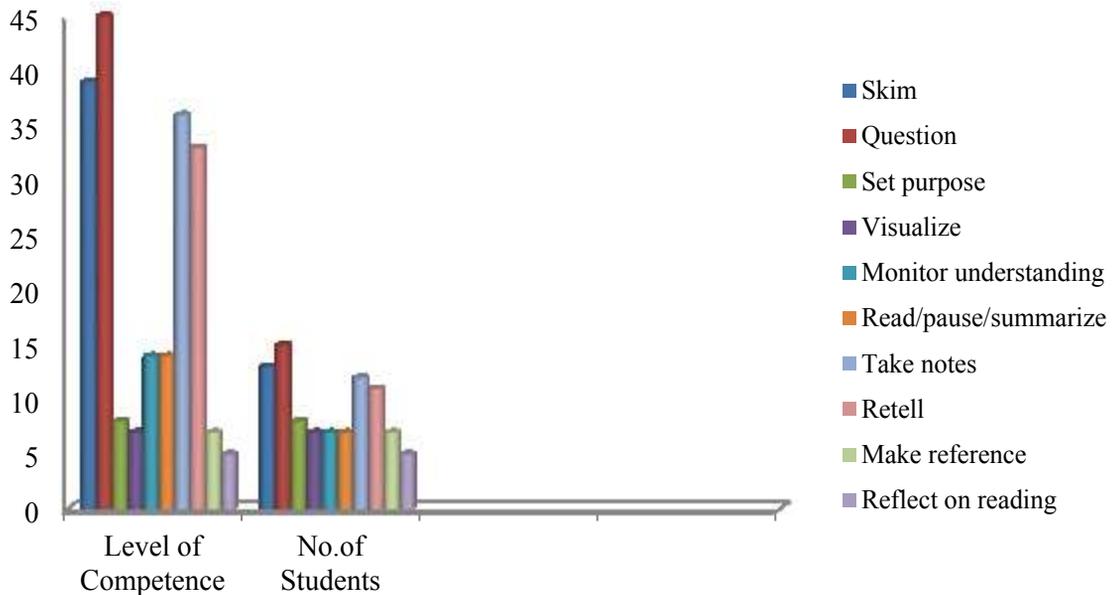
Table 4 showed the level of Iranian EFL students' competence that the researcher obtained by multiplying the number of students to scores of competency e.g. 15(students) x3(satisfactory) =39

**Table 4: Critical Reading Strategies among Iranian EFL Students**

Average of Scores of Competency	Reading Strategies
(13*3)39	Skim
(15*3)45	Question
(8*1)8	Set Purpose
(7*1)7	Visualize
(7*2)14	Monitor Understanding
(7*2)14	Read/Pause/Summarize
(12*3)36	Take Notes
(11*3)33	Retell
(7*1)7	Make Reference
(5*1)5	Reflect on Reading

4= Exemplary: Exceeds the standard; response is excellent/skilled  
 3= Satisfactory: Meets the standard; response is competent/effective  
 2= Below Satisfactory: Approaches the standard; response shows a lack of consistent competence

1= Unsatisfactory: Below the standard; response is unskilled and insufficient  
 e.g. 15(Students)\*3(Satisfactory)=39



