

Epistemic cognition among law professionals and multidisciplinary public policy students

Ghada M. Awada
Email: ghada.awada@lau.edu.lb
Lebanese American University

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.071025/dk5dtm98>

Date of Submission: 30-09-2025	Date of Acceptance: 15-11-2025	Date of Publish: 15-11-2025
--------------------------------	--------------------------------	-----------------------------

Abstract

This study explores how university students and early-career legal professionals engage with the deeper dimensions of reading—particularly how they interpret an author’s purpose, intended audience, and background. Using epistemic cognition as its guiding framework, the research examines how readers think about the nature and construction of knowledge. This research employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how students and early-career legal professionals engage with the epistemic dimensions of reading. A mixed-methods design combined structured surveys with semi-structured interviews to capture both broad trends and personal insights. The study involved 48 participants (31 male, 17 female), ranging in age from 18 to 35 ($M = 24.3$, $SD = 3.9$). Survey data showed that most participants actively considered why an author wrote a text and for whom, and more than half critically reflected on the author’s credibility and potential biases. Interviews revealed moments of epistemic doubt, careful evaluation of sources, and the dynamic relationship between reader and author during interpretation. The findings suggested that reading is not a passive act of receiving information but a reflective process through which readers continually could negotiate meaning. By bringing together quantitative and qualitative perspectives, this research enriches the understanding of epistemic cognition in legal and academic contexts. It also highlights the value of cultivating critical literacy and epistemic awareness to navigate today’s complex information environment.

Keywords: Critical literacy; epistemic cognition; legal professionals; public policy

INTRODUCTION

Individual’s beliefs about knowledge—what it is, how it’s justified, and who holds it—shape how they make sense of the texts they read. Previous research has shown that a reader’s personal epistemological beliefs influence how they process and integrate information from multiple sources (Bråten & Strømsø, 2006). Encouraging students to summarize one source before turning to another, for example, has been shown to help them connect ideas and build a more coherent understanding (Britt & Sommer, 2004).

Critical reading is often described as the ability to question claims, evaluate sources, and interpret meaning (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Greene et al., 2016). But in practice, reading is more than an academic exercise it is a cognitive and personal encounter. Readers bring to the text their assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge, how knowledge is justified, and which voices are credible (Schommer, 1990). These issues become even more pronounced in fields like law and public policy, where interpretation and fact are tightly intertwined, and in multilingual or interdisciplinary settings, where cultural and linguistic factors shape the way readers construct meaning (Awada, 2025; Piller et al., 2022).

Although we know quite a lot about how readers comprehend and retain information, much less is understood about how they handle epistemic challenges: the moments of doubt, scrutiny, and

evaluation that arise when engaging with complex material. Most existing research focuses on monolingual students in scientific disciplines, leaving the experiences of multilingual learners and professionals underexplored (Cheung et al., 2025). Moreover, while epistemic cognition theories describe how people think about knowledge and justification (Bråten et al., 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997), less is known about how these beliefs come into play during actual reading—especially in diverse cultural and disciplinary contexts.

This study addresses those gaps. Using a phenomenological lens, it examines how undergraduate students and early-career legal professionals interpret academic and professional texts. Drawing on the AIR model of epistemic cognition, which focuses on readers' aims, ideals, and reasoning processes (Chinn et al., 2011), it investigates how participants evaluate sources, reflect on knowledge, and navigate competing perspectives. The combination of surveys and in-depth interviews offers a detailed picture of how readers engage with complex knowledge claims in real time.

Statement of The Problem

In classrooms, courtrooms, and research spaces, critical reading isn't just a useful skill—it's indispensable. Effective reading involves questioning claims, assessing evidence, and interpreting meaning, often in high-stakes situations. For many students and professionals, however, reading is not merely academic. It's a personal and intellectual journey that requires grappling with their own assumptions about knowledge, its sources, and its legitimacy.

Despite significant advances in literacy and cognition research, we still lack a clear understanding of how people *experience* knowledge while reading. This is particularly true for multilingual readers and those working across disciplines like law and public policy, where the boundaries between fact and interpretation are often blurred. We know little about how these readers manage uncertainty, weigh conflicting claims, or decide whether to trust a text (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Greene et al., 2016). Existing research tends to focus on monolingual science students, leaving a substantial gap in other domains.

Purpose Of The Study

This study examines the often-overlooked moments that occur during reading—pauses to reflect, moments of doubt, and decisions about whether to trust the text. It focuses on how undergraduate students and early-career professionals make sense of challenging or unfamiliar material, particularly when faced with multiple viewpoints.

Using a phenomenological approach, the research captures participants' experiences in their own words, highlighting how they define knowledge, judge the credibility of sources, and handle complexity or contradiction. It is grounded in the framework of epistemic cognition, which explores how individuals think about knowing and justification (Schommer, 1990; Bråten et al., 2011). Through a combination of open-ended surveys and reflective interviews, the study paints a fuller picture of how readers reason through texts in real time.

Significance of The Study

This research brings attention to readers whose perspectives are often overlooked in studies of literacy and cognition. These include law students questioning legal precedents, multilingual learners negotiating cultural perspectives in policy texts, and first-generation university students grappling with academic language.

