



## **FOSTERING READING COMPREHENSION IN EFL LEARNERS THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGIES**

Davronova Farangiz Sunnatovna  
Second-Year Master's Student  
Karshi International University

### **Abstract**

In modern language education, reading is no longer viewed as a passive act of decoding words and extracting basic information. It is increasingly understood as an interactive and reflective process in which learners construct meaning, evaluate arguments, and connect textual ideas with prior knowledge. This article examines the role of critical thinking in improving reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It argues that the integration of critical thinking strategies into reading lessons helps learners move beyond literal understanding toward analysis, inference, evaluation, and interpretation. The study is based on a theoretical analysis of major works on critical thinking, critical reading, Bloom's revised taxonomy, and scaffolding, as well as recent empirical studies conducted in EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** EFL reading, reading comprehension, critical thinking, critical reading, higher-order thinking, scaffolding.

### **Introduction**

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills in foreign language learning because it enables learners to access information, develop vocabulary, and participate in academic discourse. However, in many EFL classrooms, reading is still taught through traditional techniques that focus mainly on vocabulary explanation, grammar analysis, and factual comprehension questions. Such practices may help students understand surface meaning, but they often do not prepare them to question a text, assess its claims, or interpret deeper meanings. At the university level in particular, students are expected not only to understand what a text says, but also to examine how it says it and why it says it in that way. This is where critical thinking becomes essential. Research has shown that when critical thinking is systematically



integrated into reading instruction, learners' comprehension and classroom engagement improve significantly.

Critical thinking has been defined in several influential ways. Facione describes it as **“purposeful, self-regulatory judgment”**, emphasizing interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference as central components of sound thinking. Scriven and Paul similarly define it as **“self-guided, self-disciplined thinking”** that aims at high-quality reasoning. These definitions make it clear that critical thinking is not mere opinion sharing; it is a disciplined mental activity grounded in reflection, logic, and evidence. In EFL reading, such thinking enables students to move from simple comprehension toward informed judgment.

The concept of critical reading is closely related to this process. The University of Toronto explains that **“to read critically is to make judgements about how a text is argued.”** This means that reading is not simply receiving information from a page. It is an active process of questioning claims, checking evidence, identifying assumptions, and considering alternative interpretations. In a recent study of Thai EFL learners, researchers noted that critical reading depends on the combined use of reading ability and critical thinking, and the article even cites the powerful view that one may think critically without reading, but cannot truly read without critical thinking. These ideas strongly support the claim that deeper reading comprehension is impossible without reflective and analytical thought.

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding the connection between reading and thinking is Bloom's revised taxonomy. Krathwohl's revision organizes learning into a sequence of cognitive processes ranging from remembering and understanding to applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In his description of the higher categories, he defines **“Analyze”** as **“breaking material into its constituent parts”** and **“Evaluate”** as **“making judgments based on criteria and standards”**<sup>1</sup>. These categories are especially relevant to reading comprehension because a learner who reads critically must distinguish key ideas, examine relationships between them, and assess whether the text is convincing. Thus, reading comprehension develops more fully when learners are guided toward higher-order thinking rather than being restricted to recall-based tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Krathwohl, D. R. A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview // Theory Into Practice. – 2002. – Vol. 41, No. 4. – P. 212–218.



Another important theoretical foundation is Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning. The concept of the zone of proximal development explains how learners progress most effectively when they receive support that is slightly beyond their present level of independent ability. Vygotsky famously defined this zone as **“the distance between the actual developmental level”** and the learner's potential development through guided problem-solving and collaboration. In EFL reading classes, this means that critical thinking does not emerge automatically. Students need structured teacher guidance, peer discussion, and carefully designed questions that help them interpret and evaluate a text step by step. Scaffolding is therefore essential in the development of critical reading ability.

Recent empirical studies confirm the pedagogical value of this approach. A 2023 study published in the *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* found that a Bloom-based critical thinking intervention produced positive gains in learners' critical thinking, reading comprehension, and even attitudes toward classroom climate. Likewise, a 2025 *MEXTESOL Journal* study on the Thinker's Guide approach concluded that critical thinking training improved both the critical thinking ability and reading performance of Iranian EFL learners. These findings suggest that critical thinking is not merely a theoretical ideal; it has measurable effects on student outcomes in real classrooms.

