# Incorporating critical thinking skills in English classroom instruction: a case study of Indonesian preservice teachers

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## ABSTRACT

*Critical thinking is an essential skill in education due to the demands of the 21st century, especially in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Nonetheless, the inclusion of critical thinking in English classroom can be quite challenging, particularly for pre-service teachers. This research deals with the integration of critical thinking into teaching modules conducted by pre-service English teachers at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, focusing on lesson plan and instructional method. The study used a case study approach, analyzing teaching modules of twelve pre-service teachers. Bloom's taxonomy and a five-step critical thinking model were used to see the incorporation of critical thinking skills in their teaching modules. Interview was also carried out to elicit information on their way of incorporating critical thinking in their English instruction as related to the document analyzed. The results shows that the pre-service teachers exercised natural, effective thinking through well-defined objectives, questioning method, practical learning with feedback and reflection as a way to incorporate critical thinking through their teaching module. The result that they are aware of their role in supporting the students in developing their critical thinking while teaching English. The implications of the insights from the study signal considerable potential contributions for increased structured approaches to critical thinking instruction in EFL and a general commitment to reflective practice and responsive lesson design in English Language Teaching. The results have important implications for the integration of language education with critical thinking so that students become equipped with essential skills required in the 21st century.*

*Keywords:* critical thinking skills, English classroom instruction, pre-service teachers

## Introduction

The notion of education has experienced a significant transformation in recent years. Students nowadays must adjust to the demands of the 21st century and develop critical thinking skills to engage in a dynamic and increasingly intricate world. Critical thinking has consistently been emphasized by educational institutions, corporations, and legislators due to its recognition as an essential life skill and a valuable asset in professional environments (Koenig, 2011). Critical thinking encompasses multiple definitions and a broad spectrum of interpretations. The researcher regarded critical thinking as an intrinsic idea vital to an individual's academic development and social existence (Wilson, 2016). Critical thinking include interpretation, analysis, assessment, conclusion, explanation, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990). Moreover, critical thinking encompasses both critical thinking skills and the inclination to engage in critical thought (Ennis, 1996). Ennis (1996) defines critical thinking as a reasonable, introspective process aimed at discerning what to observe or undertake. Individuals possessing critical thinking skills can make informed choices and decisions.

Nowadays, the teaching of English at schools and universities should engage students in communicative activities that encourage critical thinking. Engaging students in critical thinking activities is an essential skill for learners of a second language in higher education. They need to be able to analyze and discuss, produce critical writing, counter-argue and speak persuasively, solve problems and make decisions. In the case of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), students should be able to think critically in a cross-cultural perspective where they need to analyse issues and assumptions. This challenging task requires higher order thinking skills that involve the ability to evaluate the clarity and logic of arguments (Masduqi, 2011).

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Incorporating critical thinking into the learning of a foreign language has proven useful in practice (El Soufi & See, 2019; Heidari, 2020). As with any other form of education, language education also requires critical thinking (Wilson, 2016). Critical thinking is essential for developing language itself (Wu et al., 2013; Yang & Gamble, 2013; Yanning, 2017). Critical thinking improves cognitive abilities and the ability to identify a relevant information as well as the means that can be employed to achieve particular goals within the educational development process (Lin, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Students who improve their critical thinking develop their problem-solving and decision making competences. This has made researchers concentrate more on the development of this type of cognition in language classes (Zhao et al., 2016). Students are allowed to probe and evaluate matters and make decisions in relation to how they learn languages (Nold, 2017). It creates awareness among students and helps them to develop the intelligence which is within them. In addition, teaching critical thinking helps students learn how to discriminate between right and wrong information, and how best to achieve the desired objectives in learning (Lin, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Students have been shown to develop these critical thinking skills. As a result, researchers have identified the promotion of this cognitive approach as a priority in language education environments.

