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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN EFL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: A SKILL–TASK–EVIDENCE ALIGNMENT MODEL

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Abstract:

Critical thinking is widely regarded as a key learning outcome in EFL education; however, classroom practice often reveals a misalignment between the teaching of critical thinking and its assessment. Instruction frequently relies on open-ended discussion or task-based activities, while assessment tends to prioritize linguistic accuracy or surface-level responses, limiting insight into learners' actual development of Critical Thinking Skills (CTSs), particularly in contexts where assessment practices remain predominantly language-focused. To address this issue, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for teaching and assessing critical thinking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, termed the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model. Grounded in research on critical thinking, EFL pedagogy, and educational assessment, the model conceptualizes critical thinking as a set of teachable and observable micro-skills and emphasizes alignment among instructional goals, classroom tasks, and assessment evidence. The paper outlines the theoretical rationale and core structure of the model and illustrates its potential application through selected teaching scenarios. Rather than reporting empirical findings, this study presents a theoretically grounded and pedagogically implementable framework intended to inform EFL classroom practice and support future empirical and design-based research.

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Introduction

The role of critical thinking has grown as it relates to EFL learners' abilities to interpret text, evaluate information, be able to express their opinions and engage in logical communication. This indicates that language learning is a richer cognitive and social experience than simply a technical exercise. Critical thinking forms part of what are considered to be 21st Century Competencies. Critical thinking has also received an increasing amount of attention at both the policy and curriculum level within the education literature (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2021). EFL education has received considerable recent focus on developing critical thinking as a natural fit because of its emphasis on discourse, interaction, and the development of meaning across cultural and linguistic divides Therefore, pedagogical discussions in applied linguistics and language education have focused on developing pedagogies that use task-based, discussion-based and inquiry-based approaches to successfully integrate language use and higher order thinking (Ellis, 2017; Pretorius et al., 2017; Buchman, 2024).

As this interest continues to grow, researchers have focused on the need for defining critical thinking in instructional contexts. According to Bates et al. (2024) and Davies & Barnett (2015), researchers have emphasized the need for clarity in conceptualizing and defining critical thinking within an educational context. Instead of considering it as a whole entity or an "abstract" concept, critical thinking is now being defined as a group of cognitive skills that could be described, taught, and assessed in learning and teaching situations with particular disciplines and approaches, according to Reed & Kromrey (2002), Crookes (2021), and Goodsett (2020). The cognitive skill-defined approach to critical thinking has opened up pathways for integrating critical thinking into learning and teaching in class situations.

In EFL education, the dual spotlight on language development training on one hand, and cognitive engagement training on the other, sheds light on the need for pedagogical approaches that might be able to integrate both language-related objectives and thinking-related objectives (Akatsuka, 2019; Ghadiri et. al, 2017). Conceptual approaches towards explaining the relationship that exists between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment practices might be a possible way to achieve this integration. But doing so might need consideration based on both theoretical orientation and practical feasibility.

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Against this backdrop, the present study proposes a conceptual framework for teaching and assessing CTSs through critical thinking micro-skills in EFL classrooms, referred to as the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model. Rather than reporting empirical findings, this paper aims to contribute a theoretically grounded perspective that clarifies how CTSs may be systematically related to instructional tasks and assessment evidence. Unlike general alignment frameworks that operate at the level of curricular outcomes, the proposed model specifies alignment at the level of critical thinking micro-skills and task-embedded evidence in language-mediated classrooms. By addressing the persistent gap between the advocacy of critical thinking and its concrete enactment in EFL classrooms, this study responds to a long-standing challenge in language education: how to make critical thinking instruction pedagogically explicit and assessable without reducing it to generic discussion or language accuracy.

