



# THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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## Abstract

Improving reading comprehension is one of the most important goals of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Yet in many classrooms, reading is still approached as a largely mechanical activity centered on vocabulary recognition, grammar explanation, and the retrieval of explicit information. Such practices may help learners decode a text, but they do not always help them interpret ideas, evaluate arguments, or construct deeper meaning. Contemporary scholarship increasingly treats critical thinking as a core component of effective reading because it enables learners to analyze, infer, question, assess evidence, and formulate reasoned judgments.

**Keywords:** EFL instruction, reading comprehension, critical thinking, critical reading, higher-order thinking, reading strategies, text analysis, learner autonomy, classroom practice, academic literacy.

## Introduction

Reading comprehension in EFL settings is not simply the ability to understand individual words or sentences. It is a complex cognitive process through which learners identify central ideas, interpret relationships, draw inferences, evaluate arguments, and connect textual information with prior knowledge. However, many EFL learners remain dependent on literal comprehension and teacher explanation because classroom reading often prioritizes surface-level understanding over intellectual engagement. This creates a gap between basic text processing and genuine comprehension. In academic contexts especially, students need to move beyond “what the text says” toward “how the text says it,” “why it



says it,” and “whether its claims are convincing.” University guidance from Toronto and Auckland explicitly defines critical reading as a reflective process of judging how a text is argued and actively responding by analyzing, questioning, and assessing content.

Against this background, critical thinking becomes highly relevant to EFL pedagogy. Facione’s Delphi Report defines critical thinking as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment,” while the Foundation for Critical Thinking describes it as self-guided, self-disciplined thinking that aims at high-quality reasoning. These definitions are important because they show that critical thinking is not an optional enrichment activity added after comprehension; rather, it is part of the very process by which deeper comprehension is achieved. A learner who reads critically does not merely identify information but examines assumptions, evaluates evidence, recognizes bias, and builds reasoned interpretations.

This perspective is especially significant in EFL education because foreign language learners often face double demands: they must process linguistic form and construct conceptual meaning at the same time. When reading instruction is reduced to translation or answer-finding, learners may appear to comprehend a text without actually engaging with its logic, perspective, or implications. Therefore, improving EFL reading comprehension through critical thinking means reconceptualizing reading as an active, reflective, and intellectually demanding act. Recent intervention studies in EFL contexts support this view, reporting gains in both critical thinking and reading comprehension when critical-thinking-focused instruction is systematically incorporated into classroom practice.

The connection between critical thinking and reading comprehension can be grounded in several influential theoretical traditions. First, the cognitive tradition represented by Bloom’s taxonomy and its revision by Krathwohl offers a useful framework for understanding levels of comprehension. Krathwohl’s 2002 overview of the revised taxonomy organizes cognitive work into remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In the context of reading, lower-order work may involve recalling facts or identifying the main idea, whereas higher-order work requires comparing viewpoints, examining evidence, evaluating claims, and producing an independent response. This



framework suggests that full reading comprehension cannot be reduced to literal understanding; it must also involve analysis and evaluation.

Second, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides a strong pedagogical basis for teaching critical reading. In *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky introduced the zone of proximal development, commonly defined as the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In reading instruction, this means students are unlikely to become critical readers automatically. They need scaffolded support: modeling, guided questioning, collaborative discussion, and structured tasks that gradually move them from supported interpretation to independent judgment. The value of this framework lies in showing that critical reading is teachable and developable, not merely an innate ability possessed by a few advanced learners.

Third, academic conceptions of critical reading reinforce the idea that comprehension is inseparable from evaluation. The University of Toronto explains that critical reading means making judgments about how a text is argued, while the University of Auckland defines it as actively responding to the text by analyzing, questioning, and assessing content to create one's own meaning. These definitions make clear that reading critically is not an act of opposition for its own sake; rather, it is a disciplined form of intellectual engagement. In other words, comprehension becomes deeper when learners are trained to ask how claims are developed, what evidence is offered, what assumptions underpin the text, and what alternative interpretations may exist.