Its relevance spans multiple fields. Educators can use these insights to design more effective critical reading activities. Legal trainers and arbitrators can reflect on how their epistemic beliefs shape their reading practices. Researchers in education and linguistics can build on these findings to explore how identity, context, and discipline affect interpretation.

At a time when misinformation spreads rapidly, understanding how readers process knowledge is not just a scholarly concern but a civic one. This study sheds light on that process, offering both theoretical insight and practical applications.

Research Questions

This study is guided by one central question and two sub-questions:

How do university students and early-career professionals experience and interpret knowledge while reading academic or professional texts?

What beliefs and strategies guide their decisions to trust, question, or accept information in a text?

How do background, academic training, or cultural identity influence their engagement with competing claims or unfamiliar perspectives?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORITICAL FOUNDATION

Reading is an inherently personal act where beliefs, identities, and experiences converge (Chinn et al., 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Epistemic cognition provides a useful lens for understanding how readers evaluate knowledge claims, assign credibility, and justify their interpretations. Recent studies (Author, 2025) have shown that multilingual readers often shift their epistemic expectations depending on the language and discipline involved. This study builds on that work by exploring how epistemic beliefs are enacted in practice especially when readers confront ambiguity or conflicting perspectives.

Several frameworks inform this study. The AIR model (Chinn et al., 2011) examines readers' aims, ideals, and reasoning processes. Hofer and Pintrich's (1997) dimensional framework highlights how beliefs about knowledge's certainty, simplicity, sources, and justification evolve. Hammer and Elby's (2002) resource-based approach explains how readers draw on different epistemic tools depending on context. The Reflective Judgment Model (King & Kitchener, 2004) shows how individuals move between absolutist and evaluativist stances. Finally, sociocultural perspectives emphasize how language and cultural positioning shape how people justify knowledge. Together, these models provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing participants' reading experiences.

Epistemological Resources Framework

Hammer and Elby's (2002) work offer a different way of thinking about how people approach knowledge. Rather than treating epistemological beliefs as rigid, unchanging theories, they argue for a more flexible, resource-based view. From this perspective, individuals draw on a repertoire of cognitive and experiential "resources," activating different ones depending on the situation, their familiarity with the topic, or the expectations of the discipline they're working within.

This approach is particularly useful for understanding some of the variability that emerged in both the interviews and the survey responses in this study. For example, a law student might lean on formal reasoning and precedent when analyzing a court judgment but rely on personal experience and intuition when interpreting a political opinion piece. Instead of seeing this as inconsistency, the resources framework encourages us to view it as a kind of adaptive epistemic practice—one that reflects the realities of reading in diverse and often shifting contexts.

Reflective Judgment Model (RJM)

King and Kitchener's (2004) Reflective Judgment Model provides a developmental lens for examining how individuals engage with uncertainty, complexity, and conflicting claims. The model traces a progression from absolutist reasoning—where knowledge is seen as fixed and based on authority toward evaluative reasoning, where knowledge is recognized as constructed, provisional, and justified through evidence.

This model proved particularly helpful in making sense of how participants responded to ambiguous or contentious texts. In interviews, for instance, some readers appeared uneasy when confronted with arguments that lacked a clear conclusion, while others were comfortable entertaining multiple interpretations. These reactions reflected different stages of reflective judgment and highlighted how individuals navigate complexity in distinctive ways. For educators, this insight points to the importance of scaffolding epistemic growth rather than assuming all readers approach texts with the same interpretive toolkit.

Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Knowing

Most epistemic models focus on individual reasoning, but socio-cultural theories remind us that knowledge-making is also shaped by language, interaction, and broader power dynamics. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and later work by Sfard (1998), this perspective emphasizes that epistemic beliefs are situated within cultural and institutional contexts—not just inside people's heads.

This is especially relevant in multilingual, postcolonial contexts such as Lebanon. Students and professionals often move between languages, educational traditions, and ideological frameworks, bringing with them diverse epistemic repertoires. As Author (2025) notes, these backgrounds affect not only what individuals read but also how they make sense of it—what they question, what they accept, and how they evaluate competing claims. Recognizing this socio-cultural dimension helps explain why readers with similar training may still interpret the same text in very different ways.

The 3R-EC Framework

Barzilai and Chinn's (2018) 3R-EC framework is an instructional extension of the AIR model—it invites educators to think critically about the epistemic messages embedded in their teaching. It asks three key questions:

1. What kinds of epistemic goals are we encouraging students to pursue?
2. What ideals about knowledge are we modeling through our own practices?
3. What processes for evaluating knowledge are we legitimizing?

Many participants in this study spoke about feeling out of step with the epistemic expectations of their courses or professional training. Some were urged to “think critically” but felt penalized when their interpretations diverged from established disciplinary norms. The 3R-EC framework offers a useful lens for unpacking these tensions and for thinking more carefully about how institutional practices shape students' epistemic development.

