Reviewing Critical Reviews in Postgraduate Teaching in Tertiary Institutions

Rajeswary Appacutty Sargunan
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Mohana Nambiar
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

Critical reviews allow access to the critical thinking abilities of their writers, especially with regard to analyzing and synthesizing ideas. In most institutions of higher learning, critical reviews are assigned as coursework, and the general assumption is that students would know how to produce a 'good' review, one that meets its readers' expectations. Is this a fair assumption? If not, which particular skills and strategies do we, as academics, teach them? This study was undertaken to find the answers to these questions and focused on the critical review writing of postgraduates. A mixed methods approach was adopted incorporating questionnaires, interviews and critical reviews of articles written in English by ESL postgraduate students at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. The critical reviews were analyzed from two perspectives (contents and presentation) using a checklist devised by the researchers. The findings revealed that most of the students lacked the skills and strategies for writing effective reviews.

Introduction

Academic criticism (Cheng 2006), incorporating within it skills such as critical thinking, critical reading and critical writing (Canagarajah 2002), has been occupying a substantial amount of research ground lately, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) and multilingual situations. This could be because although producing critical reviews of books, chapters and journal articles is a common method of teaching and evaluating content knowledge (and sometimes skills) in tertiary institutions, the area appears to be one that is lodged in murky waters. Students appear to find it a very daunting task and to be unsure of what is expected of them; instructors appear to assume that students know how to write good critical reviews, and to be dissatisfied with the performance of many of their students. There is little empirical evidence to lend proof to this statement, but academics and writing development staff have noted that this seems to be the case in many institutions of higher learning (Kumar and Strack 2007).

The study outlined in this article researched the critical writing skills and strategies of ESL postgraduates at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, largely because the institution reflects the state of affairs described above. Also, since the researchers were academics teaching on the postgraduate programme at the faculty, our familiarity with the setting allowed us to probe deeper into the relevant issues within the time frames we had established for ourselves.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which students demonstrate their skills and strategies in producing critical reviews of journal articles. Evidence from the study will allow us to validate or disprove existing assumptions about students' competencies in the relevant skills and

strategies, as well as to identify the areas where students might need greater help. The research questions are thus as follows:

1. Do postgraduate students know how to produce a good critical review (CR)?

2. What particular skills and strategies do postgraduate students seem to lack, if any?

A prerequisite for answering the first question was defining what a good critical review is: we have attempted to do this by surveying the literature in the field, and marrying this with instructors' perceptions and expectations.

Definition of a Good Critical Review

A critical review is a summary and evaluation of the ideas and information in a text, in this case published journal articles, and expresses the reviewer's opinions in the light of what he/she knows of the subject and what is acquired from related texts. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the article should be taken into consideration (Academic Writing Center n.d.). A critical review should be able to stand on its own, and be concise yet comprehensive.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach, incorporating a two-phase design for data collection and analysis. In the first phase, 16 CRs written by students pursuing a particular course at the master's level were collected. The students were required to write a 1,000 word review on either one of two journal articles provided by the instructor. The two instructors of the course were also interviewed to discover their expectations of their students' critical review skills. It was decided that the best way to analyse the 16 CRs was to study them in terms of what a CR should ideally comprise, and how effectively these had been presented by the students. There has been much work done on how to review related literature for writing theses and academic articles (Fink 2009 and Hartley 2008), where there is a need to not only analyze individual articles but also synthesize them as a whole. However, there is a paucity of literature on how to critically review single or stand-alone articles from academic journals. Hence, using the limited literature in the field and the input from the two instructors, the first draft of a checklist was produced, outlining the criteria for identifying and assessing effective CRs. It consisted of a three part structure: *heading*, *summary* and *critique*. Each of these was reviewed from three dimensions – *identification*, *evaluatio*n and *presentatio*n, thereby giving rise to a 47-item checklist. A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess each item on the checklist.

