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AN INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGIES IN EFL READING CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation of an instructional framework for integrating critical thinking strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading contexts. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted in a Reading for General Communication course involving one lecturer and first-semester students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and students' reflective writings and were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in instructional practices and student engagement. The findings comprise three stages: activation, exploration, and reflection. The activation stage engages students by connecting prior knowledge with new reading materials through guided discussions, lecturer facilitation, and authentic learning resources. The exploration stage promotes higher-order thinking through problem-based tasks, collaborative learning activities, and structured argumentation that encourage students to analyze, evaluate, and justify ideas. The reflection stage fosters metacognitive awareness by providing opportunities for independent learning, self-assessment, and reflective activities that help students monitor their comprehension and reasoning processes. The integration supports the development of critical thinking. The framework enhances students' analytical, evaluative, logical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities while encouraging active engagement with texts. These findings offer practical insights for EFL educators seeking to systematically integrate critical thinking strategies into reading instruction.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Strategies, EFL Reading, Instructional Framework, Higher-Order Thinking Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning which enabling students to acquire information, construct meaning, and develop communicative competence. Beyond literal comprehension, reading requires learners to engage in higher-order cognitive processes, including inference, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation (Astuti & Nurhayati, 2023; Jugas et al., 2024). Consequently, reading instruction plays an important role in fostering critical thinking, as learners are expected not only to understand texts but also to evaluate information and formulate reasoned judgments.

Critical thinking has become a central objective in higher education because it equips learners with the ability to analyze evidence, evaluate arguments, solve problems, and make informed decisions (Golden, 2023; Ossa et al., 2023). In EFL contexts, critical thinking enhances learners' engagement with texts by encouraging them to interpret meanings beyond surface-level comprehension and to construct evidence-based interpretations (Ilyas & Istaryatiningtias, 2025). Further, it encompasses activities that involve identifying cause-and-effect relationships and making comparisons within the

text (Damayanti et al., 2024). As a result, the integration of critical thinking into reading instruction has attracted increasing attention from students.

Previous studies have identified various instructional approaches that support the development of critical thinking in EFL classrooms. Metacognitive reading strategies, for example, have been shown to improve learners' comprehension and critical reading abilities (Asalifew et al., 2024). Similarly, Problem-Based Learning promotes analytical reasoning and problem-solving by engaging students with authentic issues (Suarlin et al., 2021), while discussion-based activities and collaborative learning encourage learners to evaluate perspectives and justify arguments (Darminto et al., 2025). Other studies have highlighted the value of role-play, self-directed learning, and authentic materials in fostering engagement, reflection, and critical analysis (Alam et al., 2024; Aqilla & Marharini, 2025).

Although these studies demonstrate the effectiveness of individual instructional strategies, they largely examine critical thinking development through isolated pedagogical approaches. As a result, limited attention has been given to how multiple strategies can be systematically organized into a coherent instructional structure that supports the progressive development of critical thinking skills. This gap is significant because critical thinking is a multidimensional process involving cognitive, social, and metacognitive dimensions that may not be adequately developed through disconnected classroom activities (Ossa et al., 2023).

Rather than conceptualizing critical thinking instruction as a single teaching method, this study views it as an instructional framework that explores the integration of complementary strategies into a structured learning sequence. An instructional framework provides pedagogical guidance for organizing learning activities and facilitating students' progression through different stages of thinking. In the context of EFL reading, such a framework can support learners in activating prior knowledge, critically engaging with texts, and reflecting on their understanding and reasoning processes.

The novelty of this study lies in its identification of an empirically grounded instructional framework that integrates multiple critical thinking strategies within EFL reading instruction. Unlike previous studies that focus on the effectiveness of individual strategies, this study explores how diverse instructional practices operate collectively through three interconnected stages: activation, exploration, and reflection. By examining the implementation of this framework in an Indonesian higher education context, the study provides a more holistic understanding of how critical thinking can be systematically fostered in EFL reading classrooms. Therefore, this study aims to explore the implementation of an instructional framework for integrating critical thinking strategies in EFL reading instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how critical thinking strategies were integrated into EFL reading instruction and to identify an instructional framework emerging from classroom practices. A case study was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of a bounded system within its real-life context, particularly instructional processes occurring in a specific classroom setting (Ary et al.,

2019). Rather than developing and validating a formal educational model, this study sought to understand how multiple critical thinking strategies were implemented and organized in practice, leading to the identification of a pedagogical framework grounded in empirical data.