**Figure 1. Five-step model of Promoting Critical Thinking**



5-Step Model to Move Students toward Critical Thinking (Duron, Limbach, Waugh, 2006)
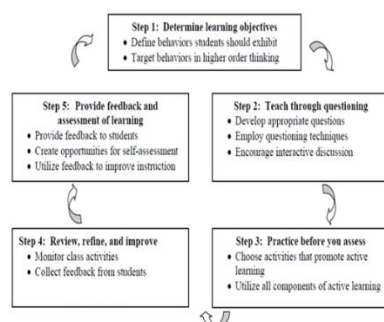
In this 21st century, students are expected to be able to communicate proficiently. They also need to have capability in verify messages, construct conclusion and arguments while also critically construct and defend their own viewpoints. Numerous research contend that critical thinking is essential for proficient language acquisition in relation to these requirements. Consequently, instruction in critical thinking must to be integrated into the ELT curriculum (Bağ & Gürsoy, 2021). Nonetheless, there are certain obstacles to the integration of critical thinking in EFL classes. Factors identified include time limits, material resources, and L2 competency (Floyd, 2011; Li, 2016; Manalo & Sheppard, 2016). The students' inadequate proficiency in English hinders their ability to articulate their thoughts and emotions. EFL teachers must devise the most effective classroom activities due to the challenges associated with integrating critical thinking. Lesson planning is crucial in the field of education. Lesson preparation is an essential component of instruction, as it furnishes educators with a structured guide for classroom activities. A lesson plan is an essential instrument that encapsulates the pedagogical philosophy and educational goals (Nesari & Heidari, 2014). Efficient lesson planning facilitates successful instruction and the execution of curriculum policies. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand the difference between traditional and critical thinking courses. The instructor consistently directs pupils during a conventional class.

Certain research have indicated that the use of critical thinking in EFL courses produced beneficial outcomes in Indonesia. Critical thinking fosters higher-order cognitive skills in pupils by necessitating the differentiation between fact and opinion (Haryati & Hidayati, 2017). Moreover, mobile learning applications can enhance critical thinking abilities in evaluation, reasoning, and conclusion formulation (Agustina et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there are obstacles to integrating fundamental strategies that foster students' critical thinking (Lamb, 2004). The deficiency in teachers' critical literacy comprehension also adds to the identified issues (Gustine, 2018).

Although there is an increasing volume of research on the integration of critical thinking in EFL classrooms and textbooks, the examination of critical thinking integration in EFL classes, encompassing lesson planning and instructional methods, has been mostly overlooked. However, only little concern given to see in what way English teachers move their

students toward critical thinking in order to assist them in having the 21st century skill as well as facing the challenge in real world. Therefore, this study explore how Pre-Service English Teachers Move Students toward Critical Thinking which is viewed through their teaching modules.

To incorporate critical thinking into courses, a workable definition is essential for the actual use of critical thinking in educational resources (Rear, 2010). Fortunately, Bloom's Taxonomy and critical thinking methodologies

can serve as the conduit between critical thinking and academic courses. There are many constraints in language teaching (and teaching in general), such as teacher's assumption that students cannot learn the subject at hand unless the teacher covers it. Hence, teachers must give up the belief and start active learning. This learning can make the course enjoyable and can encourage students to think critically. In addition, Bloom's taxonomy facilitates teachers to classify instructional activities as they advance in difficulties (Duron et al., 2006).

**Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how Indonesian EFL preservice teachers integrate critical thinking skills into their English classroom instruction. A case study design was chosen as it allows for an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon within its real-world context. Through this approach, the study aimed to examine how preservice English teachers conceptualize, implement, and reflect on critical thinking within their instructional practices.

The participants consisted of twelve preservice English teachers (six males and six females) who were enrolled in the English Language Education Department at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia. They were selected using convenience sampling, a non-random sampling technique that involves recruiting participants based on availability and willingness to participate (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The selection criteria included preservice English teachers who had completed the faculty's required teaching practicum, ensuring they had prior classroom teaching experience.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how preservice English teachers incorporate critical thinking into their teaching, this study utilized two primary data sources: document analysis and interviews.