By weaving together these frameworks—the AIR model, dimensional approaches, resource theories, reflective judgment, and socio-cultural perspectives—this research provides a grounded, multi-layered account of how readers approach texts in real-world contexts. Epistemic cognition is treated here not as an abstract psychological construct but as something lived, situated, and constantly negotiated during the act of reading.

METHOD

Design

This research employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how students and early-career legal professionals engage with the epistemic dimensions of reading. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows for a close, textured examination of participants' lived experiences—their moments of doubt, reflection, negotiation, and meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The study involved 48 participants (31 male, 17 female), ranging in age from 18 to 35 ($M = 24.3$, $SD = 3.9$). Participants were purposefully selected to reflect a cross-section of academic and professional backgrounds: undergraduate students enrolled in law, education, or political science/public administration courses, as well as early-career legal professionals and arbitrators taking part in continuing legal education workshops. All had recent experience reading academic or professional materials in English and/or Arabic. This diversity made it possible to examine how epistemic beliefs and reading strategies vary across contexts.

Instruments

Two primary tools were used to collect data:

Epistemic Reading Survey

An online survey with 20 open-ended questions divided into five sections: demographics, views on knowledge, evaluating sources, understanding the author's role, and reader agency. Questions

were adapted from established instruments (Schommer, 1990; Bråten et al., 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997) and designed to elicit reflective, narrative responses.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Ten participants (five students and five professionals) were invited for follow-up interviews, conducted in either English or Arabic, depending on their preference. These sessions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and allowed participants to elaborate on issues such as epistemic doubt, source evaluation, and reader–author interaction.

Process

The study unfolded over six weeks in two main phases. First, surveys were distributed through university mailing lists and professional WhatsApp groups. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained digitally. Second, interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom. All were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, when necessary, with careful attention to preserving cultural nuances. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

Ethical Considerations

The project received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, informed consent, pseudonymization of interview data, and secure storage of all digital files. Only the core research team had access to raw data, and audio files were destroyed after transcription and verification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic approach, supported by descriptive statistics to capture general patterns.

Immersion and Familiarization

Researchers carefully read and re-read responses, often aloud, to engage more deeply with participants’ voices and tone.

Open Coding: Themes were allowed to emerge organically, rather than being forced into predefined categories.

Theme Development: Recurring ideas—such as credibility assessment, rhetorical awareness, and reader identity—were refined into coherent themes.

Quantifying Patterns: While primarily qualitative, the study also noted how frequently themes appeared. For example, 81.5% of participants actively considered the author’s purpose or audience, and 53.8% linked author background to credibility judgments.

Cross-Comparison: Themes were compared across disciplines and reading contexts. For instance, legal professionals prioritized evidence and precedent, while humanities students focused more on authorial intent.

Validation: Two researchers independently coded data with high inter-rater reliability ($\kappa > .85$). Member-checking with participants confirmed the accuracy and resonance of interpretations.

RESULTS

A total of 48 participants contributed to the study. Of these, approximately 64% identified as male ($n = 31$), while 36% identified as female ($n = 17$). The sample included undergraduate students from different academic years, graduate students, practicing legal professionals, and individuals working in specialized sectors such as the military and aviation. Most participants were affiliated with Law and Legal Studies (48%), followed by Engineering and Public Policy. This diverse composition allowed for a nuanced examination of how readers with different disciplinary backgrounds approach epistemic tasks.

RQ1: How Do University Readers Evaluate the Truth and Credibility of What They Read? When asked how they assess the trustworthiness of information, participants described a range of strategies. Four dominant themes emerged: cross-checking multiple sources, evaluating the

authority and reliability of sources, engaging in critical analysis, and seeking peer validation through informal conversations. Many respondents emphasized the importance of verifying claims rather than accepting information at face value.

Table 1
Themes in Student Approaches to Evaluating Information

Theme	Frequency Level	Representative Quote
Cross-checking source:	High	I compare what I have to another source.”
Authority of source	High	I check if the source is reliable and if the evidence supports claim.”
Critical analysis	Moderate	I reflect whether I can trust the source or not.”
Peer validation	Low	Usually through asking people in conversations.”

Note. Themes emerged from participants’ responses about how they evaluate information credibility. Frequency levels were determined based on the number of mentions across coded transcripts.

RQ2: What Does It Mean to “Know” Something After Reading? Participants also reflected on what it means to *know* something after engaging with a text. Their answers revealed several overlapping conceptions of knowledge, including understanding and recall, the ability to explain content in one’s own words, feeling confident about the information, and connecting new knowledge to prior understandings.

Table 2
Student Conceptions of “Knowing” After Reading

Indicator of Knowing	Sample Quote
Understanding and recall	Actually understanding the content and being able to recall it.”
Explanation in own words	Being able to explain it to someone else.”
Confidence or conviction	To ensure after reading that I’m not skeptical about the idea.”
Knowledge integration	To connect it with what I already know.”

Note. This table summarizes the main indicators students used to describe what it means to ‘know’ something after reading. Quotes are representative examples from open-ended responses.

