

A Systematic Literature Review on the Components for Designing and Developing Critical Reading Modules for EFL Learners

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Abstract

Teaching methods focusing on developing critical reading skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have gained popularity. However, effectively implementing these skills depends on clear knowledge, mastering understanding, and teacher readiness. Unfortunately, teachers often do not fully use effective approaches when teaching critical reading, making it difficult to integrate them into teaching reading. While there have been many studies on teaching critical reading skills, there are a few comprehensive reviews regarding the components of critical reading module. This article aims to identify the components of the critical reading skills teaching and learning module for EFL learners. By conducting a systematic literature review, this study uses Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) as the research framework. After reviewing 15 articles from 2018 to 2023, four themes were identified: module structure, module strategy, incorporating critical thinking, and module content. The study suggests that these themes are essential for teaching critical reading in the EFL context. It provides valuable guidance for teachers and opportunities for students to learn through critical reading skills.

Keywords: Systematic Literature Review, Critical Reading Skills, Critical Thinking, Module, EFL Learners

Introduction

Critical reading skills are globally emphasized abilities critical for classroom instruction. Critical reading is defined as a positive process of comprehension, which helps readers improve their reading from literal understanding to a critical level (Pardede, 2007, 2019). The purpose of reading is more than just finding the correct answer (Zhuo, 2021). Readers need to explore the material, ask questions, and share ideas, rather than passively searching for the right

answer in reading (Katan & Baarts, 2021). Reading critically requires teachers to encourage learners to think deeply, interpret, and evaluate before presenting their views. This is the premise to guide learners to think critically (Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019). Critical reading requires a more active and complex engagement of the readers with the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2020). Critical reading skills allow readers to think actively to come up with their ideas and interpretations (Flynn, 1989; Wilson, 2016), instead of solely relying on teachers and textbooks for answers. Otherwise, the students are at a superficial level of understanding and are easily obscured by the input of others, making it challenging for them to fully adapt to the intricacies of the language world (Romly et al., 2018; Desa et al., 2020).

Teaching methods focus on cultivating critical reading, such as problem-based learning (e.g., Thorndahl & Stentoft, 2020), reflective writing (e.g., Jawas, 2019; Joannes & AlSaqqaf, 2023), and textual analysis (Odo, 2018), which enhance students' awareness of their thinking processes. Critical reading involves understanding critical thinking and employing techniques to increase engagement in reading. These strategies aim to improve students' interaction with the written essays, fostering active involvement and control over information processing.

Russell (1974) defines modules as structured units that enhance teaching and learning across educational levels. Recent quantitative studies, including Nhi and AlSaqqaf (2023) and AlSaqqaf et al (2024), demonstrate the significant impact of well-structured module components on improving English language education. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), Moghadam, et al. highlighted that (2023) developing a critical reading module involves the systematic creation of tailored learning materials and activities from low to high that align with the cognitive process of critical thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Moghadam, et al (2024) further advocated for targeted learning objectives that promote deep engagement and enhance critical reading skills. Thus, strategically developing well-structured module components, aligned with targeted learning objectives, provided effective tools to support and optimize the teaching and learning process in the EFL context.

Research Objective

The research objectives for this study are to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) to explore previous studies on critical reading skills and to identify the essential components of the critical reading skills teaching and learning module for EFL learners.

Method

In response to the research objective, an SLR was conducted to explore the instruction of critical reading in prior research. When doing an SLR, researchers use Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines to make sure their review is rigorous and transparent, boosting its credibility and usefulness to the scientific community. PRISMA was utilized. While PRISMA is commonly employed in medicine and public health, its suitability for this study was affirmed as it facilitated the formulation of precise research questions and enabled systematic searches through its 27 components. Furthermore, PRISMA mitigates several biases and aids in efficiently synthesizing studies by mandating a systematic search strategy consisting of four key processes: identification, screening, eligibility, and assessment of article quality.