Through document analysis, the primary documents analyzed were lesson plans (teaching modules) developed by the preservice English teachers. Each preservice English teachers has one module to be the object of document analysis in this study. Therefore, there are twelve teaching modules in total. The documents offer substantial insights into the integration of critical thinking in the realm of

lesson planning, activities, and assessment strategies. The analytical framework draws upon the revised Bloom's Taxonomy by Anderson et al. (2001), which categorizes cognitive learning objectives into distinct levels, and the 5-Step Model for Promoting Critical Thinking (Duron et al., 2006), which delineates the procedural steps involved in the structuring of learning activities to foster critical thinking.

In addition to document analysis, semi-structured interviews were carried out to confirm and reveal the preservice English teachers' viewpoints on incorporating critical thinking in their classroom through their constructed teaching module. The questions focused on their understanding of critical thinking and its role in English language teaching, strategies they used to incorporate critical thinking into their lessons, and challenges they encountered in fostering critical thinking among students. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The collected data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) qualitative data analysis framework, which consists of three stages including data condensation by filtering and coding key elements related to critical thinking integration, data display that organizing findings in thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation and conclusion drawing and verification which identifying patterns, themes, and relationships across participants' lesson plans and interview responses.

For document analysis, teaching modules were coded based on Bloom's Taxonomy and the 5-Step Model, categorizing

instructional strategies that promoted critical thinking. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, where recurring ideas and concepts were grouped into emerging themes. A cross-case comparison was conducted to highlight commonalities and variations in how preservice English teachers implemented critical thinking.

By employing multiple data sources and a systematic analysis approach, this study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how Indonesian EFL preservice teachers incorporate critical thinking into their classroom instruction.

## Results and Discussion
### Results
*Incorporation of Critical Thinking Skills: Determining Learning Objectives*

Aligned with the initial phase of the critical thinking model, all pre-service teachers in the study articulated specific learning objectives aimed at promoting higher-order thinking skills.

> *"I made sure that my learning objectives encouraged my students to analyze and evaluate rather than just recall information. For example, instead of writing 'students will understand the concept of argumentative writing,' I used verbs like 'analyze,' 'compare,' or 'critique' to push them towards deeper thinking." (S2, M)*

Utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy as a guiding framework, these objectives emphasized action verbs that required students to analyze, evaluate, and create, rather than engage in rote memorization. This approach reflects pre-service teachers' understanding that clearly defined learning objectives are instrumental in fostering students' cognitive development from the outset.

**Figure 2. Learning Objectives in One of the Preservice English Teachers' Teaching Module**
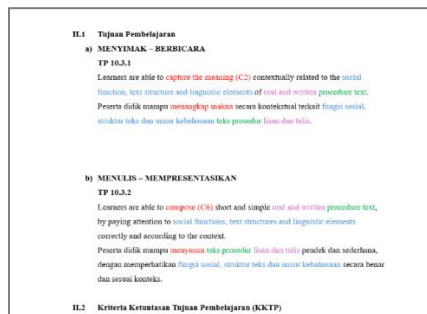


Each teaching module integrated these objectives to establish a foundation for critical engagement, explicitly setting expectations for students to interpret and critically assess classroom content. The preservice teachers even gave different font color to highlight the operational verbs of the objectives as seen in Figure 2.

*Incorporation of Critical Thinking Skills: Teaching through Questioning*

In the second phase, pre-service teachers effectively employed questioning techniques within their modules to enhance students' critical thinking skills.