Engagement Frequency and Text Types

Reading habits varied across participants. While a few students reported daily engagement with academic or professional texts, many indicated more sporadic reading routines. The majority interacted with scientific, technical, or legal/policy-related materials.

Table 3
Student Engagement Frequency with Academic or Professional Texts

Engagement Frequency	Number of Students
Daily	1
Few times a week	1
Occasionally	18
Rarely	1

Note. Data reflect participants’ self-reported reading frequency for academic, legal, or professional materials.

Table 4
Most Common Types of Texts Read by Students

Text Type	Frequency
Scientific/technical	25
Legal/policy-related	10
Mixed (scientific + legal)	10
Humanities/social sciences	
Not sure	

Note. This table summarizes the types of texts students most frequently engage with, based on academic background or personal interests.

Evaluating Credibility: Patterns and Priorities

Across the sample, students demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of epistemic responsibility. Many actively cross-checked claims, examined author backgrounds, paid attention to tone, and weighed the use of evidence before forming judgments. This behavior resonates with Bråten et al.'s (2011) view of epistemic cognition as both reflective and strategic. Notably, several participants described “knowing” as being able to teach or paraphrase content for others—an idea consistent with Vygotsky’s notion of internalization and Chinn et al.’s (2011) AIR model.

Table 5
Key Findings on Evaluating Text Credibility

Theme	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Enhancing credibility and trust	5	7.8
Supporting persuasion or conviction	6	7.8
Enabling critical reading and engagement	7	7.8
Caution / need for context / fact-checking	0	2.2
Examples matter more than data (skeptical view)		.9
Legal-specific appreciation (case law)		1.1

Note. Percentages indicate the proportion of participants who mentioned each theme when describing how they assess text credibility.

Illustrative Quotes

“They render the text more trustworthy, believable, and make me more likely to be persuaded by the article.”

— *Undergraduate Law Student*

“Sometimes numbers can be misleading without context.”

— *Engineering Student*

“In legal studies, we should pay close attention to how case law is used to support a position.”

— *Legal Professional*

These results underscore the centrality of evidence-based reasoning in how university students and early-career professionals assess texts. For many, evidence is more than persuasive—it is a prerequisite for trust, critical engagement, and epistemic judgment, particularly in legal and technical domains.

Thematic Results: The Role of Prior Knowledge in Critical Reading

Participants' open-ended responses revealed the central role that prior knowledge plays in how they comprehend, interpret, and critically evaluate texts. Many described drawings on their existing knowledge not merely as a passive background influence, but as an *active cognitive tool* that shapes how they make sense of new information.

Table 6
Quantitative Overview of Themes Related to Prior Knowledge Use

Theme	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Drawing from prior knowledge to understand text	2	7.5
Linking new information to past experience	1	4.6
Assessing truthfulness or logic based on existing knowledge	4	9.2
Experience/knowledge helps in critical reading or spotting bias	2	5.0
Balanced use of knowledge and experience	1	2.9
Subject-dependent use of prior knowledge	0	0.8
Admits bias is inescapable / subjectivity is natural		2.5
No or rare use of prior knowledge (outliers)		.2

Note. Responses were double-coded when overlapping. Percentages represent the proportion of participants mentioning each theme.

A. Prior Knowledge as a Cognitive Anchor (87.5%)

Almost all participants described using prior knowledge as a foundation for understanding and evaluating new material. For many, this involved actively connecting ideas in the text to familiar concepts and frameworks:

“Yes, I use my own knowledge and experience to connect with new ideas, compare them to what I already know, and judge whether they make sense.”

This pattern aligns closely with schema theory and cognitive constructivism, which emphasize that readers construct meaning by attaching new information to existing mental structures.

B. Experience as a Bridge to Understanding (64.6%)

Roughly two-thirds of respondents highlighted how personal or academic experiences help them interpret new material, particularly in fields they are already familiar with, such as law, technology, or climate change. One student explained:

“When I read an article about AI in law, I could connect it to what I learned in legal tech class.”

Here, prior experience acts as a bridge between abstract content and meaningful interpretation, consistent with theories of situated cognition that emphasize learning within familiar contexts.

C. Evaluating Claims Through Knowledge (29.2%)

For about one-third of participants, prior knowledge served as a critical filter for assessing a text's truthfulness or logical coherence:

“My knowledge helps me know what is a clear lie and what is not.”

This kind of epistemic vigilance reflects a deliberate effort to guard against misinformation and evaluate arguments more rigorously.

D. Critical Reading Through Experience (25.0%)

Many participants also used their background knowledge to scrutinize tone, bias, and argumentative strategies, indicating a reflective and analytical stance toward texts:

“The more I know about the author, the easier it is to analyze his motives, psychological drives, and style.”

This shows how personal and disciplinary knowledge intertwines with critical reading, enabling readers to navigate complex rhetorical situations.

E. Contextual and Flexible Use of Knowledge (20.8%)

Some respondents described adapting how they use prior knowledge depending on the subject matter and their confidence in it:

“It depends on the subject... if I know something, I check how it matches with what’s being said.”

This epistemic flexibility suggests that students are not rigidly applying prior knowledge but are strategically deciding when and how to rely on it.

