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Ivana Poulíková
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
e-mail: ivana.poulikova@ukf.sk
ORCID: 0009-0006-7548-4988

Andrea Kóňová
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
e-mail: andrea.konova@ukf.sk
ORCID: 0009-0003-1501-2418

Ivan Haringa
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
e-mail: ivan.haringa@ukf.sk
ORCID: 0000-0001-6447-6903

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH READING COMPREHENSION[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present how learners' critical thinking (CT) can be supported through reading comprehension instruction synthesizing existing theories and proposing classroom practices for improving learners' CT abilities in conjunction with reading comprehension activities. The theoretical framework sheds light on the reading comprehension process, CT psycholinguistics' perspective and specific teachers' professional competencies necessary for developing CT, emphasizing reading comprehension as an appropriate and useful platform for stimulating, developing, and supporting learners' CT. The contribution lies in presenting an argument-based approach and outlining specific teaching

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strategies that reinforce the synergy between the two constructs as well as discussing the current debates and gaps in the literature. The paper aims to highlight the use of particular CT techniques that collectively promote deeper engagement with texts and are particularly effective in supporting learners' CT.

Keywords: critical thinking, reading comprehension, reading strategies, professional competencies

ABSTRAKT

ROZWIJANIE KRYTYCZNEGO MYŚLENIA POPRZEZ CZYTANIE ZE ZROZUMIENIEM

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie, w jaki sposób krytyczne myślenie uczniów (KM) może być wspierane przez nauczanie czytania ze zrozumieniem, syntetyzując istniejące teorie i proponując praktyki realizowane w klasie w celu poprawy umiejętności KM uczniów w połączeniu z ćwiczeniami czytania ze zrozumieniem. Ramy teoretyczne uwzględnione w artykule rzucają światło na proces czytania ze zrozumieniem, perspektywę psycholingwistyki KM i konkretne kompetencje zawodowe nauczycieli niezbędne do rozwijania KM, podkreślają również, że czytanie ze zrozumieniem jest odpowiednią i przydatną formą stymulowania, rozwijania i wspierania KM uczniów. Wkład opracowania polega na przedstawieniu podejścia opartego na argumentach i nakreśleniu konkretnych strategii nauczania, które wzmacniają synergię między tymi dwoma konstruktami, a także omówieniu bieżących opinii na wskazany temat oraz luk w literaturze przedmiotu. Artykuł ma na celu podkreślenie wykorzystania konkretnych technik KM, które wspólnie promują głębsze zaangażowanie w teksty i są szczególnie skuteczne we wspieraniu KM uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe: krytyczne myślenie, czytanie ze zrozumieniem, strategie czytania, kompetencje zawodowe

1. Introduction

Skill in understanding written text in a foreign language has long been of interest in various scientific fields. The examination of cognitive processes in the context of (in) comprehension has been shown to serve as a direct pathway to academic success, socialization, and emotional development[2]. Today, there is widespread agreement

[2] K. Heidari, *Critical Thinking and Efl Learners' Performance on Textually-Explicit, Textually-Implicit, and Script-Based Reading Items*, "Thinking Skills and Creativity" 2020, 37, pp. 3–4; N. Kamgar, E. Jadidi, *Exploring the Relationship of Iranian EFL Learners' Critical Thinking and Self-regulation with their Reading Comprehension Ability*, "Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences" 2016, 232,

that the purpose of education should extend beyond academic achievement to equip learners with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in personal, social, and professional spheres. As a result, there is a call for a shift in educational focus from solely emphasizing content and academic development to also prioritizing individual and non-academic growth[3]. Critical thinking is one of the fundamental 21st-century skills that should be incorporated into pedagogical environments[4]. Equipped with the skills and attitudes of critical thinking, individuals become reflective and informed about issues and everyday challenges[5]. According to Moghadam, highly functional and harmonically developed individuals "gain the ability to make effective decisions and distinguish between facts and opinions, leading to greater autonomy and activity in the learning process and in achieving their goals"[6]. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, critical thinking is rated as the most desirable skill in recruiting and hiring employees[7]. Additionally, the World Economic Forum has designated critical thinking as the foremost skill required for the future workforce by 2025[8]. Individuals that are equipped with critical thinking skills and attitudes develop a reflective approach when confronted with challenges and daily obstacles[9]. As a result, substantial efforts have been directed towards intentionally integrating critical thinking into education at large, with a particular emphasis on language instruction and the teaching of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL)[10].