Problem Statement

Although many people recognize that one of the primary purposes of EFL is to develop CTSs, there has been little development on how to systematically integrate them into how we teach and assess them in EFL. While many educators cite "teaching critical thinking" as an important learning goal for EFL students, there is no agreed approach to how critical thinking can be explicitly defined, taught and assessed in a pedagogically meaningful way (Ghadiri et al., 2017). One major issue involves the over-identification of CTSs in EFL classrooms. Critical thought tends to be described in general, catch-all terminology, such as "fostering discussion or opinion expression," without much defined specificity on what exactly those cognitive processes are, such as: Logical Reasoning, Evidence Evaluation and Alternative Point of View Consideration (Dong & Chang, 2023). This lack of specificity impairs an educator's ability to create intentional task design and direct the focus of their EFL pedagogy toward developing a particular type of critical thinking.

Another closely related challenge to this is that in EFL classrooms, instructors often create assessments based on language proficiency, or to see the tasks completed, rather than providing insight into the learner's critical thinking abilities (Lu, 2019; Du & Zhang, 2022). Therefore, attempts by EFL instructors to teach students to think critically, do not convey the same level of support for the programmes of EFL as the instructor's assessment would indicate.

Aligning the objectives for learning, what students will do to learn, and how you will know that students have met the objectives of Learning is referred to as Alignment. Educators are increasingly being held accountable for the alignment of their assessments to their instructional activities, including the objectives for learning (Vafamehr et al., 2026). In EFL education, however, the extent to which educators define specific micro-skills related to critical thinking and articulate those skills within the context of what learners will learn in the classroom and how those skills will be assessed continues to be lacking (Pelenkahu et al., 2024; Ebadi & Rahimi, 2018). In addition, because the dual purpose of EFL instruction is to facilitate not only the acquisition of language but the application of higher-order thinking (Allehyani, 2025), the lack of clarity regarding the relationship among CTSs and classroom tasks creates significant barriers to achieving that end.

Thus, the need for a conceptual framework to clarify the relationship among CTSs, instructional tasks, and assessment evidence associated with an EFL classroom is apparent. It is this gap in the existing literature that is addressed with the proposed Skill–Task–Evidence

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Alignment Model through the systematic approach to teaching and assessing critical thinking in the EFL classroom.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to propose and articulate a conceptual framework for the teaching and assessment of CTSs in EFL education classrooms. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Conceptualize CTSs as teachable and observable micro-skills relevant to EFL classroom contexts.
2. Clarify the pedagogical alignment among CTSs, instructional tasks, and assessment evidence; and
3. Provide a theoretically grounded and pedagogically implementable model that can inform instructional design and support future empirical and design-based research in EFL education.

Methodology

Conceptual Approach

By adopting a conceptual and framework-oriented perspective, the authors are developing a pedagogical model of how to teach and assess CTSs in EFL classrooms. Instead of presenting empirical data and evaluating the impact of a particular instructional method used to teach CTSs, this study focuses on providing a theoretical clarification and integration of teaching CTSs using currently available literature to create a comprehensive and practical framework for EFL instructors.

The chosen methodology is consistent with the tradition of developing conceptual research in education, which aims to clarify important constructs, explore the interrelationship of elements of instruction and develop a framework for organizing them into effective pedagogies and supporting future empirical inquiry (Jabareen, 2009; Luft et al., 2022). According to Jabareen (2009), “a conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts but, rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role; it is not merely a collection of concepts but, rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role”. Thus, a conceptual approach is deemed most suitable and methodologically sound for examining the issue of CTSs alignment, along with instructional tasks and assessment evidence.

Literature Basis

There is literature engagement for the development of the proposed framework in the following intersecting domains:

1) studies related to critical thinking and CTSs.
2) pedagogical scholarship in EFL and linguistics, with special reference to work done in task-based, communicative, and reasoning-oriented learning; and
3) studies about educational assessment and alignment.

Instead, the interaction with the existing literature is oriented towards the concepts of relevance, insights, intensive theoretical debates, and contributions that examine the implications for CTSs in teaching and learning through language.