**Figure 3. Stimulating Questions in One of the Preservice English Teachers' Teaching Module**
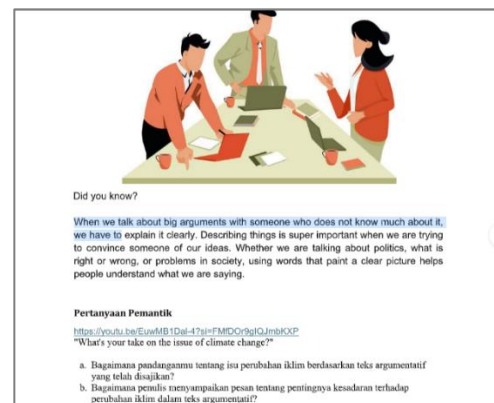


The questions were crafted to prompt students to interpret, evaluate, and make informed judgments. These questions were strategically designed to lead students through progressively complex levels of inquiry, encouraging them to move beyond superficial responses.

> *"At first, students hesitated to respond to open-ended questions, but once they realized I didn't want them to give me one*

*'correct' answer, they started engaging more and supporting their arguments with examples." (S2, F)*

This approach aligns with the higher-order cognitive tasks outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy, as it required students to justify their answers, thus fostering a classroom environment supportive of critical thinking.

*Incorporation of Critical Thinking Skills: Practice Before Assessing*

After the questioning phase, pre-service teachers introduced practical exercises designed to enable students to apply critical thinking skills prior to formal assessments. These exercises frequently included group discussions, problem-solving tasks, and real-life scenarios that encouraged active engagement with critical thinking strategies in a collaborative context.

**Figure 4. Stages of Practice in One of the Preservice English Teachers' Teaching Module**



This stage, like what is shown by Figure 4, provided students with opportunities to practice critical analysis in a low-stakes environment, building confidence and reinforcing critical thinking skills before formal evaluation.

*"Before giving my students final evaluation, usually I make sure they had enough opportunities to practice either through group discussions or class discussion first. This helped them organize their thoughts and do better in the next activity." (S2, M)*

These practice-oriented activities reflect pre-service teachers' recognition of the importance of experiential learning in cultivating critical thinking abilities.

*Incorporation of Critical Thinking Skills: Feedback and Assessment of Learning*

Assessment constituted a fundamental element of each module, structured to measure not only content mastery but also the development of students' critical thinking processes.

**Figure 5. Assessment Part in One of the Preservice English Teachers' Teaching Module**
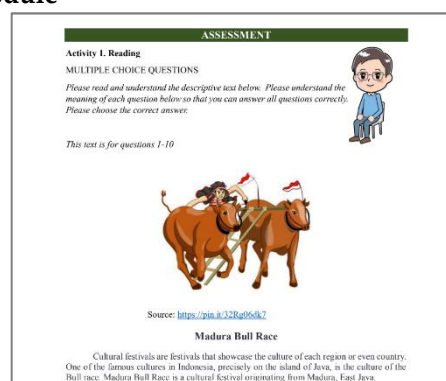


Figure 5 shows the assessment part within the English preservice teachers' teaching module. Not only summative assessment, they also employed diverse formative assessments, including reflective journaling and oral feedback sessions, to offer constructive feedback aimed at deepening students' critical engagement.

*"The students are asked to reflect on their learning through journal writing. Some of them initially found it difficult, but over time, they started recognizing how their thinking evolved." (S6, F)*

These feedback mechanisms were carefully designed to identify areas for improvement, enabling students to enhance their reasoning and analytical abilities. Through this iterative feedback process, students were encouraged to engage in self-reflection—an essential component of critical thinking that fosters awareness of their cognitive processes and supports more effective decision-making.

*Incorporation of Critical Thinking Skills: Review, Refine, and Improve*

The final phase involved reflective practices, wherein pre-service teachers critically analyzed and refined their teaching modules in response to student outcomes and classroom experiences.

**Figure 6. Reflection and Evaluation Part in One of the Preservice English Teachers' Teaching Module**



By systematically reviewing their instructional strategies and evaluating the effectiveness of their methods in fostering critical thinking, pre-service teachers exhibited a commitment to continuous improvement.