F. Blended Reliance on Knowledge and Experience (22.9%)

A subset of participants emphasized using both formal education and real-world experience when engaging with challenging texts:

“Both help me. I use both when reading something difficult.”

This blended approach illustrates how cognitive and experiential resources work together to deepen comprehension.

G. Acknowledging Subjectivity and Bias (12.5%)

A minority showed notable self-awareness by recognizing how their prior knowledge can introduce bias:

“To say no is lying... All info goes through our previous biases.”

This metacognitive reflection indicates emerging epistemic maturity, as students recognize that their perspectives inevitably shape interpretation.

H. Non-Reliance Outliers (4.2%)

Only two participants claimed they rarely rely on prior knowledge while reading, though one of them immediately questioned the accuracy of their own statement:

“Nope. But I know that’s probably not true.”

These outliers highlight how deeply ingrained prior knowledge use is—even for those who may not consciously recognize it.

Taken together, these findings make clear that prior knowledge functions as more than an accessory to reading; it forms the backbone of interpretive and evaluative processes. Participants drew on what they already knew to interpret evidence, assess tone, detect bias, and calibrate their trust in authors. Their reflections also show a sophisticated blend of statistical reasoning and personal narrative: students rely on both formal knowledge and lived experience to build a coherent understanding of texts.

Understanding Author’s Purpose and Audiences: a Statistical and Thematic Analysis

The study also explored how readers consider an author’s purpose and intended audience while reading. Participants’ reflections revealed widespread awareness of how these factors shape textual interpretation.

Table 7
Key Quantitative Findings on Audience and Purpose Awareness

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Audience and purpose shape interpretation	53	81.5
Author’s background affects trust / bias recognition	35	53.8
Audience awareness enhances tone/style understanding	27	41.5
Important in evaluating language and evidence	23	35.4
Context-dependent consideration	7	10.8
No or minimal attention to author’s purpose	4	6.2
Advanced epistemic insight (bias/ideology)	15	23.1

Note. Participants often mentioned multiple themes. Percentages reflect the proportion of participants referencing each theme.

The majority of respondents (81.5%) stated that understanding an author's purpose and intended audience significantly shapes how they interpret a text. Many also pointed to the author's background—including ideological leanings, disciplinary training, or institutional affiliation—as an important factor in detecting potential bias or evaluating credibility (53.8%). Additionally, 41.5% noted that recognizing audience and purpose helps them better understand the author's tone and stylistic choices, while 35.4% emphasized its importance for evaluating evidence and argumentative strategy.

Notably, a smaller group (23.1%) demonstrated advanced epistemic insight by explicitly acknowledging how ideological positioning and rhetorical framing influence both the text and their own interpretation. Only a handful of participants (6.2%) admitted to paying little or no attention to authorial intent, suggesting that audience and purpose awareness is a widespread and sophisticated aspect of students' reading practices.

Thematic Insights and Reader Reflection Audience and Purpose Are Central (81.5%)

Most participants reported that they actively consider *who* the author is addressing and *why* the text was written. This awareness helps them interpret the author's tone, argumentation style, and overall credibility. For example, students often distinguished between the formal, evidence-rich tone of academic texts and the more accessible and direct tone of popular writing:

"Knowing the audience helps me understand the author's tone and depth of argument."

Such reflections illustrate the use of metacognitive reading strategies—readers think not only about *what* is being communicated, but also about the communicative intent and target audience.

Author's Background Influence Trust (53.8%)

More than half of the participants indicated that the author's expertise, education, or institutional affiliation influences how credible they find the text. This was especially evident in technical or persuasive contexts, where credentials functioned as a key trust signal:

"If the author is an expert, I tend to trust the information more."

This reflects a form of epistemic vigilance, where readers evaluate an author's authority and reliability as part of their credibility assessments.

Audience Awareness Shapes Interpretation of Tone and Style (41.5%)

Many readers emphasized that understanding the intended audience helps them decode the author's rhetorical strategies and stylistic choices:

"Recognizing the audience helps me see why the author chooses a certain tone or structure."

This demonstrates adaptive interpretation skills readers adjust their reading strategies depending on genre and communicative intent.

Evaluating Arguments and Evidence Through Authorial Purpose (35.4%)

Over one-third of participants explained that awareness of the author's goals influences how they assess argument strength, evidence credibility, and persuasive strategies:

"If the author wants to persuade, I pay closer attention to their reasoning."

This aligns with critical discourse approaches, which emphasize how language and evidence are strategically deployed to achieve rhetorical goals.

Context Matters: Academic Vs. Casual Reading (10.8%)

Some readers reported that their level of attention to authorial intent varies depending on the reading context. For leisure reading, they are less likely to analyze the author's purpose, whereas academic tasks prompt more critical evaluation:

"For fun reading, I don't think much about the author's background, but for academic work, I do." This illustrates pragmatic flexibility in reading strategies.

Minimal Consideration of Authorial Factors (6.2%)

A small minority admitted to paying little attention to the author's purpose or background, adopting a more passive reading stance:

"I just read what's there without questioning who wrote it."