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Framework Development

The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model was developed through an iterative process of conceptual synthesis, drawing on insights from multiple strands of educational research. Rather than stemming from a single theoretical tradition, the framework took shape through the deliberate integration of three closely related bodies of literature: research on critical thinking and its constituent micro-skills, pedagogical studies on task design and language-mediated learning in EFL contexts, and scholarship concerned with assessment and instructional alignment (Jabareen, 2009).

Stage 1: A review of influential descriptions on critical thinking skills began in order to determine skills which have not only theoretical validity and integrity but could also be applicable within a classroom context. In this way, due to the reality that think processes within any typical EFL class occur and can be observed through the use of language skills, particular focus has been placed on skills that could be adequately determined through oral and written performance (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011; Davies & Barnett, 2015). A series of critical thinking micro-skills were determined.

Phase 2: The literature in EFL pedagogy and applied linguistics was investigated to explore how these micro-skills might be facilitated through tasks. Instead of correlating these skills to tasks, this analysis examined key task constituents such as comparing points of view, justifying opinions, or considering different points of view that naturally trigger thinking about language in context through reading, conversation, or writing tasks (Ellis, 2017; Crookes, 2021).

Stage 3: assessment-related research was drawn on to gain an understanding of what constitutes interpretable and instructionally relevant evidence of critical thinking within learner output. This was achieved by focusing on the alignment of indicators such as the employment of evidence, the quality of reasoning, and reactions to counterarguments that have been addressed within existing research to date on the topic (Biggs, 1996; Leber et al., 2018; Goodsett, 2020). Bringing these strands of insight together made it possible to clarify how skills, tasks, and evidence relate to one another in classroom practice. On this basis, the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model was developed as a coherent conceptual structure to support instructional planning and assessment design in EFL classrooms. The model does not prescribe particular methods or tools; instead, it serves as a guiding lens that teachers can adapt to different contexts, proficiency levels, and curricular priorities while retaining a clear and consistent pedagogical logic (Jabareen, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

Conceptual Foundations of CT Micro-Skills

Current scholarship suggests that critical thinking is increasingly characterized not as a unitary and general sort of competence, but rather as a set of skills that is context-dependent and teachable through discipline-based practices (Ennis, 2011). In this respect, it is especially pertinent to educational practices in English as a Foreign Language to suggest that critical thinking is a process that is realized through actions mediated through languages, in this instance through text interpretation, argumentation, and dialogical conversation. In this way, improving practices in critical thinking education would focus not on definitions, but on identifying skills that can be taught.

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From General Competence to Micro-skills

Initial critical thinking frameworks offered a large scale, broad characterization of what critical thinking was in terms of Reasoning, Judgment, and Evaluation, and so on (Facione et al., 1990; Ennis et al., 2011; Paul and Elder et al., 2009). While the Paul and Elder Framework remains significant as a complete and normative view on what it means to Reason Disciplinedly, it is mostly limited to a higher-end view of critical thinking (I.e. cognitive operations). Consequently, those critical thinking frameworks do not provide any meaningful guidance as to how to connect Instructional Tasks to observable Assessment data. As a result, newer studies suggest taking a micro-skills approach to critical thinking, where the overall picture of critical thinking is broken down into smaller units of observable cognitive operations that can be included within Instructional Tasks (Vafamehr et al., 2026). Other recent studies provide sound frameworks that clearly separate out Analysis, Evaluation, and Inference as distinct but related Cognitive Processes, allowing for Targeted Instructional Design and Development. Conceptual Models that bring together Disciplinary (e.g. Psychology) and Cognitive perspectives provide a comprehensive framework that allows for Cross-Contextual Understanding, and often outmaneuver, and exceed many of the current CT frameworks (Hačatrjana & Namsone, 2024). The recognition of these micro-skills as foundational to critical thinking supports their explicit inclusion in curricula. This shift supports greater pedagogical precision by enabling teachers to align learning objectives with specific task demands and assessment criteria.

Critical thinking micro-skills in EFL classrooms are the task-level cognitive and metacognitive operations learners use to process, judge, and use information in English; researchers often treat them as teachable sub-skills that support both reasoning and language use. Many EFL studies adopt a cluster of core skills—interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation—when defining classroom targets and assessments (see table 1).