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pp. 781–782; K. Larsson, *Understanding and Teaching Critical Thinking – a New Approach*, "International Journal of Educational Research" 2017, 84, p. 34.

3 M.E. Oliveri, R. Markle, *Continuing a Culture of Evidence: Expanding Skills in Higher Education*, "ETS Research Report Series" 2017, 1, pp. 4–5.

4 R.H. Ennis, *The Nature of Critical Thinking: An Outline of Critical Thinking Dispositions and Abilities*, [in:] *SAGE Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment*, J.H. McMillan (ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA 2018, pp. 51–59.

5 Ibidem.

6 Z.B. Moghadam, M.H. Narafshan, M. Tajadini, *The Effect of Implementing a Critical Thinking Intervention Program on English Language Learners' Critical Thinking, Reading Comprehension, and Classroom Climate*, "Asian Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education" 2023, 8 (15), p. 15.

7 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), *Career Readiness Defined*, 2017.

8 World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2020*, 2020.

9 J.E. McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education*, London 1981.

10 K. Heidari, *Critical thinking...*, pp. 3–4; N. Kamgar, E. Jadidi, *Exploring the Relationship...*, pp. 781–782; K. Larsson, *Understanding and teaching...*, pp. 34–35; Y. Liu, *Critical Literacy Practices in Efl Reading Classroom – an Experimental Study Towards Chinese University Students*, "English Language Teaching" 2017, 10 (5), pp. 133–134; E.D. Romero, J. Bobkina, *Exploring Critical and Visual Literacy Needs in Digital Learning Environments: The Use of Memes in the Efl/Esl University Classroom*, "Thinking Skills and Creativity" 2021, 40, pp. 10–11.

Despite the extensive body of literature on critical thinking, there remains a need to clarify current debates, identify gaps, and articulate a clear rationale for further research into the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. This paper advocates a more integrated approach that not only highlights existing theories but also emphasizes an argument-based structure for understanding why and how critical thinking should be intentionally developed via reading comprehension activities.

1.1. Reading comprehension

Reading is a multifaceted process encompassing various skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. These skills are crucial for individuals to extract meaning from written text[11]. Decoding, the ability to translate letters and words into meaning, is fundamental for fluent reading[12]. Fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension further enhance the reader's ability to understand and retain information[13]. However, reading comprehension goes beyond mere word recognition; it requires critical thinking to understand and analyze ideas conveyed in the text[14]. Though critical thinking is more than only analysis, it is crucial to first develop the ability to analyze and synthesize as a basis for developing further operations such as evaluating the information in a wide context. The challenging nature of reading comprehension is underscored by scholars who argue that it is a skill not naturally evolved but must be instructed[15]. Reading comprehension's complexity is highlighted by its relatively recent practice compared to oral comprehension[16]. However, reading comprehension overlaps considerably with spoken language comprehension, suggesting that teaching reading involves leveraging existing comprehension processes[17]. Thus,

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11 T.N. Fitria, *Improving Students' Reading Comprehension Through Cooperative Integrated Reading Composition (Circ)*, "SSRN Electronic Journal" 2015, pp. 2–3.

12 H. Al-Jahhar, N.S. Ismail, *Reading Comprehension Strategies among EFL Learners in Higher Learning Institutions*, "Arab World English Journal" 2018, 9 (2), p. 317.

13 Ibidem, pp. 317–318.

14 D.S. McNamara (ed.), *Reading Comprehension Strategies: Theories, Interventions, and Technologies*, 2007, p. 469.

15 J.R. Kirby, *Reading Comprehension: Its Nature and Development*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development* 2007, p. 6.