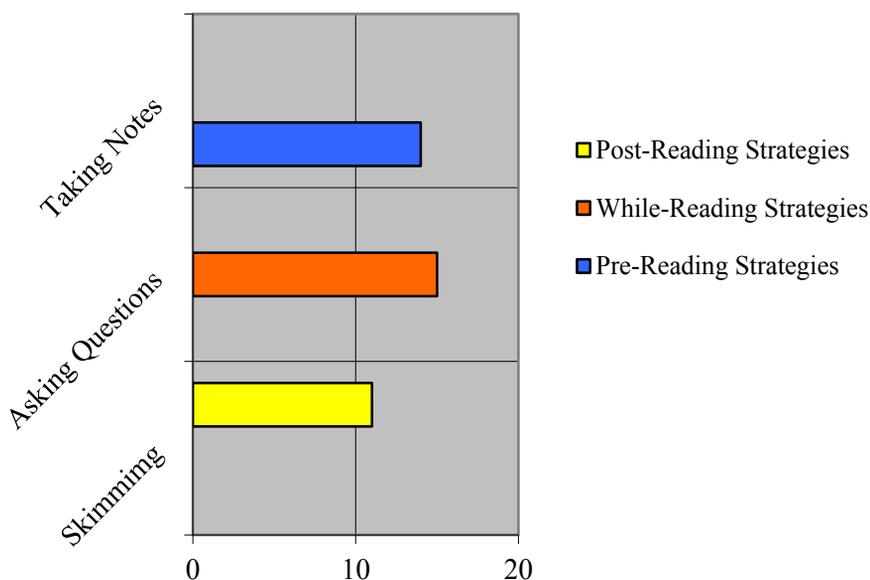
**Figure 4: Critical Reading Strategies among Iranian EFL Students**

The analysis of the summative observation checklist as final judgment also revealed the reading strategies ,question for understanding; skimming and taking notes , among Iranian EFL students met the appropriate standard and applying these strategies was effective for fostering and growing students reading specifically critical reading . However, in order to utilize these strategies, as professional reading skills for access to the highest level of critical thinking EFL students need a systematic training plan.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

Implementing first phase of Stringer's Action Research Model had allowed the teacher-researcher to identify the most common and the prevalent critical reading strategies among EFL students. The Students throughout the Look phase began to share the strategies that work for them. Reading strategies took more time at first, but with practice, helped the students to understand and remember much more from the text in less time than it would take without using reading strategies. At first, such a strategy would take the students much more time and effort, and might even seem inefficient. Nevertheless, with practice, such strategies became more automatic, and then they became a natural part of reading. However, utilizing strategies were an important part of comprehension; there were only a few strategies students used in various combinations repeatedly, with slight variation from one reading situation to another. These strategies could be categorized as: before students began reading, during reading and after reading.

The findings in relation to identify the critical reading strategies employed by EFL students reveal that students are generally familiar with reading strategies, however in most of the Iranian high school the reading strategies are presented as a set of isolated skills and seldom practice systematically in the actual context. In fact, they know reading strategies as 'per-reading, while and post-reading' activities which Iranian students are now routinely taught as a way of dealing with their textbook reading passages. Thus, this helps them to pursue acquiring meaning all over the reading process. Moreover the results of the study show that critical reading strategies of skimming and scanning, as a means of processing the text, asking questions for better understanding, and taking notes are the brilliant critical reading strategies among Iranian EFL students.



**Figure 5:** Common Critical Reading Strategies among Iranian EFL Students

The Fig.5 showed the most common critical reading strategies that Iranian EFL students used in reading classes. Three distinguished strategies were skimming that was utilized by 11 students. Questioning that was used by 14 students, and ultimately "Taking Notes" the important part independently was applied by 15 students

## 6. Recommendation for Future Work

There is a great deal of evidence for the importance of critical reading strategies. One source of evidence is that successful readers know when and how to use deliberate strategies to repair comprehension. Based on the review of literatures conducted on the West, Asian region and Iran, it is found out similarities such as practicing reading strategies as isolated skill; absence of explicit tool or strategies. Lack of variety of classroom activities that reinforce the students to use strategies in different contexts, needs must explicit modeling to teaching strategies effectively. Due to lack of thorough use of critical reading strategies within EFL students, the area of concern for future work can focus on developing critical reading strategies using the Cognitive Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy in the EFL students in the context of Iranian classrooms. Hence, the EFL students require utilizing critical reading strategies that is a key toward helping them to improve critical reading, critical thinking and higher order thinking ability. It is suggested that carry out a research to increase utilizing critical reading strategies directly as a medium for improving comprehension will also be facilitated by instructional attention to teaching reading based on cognitive domain of Bloom 's taxonomy.

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