Research Article

Standardized Testing And Critical Reading: A Comprehensive Approach To Adventist Educational Innovation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores critical reading competencies in students in the Adventist educational system in Colombia, analyzing both achievements and challenges through a mixed approach. **In the introduction,** the value of standardized tests to identify areas for improvement in educational processes is argued. However, limitations in its implementation are highlighted, especially in heterogeneous contexts. **The methodology** combined quantitative analyses, based on the results of the ICFES tests of the last five years, with qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus groups with students and teachers. This design allowed a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect performance in critical reading. **Among the results**, advances in levels of literal and inferential comprehension are identified, although significant weaknesses persist in deep critical thinking. Students cited barriers such as lack of reading habits and technological distractions, while teachers highlighted the absence of clear institutional policies and up-to-date teaching materials. **The discussion** addresses the need for innovative pedagogical strategies, including unqualified drills and the integration of technological tools to improve critical competencies. **In the conclusion,** the importance of a comprehensive approach that includes teacher training, diversification of texts, and a transversal approach in the curriculum is underlined, in order to strengthen critical reading competencies and their impact on student learning. **Keywords:** competencies, training, diversification

INTRODUCTION

The arguments around the pedagogical value of standardized tests are generally dissimilar. There is research that affirms that the implementation of these systems ignores the different contexts and realities of education systems and, therefore, it would be a mistake to assume their results as a standard for improvement for learning (Sánchez & Corte, 2013). Likewise, they are criticized that despite the fact that these measurements are designed with criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and objectivity; with this alone it is difficult to determine true quality processes in the training of students (Fernández et al. 2017; Tristán & Pedraza, 2017). On the other hand, different studies doubt that the mere use of pencil and paper will diagnose mastery in critical reading skills. In addition, according to them, these practices harm the proper development of students' learning because the only role played by young people is that of passive subjects. Likewise, they constrain the school curriculum, by pigeonholing teachers who instruct according to the demands of the tests, which are generally focused on knowledge that only requires the memory of certain facts or isolated data (Alcaraz et al., 2013. Moreno, 2016).

However, without ignoring the above, the value of these tests in gathering data and statistical information that allow comparisons to be made between regions of a nation or between countries is widely recognized. With this, they generally establish indicators that serve as a reference in the formulation of policies and reforms to the education system (Báez, 2020., Cifuente et al. 2018). In addition, as Shepard (2006) rightly observes, external examinations, when pedagogical use is made of the results, manage to profoundly impact classroom practices. It would also allow teachers to identify some crucial points that need to be materialized in their work (Ravela, 2010). In addition, census exams provide valuable information to teachers regarding skills, knowledge, and competencies that need to be strengthened in their students (Popham, 2017).

Therefore, by investigating the performance of students in the standardized tests in the critical reading exam, it helped to identify difficulties in some student competencies; while providing tools for the improvement of the teaching-learning processes taught by teachers. At this point, it should be noted that it is wrong to assume the results, which in the case of Colombia are provided by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education (ICFES), as simple statistical data with only informative value. This project proposed to investigate the role of teachers, students and educational institutions in presenting and managing the results of the test. Likewise, it sought that the information derived from them could provide pedagogical input in order to establish a strategy that enriches classroom practices.

This may be a weakness in the Adventist educational system to the extent that there is little bibliographic information that studies and proposes criteria for improvement based on the results of critical reading tests, both in secondary and undergraduate education, especially in education programs. Therefore, the census results obtained tend to be ignored or isolated improvement projects are carried out that have little impact on student learning. Therefore, the need arose to investigate the historical performances of the last five years of the test in order to identify constants that allow, at least, two important achievements. First, recognize possible weaknesses in the training or preparation processes of teachers, students, and educational institutions when presenting the evaluation. Second, to provide conceptual and pedagogical indications that enrich the teaching-learning processes, especially in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

According to the objectives and research question, this inquiry was of the Mixed type with a sequence design. The proposed operationalization was as follows.

1. **Quantitative approach:** To evaluate the performance of students in critical reading competencies through the ICFES standardized assessments, a quantitative analysis will be carried out. In the interest of providing objective numerical data.

2. **Qualitative Approach:** To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the quantitative results and to explore possible contextual factors, interviews, surveys, or focus groups will be conducted with students, faculty, and other key actors in the Adventist education system.