16 R.K. Olson, H. Datta, J. Gayan, J.C. DeFries, *A Behavioral-Genetic Analysis of Reading Disabilities and Component Processes*, [in:] *Converging Methods for Understanding Reading and Dyslexia*, 1999, pp. 135–136.

17 D.T. Willingham, *The Usefulness of Brief Instruction in Reading Comprehension Strategies*, "American Educator" 2006, 30 (4), p. 40.

when examining reading proficiency, experts should take into account how learners perceive written text and interact with it. Understanding these processes is not only essential for providing individual support to learners, but also for forming educators' collective knowledge of effective teaching strategies that can benefit all learners.

1.2. Critical thinking

Critical thinking (CT) stands in education as a skill that extends beyond mere cognitive skills. As highlighted by Kennedy et al., CT comprises both cognitive and affective components[18]. These component skills include the analysis of arguments, the use of inductive or deductive reasoning to make inferences, the evaluation of evidence, and the ability to make informed decisions or solve complex problems[19]. Lai states that while background knowledge serves as a foundation, it alone is insufficient for fostering critical thought within a particular subject[20]. Critical thinking includes not only cognitive abilities but also certain dispositions or habits of mind, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, flexibility, and willingness to consider diverse perspectives (ibid.). Research[21] suggests that the development of critical thinking should begin early in life, yet can be nurtured and refined throughout one's academic and professional journey. In examining educational methodologies is it important to underline approaches to language teaching that clarify the impact on student learning and development.

At the beginning of Western philosophical thought, Socrates believed in the importance of questioning assumptions and seeking understanding through dialogue from a very young age[22]. His approach suggests that children are naturally curious and capable of philosophical inquiry, and this idea underpins the Socratic method, or Socratic questioning[23]. Nevertheless, what might be observed in the traditional educational context of Slovakia is that these natural tendencies can be

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18 R.R. Kennedy, *In-Class Debates: Fertile Ground for Active Learning and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Skills*, "International Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education" 2007, 19 (2), p. 188.

19 E. Stranovská, A. Ficzere, *Intervencia a prediktory čítania s porozumením*, Praha 2020, pp. 63–64.

20 E.R. Lai, *Critical Thinking: A Literature Review*, "Pearson's Research Reports" 2011, 6 (1), p. 40–41.

21 Ibidem.

22 G.B. Matthews, *Socrates' Children*, [in:] G.B. Matthews, *The Child's Philosopher*, M.R. Gregory, M.J. Raverty (Eds.), London 2021, p. 144.

23 T.A. Carey, R.J. Mullan, *What Is Socratic Questioning?*, "Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training" 2004, 41 (3), p. 217.

overlooked when repetitive, reproductive thinking teaching methods of EFL are preferred over more interactive approaches. "Reproductive thinking involves the application of familiar, routine procedures such as skimming and scanning to extract information efficiently"[24]. On the other hand, productive thinking methods emphasize critical inquiry, creativity, and learner engagement[25]. Such methods align more closely with Socratic questioning and problem-based learning activities, illustrating how explicit and interactive instruction can foster deeper levels of critical thinking and comprehension. While teaching reading comprehension, explicit instruction of critical thinking, transfer of skills to new and practical contexts, and using pedagogical approaches that promote learner-centred learning are seen as beneficial[26]. In assessing critical thinking, educators should be encouraged to design tasks that are open-ended, rooted in real-world or authentic problem contexts, thus encouraging learners to go beyond information[27].

1.3. Teachers' professional competencies

As implied before, the role of educators in the development of critical thinking through reading comprehension is essential. Developing critical thinking in the process of education requires specific professional competencies of teachers. Ennis[28] emphasizes the necessity for educators to possess a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking, including cognitive processes. While instructing reading comprehension, the author[29] also suggests the implementation of interactive and collaborative instructional approaches to stimulate higher-order cognitive processes such as critical thinking. To be an educator that promotes the skill development of such complexity, one might argue that an individual him/herself must possess reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. These abilities include understanding the main ideas of a text, analyzing information to decide whether it is important and trustworthy, thinking critically to form opinions and solve problems, interpreting information to draw logical conclu-

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[24] J.B. Cunningham, J.N. MacGregor, *Productive and Re-Productive Thinking in Solving Insight Problems*, "The Journal of Creative Behavior" 2014, 48 (1), p. 44.

