From Literal Comprehension to Critical Reading: A Skill-Based Progression for Undergraduate ESL Learners

Chiranjeevi Jakkani
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Agricultural College, Polasa, PJTSAU

Abstract

Critical reading is an essential component of academic literacy that enables learners to move beyond literal comprehension towards analytical and evaluative engagement with texts. Although previous research has established the importance of critical reading instruction, limited attention has been given to how critical reading skills can be systematically developed through a pedagogically sequenced approach. This study qualitatively examines the development of critical reading among undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners through a structured progression of five core reading skills: identifying the main idea, recognizing tone, determining the author's purpose, interpreting vocabulary in context, and identifying assumptions. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, learner responses, group discussions, instructional activities, and teacher field notes during a five-lesson classroom intervention. Thematic analysis revealed that learners developed critical reading progressively, with each skill serving as a foundation for the next. The findings indicate that explicit instruction, collaborative learning, and guided textual analysis facilitated learners' transition from literal comprehension to deeper textual interpretation. The study proposes a skill-based progression as a pedagogical framework for teaching critical reading, contributing to both the theory and practice of ESL reading instruction. The findings have important implications for language teachers seeking to foster higher-order reading abilities in undergraduate classrooms.

Keywords: Critical reading, ESL learners, reading pedagogy, skill-based progression, qualitative study, reading comprehension, higher-order thinking.

1. Introduction

Reading is no longer viewed as a passive process of decoding written symbols or retrieving explicitly stated information. Contemporary perspectives on second language (L2) reading emphasize that effective readers actively construct meaning by interacting with texts, drawing inferences, evaluating arguments, recognizing implicit assumptions, and relating textual information to their prior knowledge (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Consequently, critical reading has emerged as an indispensable component of academic literacy, enabling learners not only to comprehend texts but also to question, interpret, and evaluate them (Wallace, 2003). In higher education, where students are expected to engage with complex academic texts and

demonstrate higher-order thinking, the ability to read critically has become an essential academic competence rather than a supplementary language skill (Bloom et al., 1956).

Despite its importance, developing critical reading remains a significant challenge for many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Classroom instruction often prioritizes literal comprehension by focusing on factual recall and surface-level understanding, leaving learners inadequately prepared to interpret deeper meanings embedded within texts. Consequently, many students struggle to identify an author's purpose, recognize tone, infer the meanings of unfamiliar lexical items from context, evaluate implicit assumptions, and distinguish between factual information and interpretation (Wallace, 2003). These limitations become particularly evident when learners encounter authentic academic texts that demand analytical and evaluative reading rather than simple information retrieval.

Research in second language reading has consistently highlighted the value of explicit instruction and the use of reading strategies in helping learners engage more effectively with texts (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Research on critical reading in language education has also emphasised the importance of guided engagement with texts, particularly when learners are encouraged to move beyond literal comprehension towards interpretation and evaluation (Wallace, 2003; Correia, 2006). While this body of work has established the importance of critical reading instruction and identified a range of relevant reading skills, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how these skills can be systematically sequenced during classroom instruction to facilitate learners' gradual progression from literal comprehension to critical reading.

Addressing this gap, the present study qualitatively examines the development of five core reading skills among undergraduate ESL learners: identifying the main idea, recognizing tone, determining the author's purpose, interpreting vocabulary in context, and identifying assumptions. These skills were selected because they represent progressively complex cognitive processes that move learners from understanding what a text explicitly states to critically examining what it implicitly conveys. Drawing on qualitative evidence from classroom observations, learner interactions, reflective discussions, and instructional activities, the study explores how learners developed these skills during a structured classroom intervention. Rather than treating these five skills as isolated competencies, the study proposes that they constitute a skill-based progression, in which mastery of one skill provides the foundation for the development of subsequent higher-order reading abilities. This progression reflects the movement from lower-order comprehension to higher-order analysis and evaluation described in Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) and is further supported by sociocultural perspectives on learning, which emphasize that higher cognitive abilities develop through guided instruction and collaborative interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduate ESL learners develop critical reading through a progression of five core reading skills?