2.1 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments:

1. **Quantitative Data:**

to. **ICFES Results:** The results of the ICFES standardized assessments for a representative group of middle and undergraduate students from the Adventist educational system in Colombia. These data

were obtained directly from educational institutions or from official ICFES sources.

2. **Qualitative data:**

to. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were implemented with students and Adventist institutions. Ask about their experiences, challenges and perceptions about critical reading in the educational system.

b. **Focus Groups:** Organizes focus groups with students to discuss their learning strategies and how they approach critical reading in their courses.

2.2 Data analysis:

1. **Quantitative data:** Descriptive and comparative statistical analyses were performed to evaluate students' performance in critical reading competencies. Use statistical tools such as ANOVA.

2. **Qualitative Data:** A thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups was conducted to identify patterns and emerging themes related to critical reading in the Adventist education system.

Data Integration: Quantitative and qualitative findings were combined to get a complete picture of student performance and the reasons behind these results

RESULTS

Research on the teaching and development of critical reading competencies in the Adventist educational system in Colombia made it possible to identify and systematize relevant findings that highlight both achievements and areas of opportunity in this area. The main results are presented below:

Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Critical Reading

- **Students**: Students recognize the importance of critical reading as an essential tool for their academic and professional development. They value mock exams as a useful strategy to familiarize themselves with standardized tests, but they say they feel overwhelmed by the length and complexity of some texts. In addition, he considers that these skills are useful not only for passing evaluations, but also for solving everyday problems and making informed decisions.

- **Teachers**: Educators perceive significant advances in students' critical capacity, but they point out that this progress is limited by factors such as lack of motivation, technological distractions and the low intensity of hours dedicated to critical reading.

On the other hand, among the students, challenges such as distraction, fatigue when reading long texts and lack of reading habit are identified. These barriers negatively affect your performance on critical reading tests. Likewise, teachers report the absence of clear institutional policies that integrate critical reading in all curricular areas, in addition to the need to update teaching materials and provide resources adapted for students with special needs.

For this reason, the teachers highlighted the effectiveness of methodologies such as debates, textual analysis workshops and the incorporation of biblical and literary texts to encourage critical reflection. Likewise, the students valued the activities that promote the socialization of results and the collaborative analysis of texts. In short, it was detected that current strategies tend to focus on basic levels of comprehension (literal and inferential), leaving behind the development of deep critical thinking.

For this reason, both teachers and students agreed on several proposals, including: Diversifying the texts used, including current literature and literature of interest to young people, increasing the intensity of hours dedicated to critical reading in school curricula, designing ungraded drills with a diagnostic approach to reduce the pressure for grades and promote more meaningful practice, and implementing reading clubs and critical reading laboratories such as extracurricular spaces for the development of analytical skills.

On the other hand, a relevant finding is the dual role of technology. While electronic devices and social media represent a significant distraction, teachers also identify the potential of these tools to promote critical reading through interactive apps and digital resources. Therefore, the results reflect a mixed picture, in which advances in critical reading are limited by both individual and structural challenges. Although there are promising pedagogical strategies, their impact is limited due to the lack of a comprehensive and sustained approach. The findings highlight the urgent need for coherent education

policies, up-to-date materials, and innovative strategies that adapt to students' technological and cultural realities.

On the other hand, according to the quantitative analysis that, according to the results of the ICFES tests of the last five years, the performance of the students indicates that they present variability in their critical reading skills. The descriptive and comparative statistical analysis revealed significant differences in management between different groups of students. That is, the results tend to be significantly different depending on the institution to which one belongs. The above is evidenced in the following figure.