While this does not necessarily imply weak comprehension, it may limit opportunities for deeper critical engagement.

Advanced Epistemic Awareness: Bias and Training (23.1%)

A significant subset of participants demonstrated sophisticated critical literacy by recognizing how authors' values, ideologies, and worldviews shape their framing of issues:

"Authors frame issues through their own worldview, which affects how information is presented."

This level of epistemic insight is particularly valuable for navigating persuasive or contested texts, where bias may be subtle but influential.

The findings indicate that most readers approach texts in an active and reflective manner. They do not simply absorb information passively; instead, they interpret content through the lens of the author's *purpose, audience, background, and ideological stance*. This dynamic engagement echoes Bråten et al.'s (2011) epistemic cognition framework, which emphasizes that critical reading involves evaluating *who says what, why, and to whom*. Moreover, the ability to detect bias and framing reflects an advanced level of critical literacy an increasingly essential skill in today's complex and often polarized information landscape. In sum, understanding the author's purpose and intended audience is not a peripheral reading skill, but a core mechanism through which readers construct and negotiate meaning.

Qualitative Insights from Semi-Structured Interviews

To deepen the quantitative findings, a subsample of 10 participants—five university students and five early-career legal professionals—took part in semi-structured interviews conducted in their preferred language (English or Arabic). These 30–45-minute conversations offered nuanced, firsthand perspectives that illuminate how readers navigate epistemic challenges in real-world reading contexts. The qualitative data revealed three interrelated themes: epistemic doubt as a catalyst for critical reflection, active evaluation of source credibility and bias, and dynamic reader–author interaction during interpretation.

Epistemic Doubt as A Catalyst for Critical Reflection

Across both groups, participants frequently described moments of uncertainty or hesitation when reading—particularly when the author's purpose, audience, or background was ambiguous. Rather than dismissing these moments, readers often used them as a springboard for deeper reflection and evaluative thinking. One student explained:

"Before trusting what I read, I ask myself who the author is and why they wrote this—it shapes how I interpret the message."

Similarly, a legal professional emphasized how authorial intent affects their evaluation:

"Understanding the author's motivations helps me decide how much weight to give their arguments."

These moments of epistemic doubt were not signs of disengagement but markers of critical engagement. Readers used their uncertainty strategically, prompting closer scrutiny of evidence and argumentation. This finding resonates with Chinn et al.'s (2011) AIR model of epistemic cognition, where reflection on aims, ideals, and reliable processes guides knowledge evaluation. In both academic and legal contexts, doubt was described as a *productive force* that sharpened interpretive judgment.

Careful Evaluation of Source Credibility and Bias

Another central theme was the deliberate and often systematic evaluation of authorial credibility and bias. Participants did not take texts at face value; instead, they examined the author's

qualifications, expertise, and potential agendas, particularly when dealing with persuasive or technical content. A legal professional highlighted this process:

“In legal work, knowing who wrote something often reveals underlying biases or agendas that aren’t immediately obvious.”

Students described practical strategies such as Googling the author, checking institutional affiliations, or comparing claims with peer-reviewed sources. These behaviors reflect what Bråten et al. (2011) describe as strategic epistemic cognition—active, knowledge-driven attempts to assess the reliability of information. This vigilance was especially pronounced among legal professionals, who framed source evaluation as essential to professional integrity and accurate case interpretation.

Reader–Author Interaction Shaping Interpretation

Interviewees also portrayed reading as a dialogic and relational act, in which their perception of the author’s intended audience and communicative stance shaped how they interpreted and emotionally engaged with texts. A student described this sense of connection:

“When I feel the author is addressing people like me, I’m more open to their ideas.”

In contrast, a legal professional noted that a sense of distance or bias provoked more critical interrogation:

“If the author seems distant or biased, I tend to question their arguments more critically.”

These reflections demonstrate that interpretation is not merely cognitive but also affective and relational. Readers position themselves in relation to the author, negotiating trust, identification, and skepticism. These echoes theories of dialogic reading (Bakhtin, 1981) and aligns with contemporary epistemic cognition research emphasizing the social dimensions of knowledge evaluation.

DISCUSSION

These qualitative insights provide a vivid, human dimension to the quantitative findings. The survey results showed that 81.5% of participants consider audience and purpose, and 53.8% evaluate the author’s background when assessing credibility. The interviews revealed *how and why* these processes unfold in practice: epistemic doubt motivates reflection, critical evaluation ensures reliability, and dialogic engagement shapes interpretation.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data paint a picture of readers who are active, strategic, and reflective. Rather than passively absorbing information, they interrogate authorial motives, assess evidence, and position themselves critically within communicative contexts. This dual methodological lens confirms that epistemic cognition is not a peripheral skill but a core mechanism through which readers—especially students and legal professionals—construct meaning, evaluate truth claims, and engage with complex texts.

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that epistemic awareness is a central mechanism shaping how readers engage with texts, particularly in higher education and early legal professional contexts. Both quantitative and qualitative results converge to highlight the sophistication of readers’ interpretive strategies: they evaluate *who* is speaking, *why* the message is communicated, and *how* it is framed before integrating new information into their knowledge structures.

