

Integrating Critical Thinking in Language Education: A Textual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is generally regarded as a desirable objective in language education, although there is disagreement on its definition, teachability to second-language learners, and integration into language classes. This paper conducts an open textual analysis of a collection of eight abstracts published between 1997 and 2024 through a lexical frequency analysis, seven-thematic coding of keywords and interpretive reading of the texts. The corpus includes 1,012 tokens and 421 word types, and the term critical thinking occurs 26 times. Explicit teaching is the main theme in seven out of eight abstracts, occurring 39 times out of 133 keyword codes, while critical pedagogy occurs in only one text and teacher training in three texts, all from 2021 and beyond. Culture is essential in all three texts published before 2002 but in only one out of the five texts written after 2018, while evidence and assessment occur mainly in texts written afterwards. This study illustrates the transformation of discussion into evidence and practice, highlights the recurring disparity between rhetoric and practice in pedagogy, and offers a five-stage integration model and a six-point research agenda. This is a pilot study and thus is restricted by a small dataset and an analysis at the level of abstracts only.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, Language Education, EFL, Textual Analysis, Content Analysis, Teacher Development.*

Introduction

Besides grammar and vocabulary practice, classroom environments of languages involve reasoning skills, arguments, and evaluation of information as well. With English becoming an international language for communication, the ability to communicate thoughts, opinions, and criticism is one of the main priorities of EFL, and critical thinking is an essential part of language teaching nowadays (Mustofa et al., 2020). The incorporation of critical thinking in the process of language learning has been disputed for years. There are various views on using critical thinking methodology in TESOL, transformational critical thinking practices, and there are recent literature reviews on the existing mismatch between the curriculum promises and classroom practice.

The discussion is extensive and fragmented, and it becomes hard to identify what issues have been resolved and what issues have not. The textual analysis technique helps reveal some structure in the discussion. Using the published abstracts as data, it becomes possible to analyze the vocabulary of the scholars and to code the themes and the evolution of the discussion. In this paper, I use textual analysis to answer four research questions regarding the discussed issue: RQ1: What vocabulary is used in the corpus? RQ2: What are the prevailing themes and neglected ones? RQ3: How has the emphasis changed over time? RQ4: What do the findings say about integrating critical thinking in language education?

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it provides a reproducible lexical and thematic analysis with a completely specified coding scheme. Second, it divides the discussion into six positions and their practical implications. Third, it suggests a five-step integration framework. Since the corpus is small and based on abstracts, this research is designed as a pilot study.

Conceptual Background

Critical thinking is commonly defined as reasonable and reflective thinking that attempts to clarify what to believe or do (Ennis, 1993). The definition sounds straightforward, but implementing it in the language learning context requires special consideration. Most language teachers are experts in teaching linguistic competences and may not have enough experience in developing critical thinking skills; hence, their success largely depends on how well they comprehend what this term means (Ouslimani & Aboubou, 2021). Students, on the other hand, learn to think critically in the foreign language, which can disguise their critical skills due to insufficient proficiency.

Three distinct intellectual traditions define the subject of discussion. The first one considers critical thinking as a specific set of skills and knowledge that can be learned and tested consciously. The second tradition understands it as a social and cultural practice that changes meaning for different communities, questioning the possibility of using Western understanding elsewhere (Atkinson, 1997). The third tradition sees criticality as a transformative approach towards language and knowledge in general, which involves questioning everything (Pennycook, 1999). The review below will consider these traditions to explain textual patterns.

Methodology

• Design

This study applies textual analysis through the methodology of content analysis, which is based on valid and replicable inferences drawn from texts (Krippendorff, 2019), along with the themes-based logic of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process has three stages. First is the lexical stage that involves token counting, word type, and frequency of content words. Second is the thematic stage that involves coding the texts according to the keyword dictionary. Third is the interpretive stage where arguments are read and categorized into positions. Table 1 provides an overview of the method.