Table 1: Illustrative Critical Thinking Micro-Skills in EFL Classrooms

Micro-skill	Operational definition in EFL	Typical EFL classroom example
Interpretation (Wale, 2020)	Grasping the meaning, restating or summarising input in English	Paraphrase a listening passage and state speaker intent
Analysis (Rear, 2017; Wale, 2020)	Breaking text/speech into parts and relationships	Identify premises and evidence in an article
Evaluation (Rear, 2017; Wale, 2020)	Judging credibility, relevance, and strength of claims	Rate reliability of web sources used for a task
Inference (Al Herz, 2025; Wale, 2020)	Drawing logically warranted conclusions from evidence	Make predictions or draw conclusions from data in a reading

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Explanation (Kusumoto, 2018; Wale, 2020)	Giving reasons, justifying conclusions in English	Write a paragraph explaining why a claim is supported
Self-regulation (Atayeva,2019; Wale, 2020)	Monitoring and revising one's reasoning and language use	Keep a reflective journal on argument revisions
Clarification (Wale, 2020)	Asking and resolving meaning ambiguities	Generate clarifying questions about a prompt
Assumption recognition (Wale, 2020)	Identifying unstated premises or biases	List assumptions behind an opinion piece
Argumentation (Lingle, 2024; El-Soufi, 2019)	Structuring claims, warrants, evidence in English	Construct Toulmin-style arguments in writing or debate
Information literacy (Rear, 2017; Al Herz, 2025)	Locating and assessing sources and data in English	Evaluate web sources and summarise findings

Note: The micro-skills listed are illustrative rather than exhaustive and reflect commonly cited constructs in EFL-oriented critical thinking research.

Implications for Teaching and Assessment Alignment

Conceptualizing critical thinking in terms of micro-skills has important implications for both instruction and assessment in EFL education. At the instructional level, micro-skills provide a basis for designing tasks that explicitly target particular aspects of thinking, rather than relying on undifferentiated discussion or opinion sharing. At the assessment level, they enable teachers to identify observable indicators of thinking in learner output, such as the use of evidence, logical connections, or engagement with alternative perspectives (Kumar et al., 2023; Jumariati et al., 2022).

Importantly, a micro-skills approach foregrounds the need for systematic alignment among learning objectives, instructional tasks, and assessment evidence (Lu & Xie, 2019). Without such alignment, critical thinking risks remaining an aspirational goal that is neither transparently taught nor meaningfully assessed. This concern motivates the development of the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model, introduced in the following section, which builds directly on the micro-skills conceptualization outlined here.

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The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model

This study takes the view of Critical Thinking as a set of micro-skills that can be taught and thus has developed the Critical Thinking Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model. The Critical Thinking Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model is proposed as a way to align the teaching and assessment of Critical Thinking in an EFL context.

The model is based upon the idea that in order for students to develop the ability to be critical thinkers, all aspects of instruction, including objectives, classroom activities, and assessment methods, must have a systematic and consistent alignment. Teaching and assessing Critical Thinking should not be thought of as independent events; rather, these two activities should be viewed as interrelated parts of an educational system that provides for student learning.

Core Components of the Model

The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model consists of three interrelated components: skills, tasks, and evidence. Each component addresses a distinct yet complementary aspect of critical thinking pedagogy in EFL education (see Figure 1).

