



Facilitating Critical Thinking in Blended Learning: Instructor Strategies in a Critical Reading Class

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Abstract

This case study examined the instructor's strategies for fostering critical thinking in a blended critical reading course at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University. Data were collected via observations of face-to-face (4 sessions) and virtual (5 sessions) meetings, analysis of online discussions within the SPADA LMS (5 sessions), and the instructor's reflective journal. Thirty second-year English Department students participated. Thematic analysis revealed five key instructor strategies: designing thought-provoking prompts, facilitating engaging online discussions, providing targeted feedback, scaffolding learning, and creating a supportive environment. The study demonstrates how the instructor adapted these strategies across modalities, leveraging each's affordances, and offers practical insights for blended critical reading instruction. It underscores the instructor's crucial role in cultivating critical thinking through intentional design, active facilitation, and strategic technology use.

Keywords: Blended Learning; Critical Thinking; Critical Reading; Instructor Strategies.

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving information landscape, the ability to think critically is no longer a desirable trait but an essential skill for navigating the complexities of the 21st century (Sinaga et al., 2023). Students entering higher education are expected to possess well-developed critical thinking skills to analyze information objectively, evaluate arguments effectively (Khoiroh, 2024), and formulate well-reasoned judgments (Ennis, 2015). This is particularly crucial in the field of English studies, where students are constantly engaging with diverse texts, interpreting nuanced meanings, and constructing their own informed interpretations. However, the development of these higher-order thinking skills, especially in the context of reading comprehension, presents a significant challenge for many students (Siska Indriyana & Kuswandono, 2019). Many struggle to move beyond a surface-level understanding of texts, often accepting information passively rather than actively questioning its

validity, relevance, and underlying assumptions. This passive approach to reading can hinder their ability to fully grasp complex ideas, identify biases, and develop their own informed perspectives (Pramerta, 2024).

Critical reading, a cornerstone of English studies, is inextricably linked to critical thinking. It demands more than simply decoding words and understanding the literal meaning of a text. Instead, it requires readers to actively engage with the text, question assumptions, identify the author's purpose and perspective, and evaluate the evidence presented (Al Roomy, 2022; Peter A, 2015). Critical reading involves a deep understanding of the text's context, audience, and purpose, as well as the ability to analyze the author's use of language, rhetoric, and evidence. It is through critical reading that students learn to discern the difference between fact and opinion, recognize logical fallacies, and construct their own well-supported arguments (Wexler et al., 2020). In the English Department at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University, critical reading is recognized as a fundamental skill for students to succeed in their studies and future careers. It is deemed essential for analyzing literature, understanding theoretical concepts, and developing effective communication skills. The ability to critically evaluate texts is not only crucial for academic success but also for active participation in a democratic society, where individuals are bombarded with information from various sources and must be able to discern credible information from misinformation(Hà & Huertas-Abril, 2024; Hajhosseini et al., 2016).

Blended learning, which strategically combines face-to-face instruction with online learning, offers a promising approach to fostering critical thinking skills (Alotaibi, 2013; Daskan, A., & Yildiz, Y. 2020). By integrating the strengths of both modalities, blended learning environments can provide students with flexible learning opportunities, access to diverse resources, and opportunities for collaborative learning. The face-to-face component allows for direct interaction with instructors and peers, fostering rich discussions, providing immediate feedback, and building a sense of community (Gao & Shi, 2023). The online component, on the other hand, offers opportunities for self-paced learning, access to a wider range of materials, and asynchronous communication, allowing students time to reflect on information and formulate their thoughts carefully (Jensen & Scharff, 2019). This combination has the potential to create a dynamic learning environment that supports the development of critical thinking by providing both structured learning experiences and opportunities for independent exploration and reflection (Nash, 2021).

However, the potential of blended learning to foster critical thinking is not automatically realized. The crucial factor is the instructor's role in designing and

facilitating learning experiences that actively promote critical thinking skills (Bråten & Braasch, 2017). Instructors must intentionally design activities, provide guidance and feedback, and create a learning environment that encourages students to question, analyze, and evaluate information critically. Effective instructor strategies are essential for maximizing the benefits of blended learning and ensuring that students develop the critical thinking skills they need to succeed.

This study aims to explore and describe the instructor strategies employed to facilitate critical thinking in a blended Critical Reading class at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What specific strategies do instructors employ to facilitate critical thinking in a blended Critical Reading class? And (2) How do these strategies manifest in the face-to-face and online components of the course?