Table 1: Corpus Selection Criteria and Analytic Protocol

Element	Specification	Rationale
Unit of analysis	Published abstract of a peer-reviewed or conference paper	Abstracts are the most comparable unit across eras and journals
Inclusion	Addresses critical thinking or criticality in language teaching; bibliographic record verifiable	Keeps focus on the integration question
Exclusion	Records without verifiable authorship, year, and venue	Ensures every analysed text can be cited
Lexical analysis	Token and type counts; frequency after stop-word removal	Shows what the corpus talks about
Thematic coding	Seven-theme keyword dictionary; presence = two or more hits	Makes coding transparent and replicable
Interpretive reading	Close reading of arguments and positions	Adds meaning that counts cannot capture

Note. Design follows content-analysis and thematic-analysis conventions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2019).

• Corpus

Identifying texts was done through searching publisher sites and open repositories using terms such as critical thinking, EFL, TESOL, systematic review, and teachers' perception in October 2026. The corpus is composed of eight abstracts that have verifiable authorship, date, and venue (see Table 2). They include concept criticisms, one empirical study, three systematic/narrative reviews, and one teacher survey. The period covered by these texts is 1997-2024. The text of Stapleton (2001) is incomplete, and the abstracts of Yin et al. (2023) and Hoorijani & Tabrizi (2024) have been extracted from the repository records.

Table 2: Texts in the Analytical Corpus

ID	Study	Type	Focus	Tokens
A1	Atkinson (1997)	Conceptual critique	Cautions on critical thinking pedagogy in TESOL	115
A2	Stapleton (2001)	Empirical study	Critical thinking in Japanese students' L2 writing	59

A3	Pennycook (1999)	Conceptual introduction	Critical approaches to TESOL	130
A4	Soufi and See (2019)	Systematic review	Explicit teaching of critical thinking, higher education	96
A5	Mustofa et al. (2020)	Narrative overview	Critical thinking across four English skills	140
A6	Ouslimani and Aboubou (2021)	Teacher survey	Teachers' perceptions at an Algerian university	149
A7	Yin et al. (2023)	Systematic review	23 studies of critical thinking in EFL writing	136
A8	Hoorijani and Tabrizi (2024)	Systematic review	Critical thinking dispositions, Iranian EFL context	187

Note. Token counts are word forms in the retrieved abstract text. The retrieved text for A2 is partial. Total = 1,012 tokens and 421 types.

• Coding and Analysis

The text was lowercased and tokenized, and a list of stop-words in standard English along with a list of generic words like paper or article was removed before frequency counts. Seven themes were identified in advance based on the debate outlined in Section 2: Definition & Nature, Culture & Context, Explicit Instruction, Teachers & Development, Writing & Skills, Evidence & Assessment, and Critical Pedagogy. Every theme was operationalized into a list of keywords (Table 3). A theme was coded as being included in a piece of text when it got two or more keyword matches, thereby avoiding incidental occurrences. The analysis was conducted using the Python language, and the same counts are used for all the figures shown in this paper. The coding was done by a single coder, and hence the instrument of replication for the present study is the keyword dictionary, as any other coder will get the same counts when applied to the same texts.

Findings

• Lexical Profile (RQ1)

The total number of tokens in the corpus is 1,012 with 421 types of words and the ratio between the two being 0.42, a common ratio for a short specialized academic text. Critical thinking has been used 26 times while critical and thinking have the highest frequencies out of all the content words being used 32 and 29 times respectively (see Figure 1). The following high frequency words after critical thinking include EFL (14), teaching (12), skill (10), English (9), language (8) and writing (7). The vocabulary is mainly made up of teaching and skills instead of learning, learner and student which indicates that it is centered on the instructor's perspective.