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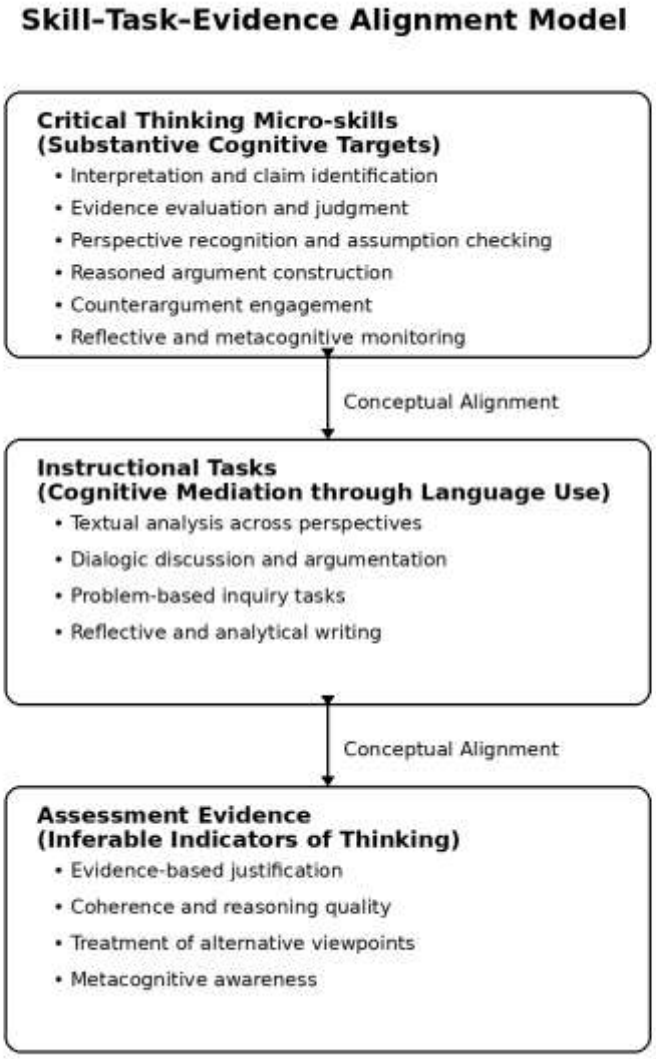

Figure 1: The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model for Teaching and Assessing Critical Thinking in EFL Classrooms

Skills: these are the particular critical thinking micro-skills that make up objectives of instruction. These skills are stated with a specificity that allows them to be deliberately addressed by instruction, as well as identified in performance. Defining critical thinking in terms of micro-skills enables the model to offer a clear basis for instruction, as opposed to very abstract definitions or statements concerning thinking.

Functions are the central vehicle through which the CTSs are implemented in the classroom through specific micro-skills. In the context of EFL education, functions refer to language-mediated operations through which the learner needs to employ the use of language resources to access information and then reason over the information presented. In this context, the function will be designed not only to trigger language production but will instead trigger the micro-skills of judging evidence or formulating arguments or views.

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Evidence is an observable indicator of critical thinking in learner output that can be used as the basis of assessment. The model focuses on evidence nested in learners' complex reasoning processes rather than on surface features of language or correct/incorrect answers. Such evidence includes the use of relevant evidence to support claims, logical links among ideas, and attention to counterarguments.

Such indications permit more direct alignment of assessment practices with those instructional objectives that aim at critical thinking. In real-world assessment practice, these may be operationally defined by much simpler, criterion-referenced instruments like analytic rubrics, observation checklists, and structured feedback prompts. These would include, for example, whether or not learners explicitly back up claims by textual evidence, acknowledge the perspectives of others in discussion, or modify initial viewpoints after counterevidence has been presented. These tools are to assist in formative interpretation of the learners' thinking and are not intended as standardised measures. Examples of the assessment indicators are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Illustrative Assessment Indicators for Critical Thinking Micro-skills in EFL Classrooms

Micro-skill	Assessment Focus	Illustrative Indicator
Interpretation	Understanding key ideas	Accurately paraphrases the main claim of a text or speaker in own words.
Analysis	Structure of reasoning	Distinguishes between claims, reasons, and supporting evidence.
Evaluation	Quality of evidence	Comments on the relevance or credibility of sources used to support a claim.
Inference	Reasoned conclusion	Draw conclusions that logically follow from the information provided.
Explanation	Justification of position	Explains why a particular piece of evidence supports a stated position.
Perspective-taking	Engagement with alternatives	Acknowledges at least one alternative viewpoint or counterargument.
Self-regulation	Reflection and revision	Revises or qualifies an initial response after receiving feedback or new evidence.