The aim of the second phase was to fine-tune the checklist. It was applied to 15 new CRs obtained from students of two master's courses, to examine whether the checklist was able to capture all the crucial aspects of a critical review. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to 47 postgraduates to survey their experiences in writing a CR, including their perceptions of what comprised a CR, and the problems they faced in writing one. To further understand instructors' expectations and to see whether there were differences in their expectations, three instructors whose courses required students to write CRs were interviewed. The assignment specifications provided by these instructors were also scrutinized.

Findings and Discussion

This section will focus on three aspects: instructors' expectations of students' performance in producing critical reviews of journal articles, students' perspectives of the definition and functions of critical reviews, and students' mastery of writing critical reviews.

Instructors' expectations and students' perspectives
Instructors' expectations were gauged based on the assignment specifications (in this case, three different instructors taught the same module but were given some freedom in setting the guidelines

for the CR assignment), and interviews (Table 1), while students' perspectives were gleaned from open-ended questionnaires. With regard to the former, although there were some similarities in the sense that all expected a critique, there were numerous differences in terms of the length of the review, the article to be selected for review, mode of presentation (written or oral), date of submission (7th or 12th week), contents of the critique (positive or negative comments, or both), language proficiency (important or not important) and focus of evaluation (process or product). These varied expectations would have had an impact on students' performance as they would have 'carried' the expectations of one instructor into the class of another, especially when the tasks were not well-defined.

Table 1: Expectations of Instructors

CRITERIA	Instructor 1	Instructor 2	Instructor 3
Length	2–3 pages, double-spaced	2–3 pages, double-spaced	A maximum of 3,000 words
Article	Not specified	Research article pub. in 2,000 or later	Had to be related to the course
Presentation	Written	Written and oral	Written
Submission	7th week	7th week	12th week
Critique	Had to include both positive and negative comments	Only positive comments: review only articles they liked	Had to include both positive and negative comments
Language proficiency	Important	Important	Not important
Process vs. product	Process more important. Vetted article and guided students through drafts. Read the original articles	Vetted articles upon request. Read only final draft	Vetted articles upon request. Read only final draft
Others			Specified students read and attach five related articles

With regard to the students, the great majority (85%) confessed that their first experience in writing a CR was at the postgraduate level, and about 60% learnt to do it on their own, with the help of friends and writing guidelines on the internet (Coutts n.d and Learning Center n.d.). Most of the students (64%) appeared to be aware that a CR reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of an article. A further 30% stated that it was a tool to express ideas and opinions about an article. According to them, it was also a mechanism for providing insights as well as possible suggestions for research. But some of their comments were most edifying. One student was wary of questioning anything in these articles: 'They have been written by professors and experts', she opined, puzzled, 'How can we be expected to question them? Everything looks perfect!'

There were also other issues that bothered them: some (about 24%) felt that they had no knowledge of how to critically evaluate an article, for instance, which aspects to comment upon. In addition, they did not have the necessary knowledge to comment on relevant aspects of the article, such as the methodology and background. Also, they had difficulty in summarizing the article and organizing their ideas about it. About an equal number complained that the articles themselves defied comprehension, and were written in language that was 'beyond them'. There were others who were confused about whether personal opinion was acceptable, and how to substantiate their opinions. They were also concerned about their difficulties in paraphrasing and using academic language and conventions.