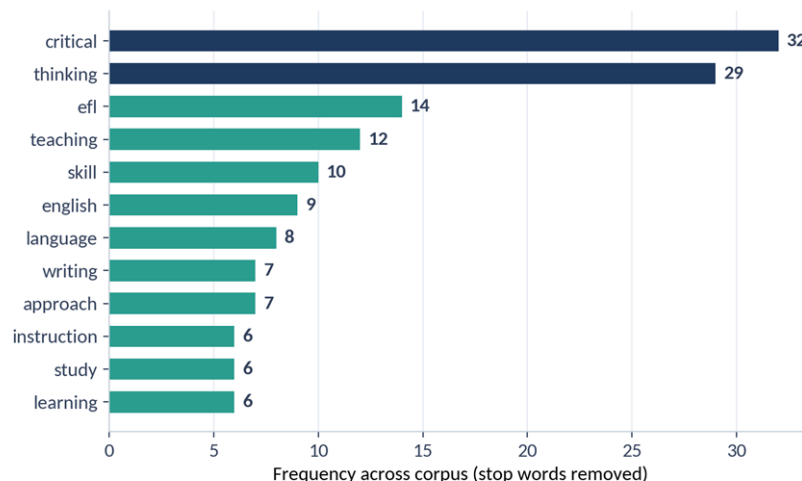


Figure 1: Most frequent content terms in the corpus

Note. Source: author's analysis of the corpus in Table 2; stop words and generic terms such as paper and article removed.

• Thematic Structure (RQ2)

Table 3 and Figures 2 and 3 present the results of thematic analysis. Overall, within the corpus, the seven themes got 133 keyword hits. The most prominent is explicit instruction with 39 hits and the appearance in seven out of eight abstracts. Next comes evidence and assessment (22 hits) and culture and context (21 hits). Teachers and development get 18 hits and writing and skills 13, while definition and nature get 11 hits. Critical pedagogy is the least covered theme (9 hits and appearance in only one text – Pennycook (1999)). It is mentioned mostly in the abstract of this article through its vocabulary of transformation, questioning, and politicisation.

It appears that the corpus is concerned primarily with how critical thinking should be taught and whether the teaching was effective and not at all with the political and ideological interpretation of critical thinking. Moreover, the development of teachers gets minimal attention since it was found as a theme in only three of eight texts; however, the survey conducted among teachers by Ouslimani and Aboubou (2021) proves that teachers' perception is key for class work.

Atkinson 1997	2	3	6	1	0	0	0
Stapleton 2001	0	5	1	0	4	0	0
Pennycook 1999	0	3	5	1	0	0	9
Soufi & See 2019	0	1	10	0	0	7	0
Mustofa et al. 2020	3	0	5	0	4	1	0
Ouslimani & Aboubou 2021	0	0	4	10	0	2	0
Yin et al. 2023	2	0	6	3	3	6	0
Hoorijani & Tabrizi 2024	4	9	2	3	2	6	0
	T1 Definition	T2 Culture	T3 Instruction	T4 Teachers	T5 Skills	T6 Evidence	T7 Critical pedagogy

Figure 2: Keyword Hits by Text and Theme

Note. Source: author's coding using the dictionary in Table 3. Darker cells indicate more hits.

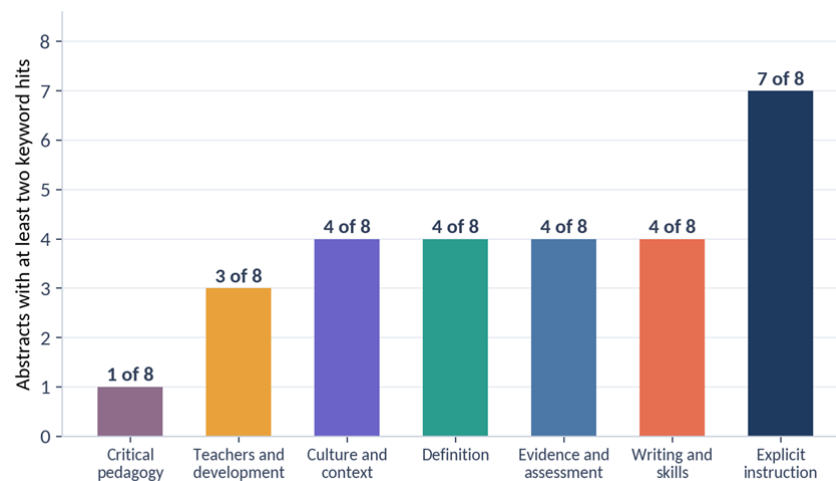


Figure 3: Prevalence of Themes Across the Eight Abstracts

Note. Source: author's coding (Table 3); a theme is present when a text has two or more hits.