Critical thinking improves EFL reading comprehension because it activates deeper levels of processing. A learner who reads only for explicit information may identify details correctly yet fail to understand tone, argument structure, or implied meaning. By contrast, a learner who reads critically asks interpretive and evaluative questions, which creates a richer mental representation of the text. This deeper engagement strengthens inferencing, helps distinguish main ideas from supporting details, and improves retention of information because the learner is not passively receiving content but actively reorganizing it cognitively. The theoretical logic of this claim is consistent with both the revised Bloom taxonomy and university definitions of critical reading.

Another reason critical thinking strengthens reading comprehension is that it helps learners deal with implicit meaning. Many difficulties in EFL reading do



not stem only from vocabulary gaps but from the inability to recognize assumptions, detect weak reasoning, or connect ideas across paragraphs. Critical thinking gives students mental tools for interpretation: they learn to compare evidence, question source reliability, identify bias, and infer unstated meanings. Because such processes require readers to engage actively with textual logic, they extend comprehension beyond the literal level. Facione's framework, which emphasizes interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference as central critical-thinking skills, directly supports this point.

Critical thinking also promotes learner autonomy. When students are trained to evaluate a text independently, they become less dependent on the teacher as the sole authority who explains meaning. This is especially valuable in higher education, where students are expected to read academic materials, synthesize viewpoints, and produce arguments of their own. The Foundation for Critical Thinking's emphasis on self-guided and self-disciplined reasoning supports the idea that critical thinking is tied not only to cognitive growth but also to intellectual independence. In reading classrooms, this independence can shift students from answer-seeking behavior toward inquiry-oriented reading.

Finally, critical thinking can improve the broader classroom environment in which reading takes place. Bakhtiari Moghadam, Narafshan, and Tajadini's 2023 study in the *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* examined a critical-thinking-based intervention in an EFL reading course with Iranian intermediate learners and reported positive changes in learners' critical thinking, reading comprehension, and classroom climate. This finding is important because it suggests that critical-thinking-oriented reading is not only cognitively beneficial but can also foster a more engaging and interactive learning environment.

Recent studies provide increasingly direct evidence that critical-thinking-oriented instruction can improve reading outcomes in EFL contexts. The 2023 intervention study by Bakhtiari Moghadam and colleagues integrated a proposed critical-thinking-based program into a BA English reading course and found positive effects on critical thinking, reading comprehension, and classroom climate among the participants. The value of this study lies in demonstrating that critical thinking can be intentionally taught within ordinary reading courses rather than treated as a separate skill unrelated to language learning.



Similar results appear in more recent work by Esfandiari, Rezvani, and Hadian in *MEXTESOL Journal* (2025). According to the ERIC record and full-text summary, their study used the California Critical Thinking Skills Test and the IELTS reading section and found advancement in several sub-elements of critical thinking as well as reading ability after “Thinker’s Guide” training. The authors conclude that the training improved both critical thinking and reading ability among EFL learners. This is particularly significant because it connects critical-thinking instruction not merely with abstract reasoning but with a widely recognized measure of reading performance.

Research on learner perceptions also supports the relevance of critical reading in EFL settings. Khathayut and Walker-Gleaves’s 2025 article in *LEARN Journal* focuses specifically on EFL students’ perceptions of English critical reading among Thai undergraduates. Even from the article title and publication context, it is clear that critical reading has become a recognized research theme in contemporary EFL scholarship, not just a theoretical concern imported from general education. The emergence of such studies indicates a growing understanding that reading instruction must include analytical and reflective dimensions if it is to meet current academic needs.

Taken together, these studies suggest that critical thinking is not merely correlated with better comprehension in theory; it can be cultivated through explicit pedagogical intervention. This matters greatly for EFL contexts, where teachers often assume that critical reading will emerge naturally once vocabulary and grammar improve. The current research trend suggests the opposite: critical reading develops more effectively when it is explicitly modeled, practiced, and assessed.