The study was conducted in a Reading for General Communication course in the English Education Study Program at STKIP PGRI Trenggalek, Indonesia. Participants consisted of one lecturer responsible for teaching the course and 12 first-semester students enrolled in the class. The lecturer was selected as the primary participant because of their central role in planning and implementing instructional activities. Students were included as supporting participants to provide insights into their learning experiences, engagement, and responses to the instructional strategies employed during the course.

As this study focused on a single lecturer and one classroom, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to all EFL settings. Instead, the study aims to provide a rich description of instructional practices that may offer transferable insights for similar educational contexts. The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the study and continuously compared interpretations across multiple data sources. This process helped minimize potential bias and increase the transparency of analytical decisions.

Data were collected through three methods to enhance data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturer to explore instructional goals, teaching strategies, and decisions related to the integration of critical thinking in reading instruction. The flexible interview format enabled follow-up questions and deeper exploration of emerging issues. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted over six instructional meetings. A non-participant observation approach was adopted to minimize disruption to the learning process. Observation data were recorded in field notes consisting of descriptive notes documenting classroom activities and interactions, as well as reflective notes capturing emerging interpretations and observations. Students were asked to provide written reflections regarding their learning experiences during the course. These reflections offered additional insights into students' engagement, perceptions of instructional activities, and critical thinking processes developed throughout the learning activities.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed four stages. First, all interview transcripts, observation notes, and student reflections were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units related to instructional activities, critical thinking practices, student engagement, and learning processes. Codes were generated inductively from the data rather than from predetermined categories. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories through axial coding. At this stage, patterns and relationships among instructional practices were examined across different data sources. For example, codes related to activating prior knowledge, guided discussion, and the use of authentic materials were grouped under a common category associated with instructional preparation and engagement. Finally, categories were synthesized into overarching themes representing recurring stages of instructional practice. Through iterative

comparison across data sources, three interconnected themes emerged: activation, exploration, and reflection. These themes formed the basis of the instructional framework proposed in this study. The framework therefore emerged from thematic patterns identified in the data rather than from a formal model-development process.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was established through data triangulation by comparing evidence from interviews, classroom observations, and student reflections. Member checking was also conducted with the lecturer to verify the accuracy of interpretations and emerging findings. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures, enabling transparency in the research process. Confirmability was enhanced through the use of reflexive notes and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and instructional setting, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Limitations of this study were the research conducted in a single EFL classroom involving one lecturer and one group of first-semester students. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-bound rather than broadly generalizable. The identified instructional framework reflects practices within a particular educational setting and may require further investigation across different institutions, instructional contexts, and participant groups to examine its broader applicability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that critical thinking strategies in EFL reading instruction were not implemented as isolated practices. Instead, they were systematically integrated into a structured instructional phase and classroom activities consisting of three interconnected phases: activation, exploration, and reflection. These phases emerged from thematic analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and students' reflective responses.