Identification

The identification phase entails the selection and expansion of suitable keywords for article retrieval. In this study, an article search was conducted using specific keywords in four major databases: ScienceDirect, Scopus, SpringerLink, and JSTOR. These databases were selected for their comprehensive searches, stable results, and advanced search features compared to others. They are also known for maintaining high-quality control and systematic indexing. To find articles, advanced search techniques such as Boolean Operator (AND, OR), phrase searching, truncation, wild cards, and field codes were utilized. Utilizing keywords enhances the precision of the search results. Three primary keywords were chosen: “critical reading”, “critical thinking”, “English language learning” or “English language education”. To broaden the search, synonyms, related terms, and variations of these keywords were explored using online thesauruses, previous research databases, Google Scholar database, and insights from experts. Through these methodologies, 40 articles were retrieved from Scopus, 105 from ScienceDirect, 440 from Springerlink, and 43 from JSTOR. Subsequently, all identified articles underwent the screening process as part of the systematic search strategy. The outcomes of this identification process are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Search string for searching database articles

Database	Search String
Scopus (n =40)	(“critical reading*” OR “critical comprehension*”) AND (“critical thinking” OR “higher-order thinking”) AND (“module”) AND (“English language learning (ELL) OR “English language education (ELE))”
ScienceDirect (n = 105)	(“critical reading*” OR “critical comprehension*”) AND (“critical thinking” OR “higher-order thinking”) AND (“module”) AND (“English language learning (ELL) OR “English language education (ELE))”
Springerlink (n = 440)	(“critical reading*” OR “critical comprehension*”) AND (“critical thinking” OR “higher-order thinking”) AND (“module”) AND (“English language learning (ELL) OR “English language education (ELE))”
JSTOR (n = 43)	(“critical reading*” OR “critical comprehension*”) AND (“critical thinking” OR “higher-order thinking”) AND (“module”) AND (“English language learning (ELL) OR “English language education (ELE))”

*Search String.

Screening

Screening involves establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria to select appropriate articles for the systematic literature review. Out of the 628 articles gathered during the identification phase, the screening process was then applied. The initial criterion was the publication year, restricted to the last 5 years (2018–2023), aligning with the concept of study maturity and the surge in related publications during this period. Additionally, only articles published in English were considered to ensure clarity. Review articles were excluded as the focus was on identifying empirical research findings. The inclusion criterion ensured that selected articles contributed relevant insights to the systematic literature review. Specifically, articles focusing on the components of the critical reading module in teaching and learning were retained, while those not explicitly addressing these elements were removed. Following the screening, 570 articles were excluded, leaving 57 articles for further analysis. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
- Must involve critical reading in EFL learning with clear descriptions of practical applications	a) Editorials, reviews, correction notes, and early-access articles
- Within the past 5 years	b) Not related to English language education
- Empirical study	c) Critical reading is not used for educational purposes
	d) Not incorporated with critical thinking
	e) Not written in English

Eligibility

The remaining 57 articles underwent a second screening phase, termed eligibility, to ensure relevance for use in the systematic literature review (SLR). This screening involved reviewing article titles and abstracts. If a decision couldn't be made based on these, the methodology, results, and discussion sections were consulted. During this phase, 10 articles were excluded for not focusing on the critical reading module elements in teaching and learning at the school level. Reasons for exclusion included not focusing on irrelevant to the research question, current population characteristics, and outcomes of interest. Subsequently, 15 articles proceeded to the next stage, which involved quality assessment. The systematic search process, conducted using PRISMA, is depicted in Figure 1.