2. What qualitative evidence illustrates learners' development across these five core reading skills?
3. How does a skill-based progression facilitate learners' transition from literal comprehension to critical reading?

By presenting qualitative evidence from an undergraduate ESL classroom, this study contributes to the growing body of research on critical reading pedagogy in three important ways. First, it demonstrates how explicit classroom instruction can facilitate learners' development of critical reading. Second, it proposes a pedagogically sequenced progression of five core reading skills that provides a conceptual framework for understanding the development of critical reading in ESL contexts. Finally, it offers practical insights for language teachers seeking to integrate critical reading instruction into undergraduate classrooms and thereby promote deeper textual engagement and higher-order thinking.

2. Literature Review

Critical reading extends beyond the ability to understand the literal meaning of a text. It involves actively engaging with written discourse by analysing ideas, evaluating arguments, recognizing implicit assumptions, and constructing informed interpretations based on textual evidence (Wallace, 2003). Unlike literal comprehension, which focuses primarily on retrieving explicitly stated information, critical reading requires readers to question the author's intentions, assess the credibility of arguments, and distinguish between fact and opinion. Consequently, critical reading is widely regarded as a higher-order cognitive process that integrates comprehension, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009).

The development of critical reading is closely associated with higher-order thinking skills described in Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Readers progress from understanding explicit information to analysing relationships within a text, evaluating the validity of arguments, and generating independent interpretations. Similarly, sociocultural perspectives on learning emphasize that higher cognitive abilities develop through guided instruction, collaborative learning, and scaffolded classroom interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives suggest that critical reading is not an innate ability but a learnable competence that can be developed through systematic instruction.

Previous research has emphasised the value of explicit instruction, guided questioning, collaborative discussion, and strategy-based approaches in helping second language learners engage more effectively with texts (Grabe, 2009; Wallace, 2003; Correia, 2006). Such approaches suggest that critical reading can be developed through classroom activities that encourage learners to move beyond literal comprehension and examine texts more carefully. The present study builds on this perspective by examining the development of five specific reading skills through a structured sequence of classroom activities.

Although previous studies have identified numerous skills associated with critical reading, they generally discuss these skills independently or evaluate the overall effectiveness of instructional interventions. Comparatively little attention has been given to the pedagogical sequencing of these skills during classroom

instruction. In other words, existing research explains what constitutes critical reading and demonstrates that instruction is beneficial, but offers limited insight into how learners progress from literal comprehension to critical interpretation through a structured sequence of interconnected skills. Understanding this developmental progression is important because higher-order reading abilities are unlikely to emerge simultaneously; rather, they are expected to develop incrementally as learners acquire increasingly sophisticated strategies for interacting with texts.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the qualitative development of five core reading skills—identifying the main idea, recognizing tone, determining the author's purpose, interpreting vocabulary in context, and identifying assumptions—within an undergraduate ESL classroom. Rather than viewing these skills as discrete instructional objectives, the study conceptualizes them as a **skill-based progression** that gradually moves learners from literal comprehension toward critical reading. By analysing classroom interactions and learners' responses during a structured instructional intervention, the study proposes a pedagogical framework that contributes to both the theory and practice of critical reading instruction in ESL contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how undergraduate ESL learners developed critical reading through a structured progression of five core reading skills. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of learners' reading behaviours, classroom interactions, and responses during instructional activities. Rather than measuring learning outcomes quantitatively, the study focused on understanding how learners gradually progressed from literal comprehension to critical reading through explicit classroom instruction.

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted with 26 undergraduate students enrolled in a compulsory English language course at an agricultural university in India. The participants represented mixed levels of English language proficiency and shared similar academic backgrounds. All students participated in the instructional activities conducted during the intervention and contributed qualitative data through classroom discussions, group activities, and reflective interactions.