[25] Ibidem, pp. 44–63.

[26] D.F. Halpern, *Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum: A Brief Edition of Thought & Knowledge*, New York 2014. pp. 5–17; R.H. Ennis, *The Nature of Critical...*, pp. 51–59.

[27] S.D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*, San Francisco 2012, pp. 233–259.

[28] R.H. Ennis, *The Nature of Critical…*, pp. 51–59.

[29] Ibidem.

sions, and combining information from different sources to create a clear and faithful understanding. Throughout these processes, techniques such as Socratic questioning[30], problem-solving tasks, and structured discourse activities can create dynamic learning environments that support active engagement and critical reflection. Moreover, creating a classroom culture characterized by intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, and respectful dialogue is essential for nurturing critical thinking skills. Educators should cultivate an atmosphere where learners feel encouraged to voice their perspectives, challenge assumptions, and engage in constructive debate[31]. Lai claims that ongoing training and collaboration with peers enable teachers to stay informed about current research and innovative teaching methodologies in critical thinking education[32]. By participating in professional learning communities and engaging in reflective practice, educators can continually enhance their capacity to facilitate meaningful critical thinking experiences for their learners. However, educators often struggle to demonstrate the practical execution of these theoretical notions. Therefore, an essential aspect of teachers' professional competencies involves the ability to translate existing arguments, theories, and constructs into practical teaching applications. This translation is crucial to avoid repetitiveness of established knowledge and provide new and effective perspectives in classroom settings.

2. Development of critical thinking through reading comprehension

Nowadays, significant efforts are dedicated to systematically integrating critical thinking into various areas of education and studying various subjects, including, for example, English language as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). This trend is evident from the works of various authors, such as Heidari, Kamgar and Jadidi, Larsson, Liu and Stapleton, and Moghadam[33]. Several authors propose various methods for teaching critical thinking. Ennis describes several approaches, such as the general, immersion, infusion, and mixed approaches, which differ in the way critical thinking is implemented: the general approach focuses

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30 R.W. Paul, L. Elder, *Critical Thinking: The Nature of Critical and Creative Thought*, "Journal of Developmental Education" 2006, 30 (2), p. 34.

31 S.D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical...*, pp. 110–111.

32 E.R. Lai, *Critical Thinking...*, pp. 40–41.

33 K. Heidari, *Critical Thinking...*, pp.1–8; N. Kamgar, E. Jadidi, *Exploring the Relationship...*, pp. 776–783; K. Larsson, *Understanding and Teaching...*, pp. 32–42; Y. Liu, *Critical Literacy Practices...*, pp. 133–138; Z.B. Moghadam, M.H. Narafshan, M. Tajadini, *The Effect of Implementing...*, p. 15.

on systematically teaching critical thinking as a separate subject; the immersion approach integrates critical thinking into the broader educational environment; the infusion approach incorporates critical thinking into existing subjects; and the mixed approach combines multiple methods and approaches to develop critical thinking in various teaching contexts[34]. Moreover, these approaches often recommend different ways to integrate critical thinking into teaching methods, such as through discussions, debates, and various activities[35]. As indicated by the literature review, despite the existence of numerous studies on the effectiveness of various approaches, there is no clear consensus on how critical thinking should be taught.

It is important to note that critical thinking and reading comprehension share many common features[36]. The mental processes required for full comprehension of a text, such as inference, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation[37], are also essential components of critical thinking. Similarly, "reading, understood as interaction between the reader and the text, requires thinking and a series of higher mental operations, ultimately corresponding to the entire spectrum of Bloom's taxonomy, including remembering facts, understanding concepts, applying knowledge, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating text"[38]. Therefore, integrating activities to support critical thinking may contribute to improving learners' reading comprehension ability. These activities encourage learners to engage in higher cognitive processes that are equally important for critical thinking and deeper understanding and processing of text[39]. Reading comprehension is considered an appropriate and useful platform for developing and supporting learners' critical thinking[40]. Laarson emphasized the importance of early age for the development of critical thinking and active learning[41]. His view was that with the development of cognitive and affective components, the skill of critical thinking should be developed, otherwise it will be difficult later in life. This claim is supported by the fields of pedagogy and psychology. Stranovská and Ficzere explain the difference between good and

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34 R.H. Ennis, *The Nature of Critical...*, pp. 51–59.