Critical thinking improves EFL reading comprehension because it transforms learners from passive receivers of information into active interpreters of meaning. When students think critically, they do not simply search for correct answers. Instead, they ask what the author's purpose is, what assumptions underlie the text, whether the evidence is sufficient, and how ideas in the passage relate to wider contexts. This approach deepens comprehension because understanding is no longer limited to the literal level. Learners begin to make inferences, identify bias, and connect textual content with their own knowledge and experience.

Critical thinking also strengthens inference-making, which is a central element of reading comprehension. Many EFL learners can identify explicit information in a passage but struggle with implied meaning. Higher-order questioning helps them bridge this gap. If students are encouraged to ask why a statement was included, what the writer wants readers to believe, or what information has been omitted, they become more sensitive to textual nuance. As a result, comprehension becomes deeper, more accurate, and more analytical. This shift is particularly important in academic



reading, where understanding often depends on recognizing stance, structure, and argumentation rather than simply locating isolated facts.

Another major benefit is improved learner autonomy. Critical thinking teaches students to rely less on the teacher's explanation and more on their own reasoning. Instead of waiting for the teacher to interpret the text for them, learners begin to ask independent questions and justify their responses with evidence. This is especially valuable in higher education, where students are expected to read journal articles, reports, and theoretical texts on their own. By developing habits of critical reading, EFL learners become more confident and academically prepared.

Finally, critical thinking can make reading lessons more engaging. Students are more likely to participate actively when they are invited to discuss controversial ideas, compare viewpoints, or challenge the writer's assumptions. The classroom becomes dialogic rather than mechanical. This is one reason why critical thinking interventions have also been associated with more positive classroom environments. In other words, critical thinking contributes not only to comprehension itself but also to the conditions that make effective comprehension possible.

Critical thinking can be incorporated into all stages of reading instruction. At the **pre-reading stage**, teachers can activate background knowledge through prediction tasks, provocative statements, pictures, titles, or warm-up questions. Instead of asking only what students know about a topic, teachers can ask what they expect the author's position to be, what arguments may appear in the text, and whether they already agree or disagree with the likely viewpoint. Such activities encourage learners to approach reading with curiosity and an analytical mindset.

At the **while-reading stage**, critical thinking becomes more explicit. Students can be asked to identify the author's main claim, underline supporting evidence, recognize emotionally loaded language, distinguish facts from opinions, and note possible bias. Teachers may pause after each paragraph and ask higher-order questions such as: What is the author trying to prove? Is the evidence convincing? Could there be another explanation? What is implied but not clearly stated? These questions guide learners from simple understanding toward analysis and evaluation. Such classroom practice directly reflects the higher cognitive processes described in Bloom's revised taxonomy.

At the **post-reading stage**, students should be given opportunities to respond critically. They may write a short paragraph evaluating the text, compare it with



another text on the same topic, participate in group discussion, or debate the validity of the author's ideas. Reflection journals are also useful because they encourage learners to identify what they found convincing, questionable, or surprising. Through such tasks, reading becomes a springboard for interpretation and intellectual response rather than a closed-ended activity.

Despite its advantages, integrating critical thinking into EFL reading instruction can be difficult. One common challenge is limited language proficiency. Students may have thoughtful ideas but lack the vocabulary or grammatical confidence to express them. Another challenge is the persistence of exam-oriented teaching, where reading is reduced to multiple-choice testing and short-answer recall tasks. In such environments, teachers may feel pressure to prioritize speed and correctness over reflection and analysis. In addition, some learners are unfamiliar with open-ended questioning because they have been educated in systems that reward memorization more than interpretation.

These difficulties, however, do not mean that critical thinking should be abandoned. Rather, they show the need for gradual scaffolding. Teachers can begin with simple analytical prompts, offer sentence frames for discussion, and model how to support an opinion with textual evidence. Pair work and group work can also reduce anxiety by allowing students to test ideas collaboratively before speaking in front of the whole class. When learners are supported within their zone of proximal development, critical reading becomes more accessible and less intimidating.

In conclusion, critical thinking plays a decisive role in improving EFL reading comprehension. It enables learners to move beyond literal understanding and engage with texts through analysis, inference, evaluation, and reflection. Theoretical perspectives from Facione, Scriven and Paul, Krathwohl, and Vygotsky all suggest that reading becomes more educationally meaningful when learners are taught to think as well as to decode. Recent classroom-based studies further confirm that critical thinking instruction can improve reading performance and strengthen the overall learning environment. Therefore, EFL reading teachers should not treat critical thinking as an optional extra. It should be integrated into lesson design, questioning techniques, discussion tasks, and assessment practices as a core dimension of successful reading instruction.



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