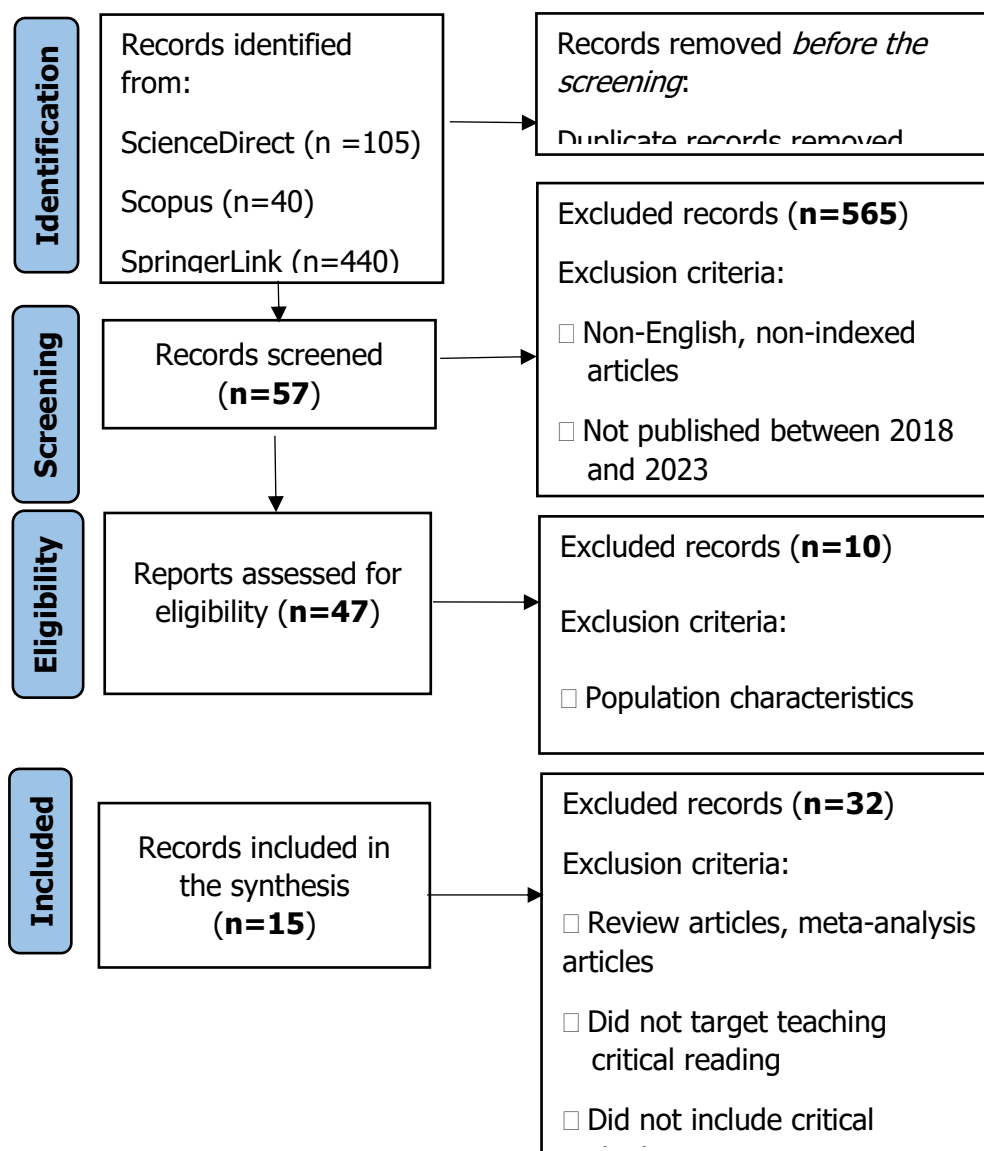


Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews (adapted from Page et al., 2021)

Assessment of Article Quality

Subsequently, data extraction from articles deemed of high quality was conducted by three researchers. Given the focus of this SLR on reviewing previous research on teaching critical reading and learning modules, the extraction process focused primarily on three key sections of each article: the abstract, results, and discussion. Additional sections providing relevant data were consulted if necessary. The extracted data were then organized into a table to facilitate analysis. Table 3 below provides an overview of the literature reviews conducted, detailing various research aspects.