> *"After each lesson, I reflected on which activities worked well and which ones needed improvement." (S4, F)*

Revisions were frequently made to questioning techniques, learning objectives, and assessment approaches to more effectively support the cultivation of critical thinking in subsequent lessons. This reflective practice underscores the understanding that teaching critical thinking is a dynamic process requiring adaptability and ongoing adjustments to meet students' evolving learning needs.

### Discussion

The study findings indicate that pre-service English teachers effectively incorporated a structured model to foster critical thinking in their teaching modules. By following a five-step critical thinking approach, the teachers highlighted the importance of well-defined objectives, purposeful questioning, practical application, feedback, and reflection in enhancing students' critical engagement. This section discusses what are beyond the findings of the study and its implications for English as a part of English as a Foreign Language Instruction.

### Integration of Critical Thinking in Classroom Instruction

In terms of the role of well-defined learning objective, the focus on Bloom's Taxonomy-based learning objectives reflects pre-service teachers' understanding of clear, competency-driven goals as foundational to critical thinking instruction. These objectives guided students toward cognitive tasks beyond memorization, promoting analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Prior studies affirm this approach, showing that higher-order objectives help students actively engage with content (Duron et al., 2006). Furthermore, Rani (2017), who study about the problems and solution of Teacher Education, state that there is a need for teachers who take students' interests, needs, age, level, and potential into account and inspire the students to develop their potential in the best way. For EFL students, who often require additional language support, such objectives are crucial in developing complex cognitive skills. Therefore, it is necessary for Preservice English teachers to construct well-defined learning objectives that can raise the students' critical thinking when it comes to the practical classroom context afterwards.

Regarding questioning as the next step of the 5-Step Model for Promoting Critical Thinking proposed by Duron, Limbach, & Waugh (2006), the use of structured questioning underscores the value of inquiry-led learning in developing critical thinking. By crafting questions that prompt deeper analysis and diverse perspectives, pre-service teachers fostered a classroom environment conducive to critical engagement. Teachers who are good at questioning could encourage and motivate their trained teachers stimulate and develop critical thinking skills as well as foster their creativity and all the potentials within them (2012). This aligns with Ennis's (1996) model, which emphasizes questions that require evaluation and justification. In EFL contexts, questioning can bridge language limitations, building students' critical analysis skills through structured dialogue.

Practical application through group work and problem-solving tasks allowed students to exercise critical thinking in a

controlled, supportive environment. This approach supports findings by Lin (2018), who observed that real-world tasks promote cognitive flexibility and adaptability. For EFL students, practical exercises are particularly valuable as they contextualize abstract concepts, enhancing both language and critical thinking abilities.

Emphasis on feedback in this study highlights its role in guiding students toward self-reflection and improvement. Through formative assessments and reflective feedback, pre-service teachers created a feedback loop that allowed students to refine their reasoning. Nesari and Heidari (2014) highlight that targeted feedback fosters self-assessment, helping EFL students develop both linguistic and cognitive skills.

The curriculum change requires teachers to adapt with the dynamic situation of all aspects of education. Some of in-service teachers have actualized the teaching module into real classroom context as well as problems dealing with it that emerged as they implement it (Rakhmawati & Imaniar, 2024).

The teachers' reflective practices demonstrated the importance of adaptability in teaching critical thinking. This aligns with learner-centered teaching, where teachers continuously refine their methods to meet students' evolving needs, as research shows reflective practices enhance instructional quality (Gustine, 2018). In EFL settings, where critical thinking may be hindered by language barriers, adaptable instruction is vital for addressing students' unique challenges.