3.3 Instructional Intervention

The instructional intervention consisted of five sequential lessons, each focusing on one core reading skill: identifying the main idea, recognizing tone, determining the author's purpose, interpreting vocabulary in context, and identifying assumptions. The lessons were designed to move learners progressively from literal

comprehension toward higher-order interpretation of texts. Instruction incorporated teacher modelling, guided questioning, collaborative learning, textual analysis, and group discussions to encourage active engagement with reading materials. Each lesson built upon the previous one, allowing learners to develop increasingly sophisticated reading strategies.

3.4 Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected throughout the instructional intervention using multiple sources, including classroom observations, learners' oral responses, group discussions, classroom activities, and teacher field notes. These sources provided rich evidence of learners' developing understanding of each reading skill and their ability to apply these skills while interacting with texts. The use of multiple data sources facilitated a comprehensive understanding of learners' critical reading development.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. Learners' responses, classroom interactions, and observational notes were examined to identify recurring patterns related to the development of the five core reading skills. The analysis focused on how learners' reading behaviours evolved across the instructional sequence and how each skill contributed to their progression from literal comprehension to critical reading. The findings are presented thematically, corresponding to the five instructional stages of the intervention.

4. Findings

The qualitative analysis of classroom observations, learner responses, group discussions, and reflective interactions revealed that learners developed critical reading through a gradual progression of five interconnected reading skills. Rather than emerging independently, each skill served as a foundation for the next, enabling learners to move from literal comprehension towards increasingly sophisticated levels of textual interpretation. The findings are presented under five themes corresponding to the instructional sequence adopted during the intervention.

4.1 Developing the Ability to Identify the Main Idea

The first stage of the intervention focused on helping learners distinguish the central idea of a passage from supporting details. During the initial classroom activities, many students identified individual facts, examples, or memorable sentences as the main idea, indicating that their reading was largely confined to surface-level comprehension. Classroom discussions revealed that learners often equated important information with the central message of the text without considering the relationships among ideas.

As the instructional activities progressed, learners began to analyse paragraphs more systematically by identifying recurring concepts, eliminating supporting details, and synthesizing information into a single central idea. Teacher-guided questioning encouraged students to justify their responses using textual evidence

rather than intuition. Group discussions further enabled learners to compare interpretations and refine their understanding through collaborative reasoning.

Observational data indicated a noticeable improvement in learners' ability to explain why a particular statement represented the main idea instead of merely selecting an answer. Their responses became increasingly analytical, demonstrating an awareness of how supporting details collectively contributed to the author's central message. This development marked an important transition from locating explicit information to constructing coherent meaning from a text.

More importantly, identifying the main idea established the cognitive foundation for subsequent critical reading tasks. Once learners understood the overall message of a text, they were better prepared to examine the author's attitude, purpose, and implicit meanings.

4.2 Developing the Ability to Recognize Tone

The second stage of the intervention introduced learners to the concept of authorial tone. Initially, many students interpreted texts primarily in terms of factual content and found it difficult to recognise the writer's attitude towards the subject. Classroom interactions showed that learners frequently described passages as neutral even when the author's lexical choices clearly conveyed approval, criticism, concern, or irony.

Through guided reading activities and collaborative discussion, learners gradually began to associate specific linguistic features with particular tones. They examined adjectives, adverbs, figurative expressions, and contextual cues to infer the author's emotional stance. Instead of relying on personal impressions, students increasingly supported their interpretations with textual evidence, citing words and phrases that reflected the writer's perspective.

Teacher observations suggested that learners became more confident in differentiating between what an author stated explicitly and what was communicated implicitly through language. This shift represented an important step beyond literal comprehension, as students recognised that language carries attitudes and values in addition to information.

The development of tone recognition also influenced learners' engagement with subsequent reading tasks. Once they became aware that writers communicate viewpoints through language choices, they were better positioned to explore the purpose behind those choices and to interpret texts more critically.

4.3 Developing the Ability to Determine the Author's Purpose

Building on their understanding of tone, learners were introduced to activities that required them to identify the author's purpose. At the beginning of this stage, many students assumed that all texts were written merely to provide information. They rarely considered that writers might also seek to persuade, entertain, criticize, warn, or provoke reflection.