Figure 2. Average of the Critical Reading Test by Educational Institution 2019-2023
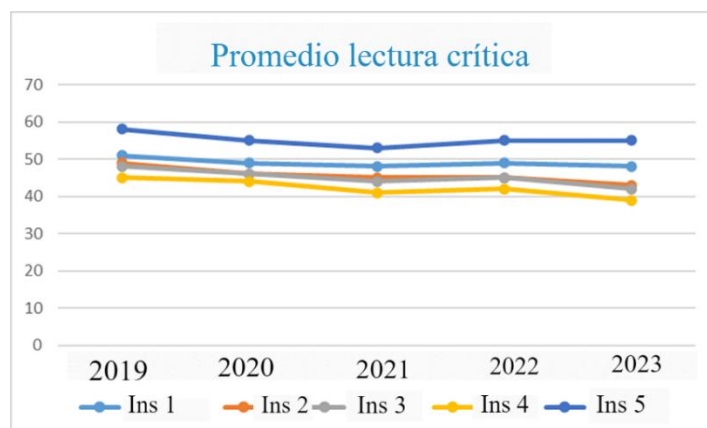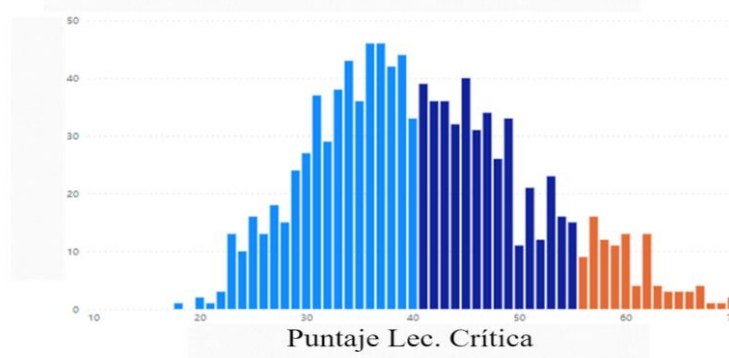

Source: Own elaboration (2024). In original language Spanish.

As the figure points out, not only significant differences between institutions; but shows a trend where the laggards decrease in their annual average. This means that not only worse scores are obtained; rather, there is no short-term expectation of overcoming this gap. These indicate, among many other things, that pedagogical practices are not influencing the improvement of educational quality.

On the other hand, it was identified that the specific competencies where students show weaknesses are, particularly, in the inferential and critical component. That is, in the aspects of the test that require greater complexity and depth. Therefore, a higher level of appropriation by students. These areas represent opportunities to design pedagogical strategies that address these gaps. The above can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 3. Results by competencies in critical reading

Source: Own elaboration (2024). In original language Spanish.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to evaluate the performance of middle and undergraduate students in critical reading competencies in the Adventist educational system in Colombia according to standardized assessments during the last 5 years. With reference to the above, the critical reading competence applied by Icfes (2021) in the Saber 11°, Saber TyT and Saber Pro state exams was considered, which seek to determine the degree of development of reading competence in terms of the levels exposed by Solé (2012, as cited in Icfes, 2021) and that this body has been synthesized into three levels of reading: literal, inferential and critical.

Based on the above considerations, critical reading as a competence in the national and international educational panorama is a priority and fundamental to form reflective people, capable of taking a critical position, with autonomy and freedom of thought, to interpret the prevailing values, discern between different points of view and unveil the intentions, imaginaries and ideologies present in the multiplicity of social contexts (Serrano and Madrid, 2007).

As could be observed, the difference between the results obtained in the diagnostic test applied during the research and the scores obtained in the ICFES tests do not show a significant variation. It is evident then that the results indicate a low performance in this competition. Pinchao (2020) mentions that the factors committed "to low reading comprehension and incipient critical reading" (p.3) in students are due to the attitude resistant to reading texts, to the tendency to learn expeditiously without effort; to the uncritical and belligerent attitude towards long texts. Arriving at university with the tendency not to question what they study and without further reflection. It should be added that for Brito (2020), critical reading is not only a problem with the area of Spanish Language, but it is also a problem with the other areas of knowledge. With respect to this situation, students are apathetic, bored and visibly reveal that they do not dare to assume a critical position in front of a text; and in relation to the causes, they are diverse: (a) weak reading habits, (b) little incentive to read, (c) limited access to libraries, (d) lack of books in homes, (e) preferences for smartphones, social networks and interactive electronic games.

Having made the above considerations and taking as a reference the interviews carried out with the teachers of the areas of Castrellana language and philosophy of the institutions participating in the research; It can be evidenced that some factors that go against a good performance in the area of critical reading are the pedagogical challenges are: Lack of a clear institutional policy for the application of critical reading tests, low intensity of hours in educational institutions for the strengthening of critical reading competence, the non-restructuring and updating of teaching materials, the establishment of goals related to the expected level of performance of students in critical reading and the lack of resources adapted for students with different learning abilities.

In this order of ideas, it can be mentioned that another fundamental aspect that limits good performance in critical reading is related to the motivation and attitude of the students. Reflected in the lack of interest in reading, distractions caused by the use of technological tools such as cell phones and Ipads, among others. Attracting them in this way in the use of social networks and causing distraction from the activities that are carried out in the classroom. Finally, the scarce development of deep thinking in students is observed, leading them to provide immediate answers.