To improve EFL reading comprehension through critical thinking, classroom practice must be designed intentionally. One of the most effective approaches is to organize reading activities into pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages, with critical-thinking tasks embedded in each phase. In the pre-reading phase, learners can be encouraged to predict the writer’s argument, discuss the topic, evaluate the likely purpose of the text, or examine the reliability of the source. Such tasks activate prior knowledge and create an anticipatory framework that makes comprehension more purposeful. This approach aligns with the view



that reading should begin not with passive exposure but with active intellectual preparation.

In the while-reading phase, students can be guided to identify central claims, distinguish fact from opinion, mark supporting evidence, detect persuasive language, and ask whether the argument is convincing. Annotation, guided questions, think-pair-share, and small-group discussion all help learners externalize their thinking while reading. These practices are consistent with Vygotskian scaffolding because they provide support precisely at the point where learners are trying to move from literal understanding toward analytical interpretation. When teachers model how to examine a paragraph's logic or how to question an author's assumptions, they effectively extend learners' zone of proximal development.

In the post-reading phase, students should not simply answer factual questions and stop. They should be encouraged to evaluate the text, compare it with another source, express agreement or disagreement with reasons, or write a short reflective response. At this stage, critical thinking becomes visible as learners synthesize information and construct independent judgments. Krathwohl's taxonomy is especially useful here because it reminds teachers that the most educationally powerful tasks often lie in analysis, evaluation, and creation rather than in recall alone.

Despite its pedagogical value, integrating critical thinking into EFL reading is not always straightforward. One major difficulty is linguistic limitation. Learners may possess emerging analytical ability but lack the language resources to articulate complex judgments. In such cases, the absence of fluent expression can be mistaken for the absence of critical thought. This is why scaffolded classroom discourse, sentence stems, and guided discussion are so important. Vygotsky's framework is particularly relevant here because it emphasizes supported performance before full independence.

Another challenge is curricular tradition. In many EFL contexts, reading lessons remain exam-driven and emphasize correct answers rather than interpretive reasoning. Teachers may feel pressure to finish the text quickly, explain unknown vocabulary, and prepare students for tests that reward literal comprehension. However, recent intervention studies suggest that critical-thinking instruction is not a distraction from reading achievement; it can contribute directly to better



reading performance. This point is strongly supported by the findings of Bakhtiari Moghadam and colleagues and by Esfandiari and colleagues.

A third difficulty concerns teacher preparation. Critical reading lessons require teachers to design higher-order questions, tolerate multiple plausible interpretations, and guide discussion without reducing it to answer checking. This requires pedagogical confidence and a shift in instructional mindset. Yet the conceptual resources already exist: university definitions of critical reading clarify what learners should do with texts, while critical-thinking frameworks explain the skills involved. The challenge, therefore, is less a lack of theory than a need for systematic pedagogical implementation.

### **Conclusion**

Improving EFL reading comprehension through critical thinking is both a theoretical necessity and a practical educational goal. Reading comprehension becomes deeper when learners move beyond literal information gathering toward interpretation, inference, evaluation, and reflective judgment. Foundational work by Facione, Scriven and Paul, Krathwohl, and Vygotsky helps explain why this is so: critical thinking is disciplined judgment, higher-order cognition extends beyond recall, and learning develops most effectively through guided support. University definitions of critical reading reinforce the same principle by framing reading as an active process of questioning and assessing how texts construct meaning.

Recent EFL research strengthens this theoretical position by showing that explicit critical-thinking instruction can improve reading comprehension and related outcomes. Studies in 2023 and 2025 report gains in reading performance, critical-thinking ability, and even classroom climate when critical-thinking frameworks are systematically integrated into EFL reading instruction. For this reason, critical thinking should not be treated as an optional add-on or a luxury reserved for advanced students. It should be recognized as one of the central pathways through which genuine reading comprehension is developed in the EFL classroom.



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