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Alignment Logic and Pedagogical Rationale

One reason why the proposed model is applicable is that one of its fundamental assumptions is that effective critical thinking education requires these activities to be conceptually aligned with educational objectives and assessment strategies. According to educational research, these aspects are poorly aligned, and as such, educational goals are not likely to be achieved (Biggs, 1996; Leber et al., 2018). In the context of critical thinking instruction, misalignment typically arises when critical thinking is articulated as a curricular goal but remains insufficiently embedded in task design, or when assessment practices privilege surface features of performance—such as linguistic accuracy—without capturing learners' underlying reasoning processes (Jumariati et al., 2022).

The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model makes alignment an intentional part of pedagogy rather than an area for implicit inference in its overall design. In this pedagogical design framework, critical thinking is seen as a coherent and systematic way of connecting three elements: the specific micro-skills that students are expected to develop, the specific types of assessments used to determine student competence, and the assessment criteria that are used to establish the relative strength of the student's competency on a particular micro-skill. The Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model also supports current trends within the educational assessment world that recognise the importance of aligning what is emphasised in the skills instruction to what is demonstrated in the data collected through the assessment of students' work.

From this perspective, instructional planning is shaped less by the choice of specific teaching techniques and more by a clear understanding of how intended CTSs, task demands, and assessment evidence relate to one another. Rather than asking which method to employ, it is suggested that teachers think about what types of thinking a task promotes and how that thinking might be identifiable in the output. This not only changes teaching focus from teaching methods to teaching constructions but helps to ensure alignment between teaching intent and assessment practice. What is important to note about this model is that it neither promotes task types nor assessment tools. Instead, it offers a conceptual tool that can be employed effectively within different teaching contexts. By using alignment, not consistency, this model promotes variability at the same time as it promotes a teaching construct.

Illustrative Application in EFL Classrooms

In an effort to further clarify the process in which the Skill-Task-Evidence Alignment Model is deployed; there will be an example provided that further elucidates how CTS are aligned with examples of classroom activity and levels of evidence. This example will be hypothetical and merely serve the purposes of explanation in regard to the process that is followed and not explain how the process is deployed in the classroom.

For example, suppose that one of these instructional objectives would be to enhance the CTSs of learning to assess evidence and take different views into consideration when completing reading and discussion tasks. The critical thinking micro-skills that would be targeted to be developed include recognizing key points being made in texts, or evaluating evidence used to support key points, or recognizing different views. After these critical thinking micro-skills have been identified, the teacher prepares tasks to draw on this micro-skill to practice using language.

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At the task level, the learners are required to read two or three short texts that take up different stands on a topical issue such as whether there should be limitations on the usage of social media for adolescents. Unlike comprehension tasks, this task requires the learners to note the similarities and differences in the arguments and sources used in the texts and form a justification of their stand on the issue. The learners are directed at how to show where they obtained evidence from the texts and why they find some evidence convincing, as well as how they can refute opposing evidence.

At the assessment level, evaluation is guided by predefined indicators of critical thinking evidence. In learners' oral or written output, assessment focuses on whether students accurately summarize key claims, appropriately use evidence to support their positions, and engage with alternative viewpoints. Logical coherence in reasoning is emphasized, while linguistic accuracy remains a relevant but non-dominant criterion. In this way, assessment practices are aligned with both the targeted micro-skills and the cognitive demands of the task.