Students' mastery of writing critical reviews
The information yielded from the analysis of the critical reviews has been summarized in Figs. 1–3 below. The Objectives, Theoretical Framework/Literature Review (TF/LR), Research Methodology (RM), Findings and Conclusions were selected as these were deemed to be the main components of a journal article. The skills and strategies of the students with regard to writing critical reviews were viewed in terms of identification, evaluation and presentation of the five aspects mentioned above.
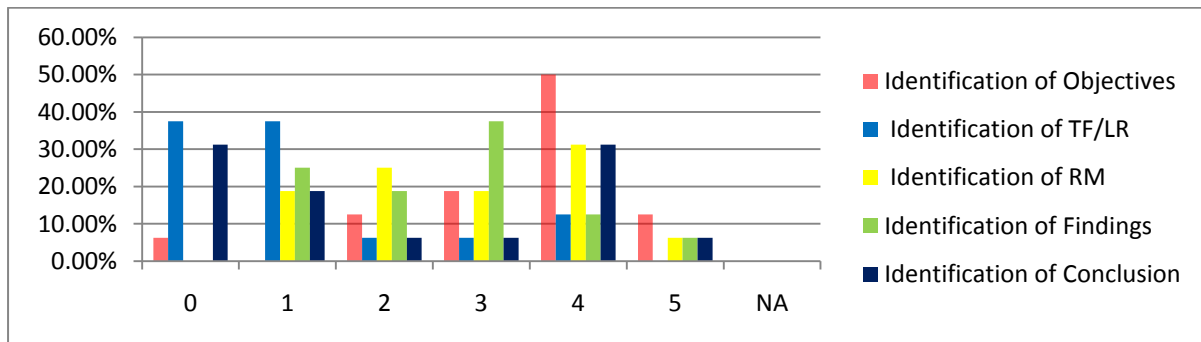
Identification

Figure 1: Identification of Objectives, TF/LR, RM, Findings and Conclusions
*'0' in the figures indicates that the item has not been addressed. 'NA' stands for non-applicable, when the item (for instance, TF/LR) has not been mentioned in the original article.

It is heartening to note that the majority of the students were able to identify the Objectives, Research Method and Conclusion quite effectively. Most of the problems appear to be with the TF/LR and Findings. It is possible that there was some confusion in their minds about the difference between TF and LR, and between Findings and Conclusion, as there was no clear demarcation between these in most of the articles.

One interesting issue related to identification of the five aspects was that the reviewers sometimes read into the article more than what was stated in it. For instance, in one of the articles, the objectives were not clearly stated, and the findings did not relate to them. The language used was also not very accurate or appropriate. However, the reviewer had 'appropriated' the article by stating her own 'improved' version of the objectives and RM.
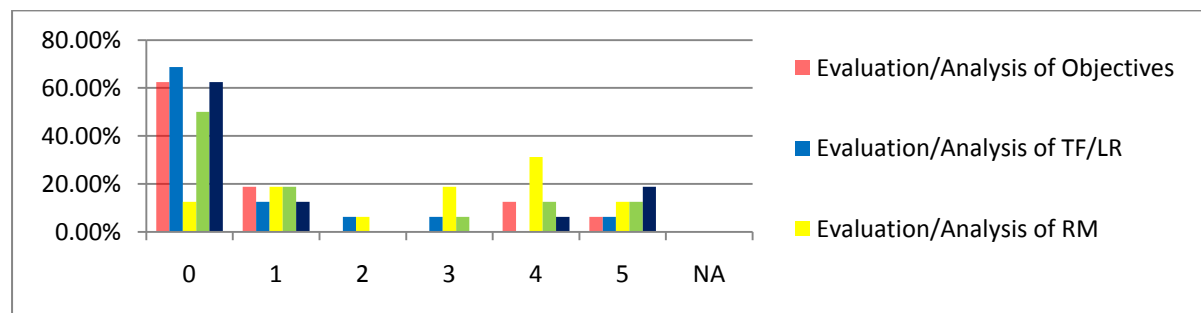
Evaluation

Figure 2: Evaluation/Analysis of Objectives, TF/LR, RM, Findings and Conclusion

As can be seen, there was hardly any evaluation: 60–70% of the students did not evaluate the objectives, TF/LR or the Conclusions. What little evaluation there was focused on RM and Findings (about 50% and 30%, respectively, were placed on points 3–5).

One important issue that arose here was whether the reviewers should comment on the content in the article, or the manner in which this had been *handled* and *presented* by the author (although fewer than 20% actually commented on the author's style of writing). There is significant difference between the two, and our checklist could not take account of this.