Table 3: Coding Dictionary and Results

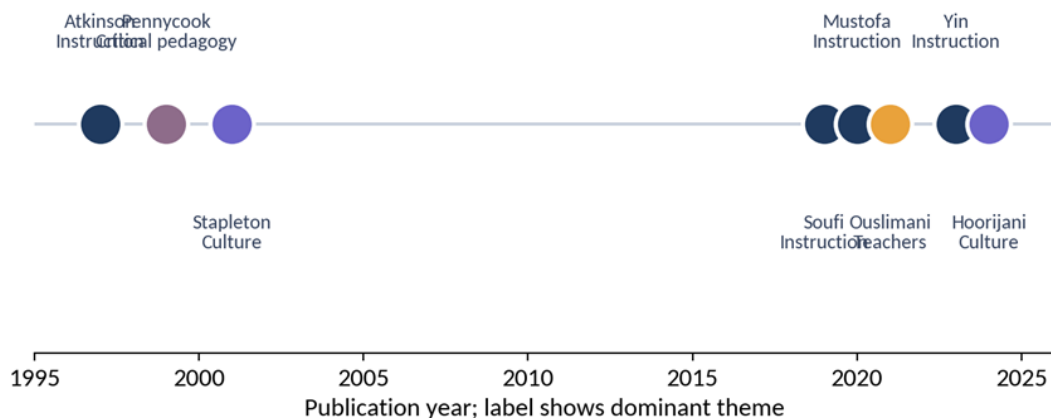
Theme	Keywords (Examples)	Total Hits	Abstracts with 2+ Hits
T1 Definition and nature	definition, construct, paradigm, framework, models, dispositions	11	4
T2 Culture and context	cultural, Asians, Japanese, Iranian, Western, nonnative, context	21	4
T3 Explicit instruction	explicit, instruction, effectiveness, teaching, pedagogies, approaches	39	7
T4 Teachers and development	teachers, professional, perceptions, practices, classroom	18	3
T5 Writing and skills	writing, reading, speaking, listening, argumentative, L2	13	4
T6 Evidence and assessment	assessment, evidence, review, systematic, empirical, questionnaire	22	4
T7 Critical pedagogy	transformative, questioning, problematizing, politicisation, reflexive	9	1

Note. Hits are counts of whole-word keyword matches in the 1,012-token corpus. The full keyword list is available from the author.

• Change Over Time (RQ3)

Figure 4 displays the main theme of each text by year. The three texts produced prior to 2001 are conceptual or contextual in focus. All three of them have culture and context as the themes with 3, 5, and 3 occurrences respectively, and no evidence or assessment terms. In contrast, all five texts produced after 2019 show the reversed trends. Evidence and assessment can be found in four out of five texts, namely 7, 1, 2, 6, and 6 occurrences respectively, while culture emerges as a coded theme only once out of five in the text by Hoorijani and Tabrizi (2024) on the Iranian context. Explicit instruction emerges in all five of the later texts, while teacher development becomes visible in the three texts written in 2021.

Taken in combination, these trends represent a progression from an argument about whether or not critical thinking should be part of language classrooms and whether or not it is culturally appropriate to arguments about how to teach critical thinking explicitly, how to obtain evidence, and how to train teachers. This trend follows the warnings of Atkinson (1997) which appear to have been heeded rather than disproved, for subsequent research does not ignore cultural issues but takes them into account in an evidence-based programme.

**Figure 4: Dominant Theme of Each Text by Publication Year**

Note. Source: author's coding; the dominant theme is the theme with the most hits in each text.

- **Interpretive reading of positions**

Close reading finds six stances (Table 4). According to Atkinson (1997), a more conservative position is taken regarding critical thinking as being a non-overt social activity, having the capacity to exclude people, being culturally problematic to non-native speakers, and not necessarily being transferable outside the instructional environment, while he recommends cognitive apprenticeship as an alternative. Stapleton (2001) talks about the controversy around claims that Asian students do not show critical thinking in English composition, and the fact that other researchers say that they have different ways of showing it, highlighting the cultural deficit theory as a controversial issue. Pennycook (1999) considers critical approaches to be transformative and questioning, thus expanding criticality from a cognitive approach to a political approach towards English.