35 E.R. Lai, *Critical Thinking...*, pp. 40–41; Z.B. Moghadam, M.H. Narafshan, M. Tajadini, *The Effect of Implementing...*, p. 15.

36 E. Stranovská, A. Ficzere, *Intervencia a prediktory...*, pp. 126–127.

37 P. Gavora, *Žiak a text*, Bratislava 1992, pp. 51–55.

38 E. Stranovská, A. Ficzere, *Intervencia a prediktory...*, p. 137.

39 Ibidem, pp. 137–140.

40 K. Heidari, *Critical Thinking...*, p. 6–7.

41 K. Larsson, *Understanding and Teaching...*, pp 32–42.

poor readers in terms of monitoring and self-regulation[42]. Metacognition is closely related to the age of the reader, as it does not develop automatically and can cause significant fluctuations in comprehension success later in life.

3. Recommended teaching strategies

Developing critical thinking through reading comprehension begins with interactive and reflective approaches that encourage students to engage more deeply with texts. Reciprocal teaching[43] exemplifies this idea by having students alternate the role of teacher, focusing on four core tasks: questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting. This method pushes learners to read actively, analyze textual details, and articulate their thoughts. Building on this, Socratic questioning[44] uses open-ended, thought-provoking questions to prompt students to consider causes, implications, or alternative interpretations of the text, thereby sharpening their ability to critically evaluate information.

In addition, teachers can implement graphic organizers[45] to visually map out relationships between ideas, allowing students to recognize key themes and trends more effectively. Equally important are metacognitive strategies[46], which train students to monitor and regulate their own cognitive processes. By reflecting on their understanding, identifying unclear segments, and adjusting their reading strategies, students gain a higher level of self-awareness. Collaborative learning methods, such as literature circles or book clubs, further bolster critical thinking by prompting diverse perspectives and reflective discourse. In these settings, students adopt different roles such as discussion facilitator, summarizer, or critic, thereby promoting active participation and deeper critical engagement. Other strategies that help develop higher cognitive processes include the following[47]:

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42 E. Stranovská, A. Ficzere, *Intervencia a prediktory...*, pp. 13–14.

43 A.L. Brown, A.S. Palincsar, *Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension Strategies: A Natural History of One Program for Enhancing Learning*, [in:] *Intelligence and Exceptionality: New Directions for Theory, Assessment, and Instructional Practices*, J.D. Day, J.G. Borkowski (Eds.), New York 1987, pp. 81–132.

44 R.W. Paul, L. Elder, *Critical Thinking...*, p. 34.

45 R.J. Marzano, D.J. Pickering, J.E. Pollock, *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, Alexandria 2001, pp. 22–24.

46 E. Szabó, *Čítanie s porozumením v cudzom jazyku a pragmalingvistická typológia*, Praha 2024, pp. 85–92.

47 Z. Gadušová, J. Harťanská, M. Hricková, S, Hvozdíková, J. Hučková, G. Miššíková, E. Szabó, Z. Vogelová, *Intervenčný program čítania s porozumením pre anglický jazyk*, Praha 2020, pp. 5–12.

SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) and SQ4R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Relate, Review) are closely related methods designed to help students engage actively with texts. In the survey step, learners skim the headings, subheadings, and visuals to get an overall sense of the topic. Then they question by turning those headings into guiding questions to be answered during reading. In the read stage, they look for answers to these questions, highlighting key points. Recite (sometimes also referred to as recall) involves summarizing or verbalizing the main ideas in one's own words. The SQ4R strategy adds the relate step, prompting learners to connect what they have read to their own experiences or previous knowledge. Review in both models involves revisiting, consolidating, or testing one's understanding of the material, often by revisiting the initial questions to see if they have been adequately addressed.