Instructional activities encouraged learners to examine the relationship between the author's language, tone, intended audience, and overall message. Classroom discussions demonstrated that students gradually moved beyond identifying factual content to considering why the text had been written. They learned to support their interpretations by analysing textual evidence rather than relying on personal assumptions.

Learners' responses indicated increasing awareness that different texts serve different communicative purposes and that understanding an author's intention contributes significantly to deeper comprehension. By connecting tone with purpose, students developed a more comprehensive understanding of how texts are constructed to achieve specific communicative goals.

This stage represented a further progression towards critical reading, as learners began interpreting texts in relation to the writer's intentions rather than merely understanding the information presented.

4.4 Developing the Ability to Interpret Vocabulary in Context

The fourth stage focused on interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual analysis rather than dictionary-based translation. Initially, learners tended to interrupt their reading whenever they encountered unfamiliar words, often assuming that understanding every individual word was necessary for comprehending the passage.

During the intervention, learners were encouraged to infer meanings by analysing surrounding sentences, grammatical structures, and contextual clues. Group activities provided opportunities for students to discuss alternative interpretations and justify their reasoning using evidence from the text. Gradually, learners became less dependent on direct translation and more willing to construct meaning from context.

Classroom observations indicated that this strategy improved both reading fluency and comprehension. Rather than viewing unfamiliar vocabulary as an obstacle, learners increasingly regarded contextual clues as valuable resources for meaning-making. Their responses demonstrated greater flexibility in interpreting lexical items while maintaining focus on the overall message of the text.

The ability to interpret vocabulary in context also strengthened learners' confidence in dealing with authentic reading materials, enabling them to engage more independently with complex texts.

4.5 Developing the Ability to Identify Assumptions

The final stage of the intervention focused on identifying assumptions embedded within texts. This proved to be the most cognitively demanding skill because it required learners to recognise ideas that were implied rather than explicitly stated. Initially, students found it difficult to distinguish assumptions from factual statements and often accepted the author's claims without questioning the underlying beliefs.

Through guided questioning, collaborative analysis, and classroom discussion, learners gradually learned to examine what the author had taken for granted and to evaluate whether those assumptions were justified. They began questioning implicit beliefs, considering alternative viewpoints, and recognising that texts often reflect particular perspectives rather than objective reality.

Qualitative evidence suggested that learners became increasingly capable of reading beyond the literal content of a passage. Their discussions reflected greater analytical depth, as they evaluated arguments instead of merely understanding them. By the end of the intervention, many students demonstrated the ability to integrate the skills developed during earlier lessons—identifying the main idea, recognising tone, determining purpose, and interpreting vocabulary in context—to uncover assumptions embedded within texts.

The development of this final skill represented learners' transition from literal comprehension to critical reading. Rather than functioning as isolated abilities, the five core reading skills collectively formed a progressive pathway through which learners developed increasingly sophisticated strategies for engaging with written texts.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that critical reading develops through a gradual progression of interconnected reading skills rather than through the acquisition of isolated strategies. The qualitative evidence indicates that learners moved systematically from identifying explicit information to interpreting implicit meanings as they engaged with increasingly complex reading tasks. This progression supports the view that critical reading is a developmental process requiring explicit instruction, guided practice, and scaffolded learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1978; Wallace, 2003).

The study also supports the view that explicit instruction and guided reading activities can help second language learners develop more analytical ways of engaging with texts (Grabe, 2009; Wallace, 2003). The classroom evidence in the present study suggests that learners' ability to analyse and interpret texts developed as they worked with specific reading skills. More importantly, the findings suggest that the sequence in which these skills are introduced may also be important. Rather than teaching reading skills independently, arranging them in a logical pedagogical progression may enable learners to build progressively more sophisticated interpretive abilities.