Similarly, within the observations made by the teachers, it was established that communication between the companies that carry out the application of standardized tests and the teachers is poor or non-existent, which leads to the non-application of them from a comprehensive approach, excluding topics of interest to students and relevant areas that must be addressed. To this must be added the infrequency with which the drills are applied.

With respect to the aforementioned factors, Avendaño de Barón (2016) states that the difficulties encountered by teachers should not only be attributed to student performance. It is up to the teacher to self-evaluate and choose measures such as becoming aware of their functions and adapting to changes. It is up to him to reflect on each of the difficulties expressed, to analyze and investigate their causes, and once these are detected, to carry out improvement actions; and not to forget that the "teaching work must be permanently linked to research, which favors the qualification of their pedagogical practices and, therefore, the learning of their students" (p. 228).

Teachers also highlight the importance of including, in critical reading, texts specifically related to the topics evaluated in standardized tests and exposing students to different points of view and critical thinking. Arguing that, although the readings currently used in the classroom contribute to the

formation of values and principles, they do not have a significant impact on obtaining good scores in these evaluations.

Finally, from a higher education perspective, the need to strengthen critical reading skills from preschool, diversify texts, and make constant self-evaluation is raised. On this basis, González (2021) states that students who come to higher education are accustomed to approaching short, formal texts without any complexity of content, whose analysis and activities subscribe to the levels of literal comprehension and interpretation, without requiring "a great effort through reflective, critical, evaluative thinking" (p. 14). These difficulties end up triggering, for González (2021), a series of parallel difficulties such as shortcomings in writing texts, spelling and the inability to develop critical thinking.

With regard to the position and condition of the students in the interview, important positions can be perceived with respect to the experience, preparation and impact of the simulations in critical reading. The vast majority recognize that educational institutions prepare them from the elementary grades and that they have been participating in them for several years. However, there is no clarity as to the dates and degrees of start.

According to them, the drills are considered a realistic experience, useful for developing concentration, comprehension and critical reading skills; it prepares them and familiarizes them with the standardized tests of the State and in the comprehension of texts in different areas of study, such as Philosophy, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Political Science and even in Mathematics. Drills help them identify the main structures and ideas of the text, analyze them, and improve them in critical thinking.

As far as the definition of critical reading is concerned, not all students present it explicitly. For some, it is comprehension, identification, and analysis of ideas within a text; and for others, it is problem solving, the development of ideas and assuming critical positions in the face of the subject of a text. These conceptions do not differ or disagree with the skills expressed by Díez and Egío (2017), contained in the international PISA tests in critical reading, such as understanding and analyzing information from various sources; critically evaluating information and formulating one's own opinions; and solving problems and making informed decisions. The students who reach the level of understanding of what this competence is are those who surpass the majority who are within the basic levels of reading, such as literal and inferential (Icfes, 2021).

Teaching activities and strategies such as the "reading plan" that schools have opted for to develop critical reading, students consider incipient, limited and exclusive. In particular, they refer to the fact that a literature rich in values is chosen, but that they are not the object of analysis in the standardized tests Saber that is carried out in the eleventh grade; since the literature that is analyzed are universal, classical, canonical, Latin American and Colombian. They also emphasize, as an activity and teaching strategy, the need to choose varied, current and interesting texts; without discarding axiological and Christian texts, which can be used in subjects such as Religious Education or Ethics and Human Values. Much more than Icfes (2023) uses two types of texts, continuous (novels, short stories, poetry, songs, dramaturgy) and discontinuous (caricature, comic). It is worth taking into account the warning made by Vélez et al. (2019) about the importance of the precise use of the texts used in the simulacra, because to a large extent they present difficulties in terms of "the clarity of their ideas, ambiguities, unnecessary repetitions or redundancies in the approach of the ideas" (p. 122). An aspect that must be strengthened due to the deficiencies in the evidence presented.