Table 3

Overview of the Literature Reviews

Research Details	Category	Occurrence	Proportion
Intervention objectives	Critical reading skill development	11	73.3%
	Revising the reading texts	2	13.3%
	Critical reading assessment design	2	13.3%
Grade	High school	6	40%
	College	10	66.7%
Level of Proficiency	Lower-intermediate	2	13.3%
	Intermediate	9	60%
	Intermediate to advanced	1	6.7%
	-	3	20%
Time	Six months and above	3	6.7%
	Four months	1	6.7%
	Two months	6	40%
	20 weeks	1	6.7%
	14 weeks	2	13.3%
	-	3	20%
Critical Thinking	Higher-order thinking	10	66.7%
	Cognitive engagement	5	33.3%
Types of Intervention	Direct critical thinking program	7	46.7%
	Project-based learning	1	6.7%
	Integration of other strategies	5	33.3%
	Blended learning	2	13.3%
Instructional Group	Control and experimental	8	53.3%
	With specific purpose	5	33.3%
	-	1	6.7%
Text Type	Various	14	93.3%
	Classroom observations, questionnaires	1	6.7%
Assessment	Test paper	14	93.3%
	Inventory	1	6.7%

The broad perspective of the module, as outlined in Table 3, provides a foundational overview such as objectives, grade levels, proficiency, duration, critical thinking, interventions, instructional groups, and text types. It sets the stage for a more detailed examination of critical reading module components, as illustrated in Table 4. By synthesizing insights from both tables, we attain a holistic understanding of the factors shaping the development and implementation of effective critical reading modules for EFL learners can be attained.

Table 4
 Details of the Reviewed Critical Reading Module

No.	Source of the study	Objectives			Grade		Level			Time				Critical thinking		Intervention			Grouping		Text		Test		
		Critical reading skill development	Revising the reading texts	Critical reading assessment design	High school	College	Lower-intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate to advanced	Six months and above	Four months	Two months	20 weeks	14 weeks	Higher-order thinking	Cognitive engagement	Direct instruction program	Project-based learning	Integration of other strategies	Blended learning	Control & experimental	With specific purpose	Various	Classroom observations	Test paper of questions
1	Moghadam et al. (2023)	✓			✓			✓						✓		✓				✓		✓		✓	
2	Erdiana & Panjaitan (2023)		✓		✓		✓		Not provided					✓	✓					✓		✓			
3	Wang (2022)	✓			✓		✓						✓		✓		✓			✓		✓		✓	
4	Moghadam et al. (2021)	✓			✓		✓		✓					✓		✓				✓		✓		✓	
5	Horváthová & Nadřová (2021)	✓			✓		✓			✓					✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	
6	Polat (2020)		✓		✓		✓		Not provided					✓				✓		✓		✓			
7	Nguyen (2020)	✓			✓		✓					✓		✓				✓		✓		✓		✓	
8	Song (2019)	✓			✓		✓			✓					✓	✓				✓			✓	✓	
9	Marsaulina (2019)	✓			✓		✓			✓				✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Yulian (2021)		✓		✓		✓			✓				✓					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
11	Lin et al. (2018)	✓			✓		✓			✓				✓				✓		✓		✓			✓
12	Surdyanto & Kurniawan (2020)	✓			✓		Not provided				✓			✓								✓		✓	
13	Pardede (2019)		✓		✓		✓		Not provided					✓				✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
14	Swanto, et al. (2021)	✓			✓	✓	Not provided			✓				✓	✓					✓		✓		✓	✓
15	Perol (2023)	✓			✓		Not provided			✓				✓	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓

Findings and Analysis of the Key Components of the Module

Following a review of the modules, a qualitative analysis was conducted as the SLR incorporated multiple research designs. Out of the 15 articles scrutinized, the publication years varied: three in 2023, one in 2022, four in 2021, three in 2020, three in 2019, and one in 2018. Thematic analysis was employed to identify overarching themes and subthemes. The process involved individually examining the 15 findings extracted from the articles, grouping shared or relevant findings into thematic datasets, and assigning appropriate themes. This resulted in the identification of four main themes: module structure, module strategy, incorporating critical thinking, and module content. Subsequently, ten subthemes were derived from each main theme: objectives, proficiency level, duration, setting, instructional type, instructional group, higher-order thinking, cognitive engagement, and text type.

The first main theme is module structure, with a particular emphasis on objectives, proficiency levels, duration, and setting. Its subtheme lies in the clear articulation of learning purposes and the targeting of both high school and college students. However, interventions primarily last for two months, with a preference for instructional diversity. Regarding this theme and its subthemes, future modules would prioritize setting clear learning objectives of improving critical reading and catering to diverse instructional needs while considering an intervention duration of at least 10 weeks.