The proposed progression begins with identifying the main idea, which establishes a foundation for understanding the overall message of a text. Once learners comprehend the central idea, they become better equipped to recognise the author's tone, interpret communicative purpose, infer vocabulary from context, and ultimately identify underlying assumptions. Each stage builds upon the cognitive abilities developed in the previous stage, enabling learners to move from literal comprehension towards critical interpretation. This progression aligns with Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), where higher-order cognitive processes

emerge from mastery of foundational skills, and with sociocultural theories that view learning as a scaffolded process facilitated through guided interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

An important contribution of this study is its reconceptualization of critical reading instruction as a skill-based progression rather than a collection of discrete classroom activities. Earlier work has identified important critical reading skills and emphasised the value of explicit and guided instruction (Wallace, 2003; Correia, 2006), but comparatively less attention has been paid in the present context to how these skills relate to one another during learners' development. The present findings suggest that critical reading may be more effectively developed when instructional activities are organised sequentially, allowing learners to build new interpretive abilities upon previously acquired competencies. This pedagogical perspective offers a practical framework that teachers can adapt to different instructional contexts while maintaining a clear developmental pathway.

The findings also have important implications for ESL pedagogy. Instead of emphasizing factual recall or isolated comprehension exercises, language teachers should design reading instruction that gradually develops learners' analytical and evaluative abilities through carefully sequenced tasks. Collaborative discussion, guided questioning, contextual analysis, and reflective interpretation emerged as valuable instructional practices that encouraged learners to engage actively with texts rather than merely retrieve information. Such an approach not only enhances reading comprehension but also cultivates independent, reflective, and critical readers capable of engaging with increasingly complex academic texts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the transition from literal comprehension to critical reading is neither immediate nor incidental. Rather, it is a structured developmental process that can be effectively supported through explicit, sequential instruction. The proposed skill-based progression therefore provides both a conceptual explanation of learners' critical reading development and a practical framework for improving reading pedagogy in undergraduate ESL classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how undergraduate ESL learners developed critical reading through a structured progression of five core reading skills: identifying the main idea, recognizing tone, determining the author's purpose, interpreting vocabulary in context, and identifying assumptions. Drawing on qualitative evidence from classroom observations, learner interactions, and instructional activities, the study demonstrated that these skills functioned as interconnected stages in learners' movement from literal comprehension to critical reading. Rather than developing independently, each skill provided a foundation for the next, enabling learners to engage with texts at progressively deeper levels of interpretation.

The study contributes to the literature on critical reading by proposing a skill-based progression that integrates five core reading skills into a coherent pedagogical framework. While previous studies have established the importance of explicit critical reading instruction, the present study extends this work by illustrating how a

structured instructional sequence can facilitate learners' gradual development of higher-order reading abilities. The findings suggest that organizing reading instruction around a logical progression of skills can enhance learners' analytical, interpretive, and evaluative engagement with texts.

The study has certain limitations. As the investigation was conducted with a relatively small group of undergraduate ESL learners in a single institutional context, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other educational settings. Future research may validate the proposed framework with larger and more diverse learner populations, examine its effectiveness across different proficiency levels, and explore its applicability in digital and multilingual learning environments.

Overall, the study underscores that critical reading is not an isolated ability acquired through incidental practice but a developmental competence that can be systematically cultivated through explicit and carefully sequenced instruction. The proposed skill-based progression offers both a conceptual understanding of learners' critical reading development and a practical framework for enhancing reading pedagogy in ESL classrooms.

References

1. Alderson, J. C. (2000). Assessing reading. Cambridge University Press.
2. Baudoin, E. M., & Bober, E. S. (1977). *Reading for concepts*. Prentice Hall.
3. Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. David McKay.
4. College Board. (2012). The official SAT study guide (2nd ed.). College Board.
5. Correia, R. (2006). Encouraging critical reading in ESL classrooms. *English Teaching Forum, 44*(1), 16–23.
6. Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive–developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist, 34*(10), 906–911. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.906
7. Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Koda, K. (2005). Insights into second language reading: A cross-linguistic approach. Cambridge University Press.
9. Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
10. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
11. Wallace, C. (2003). *Critical reading in language education*. Palgrave Macmillan.