*Preservice English Teachers' Awareness of Promoting Critical Thinking Skills*

From the results, it is revealed that the preservice English teachers demonstrated a significant awareness of the importance of incorporating critical thinking skills in their instructional practices. This awareness is seen from how they structured and constructed their teaching modules, provide stimulating questions, structure the practices and all the activities within, set assessment plan, and involve students in reflective teaching practice. Each step of their instruction, seen from their teaching module and confirmed directly by them, was planned carefully since they are aware of the importance of assisting their students to higher-order thinking skills, in line with the established pedagogical frameworks.

One primary indicators of the preservice teachers' awareness of critical thinking instructions is how they approached writing the learning objectives. As mentioned in the results, they designed learning objectives that included the action verbs of analyze, evaluate, and create and not just remember. This shows their understanding that effective learning objectives can be steps towards developed students' critical thinking skills. Their operational verbs highlight, which they wrote in different font colors in their lesson plans, also demonstrates their further attempts to promote higher order thinking at the very beginning of instruction. Such awareness suggests that these teachers understand that by proactively planning instruction, students' skills for analysis and evaluation can be nurtured (Brookhart, 2010).

Equally important, and an example of another type of critical thinking skill awareness, is the conscious selection of class discussion methods intended to enhance students' critical thinking ability. The pre-service teachers used more advanced questions in a sequential manner that shifted away from simplistic answers to above average engagement and comprehension in the classroom. By using the Socratic method where the students are asked questions to probe their understanding and evaluation of their own answers illustrates that these teachers – in addition to appreciating the need to ask critical questions (Elder & Paul, 2019). Moreover, their observations of students' initial hesitation and subsequent engagement indicate an awareness of the challenges associated with fostering critical thinking and the necessity of scaffolding students' responses over time.

Preservice teachers focusing on practice before assessment also indicates their understanding on how students can be nurtured to think critically. Through group discussion, problem solving, and even role play, students were provided opportunities to practice reasoning in a relatively low-stakes context, prior to assessment. Their comments on how students should be provided with an opportunity to think through the discussion before they are evaluated show that they comprehend the levels of experiential learning in terms of cognitive development (Kolb, 2015).

This finding is consistent with earlier work which confirms that providing students with authentic practice opportunities has an positive impact on critical thinking skills (Halpern, 2013).

*Implications for EFL Instruction and Critical Thinking Development*

These conclusions propose very important propositions for the teaching of EFL, especially in regions where critical thought has just begun to be a consideration. It follows that the use of well-defined and systematic models aids in the achievement of critical thinking by providing teachers a definite guide to follow in varying EFL situations. Additionally, the focus on teaching reflective practice suggests the importance of sustained EFL teacher training in critical thinking skill instruction. The application of questioning and the practical incorporation of those methods into EFL instruction can develop both language and

cognitive skills necessary for students' academic and professional endeavors. In the same way, the application of questioning strategy in the classroom of preservice teachers would help them acquire the critical thinking skills that they are supposed to develop during the lessons (Rasyid, F., Aini, N., & Varghesse, KJ.; 2023).

Furthermore, the fact that the -preservice English teachers are non-native, strengthens the potential to support students developing their critical thinking skills. This is supported by Adara (2019) that the students show more relaxed attitudes when they were being taught by Non-native English Teachers due to the same first language they have as well as teachers' background knowledge in learning English since they are also ELF learners in the past.

**Conclusion**

This study explored how pre-service English teachers incorporate critical thinking into lesson planning and instruction using a structured five-step model based on Bloom's Taxonomy. Findings show that these teachers effectively fostered critical thinking through well-defined objectives, strategic questioning, hands-on activities, iterative feedback, and reflective practices. By emphasizing analysis, evaluation, and creation, they promoted deeper cognitive engagement, while questioning

techniques and practical tasks helped bridge theory and practice. Feedback and reflection further supported metacognitive growth and instructional adaptability. This structured approach provides a practical framework for integrating critical thinking into EFL classrooms, preparing students for academic and real-world challenges. Future research could explore its scalability across diverse EFL settings.

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