In the latter sources, there is a move to evidence and practice. According to Soufi & See (2019), the search involved over 1,794 articles in 12 databases, and the authors came to the conclusion that even though nearly all of the discussed approaches were supposed to be effective, only explicit instruction in general critical thinking skills had strong evidence and the others did not. In their review of 23 empirical articles on critical thinking in EFL writing from 2013 to 2022, Yin et al. (2023), and Hoorijani & Tabrizi (2024) in the context of Iran describe a gap between pedagogical rhetoric and practice. A possible reason for this gap may lie in Ouslimani & Aboubou (2021). The authors explain that even though teachers recognised the significance of critical thinking, they focused on content and saw the students as passive.

A clear conflict emerges between the two perspectives. Evidence based perspective supports explicit teaching of generic skills, while cautionary and critical perspectives highlight the fact that skills do not necessarily transfer and criticality has context and politics to it. This conflict does not get resolved through the corpus and the integration framework presented in the next section holds both perspectives.

Table 4: Positions in the Critical Thinking Debate and their Implications for Integration

Position	Source	Core Claim	Implication
Cautious	Atkinson (1997)	Critical thinking may be a social practice that is hard to define, exclusionary, culturally fraught, and non-transferable	Adapt pedagogy to context; consider apprenticeship
Culture-sceptical	Stapleton (2001)	Claims of Asian deficiency are contested; abilities may be displayed differently	Avoid deficit assumptions
Critical-pedagogical	Pennycook (1999)	Critical approaches are transformative and self-questioning	Treat criticality as politics of language, not only skill
Evidence-based	Soufi and See (2019)	Only explicit general instruction has the best evidence	Teach critical thinking explicitly
Practice-gap	Yin et al. (2023); Hoorijani and Tabrizi (2024)	Gap between pedagogical rhetoric and classroom practice	Embed critical thinking in methods and assessment
Teacher-readiness	Ouslimani and Aboubou (2021)	Teachers prioritise content and doubt their own mastery	Invest in professional development

Note. Positions are the author's interpretive grouping of the cited abstracts.

Integration Framework and Research Gaps (RQ4)

The emerging patterns provide a five-stage process of incorporating critical thinking into language teaching curriculum (Figure 5). The first stage is defining critical thinking for the course because the corpus reveals that definitional confusion is a frequent barrier and that teachers require clear definition to teach critical thinking (Ouslimani & Aboubou, 2021). The second one is teaching critical thinking explicitly because explicit instruction is supported by the most solid evidence (Soufi & See, 2019). The third step is embedding critical thinking into the language skills taught by the course, including argumentative writing, reading, and discussion, as critical thinking should not be seen as an independent topic (Mustofa et al., 2020; Yin et al., 2023). The fourth step is assessing critical thinking based on its

own criteria, which are not associated with language accuracy. The last is to build teachers, since practice relies on their understanding and confidence.

There are two surrounding layers, one concerned with context and the other with evidence. The former is to remind the designers of learner culture, competence, and institutional requirements without any deficit view of culture (Atkinson, 1997; Stapleton, 2001) and to adopt the self-reflexive stance in relation to the politics of English (Pennycook, 1999). The latter is to ensure that the data are gathered in classrooms and that learner scores are collected to check integration (Soufi & See, 2019).

There are four gaps. One is that the corpus is small and conceptual and hence that the lexical and thematic patterns must be tested against full texts and larger corpora. Two is that there is almost no critical pedagogy in recent texts, which implies that the transformational tradition has been far removed from the evidence tradition. Three is that teacher development is introduced late and sparingly. Four is that the corpus includes no study conducted in India or other multilingual South Asia, where the learners and teachers operate in several languages.