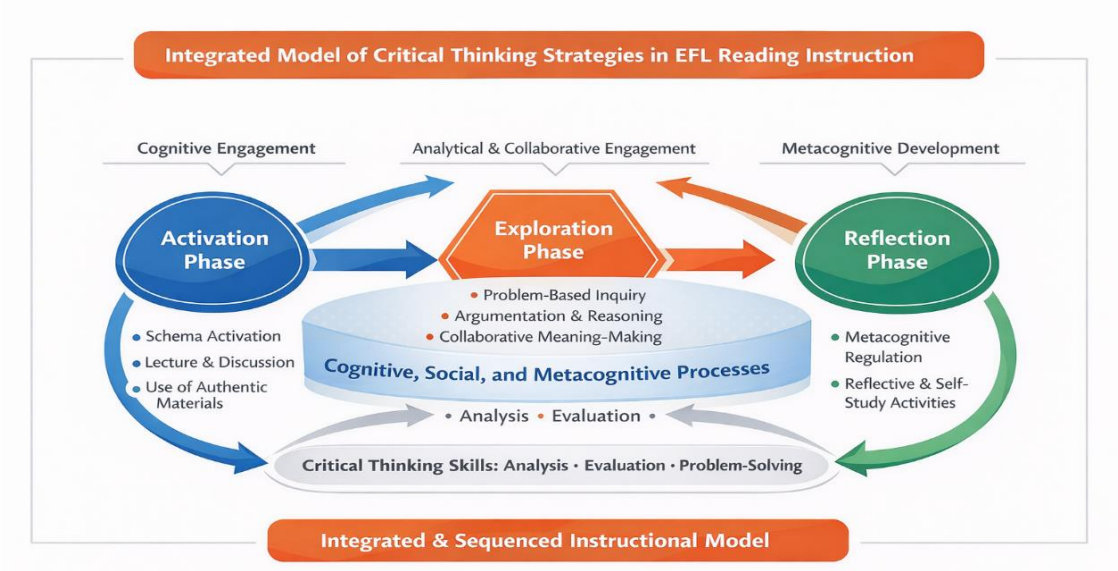

Figure 1. An Integrated Model of Critical Thinking Strategies in EFL Reading Instruction

As illustrated in Figure 1, the cyclical relationship among activation, exploration, and reflection indicates that critical thinking development is continual rather than linear. Here is the explanation of each stage. Form the figure above, activation consists of schema activation, lecture and discussion and the use of authentic materials. Schema activation describes how learners use their prior knowledge related to discussing topic. Meanwhile, lecture and discussion involve communication interaction between lecturer and students. Lecturer is related to presenting material by lecture and discussion promotes exchanging opinion or idea from different viewpoints or perspectives.

Exploration phase is connected to problem – based inquiry, argumentative and reasoning, and collaborative meaning making. Problem – based inquiry is connected to learning when students do investigation, analyzing, and offering solution from existing problem. Therefore, argumentative and reasoning are concerned into constructing argumentation with logical reason and evidence. Collaborative meaning making involves developing idea, opinion or concept through discussion, sharing information or questioning.

Reflection phase is related to metacognitive regulation and reflective and self – study activities. Metacognitive regulation means how students can plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning process. It promotes them to manage their own learning. Meanwhile, reflective and self – study activities are learning when students are motivated and encouraged to study independently.

The three phases support students' critical thinking development and facilitate their skill to analyze, evaluate and solve the problem. In conclusion, they enable students to strengthen their critical thinking competence.

Activation Phase: Building Prior Knowledge and Initial Engagement

The activation phase focused on preparing students to engage with the reading materials by activating their prior knowledge and introducing key concepts. This phase primarily involved Lecture-Discussion Teaching (LDT**)** and the use of authentic materials**.** Classroom observations showed that the lecturer began each session by presenting relevant topics and guiding students through initial discussions. This process encouraged students to connect their background knowledge with the reading content. For instance, when discussing a real-life issue from an article, students were prompted to share their opinions before reading the full text.

Interview data also confirmed that the lecturer intentionally used questioning techniques to stimulate students' thinking at the beginning of the lesson. This aligns with the purpose of LDT, which combines content delivery with interactive discussion to promote engagement. The lecturer emphasized the importance of initiating discussion before engaging with the text:

"I usually start the class by asking students what they know about the topic before reading. This helps them connect their experience to the text." (Interview, Lecturer)

This finding indicates that the lecturer intentionally activates students' background knowledge as an entry point to reading comprehension. From an instructional perspective,

this practice reflects the cognitive dimension of critical thinking, where learners begin to construct meaning by linking prior knowledge with new information.