Table 3: Illustrative Alignment of Critical Thinking Micro-skills, Task Demands, and Assessment Evidence in an EFL Classroom

Critical Thinking Micro-skill	Illustrative Task Demand	Observable Evidence Indicators
Interpretation	Read multiple short texts presenting different viewpoints on a topical issue and restate each author's main position in one's own words.	Accurately paraphrases core arguments without distorting the original intent of the source material.
Analysis	Compare arguments across texts by identifying claims, reasons, and supporting evidence.	Clearly distinguishes between primary claims and supporting evidence or premises.
Evaluation	Judge the relevance, credibility, and sufficiency of evidence used to support different positions.	Critiques evidence by commenting on source reliability, relevance to the claim, or adequacy of support.
Inference	Formulate a reasoned position based on information synthesized from multiple texts.	Draws logically warranted conclusions or predictions grounded in the available evidence.
Explanation	Articulate and justify one's position during discussion or in a short-written response.	Provides a coherent rationale for a stated position using appropriate logical connectors (e.g., however, therefore, as a result).
Self-regulation	Reconsider and refine an initial position after exposure to counterarguments or peer feedback.	Monitors and revises one's own reasoning by qualifying claims or clarifying meaning in response to counter-evidence.

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Perspective-taking	Address alternative viewpoints explicitly during discussion or written argumentation.	Acknowledges and responds to counterarguments or alternative interpretations in a reasoned manner.
Assumption recognition	Examine texts or arguments to identify implicit assumptions or underlying premises.	Explicitly identifies unstated assumptions, biases, or presuppositions shaping an argument.
Argumentation	Construct a structured position using claims, reasons, and evidence in discussion or writing.	Organizes arguments with clear claims supported by relevant reasons and evidence.
Information literacy	Locate and evaluate information sources relevant to the task.	Selects appropriate sources and comments on their reliability or relevance to the task.

This example case illustrates how critical thinking micro-skills might be deliberately incorporated into task design and observable through assessment evidence. In doing so, the Skill-Task-Evidence Alignment Model provides a systematic method of fulfilling the instruction-evidence interpretation function and making more transparent and cohesive critical thinking instruction and assessment in the EFL classroom. For instance, the indicators might be embedded into assessment rubrics, observation tools, or feedback statements, making it possible for the teacher to pay attention to the quality of thinking and language abilities simultaneously without having to increase the complexity of the assessment.

Pedagogical Implications

From a pedagogical perspective, the proposed model supports a framework-informed teaching approach in which critical thinking instruction is organized around the alignment of skills, tasks, and assessment evidence. Rather than prescribing specific classroom techniques, this approach encourages teachers to begin instructional planning by clarifying the critical thinking micro-skills to be developed, to design language-mediated tasks that activate these skills, and to attend to observable indicators of thinking in learner output. In this way, critical thinking instruction is embedded within everyday classroom practices without requiring the adoption of a separate or methodologically rigid instructional model.

A Framework-informed Teaching Approach for EFL Classrooms

In EFL classroom contexts, the proposed Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model supports a framework-informed teaching approach that aims to enhance the pedagogical operability of critical thinking instruction without introducing a new instructional method. Rather than prescribing fixed procedures or classroom techniques, this approach provides teachers with a set of design-oriented principles to guide instructional planning and in-class decision-making, consistent with conceptual perspectives that emphasize alignment over method prescription in educational design.

Under this approach, instructional planning begins with the explicit identification of targeted critical thinking micro-skills, rather than with broad or undifferentiated learning goals. Research on critical thinking has repeatedly noted that overly general formulations offer

limited guidance for classroom practice (Ahern, 2017; Schoute & Alexander, 2025). For example, in reading or discussion activities, teachers may distinguish whether the instructional focus is on evaluating evidence, comparing perspectives, or constructing reasoned arguments. By articulating instructional goals at the level of specific micro-skills, teachers are better positioned to determine what kinds of thinking are being practiced through classroom activities, thereby avoiding the tendency to equate critical thinking with general participation or opinion expression (Ennis, 2011; Thomas, K., & Lok, 2015).