In view of this, Brito (2020) suggests that, in order to contribute to the development of reading comprehension competence, it is necessary to generate pleasant and pleasant forms, so that students can arrive at university with the skills required in critical reading, and can read consciously, reflectively, and critically. "Motivation is the starting point for a student to access a text without difficulty" (Blanco & Moreno, 2020, p. 139). In this regard, students share that the best method is to read for pleasure, and to apply and practice internalizing the text with their teachers in the classroom. At secondary and university educational levels, reading is often a superficial process, without comprehension, without motivation, lacking a deep and critical analysis. Literal reading predominates, without exploring more advanced perspectives for comprehension and analysis. The ideal, as Cassany (2013, p. 344) puts it, is to move from "literal reading (reading the lines), inferential reading (reading between the lines) and critical reading (reading behind the lines)".

With references to the challenges students face in developing critical reading skills, they list the following:

- Develop concentration and comprehension, because they are prone to being distracted by reading. Concentration is the most recurrent problem among the answers.

- Stress in the face of long or long texts in tests or simulations.
- Do not read much because it is not a habit or custom in your personal lifestyle.
- Tiredness when reading long paragraphs.
- Difficulty understanding some words.
- Tendency to read quickly, omitting important parts of the text.
- The pressure for the grade in this subject can induce copying of the other classmates.
- Pressure on students.

In recent research, they have explored the description of academic anxiety and stress levels in students as conditioning factors for the results obtained from external standardized tests; which conjectures the importance of governing a process of prior preparation to face these academic tests and the difficulties that it entails (Deleón & Quintanilla, 2020).

Faced with these problems and challenges, students suggest some ideas that could improve the simulations and the teaching of critical reading in general:

- Explain the structure of a text and provide strategies for its understanding, analysis and critical appropriation.
- Apply critical reading in a transversal way in various areas and situations.
- They propose improvements in the various drills that are carried out in the different areas to include and focus more on critical reading and less on long texts.
- They suggest starting the teaching of critical reading from the lower grades, gradually encouraging the reading of complex texts and encouraging their practice in various areas.
- They recommend including academic books in the reading plan and developing reading skills with varied literature.
- They propose the socialization of the results obtained from the critical reading tests and take measures and pedagogical strategies for solutions.
- They express having simulations so as not to be graded, because their intention is to diagnose the state of students' critical reading.

With regard to the skills and expectations they want to have in the future in relation to the development of critical reading, students see it as useful for analysis and decision-making, in practical, work and professional life, which can help interpret complex problems and solve them. They see it as key to a successful future, for analyzing information in depth and making responsible and informed decisions.

They express a desire to read more. To be successful in evaluations that require critical reading. Possess it as a competence for the university environment, as it is indispensable, remarkable and relevant in academic and social development.

Students in the Bachelor's Degree in Spanish and English at the Adventist University Corporation identify several problems in relation to critical reading. They point out that this skill is challenging and complicated, mainly because of the large number of readings and the limited time to do them. They recognize that critical reading is essential to improve academic quality and develop deeper arguments, but they regret the lack of an educational plan that promotes a critical stance towards texts. To address these challenges, students suggest several recommendations. They propose the practice of critical reading in a transversal and comprehensive way in the career, implementing strategies such as analysis before and after readings in reading clubs. In addition, they suggest incorporating relevant readings and helping to expand students' vocabulary. Finally, participants see great potential in developing these skills for their professional future and aspire to become inspiring role models for their own students.

CONCLUSIONS

This research allowed us to comprehensively explore critical reading competencies in students of the Adventist educational system in Colombia, addressing both the achievements and the areas of opportunity identified through a mixed approach. The findings reveal a complex reality: although current simulations and pedagogical strategies have generated advances in the levels of literal and inferential comprehension, important challenges remain in the consolidation of deep critical thinking. This is largely due to individual factors such as lack of reading habit and distraction, as well as related structural limitations.

A highlight was the identification of the dual role of technology, which, while representing a significant source of distraction, can also be leveraged as a powerful tool to innovate in the teaching of critical reading. Likewise, the absence of clear institutional policies and the lack of adequate resources for students with special needs show the urgency of developing education strategies.

In conclusion, this research underscores the need for a comprehensive pedagogical approach that considers both individual student characteristics and systemic limitations. Key recommendations include diversifying the texts used in the classroom, increasing the intensity of hours dedicated to critical reading, and encouraging the use of unqualified diagnostic drills. In addition, it is essential to strengthen teacher training and promote practices that integrate critical reading in a transversal way in various areas of the curriculum. Only through a joint effort between institutions, teachers and students will it be possible to significantly improve critical reading skills and, with it, contribute to the development of a

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