Quantitative and Qualitative Insights

From a quantitative perspective, the high proportion of participants (81.5%) who reported considering audience and authorial purpose confirms earlier research demonstrating the metacognitive strategies readers employ to anticipate tone, structure, and argumentative direction (Bråten et al., 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Similarly, the emphasis on author background and expertise (53.8%) mirrors longstanding evidence that source credibility is a cornerstone of critical literacy and knowledge evaluation (Chinn et al., 2011; Kuhn, 1999).

The qualitative interviews deepened these insights, revealing the lived cognitive and emotional processes behind these strategies. Participants described how moments of epistemic doubt often served as catalysts for critical reflection, prompting them to question motives, reliability, and ideological framing. This resonates with Kuhn's (1999) conception of epistemic development as involving evaluative knowing rather than mere belief acceptance. It also aligns with Fairclough's (2013) and van Dijk's (1998) work on critical discourse, which highlights how ideological positioning influences meaning-making. Moreover, participants' reflections portrayed reading as a dialogic and interactive process. Their interpretation was shaped by perceived alignment (or misalignment) with the author's intended audience and communicative stance—echoing socio-cognitive and transactional models of reading (Rosenblatt, 1994). This dynamic interaction was especially pronounced among legal professionals, who often approach texts with heightened epistemic vigilance and strategic skepticism.

The present findings parallel studies in education and cognitive psychology demonstrating that expert readers differ from novices not merely in knowledge base but in strategic deployment of epistemic skills. For example, Bråten et al. (2011) found that proficient academic readers systematically evaluate authorial intent and corroborate claims across multiple sources, a pattern clearly reflected in both student and professional participants here. However, this study goes further by showing how these epistemic strategies manifest in legal and multilingual contexts, where rhetorical precision, credibility, and ideological framing have tangible professional consequences. Compared with general academic populations, the legal participants demonstrated higher sensitivity to bias and framing, likely due to their training in argumentation, case analysis, and evidentiary reasoning.

Implications for Legal and Higher Education

These findings carry significant implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and professional training.

Curricular Integration of Epistemic Cognition: Law programs and related disciplines would benefit from embedding epistemic awareness training directly into coursework. This could include modules on identifying authorial framing, assessing credibility, and practicing cross-source verification in real case studies.

Reflective Reading Pedagogies: Encouraging students to pause and reflect on their interpretive process through reading journals, think-aloud protocols, or peer discussions can help make epistemic strategies more explicit and transferable.

Multilingual and Cross-Cultural Literacy: Given the bilingual context of the study, training should also address how language choice influences epistemic interpretation, particularly when readers navigate between Arabic and English texts with different rhetorical conventions.

Beyond education, these insights are relevant for legal practice. Critical evaluation of authorial intent and bias is crucial in litigation, contract drafting, and legal interpretation, where misreading or uncritical acceptance can have real-world consequences. Strengthening epistemic skills in legal professionals may enhance the quality of legal reasoning, argumentation, and decision-making.

Broader Implications and Policy Relevance

In a broader sense, the findings speak to the challenges of reading in today's information-saturated, polarized digital environment. Whether in legal practice, policymaking, or academia, the ability to critically evaluate sources and motivations is increasingly tied to civic responsibility and democratic resilience. Embedding epistemic literacy into higher education policy frameworks can help cultivate more discerning, reflective citizens capable of resisting misinformation and ideological manipulation. The findings carry significant implications for education and professional development. First, they suggest the need for explicit instructional initiatives that cultivate critical literacy, epistemic awareness, and reflective reading strategies, particularly in legal education. Incorporating exercises that emphasize evaluation of author intent, audience

adaptation, and source credibility can strengthen learners' ability to navigate complex or contested texts. Second, the bilingual and multidisciplinary nature of participants' reading experiences highlights the importance of multilingual and cross-cultural approaches to epistemic training, ensuring that learners can interpret texts effectively across languages and disciplinary conventions. Moreover, the study points to broader societal and professional relevance. In today's information-rich and often polarized environments, the capacity to critically assess sources, detect bias, and weigh evidence is essential not only for academic success but also for ethical professional practice and informed citizenship. Readers who develop these skills are better equipped to make reasoned judgments, resist misinformation, and engage in meaningful dialogue—skills that are particularly crucial in law, public policy, and other fields where interpretation and decision-making carry tangible consequences.

LIMITATIONS

While this study provides meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small and discipline-specific sample comprising law students and early-career legal professionals—limits the generalizability of findings to other populations. Future research should examine epistemic awareness across diverse academic fields and cultural settings to explore disciplinary and contextual variations. Second, the study relied largely on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Triangulating these findings with observational or experimental methods, such as eye-tracking or think-aloud protocols, would yield richer insights into real-time reading behaviors. Third, although interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic to respect participants' linguistic preferences, this bilingual approach introduces translation and interpretation complexities. Future studies could analyze how epistemic strategies differ across languages, especially in legal contexts where rhetorical nuances are critical. Finally, longitudinal research could explore how epistemic awareness develops over time, particularly as students transition into professional roles. Additionally, investigating how these skills are applied to **digital texts**, including AI-generated content, could address timely challenges in contemporary reading environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the centrality of epistemic cognition as both a cognitive and socio-cultural process in academic and legal reading. Readers are not passive recipients of information but active evaluators, negotiators, and interpreters who bring prior knowledge, doubt, and strategic reasoning to the texts they encounter.

