

DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING SKILLS THROUGH IELTS-ORIENTED TASKS IN UNIVERSITY EFL CLASSES

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Abstract: This article examines how IELTS-oriented reading tasks can support the development of critical reading skills among university EFL learners. With the increasing demand for academic literacy in higher education, students must engage with texts beyond literal comprehension to evaluate arguments, infer meaning, and integrate information effectively. Current pedagogical research highlights the potential of exam-oriented tasks as tools for fostering higher-order thinking when combined with strategic instruction. Drawing on recent studies, this article explores theoretical perspectives on task-based reading, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and the role of reflective practice in enhancing critical reading.

Keywords: critical reading, IELTS reading tasks, task-based instruction, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, EFL, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Critical reading is widely acknowledged as an essential academic skill that transcends basic text comprehension. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, developing learners' capacity to analyze, evaluate, and infer textual meaning has become increasingly important as students encounter diverse and complex materials in academic settings (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018). Traditional EFL reading instruction, often focused on decontextualized exercises and vocabulary memorization, has been critiqued for its limited impact on higher-order comprehension skills (Alderson, 2020).

Examination frameworks such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) offer a structured sequence of reading tasks that require learners to process texts at multiple cognitive levels. Tasks like identifying writer's views, matching headings, and distinguishing between explicit and implicit meaning inherently demand analytical engagement (Green, 2019). Research suggests that when learners engage with such tasks, they encounter opportunities to apply evaluative reasoning and strategy use, which are key features of critical reading (Hwang & Nation, 2018).

This article theoretically explores the integration of IELTS-oriented reading tasks into university EFL classes as a vehicle for promoting critical reading. It

synthesizes recent research on task-based reading instruction, examines cognitive and metacognitive strategy development, and discusses reflective practices that enhance interpretive competence.

MAIN BODY

Critical reading extends beyond literal word recognition to include interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. As Flowerdew and Peacock (2019) assert, “critical reading involves questioning the assumptions within a text and distinguishing between facts and opinions” (p. 72). In higher education, learners must navigate argumentative essays, research articles, and discourse that foreground complex ideas and perspectives, necessitating such higher-order reading skills. A study by Liu and Storch (2020) found that EFL learners often excel at surface-level content recognition but struggle with tasks requiring inference and evaluation. They argued that “reading instruction that fails to target strategic and reflective engagement with texts may limit learners to literal comprehension” (p. 456).

IELTS-Oriented Tasks as Pedagogical Tools. Recent investigation highlights the pedagogical potential of exam-oriented reading tasks when used within a task-based instructional framework (Ellis, 2018). Task-based language teaching situates learning in meaningful and purposeful activities, encouraging learners to use language strategically while engaging with real text processing demands.

IELTS reading tasks are exemplary in this regard because they integrate text processing with strategic decision-making. Green (2019) notes that “IELTS tasks require learners to integrate information across paragraphs, evaluate the relevance of paraphrased statements, and recognize implied meaning, all of which mirror academic reading demands” (p. 88). Studies such as those by Khamkhien (2021) demonstrate that learners exposed to IELTS reading formats showed improved abilities in scanning for key information and synthesizing multiple ideas, which are critical reading markers.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategy Development. Effective reading instruction must incorporate both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies include skimming, scanning, and summarizing, while metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating task performance (Anderson, 2017).

Sun and Wang (2021) reported that students who consciously used metacognitive strategies significantly outperformed peers who relied solely on surface comprehension. Their research emphasized that “students must be aware of their reading processes and regulate them if they hope to achieve deep understanding” (p. 102).

One effective way to enhance critical reading skills in university EFL classes is through *IELTS-oriented tasks*, which require learners to engage actively with texts and develop higher-order cognitive abilities. Among the most widely used activities is

identifying main ideas and supporting details, where students read a passage and determine the central argument of each paragraph while distinguishing the examples and evidence that support it. This activity not only trains learners to focus on essential information but also encourages analytical reading, helping them to differentiate between significant and peripheral content (Green, 2019). By repeatedly practicing this skill, students gradually develop the ability to process complex academic texts efficiently.

Another essential task is the *True/False/Not Given exercise*, which fosters evaluative thinking and inferential comprehension. In this task, learners must assess statements against the passage, identifying whether they are true, false, or not explicitly addressed. Crucially, students are encouraged to justify their choices with direct textual evidence, which promotes close reading and critical evaluation of claims. This task mirrors real-world academic reading, where discerning between explicit information and inferred meaning is vital for effective understanding (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018).

Matching headings to paragraphs is a complementary activity that strengthens learners' summarization and synthesis skills. Students are provided with a list of potential headings and asked to match each to the corresponding paragraph. This requires them to comprehend the overall purpose of each section, evaluate alternative headings, and justify their choices. Such exercises improve learners' ability to recognize the logical structure of texts, an essential aspect of critical reading, and help them practice summarizing complex information concisely (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2019).

Developing awareness of the *writer's opinion and tone* is another important dimension of critical reading. Learners identify phrases or sentences that reveal the author's stance, bias, or attitude toward a topic. Discussing these findings in pairs or groups encourages interpretation, evaluation, and collaborative analysis, deepening understanding of nuanced meaning. By engaging in this activity, students become adept at recognizing underlying arguments, which is a central component of critical literacy in academic contexts (Liu & Storch, 2020).

Sentence completion and paraphrasing exercises further enhance comprehension by requiring learners to restate ideas from the text in their own words while maintaining the original meaning. This develops semantic flexibility and encourages learners to engage with the text at a deeper level rather than relying on surface-level reading. Paraphrasing also supports vocabulary retention and the ability to express complex ideas accurately, which is essential for academic writing and discussion (Hwang & Nation, 2018).

Tasks such as *matching information or completing flowcharts* require learners to synthesize and organize information from the passage logically. For example, students might match paragraphs or statements to a diagram or table, mapping the

structure and relationships within the text. This not only improves comprehension but also cultivates learners' ability to integrate information across different parts of the passage, a skill critical for academic reading and research tasks (Khamkhien, 2021).

By incorporating these IELTS-oriented activities into EFL instruction, educators create a *progressive and scaffolded learning environment*. Tasks can be sequenced from literal comprehension exercises, such as identifying main ideas, to inferential and evaluative tasks, such as TFNG exercises or recognizing authorial stance. This structured approach ensures that learners systematically develop critical reading skills while simultaneously improving their academic literacy and readiness for higher education reading demands (Ellis, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Developing critical reading skills in university EFL classes is essential for academic success and lifelong learning. IELTS-oriented reading tasks provide a meaningful and contextually relevant framework for encouraging higher-order engagement with texts. Drawing on contemporary research, it is evident that such tasks support the cultivation of critical reading by integrating cognitive and metacognitive strategies and through the encouragement of reflective practice.

Pedagogically, instructors should incorporate IELTS-style tasks within broader reading instruction that emphasizes planning, strategy awareness, and reflection. This approach not only prepares students for examination formats but also enhances their overall academic literacy, enabling them to interpret, evaluate, and synthesize complex materials with greater autonomy. Future research might explore longitudinal effects of task integration and its interaction with digital reading environments.

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