The second main theme, critical reading skills emphasized the benefits of incorporating text analysis with the interaction of the author, resulting in engagement of the reading and improved teaching efficacy and learning outcomes, particularly in subjects like EFL learning.

The third main theme is incorporating critical thinking, with subthemes focusing on higher-order thinking and cognitive engagement. Its subtheme emphasizes integrating higher-order thinking skills and promoting cognitive engagement to enhance learning outcomes. However, there's a need to further explore text analysis and author interaction to foster engagement and improve teaching efficacy and learning outcomes. Regarding this theme and its subthemes, future modules are suggested to incorporate more interactive and engaging activities that encourage critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the content.

The fourth main theme is module content, with subthemes including text type and assessment. Its subtheme highlights the utilization of various text types for diverse learning and assessment opportunities. Likewise, there's also a need to consider alternative assessment methods beyond traditional tests of questions. Regarding this theme and its subthemes, future modules are suggested to incorporate a wider range of innovative assessment tools like project-based assessment, peer and self-assessment, and classroom observations that align more closely with the module's content and learning objectives.

These themes were further analyzed to derive subthemes, resulting in identified ten subthemes. All themes and subthemes were carefully reviewed and retained as they directly addressed the research questions. Finally, validation of the themes and subthemes was carried out by three experts—one in systematic literature review and two others in module development. The three experts concurred that the main themes and subthemes presented in Table 5 were appropriate and relevant to the research questions.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis of Components of Critical Reading Module

Theme	Sub Themes	Key Findings
Module structure	-Objectives	a) A clearly stated learning purpose of the module b) Focusing on improving critical reading skills in both high school and college student
	-Proficiency level	c) The majority of interventions last for two months, involving various instructional groups
	-Duration	d) Module tailored to intermediate learners while also suitable to different proficiency levels
	-Setting	e) More often in college settings while less in diverse high school settings
Module strategy		a) Focusing on developing critical reading skills and developing higher-order thinking skills

	- Instructional type	b) More on direct critical thinking programs strategies, but also combining with diverse teaching strategies c) Control and experimental groups, as well as groups with specific purposes
	- Instructional group	
Incorporating Critical thinking	-Higher-order Thinking -Cognitive engagement	a) Integrating higher-order thinking skills b) Promoting cognitive engagement to enhance learning outcomes c) Incorporating text analysis with the interaction of the author, resulting in engagement of the reading and improved teaching efficacy and learning outcomes
Module content	-Text type - Assessment	a) Utilization of various text types provides a diverse range of materials for learning and assessment b) Classroom observations and project-based assessments also used as assessment tools c) Wider range and more innovative tools tailored to the module's content, with one employing an inventory approach.

In summary, the SLR findings underscored the importance of the elements of module structure, strategy, critical thinking, and content. These elements require further exploration to facilitate their effective integration into teaching practices. The analysis of the module's key components reveals four main themes: module structure, strategy, critical thinking, and module content. Each theme has specific subthemes and findings. The module structure emphasizes clear objectives and tailoring to different learner levels and settings. The strategy highlights diverse teaching methods and groups. Critical thinking involves integrating higher-order skills and promoting active engagement. Content focuses on using varied texts and assessment tools critical reading test papers and inventory. These insights suggest future modules should be comprehensive and aligned with learning goals, and tailored materials, using diverse teaching strategies and assessment tools.

Discussion

The 15 modules under review targeted the components of the critical reading module. They found it to be beneficial for EFL learners Lin et al (2018) English as well as English as a second language (ESL) learners Pardede (2017), which may offer valuable insights into the development of a critical reading module for English language learners. Their perspective on learners' needs, abilities, and assessment sheds light on the components of the critical module in the English language learning context. These findings were in line with Li and Wan (2022), who noted a lack of attention to critical reading modules in higher education, leading to a shortage of appropriate teaching guidelines for critical reading among Chinese EFL undergraduates. As a result, there is an urgent requirement to create a customized module that directly tackles the challenges in critical reading faced by EFL learners.