Other strategies target specific aspects of comprehension and critical reflection. 3–2-1 asks learners to identify three key pieces of information from the text, two intriguing points that challenged their expectations, and one question they still have or something they didn't find answered in the reading. PLAN (Predict, Locate, Add, Note) supports a heuristic approach: students start by predicting content (often creating a conceptual map), then locate and mark known or unclear information, add short explanations as they read, and finally note (summarize) the key insights they have gained. PROR (Pre-read, Read, Organize, Review) emphasizes pre-reading activities, such as formulating questions and scanning headings, followed by careful reading, organizing ideas into diagrams or note cards, and reviewing content to reinforce retention. KWL (Know, Want to know, Learned) encourages students to list prior knowledge, set clear learning goals in the form of questions, and then reflect on what they have actually learned. Finally, REAP (Read, Encode, Annotate, Ponder) highlights the importance of annotating (writing summaries or critical remarks directly on or alongside the text) and then critically evaluating those annotations to deepen understanding. All of these strategies share a common emphasis on active engagement, metacognition, and reflective thinking, thereby promoting a more meaningful and critical interaction with the reading material.

4. Conclusions

The current state of critical thinking in schools is shaped by multiple factors, whose impact may vary depending on available resources and teacher preparedness. Although the curriculum theoretically emphasizes analytical and evaluative skills, actual classroom practice often leans toward memorization. Some schools have

embraced methods such as project-based learning and class discussions, both of which enhance students' critical capacities, yet their success remains inconsistent. Recent studies indicate substantial variability in students' critical thinking. While some effectively analyze and assess the information they encounter, others need ongoing guidance and structured support[48].

From this literature review, it is apparent that although numerous studies and methodologies focus on either critical thinking or reading comprehension, a cohesive framework systematically interlinking both areas is still lacking in practice. Teachers may not always receive sufficiently detailed guidance on why and how to effectively integrate critical thinking into reading instruction. This paper thus addresses a gap in the literature by emphasizing the importance of specific teacher competencies required to implement the proposed approaches, building on relevant theoretical foundations. By analysing both the shared and unique characteristics of critical thinking and reading comprehension, the paper aims to synthesize an essential framework for effective instructional approaches. Moreover, the ultimate aim is to offer targeted, practically applicable strategies that not only enhance students' reading literacy but also develop their critical thinking skills, equipping them to apply these abilities in real-world contexts.

Among the concrete strategies proposed are interactive methods (e.g., reciprocal teaching, Socratic questioning), visual supports (e.g., graphic organizers), and collaborative techniques (e.g., literature circles). The authors of this article believe that these classroom-ready practices enable educators to enhance deeper engagement with texts, encourage students to ask probing questions, and guide them in constructing and evaluating arguments. This practical view further underscores the value of professional development focused on critical literacy and teacher competencies, supporting learners in becoming active, reflective thinkers prepared for the complexities of the 21st century. Future research could delve into the ways in which digital tools and resources can both enhance reading proficiency and strengthen learners' critical thinking capabilities.

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[48] Z. Sarkoohi, M. Nematollahi, M. Dehghan, R. Mehdipour-Rabori, Z. Khoshnood, P. Parandeh-Afshar, J. Farokhzadian, *Can Internship Programs Affect Nursing Students' Critical Thinking Disposition, Caring Behaviors, and Professional Commitment?*, "BMC Nursing" 2024, 23, pp. 2–3; H. Song, L. Cai, *Interactive Learning Environment as a Source of Critical Thinking Skills for College Students*, "BMC Med Educ" 2024, 24, pp. 2–3; G. Orosz, L. Faragó, B. Paskuj, P. Krekó, *Strategies to Combat Misinformation: Enduring Effects of a 15-Minute Online Intervention on Critical-Thinking Adolescents*, "Computers in Human Behavior" 2024, 159, pp. 3–4; X. Li, J. Liu, *Validating a Critical Thinking Ability Questionnaire for Efl Learners*, "Thinking Skills and Creativity" 2024, 51, pp. 2–4.

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