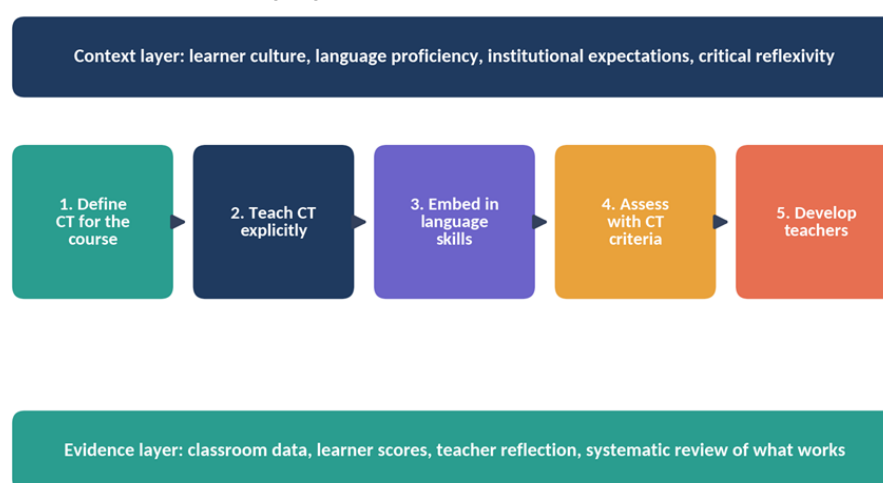


Figure 5: Framework for Integrating Critical thinking in Language Education

Note. Source: author's synthesis of Table 4 and Section 4.

Future Research Agenda

These gaps lead us to formulate Table 5 below as six directions. Direction D1 involves an extension of our methodology: testing the results on several hundreds of full-text articles with a similar dictionary- and interpretative-based methodology would allow us to check the validity of these results and use some more sophisticated methods like topic modeling. Direction D2 considers the issue of when explicit teaching surpasses embedding of critical thinking in language exercises; there are different answers from the evidence-based and critical standpoints, and it needs a randomized or quasi-randomized design.

Direction D4 proposes multi-sited case studies of critical thinking pedagogy in multilingual contexts, including India, to see if the results travel. The direction D5 is about assessment, where the rubric needs to value reasoning despite any deficiency in proficiency, as indicated by the result that language proficiency masks reasoning ability. Direction D6 brings back the link between criticality and power by studying how learners employ critical thinking to challenge language ideology.

Discussion and Implications

The findings show the shift from whether critical thinking should be taught in language classes to how it can be taught successfully, but this shift has overlooked two important questions – what does criticality mean other than a skill and what is the process of becoming a teacher of critical thinking. Practitioners need to follow several implications. First, course developers need to make sure that they clearly define the concept of critical thinking and include instruction of the skill within already existing lessons. Second, the institutions should provide professional development because the teachers' survey shows that the instructors prioritize content over critical thinking and underestimate their ability to teach it.

As for the researchers, the implication is related to the connection between the traditions of the discourse. While these approaches rarely occur in one text in the current corpus, they address the weaknesses of each other: the evidence-based approach may neglect the ideological issues while the critical pedagogy lacks practical classroom experience.

Limitations

There are some limitations in the current research. First, the corpus is relatively small (1,012 tokens), and purposefully selected, and thus the percentages indicate how prevalent the concepts are in the corpus rather than in the entire field. Second, abstracts present compressed arguments and have varying lengths which influence the number of keywords. Moreover, there are some cases when the retrieved text for the three abstracts is incomplete. Finally, dictionary-based coding is obvious, but lacks negation and implications and was created by one coder. Some keywords, for example, teaching, are very general.

Conclusion

The textual analysis of eight abstracts from 1997 through 2024 demonstrates a body of literature about language education with an increasing focus on explicit instruction and evidence, and diminishing cultural arguments, delayed emphasis on teacher education, and an absence of critical pedagogy. This indicates a discipline which has learned to consider whether critical thinking works but not yet whether critical thinking means something or whether anyone is prepared to teach it. The five stages of definition, explicit instruction, embedded practice, assessment, and teacher preparation, set in layers of context and evidence, provide practitioners with a model for incorporating critical thinking and researchers with a set of testable hypotheses. The most pressing follow-up task at hand would be an expansion of the literature review to include full texts and multilingual contexts such as India.

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