Classroom observations also showed that students actively responded to initial questions and shared their perspectives. One student reflected:

"Before reading, we discuss the topic first. It makes the text easier to understand because we already have an idea." (Student Reflection)

This suggests that the activation phase not only supports comprehension but also increases students' engagement. The interaction between the lecturer's questioning and the students' responses creates a meaningful learning environment that prepares students for deeper analysis.

Students' reflective responses indicated that this phase helped them feel more prepared and confident in approaching the reading tasks. They reported that initial discussions made the materials easier to understand and more meaningful.

Exploration Phase: Developing Critical Thinking through Analysis and Interaction

The exploration phase represented the core of critical thinking development, where students actively analyzed texts, constructed arguments, and engaged in collaborative learning. This phase integrated several strategies, including Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Defining Arguments, and Group Work**.** The exploration phase emerged as the core stage where students developed their critical thinking skills through Problem-Based Learning, defining arguments, and group work.

The lecturer described how students were encouraged to analyze problems and construct arguments:

"I give them a problem from the text, and they have to discuss in groups and give their own arguments with reasons." (Interview, Lecturer)

This practice highlights the integration of reasoning and evaluation processes, which are essential components of critical thinking. Students were not only asked to understand the text but also to interpret and respond to it critically.

During classroom observations, students were assigned tasks requiring them to identify problems in texts, propose solutions, and justify their arguments with evidence. These activities encouraged deeper engagement with the material and required students to critically evaluate information. Observation data confirmed that students engaged actively in group discussions, exchanging ideas and debating different perspectives. This was further supported by students' reflections:

"When we work in groups, we can see different opinions. It helps me think more deeply and improve my arguments." (Student Reflection)

For example, in a problem-based task, students discussed a social issue presented in a reading text and proposed alternative solutions in groups. The lecturer guided the discussion by asking probing questions, which helped students refine their reasoning. Student reflections revealed that group discussions enabled them to consider multiple

perspectives and develop stronger arguments. They also reported increased confidence in expressing their opinions.

This phase demonstrated how the integration of multiple strategies created a more dynamic learning environment, allowing students to practice critical thinking through interaction, reasoning, and collaboration. From an analytical perspective, this phase also reflects the multidimensional nature of critical thinking, particularly the cognitive and social dimensions. The collaborative environment enables students to evaluate information, justify their reasoning, and negotiate meaning with peers.

Reflection Phase: Reinforcing Understanding and Metacognitive Awareness

The reflection phase aimed to consolidate students' learning and promote metacognitive awareness. This phase involved Self-Study and role-play activities. The lecturer explained the purpose of independent learning activities:

"I ask students to review the material by themselves after class, so they can reflect on what they have learned." (Interview, Lecturer).

This indicates that the lecturer intentionally integrates reflective practices to encourage students to monitor their own learning. Reflection is a key component of metacognitive processes, allowing learners to evaluate their thinking and learning strategies

Observation data showed that students were encouraged to review the materials independently and reflect on their learning experiences. In subsequent sessions, they shared their insights and discussed what they had learned. Students also reported the benefits of reflective activities:

"When I study by myself, I realize what I understand and what I don't. It helps me improve." (Student Reflection)

In addition, role-play activities provided opportunities for students to apply their understanding in contextual situations. This supports experiential learning, where students actively construct meaning through practice.

Role-play activities were also used to deepen understanding, particularly in dialogue-based texts. Students acted out scenarios, which helped them interpret meaning and apply their knowledge in context. Students' reflective responses indicated that this phase allowed them to evaluate their own thinking processes and identify areas for improvement. They reported that self-study helped them develop independence, while role play made learning more engaging and interactive. In addition, role-play activities provided opportunities for students to apply their understanding in contextual situations. This supports experiential learning, where students actively construct meaning through practice.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the development of critical thinking in EFL reading is more effective when instructional strategies are not implemented in isolation but are systematically integrated into a coherent pedagogical framework. This finding extends previous studies (Li, 2023;Ossa et al., 2023), which primarily emphasize the effectiveness of individual strategies, by showing that the pedagogical sequencing of

strategies plays a crucial role in shaping students' critical thinking processes. Previous studies indicate that critical thinking involves cognitive and social as well as metacognitive dimension that enable students to do analyzing, evaluating, offering solution and monitoring their own learning process.