At the level of task design, the framework-informed approach draws attention to what tasks actually ask learners to do cognitively, not just what language they produce. From a task-based and sociocognitive perspective, classroom tasks are more than opportunities for language practice; they are moments where learners think, negotiate meaning, and make sense of ideas together through interaction (Sami & Raza, 2025). For this reason, teachers are encouraged to move beyond asking whether a task encourages participation and to consider whether it invites learners to engage in particular ways of thinking. Tasks that involve comparing different viewpoints, explaining why certain evidence is convincing, or responding to alternative opinions naturally prompt learners to reason, justify, and reflect. As previous work on critical thinking in EFL classrooms suggests, such tasks can support the development of critical thinking by making thinking an explicit part of language use rather than an assumed by-product of discussion (Nejmaoui, 2018).

When implemented in the classroom, it encourages the teacher to reflect upon the representation of the thinking of the learners in the utterances they make, either verbally or written. The statements/works created can aid the teacher in noticing how the learners apply information, idea connections, and views with differences. This is in alignment with recommendations emphasizing a more visible process linked with cognition in language assessment, without veering away from language-centered criteria (Nejmaoui, 2018; Ahern et al., 2019; Lu & Xie, 2019).

Implications for Assessment Practices

An important consideration to come out of this framework is the emphasis there now is in trying to discern what constitutes evidence for critical thinking in assessment. Rather than there being a reliance upon a kind of gut instinct about whether critical thinking has taken place, the assessment might be organized around a set of clear criteria which encapsulate certain micro-skills (Reed and Kromrey, 2001). In relation to this, for instance, teachers might look to see if and how learners make use of appropriate data to support a point of view, to connect ideas, to evaluate competing views, or to look back on how they went.

When the criteria in assessments involve both language use and thinking quality, there is greater clarity in what is expected, which helps teachers provide more specific, helpful feedback. Notably, this change in practice does not mean that teachers need to rethink conventional formats for assessments. Rather, contractual changes, which might be slight, involve using words, phrases, or rating comments to emphasize critical thinking in conjunction with language use. The alignment rationale also illustrates how the role of assessment in the development of critical thinking skills is informative in practice. To enhance their own instruction, instead of, or in addition to, relying on what learners have accomplished by completing a specific activity, teachers are encouraged to observe during and after these events, for instance, how learners reason in response to, or in relation to, tasks, which helps them make

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changes in related respects, like revising or adapting related tasks, or in related ways, by using related feedback techniques.

In general, these implications for assessment suggest a more construct-aligned and pedagogically integrated approach to the assessment of critical thinking in the EFL class. By intertwining the assessment evidence and the actual class intentions, the process of assessment can be more easily viewed and interpreted by both teachers and students, instead of using fixed instruments in the form of tests. This approach to assessment remains flexible and rooted in the class instructions.

Conclusion

This research introduces the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model for the conceptualization of critical thinking micro-skills education within the context of critical thinking in EFL environments. This approach to critical thinking, conceptualized in terms of a set of trainable skills that corresponds to a focus on alignment between teaching for instructional purposes, classroom activities, and evidence for evaluation, finally bridges the long-existing instructional assessment divide. This conceptual approach presents not a different educational approach to teaching, say, a different instructional technique, so much as a cohesive logic for instructive educational purposes. The approach presented emphasizes the connections that need to exist between what is learned, the activities that are engaged in, and how the thinking that underlies these activities is measured.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, at the level of a conceptual investigation, the model proposed has not been tested in empirically naturalistic classroom settings. Its value is more theoretical coherence and pedagogical plausibility rather than demonstrated instructional effectiveness. Future studies may investigate how the model works in practice through classroom-based, design-based, or mixed-methods studies. Second, while developing the framework with EFL classrooms in mind, its applicability across different levels of education, populations of learners, and institutional contexts require further exploration and contextual adjustment. Finally, the articulation of critical thinking micro-skills, even though pedagogically oriented, is not intended as an exhaustive taxonomy and may be refined or expanded in response to disciplinary or curricular priorities.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the Skill–Task–Evidence Alignment Model provides a theoretical framework through which some long-standing challenges in critical thinking pedagogy might be met within EFL education. In emphasizing alignment as a theoretical tenet, this framework encourages theoretical work and empirical investigation that reflects on and reframes critical thinking concepts and practices and critical thinking evaluation in language learning contexts.

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