Based on the observations, diverse methods enhance critical reading skills, especially in college for intermediate-level learners. This review highlights the positive impact of various interventions on critical reading skill development in language education contexts (n=10). Through critical thinking programs e.g., Moghadam et al (2023); Erdiana & Panjaitan (2023), higher-order thinking questions Polat (2020); Nguyen (2020), project-based learning Wang (2022), and blended learning (Marsaulina, 2019; Yulian, 2021), it observed improvements in students' critical thinking abilities, reading comprehension, and self-directed learning habits. By incorporating cultivating critical thinking, the studies found that these interventions facilitated deeper learning and enhanced critical thinking skills among language learners.

Meanwhile, the findings suggest modules should involve active engagement, empowering students with practical approaches including feedback and reflection, focusing on students' involvement in applying critical reading skills (Wang, 2022). Innovative teaching strategies and supportive learning environments play crucial roles in nurturing students' critical reading skills across EFL settings.

In addition, in structuring a critical reading module for intermediate undergraduates, it is fundamental to define clear learning objectives that align with a progressive development under Bloom's Taxonomy, as emphasized by (Moghadam et al., 2021, 2023). The tailored design of the module should correspond to the learners' academic level and linguistic proficiency, ensuring an appropriate challenge and learning pace. Consistent with review recommendations, the course duration is advised to be no less than 10 weeks e.g., Song (2019); Marsaulina (2019); Yulian (2021), incorporating a blend of authentic materials and engaging pedagogical strategies. The use of interactive activities, a key component in modern education theory Polat (2020); Nguyen (2020), should be prevalent throughout the module. Direct instruction is also crucial, as is the encouragement of critical thinking skills, which can be nurtured through meticulously planned lessons (e.g., Horváthová & Naďová, 2021).

Furthermore, assessment tasks in the module are suggested to be innovative and more comprehensive. This aligns with Lin et al (2018) who used both inventories as well as questions in the study but advised a wider range and more innovative assessment tools like project-based assessment and self or peer evaluation form be used for a comprehensive and formative assessment of the critical reading skills. Meanwhile, collaborative group work and exposure to diverse types of texts, as supported by the findings of Moghadam et al (2023), equipped students with the necessary critical reading skills that are fundamental for navigating academic challenges effectively.

Overall, integrating these components into both high school and college curricula in the English learning context ensures continuity in critical reading skill development throughout students' academic journeys (Syafitri, 2023). To enhance critical reading skills for EFL learners, the findings above reveal that incorporating structured interventions focused on progressive critical thinking skill development, tailoring reading texts designing critical reading assessments are imperative in cultivating critical reading skills. These components align with the results from previous studies Nguyen (2020); Surdyanto & Kurniawan (2020); Dongmei et al (2022), which argued that a targeted, flexible module can provide a comprehensive framework for fostering critical reading skills and nurturing critical thinking abilities. This module should be flexible to accommodate various factors. By integrating these key elements into the curriculum, educational institutions can ensure a more effective development of critical reading skills among students throughout their academic journey.

Conclusion

To summarize, the systematic literature review has identified key components for developing effective critical reading modules tailored to the needs of EFL learners. The review addresses gaps in existing research, introducing new pedagogical ideas in critical reading instruction by interactively integrating components of structure, strategies, critical thinking, and content into module development to achieve the learning outcome. Tailoring critical reading modules to the needs of EFL learners also acknowledges the unique challenges they face in English reading, highlighting the necessity to adjust teaching materials to improve their critical reading. Observably, the comprehensive scope of the present study which covers diverse and impact EFL and ELL contexts such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, and the Philippines, enhances research quality and teaching practices to meet international standards. The practical implications suggest adapting the identified components to various educational levels, from high school to graduate school, to optimize learning outcomes and cultivate advanced cognitive skills in critical reading. Notably, studies have emphasized the importance of exposing college learners to critical reading as it equips them with essential skills for academic and professional success. Similarly, future learning materials with the mentioned module components adapted to graduate students may have impacts on improving their critical reading skills when doing academic reading.

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