This supports constructivist perspectives on learning, which argue that knowledge construction begins with the activation of existing schemas (Astuti & Nurhayati, 2023). However, this study further suggests that activation also plays a motivational role by increasing students' engagement, indicating that its function extends beyond cognition to include affective dimensions. It highlights that interaction between cognition and affective dimensions is more effective rather than only employing cognitive stimulation

The exploration phase represents the core of critical thinking development, where students engage in analytical and evaluative processes through Problem-Based Learning, argumentation, and collaborative interaction. While previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of these strategies individually (Ilyas & Istaryatiningtias, 2025), the findings of this study suggest that their integration within a single instructional phase creates a more dynamic and cognitively demanding learning environment. It implies that the integration constructs environment when each phase strengthens and supports each other to engage students' cognitive process and enhance their critical thinking development.

In this context, critical thinking emerges not only as an individual cognitive activity but also as a socially mediated process, where meaning is negotiated through interaction. This supports socio-constructivist views that emphasize the role of dialogue and collaboration in higher-order thinking development.

Furthermore, the reflection phase highlights the importance of metacognitive processes in consolidating learning. The use of self-study and reflective activities enables students to monitor their understanding and evaluate their reasoning processes. This finding aligns with the notion that critical thinking involves not only analysis and evaluation but also self-regulation and awareness of one's cognitive processes (Ossa et al., 2023). Importantly, Evidence from this study points to reflection as not an optional or supplementary stage but a necessary component that reinforces and stabilizes learning outcomes.

A key contribution of this study lies in its shift from viewing instructional strategies as separate techniques to understanding them as part of an interconnected system. The effectiveness of critical thinking instruction, therefore, depends not only on what strategies are used but on how they are organized and how they interact within a learning sequence. The finding also indicates that students' critical thinking is developed through the instruction. It can be seen from how students analyze, evaluate and offer alternative solution. It shows that the three phases activate and encourage students' critical thinking rather than remembering the material or information.

More importantly, the findings suggest that critical thinking in EFL contexts should be seen as a process-oriented phenomenon. Rather than emerging from isolated activities, it develops through the interaction of cognitive, social, and metacognitive processes across different phases of learning. This perspective challenges more fragmented approaches and offers a more comprehensive way of understanding how critical thinking can be fostered in classroom practice.

However, the findings can be interpreted differently. Instead of showing evidence in developing critical thinking during reading learning, it should be evaluated if the skill can be sustained and employed in different context beyond of reading activity. Therefore, next researcher can examine or investigate students' critical thinking in different situation, such as employing instructional phase in writing learning. It supports evidence that the instructional phase can be used for any skills.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that critical thinking in EFL reading develops more effectively when instructional strategies are systematically organized into a structured, phase-based model rather than implemented as isolated practices. The findings propose an instructional framework consisting of three interconnected phases: activation, exploration, and reflection, which support students in building prior knowledge, engaging in analysis and problem-solving, and developing metacognitive awareness. This model provides a clearer understanding of how cognitive, social, and metacognitive processes interact within a structured learning sequence.

Theoretically, this study contributes by conceptualizing critical thinking instruction from a fragmented, strategy-based approach into a coherent, process-oriented framework. Practically, it suggests that EFL lecturers should design reading instruction by sequencing and integrating multiple strategies to enhance students' higher-order thinking skills. However, as this study is limited to a single case, future research is needed to examine the applicability of the model across different contexts and research designs. Future researchers can use more participants with different characteristics of particular class, such as educational background, language proficiency or motivation of learning. They can conduct research with different design about critical thinking development. Overall, this study highlights the importance of viewing instruction as a structured process to more effectively support critical thinking development in EFL learning.

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