Only 17% of the students related the findings to the conclusion of the study, and there were instances where the reviewer criticized limitations that had already been acknowledged as such by the authors, especially with regard to issues related to RM. This reveals that perhaps the reviewers were not really aware of the conventions of academic writing. Their performance *vis-à-vis* presentation, especially paraphrasing, attests to this (see below).
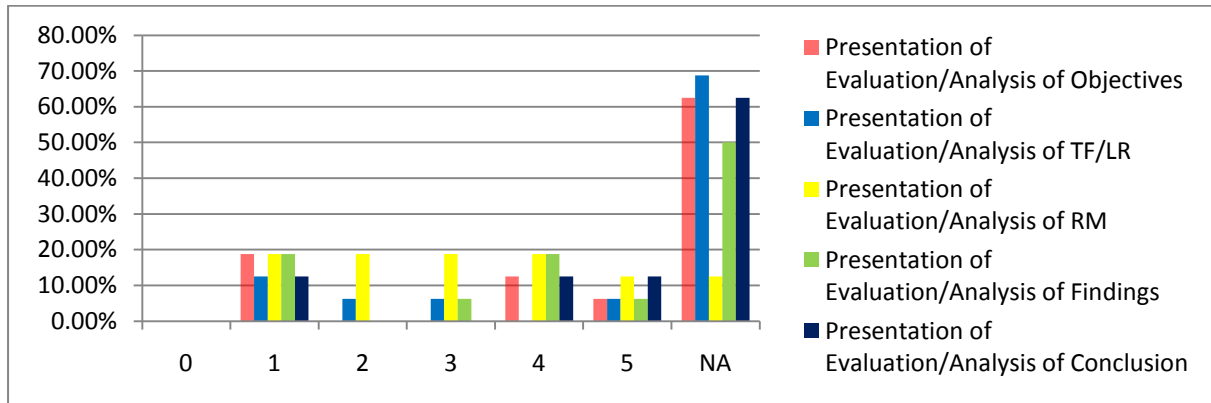
Presentation

Figure 3: Presentation of Evaluation/Analysis of Objectives, TF/LR, RM, Findings and Conclusions

This refers to the manner in which the students presented their evaluation of the five aspects stated earlier, and includes both language and organisation. Basically, most of the students fell into the NA column because they did not evaluate these five aspects. The only exception was RM: about 30% of the students actually fell on points 4 and 5 on the Likert scale, attesting to the fact that they had presented their evaluation of research methods in an effective manner.

One of the main issues with presentation related to paraphrasing and plagiarisation. Although more than 62% of the reviewers showed evidence of attempting to paraphrase the article, many could not do so effectively (only 37% managed placement on points 4 and 5 on the Likert scale). Whole chunks of materials had been lifted from the original. This made it difficult to gauge whether the students had actually understood the contents. Some of the students were smart enough to combine lifted expressions cleverly by copying and pasting expressions from different parts of the article such that these could not be easily identified. In the case of a few students, there were doubts as to the actual authorsip of the CRs – the language and style were not consistent with their usual use of language in class. This was based on the experience of the researchers while teaching on the postgraduate programme.

Conclusion

In our research we had asked the question whether it was fair to assume that postgraduate students would know how to produce a good CR. The answer that we obtained is that this is not a fair assumption as evidenced from students' questionnaires and their CRs. The next question we had asked was what strategies and skills they seemed to lack. This was answered in some detail in our findings (see discussion above).

The next step was to investigate the practical application of the tool, and examine its usefulness for both learners and instructors. Two instructors consented to be part of the research, and at their suggestion, the checklist was also made accessible to their students (about 30). The responses from both categories of respondents were, on the whole, very positive. They unanimously declared that the checklist had sensitized them not only to the contents of CRs, but also the skills and strategies they needed to have in order to in order to summarise and evaluate a journal article.

We had also intended that the checklist would serve as a guide for instructors to evaluate the performance of their students, but both the instructors felt that it (the checklist) was too detailed, and would require too much time and effort on their part. Given the number of students they had, they felt it would be feasible to create an abbreviated version of the tool. Further fieldwork has to be conducted before any decisions can be made with regard to this. It is gratifying to note, however, that the students were unreservedly enthusiastic about the checklist as they felt they had something tangible to guide them.

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