To cultivate these capacities, educational institutions should:

Integrate epistemic cognition training into curricula.

Promote reflective reading and dialogic engagement with texts.

Address multilingual literacy challenges explicitly.

Develop professional development modules for legal practitioners focused on epistemic evaluation.

By doing so, universities and professional institutions can equip learners and practitioners to navigate increasingly complex information landscapes with discernment, critical insight, and intellectual resilience.

Recommendations for practice include:

1. Curriculum Design: Integrate structured epistemic cognition exercises and reflective reading tasks into academic programs.
2. Professional Training: Offer workshops for early-career professionals focused on source evaluation, critical reasoning, and epistemic reflection.
3. Assessment and Feedback: Provide opportunities for learners to receive feedback on their interpretive strategies and source evaluation skills, fostering iterative improvement.

4. Digital Literacy Integration: Prepare readers to critically engage with online and AI-generated content, cultivating epistemic vigilance in digital environments.

This study underscores the active, reflective, and context-sensitive nature of reading among university students and early-career legal professionals. Participants did not passively absorb information; instead, they engaged critically with texts, evaluating authorial purpose, audience, and background as central components of comprehension. Their responses demonstrate that effective reading extends beyond understanding content—it involves negotiating meaning, questioning assumptions, and recognizing potential biases, all hallmarks of advanced epistemic cognition.

By integrating quantitative survey findings with qualitative interview insights, the study highlights a sophisticated reader stance. Participants consistently applied critical thinking strategies, such as cross-checking sources, assessing credibility, and interpreting rhetorical cues, often adapting their approach depending on the subject matter, context, or perceived expertise of the author. This active epistemic engagement aligns with prior research emphasizing metacognitive and socio-cultural dimensions of reading (Bråten et al., 2011; Chinn et al., 2011; Rosenblatt, 1994) while extending these findings to legal and professional contexts, where the stakes of misinterpretation are higher.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that reading is an inherently active, reflective, and evaluative process, shaped by both cognitive and socio-cultural factors. University students and early-career legal professionals are not simply consumers of information; they are strategic, discerning interpreters who continuously negotiate meaning. By fostering these abilities through education and professional development, we can equip learners to engage thoughtfully, critically, and ethically with texts across academic, professional, and real-world contexts, thereby enhancing the epistemic quality of reading in higher education and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad Munawir¹, N. I. (2022). Students' vocabulary mastery by using animation videos on English language teaching. *Indonesian Journal of Research and Educational Review*, 3(1), 354-359.
- Arimuliani Ahmad¹, J. A. (2023). Designing teaching material based-animation video for teaching English language at the elementary level. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 3(15), 1-8.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Razavieh, A., & Sorensen, C. (2009). *Introduction to Research in Education*. Cengage Learning.
- Bajracharya, M. (2012). Improving English spellings of EFL learners in primary schools. Unpublished master's thesis. Kathmandu University School of Education.
- Briggs, L. J., Gustafson, K. L., & Tillman, M. H. (1991). *Instructional design, principles and application*. Educational Technology Publications.
- Effendi, M.S. (2013). Desain Eksperimental dalam penelitian pendidikan. *Jurnal Perspektif Pendidikan*, 6(1), 87-102.
- Febriyanti, E., & Haryanto, H. (2024). The effectiveness of Canva application in fun English learning to improve the students' English vocabulary (an experimental study for grade XI of SMK Balekambang Jepara). *Journal on Education*, 6(4), 19501-19513. <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v6i4.5870>
- Jaedun, A. (2011). Metodologi penelitian eksperimen. Fakultas Teknik UNY.
- Juhana, J. (2014). Teaching English to young learners: some points to be considered. *Asian Journal of Education and E-Learning*, 2(1), 43-46.

- Putri Ayu Lestari¹, S. S. (2021). The effect of teaching English vocabulary by using animation video at SMP Swasta Baitul Aziz Bandar Klippa in 2021/2022 academic year. *Journal Research and Education Studies*, 2(1), 33-39.
- Rahayu, M. S. (2024). Experimental research dalam penelitian pendidikan. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 10(18), 901-911.
- Rohman S. (2024) The development of animation video-based learning material by combining mobile applications for teaching English at the secondary level. *The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024 Official Conference Proceedings*, 473-489. <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2186-229X.2024.42>
- Rustambekovna, A. F. (2020). The effectiveness of applying video materials in communicative language teaching. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences*, 8(2), 108-115.
- Seemiller, C. &. (2017). Generation Z: Educating and engaging the next generation of students. *About campus*, 22(3), 21-26.
- Suprianti, G. A. (2020). Powtoon animation video: a learning media for the sixth graders. *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 4(2), 152-162.