This qualitative study is significant because it can provide valuable insights for instructors at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University and other institutions who are teaching critical reading or related courses using blended learning. By identifying and describing effective instructor strategies, this research can contribute to improved teaching practices and enhanced student learning outcomes in the development of critical thinking. It offers a deeper understanding of the pedagogical approaches that can effectively support critical thinking development in the context of blended learning for critical reading.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore and describe the instructor strategies used to facilitate critical thinking in a blended critical reading class at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon (instructor strategies for promoting critical thinking) within a bounded context (a blended critical reading class) (Priya. A, 2021). This design is well-suited for addressing the research questions, which focus on understanding the nuances of instructor practices and how they manifest in a real-world classroom setting. The qualitative nature of the study allows for rich, descriptive data collection and analysis, providing valuable insights into the complexities of instructor practices and their perceived impact on student learning. This approach recognizes that critical thinking development is a complex process that is best understood through in-depth exploration of the learning environment and the instructor's role within it.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in the English Department at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University, specifically within a Critical Reading class. This particular class was chosen because critical reading is a core component of the English curriculum, and the blended learning modality offered a suitable context for investigating the interplay of online and face-to-face instruction in promoting critical thinking. The class consisted of 16 meetings, combining four face-to-face sessions, five virtual meetings (synchronous), five designated online sessions using SPADA for asynchronous activities and the rest two for mid and final test. This blended format is increasingly common in higher education, making the findings of this study relevant to a wider audience of instructors and researchers. The specific context of a critical reading class within an English department provides a focused lens for examining the development of critical thinking skills within a discipline that heavily relies on textual analysis and interpretation.

Participants

The participants in this study were the instructor of the Critical Reading course (who is also the researcher) and the 30 second-year students from the English Department at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University enrolled in the course during the specified semester. Focusing on the instructor's perspective as the primary data source aligns with the research focus on instructor strategies. While student perspectives could offer additional valuable insights, this study prioritizes the instructor's reflections and documented practices as the primary focus. All students in the class were invited to participate in the research, primarily through the analysis of their contributions to online discussions. Students were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of the confidentiality of their contributions (data will be anonymized), and given the option to opt-out of the research component of the course without penalty. This is crucial for ethical reasons, as the researcher is also the instructor, ensuring that student participation in the research does not impact their grades or standing in the course.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through multiple sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the instructor strategies and their implementation:

1. Classroom Observations. Four face-to-face class sessions and five virtual meeting sessions were observed by the researcher. These observations were strategically selected to capture a range of activities and topics covered in the course. An observation protocol, informed by the literature on effective

teaching practices for critical thinking, guided the observations. The protocol focused on documenting specific instructor strategies, including designing and facilitating online discussions, providing feedback on student work, scaffolding learning activities, and creating a supportive learning environment. Detailed field notes were taken during each observation, focusing on the instructor's actions, student interactions, and the learning environment. These notes included descriptions of the instructor's specific behaviors, examples of student contributions to discussions, and observations of the overall classroom atmosphere.

2. Analysis of Online Discussions (SPADA). All online discussions conducted through SPADA across the five designated online sessions were analyzed. These online discussions provided a valuable record of the instructor's strategies as they unfolded in the online environment. The analysis focused on identifying and describing the instructor's strategies related to promoting critical thinking (as defined in the literature review) as they manifested within the online discussions. This included analyzing the instructor's prompts, their responses to student posts, and the overall flow of the discussions. Particular attention was paid to how the instructor used SPADA's features to support critical thinking.
3. Instructor's Reflective Journal. The instructor (researcher) maintained a reflective journal throughout the study, documenting her reflections on her teaching practices, her observations of student learning, and her decisions regarding instructional strategies. This journal served as a valuable source of data, providing insights into the instructor's thinking and rationale behind her actions. The journal entries were free-form reflections, allowing the instructor to document her thoughts and observations in a natural and unstructured way. This approach allowed for the capture of emergent themes and insights that might not have been anticipated beforehand.

Data Analysis

Data from the classroom observations, online discussions, and the instructor's reflective journal were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a rigorous and systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis followed a six-phase process: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated readings and review of all data sources; (2) generating initial codes based on the research questions and the literature review, focusing on instructor strategies related to promoting critical thinking; (3) searching

for themes across the coded data, looking for recurring patterns and connections between codes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure coherence and relevance, checking that the themes accurately reflected the data and addressed the research questions; (5) defining and naming themes, providing clear and concise descriptions of the key instructor strategies identified in the study; and (6) producing the final report, using rich descriptions and illustrative excerpts from the data to support the identified themes and provide evidence for the claims made.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this qualitative study was addressed through several strategies (Ahmed, 2024):

1. **Credibility.** Prolonged engagement in the research setting, persistent observation across multiple sessions, and triangulation of data sources (observations, discussions, journal) contributed to the credibility of the findings. The researcher's role as the instructor provided a deep understanding of the context, but also required careful attention to potential biases.
2. **Transferability.** Thick descriptions of the research setting, participants, and instructor strategies will allow readers to judge the transferability of the findings to other contexts. The detailed descriptions of the blended learning environment and the specific instructor strategies employed will provide readers with the information they need to assess the relevance of the findings to their own settings.
3. **Dependability.** A detailed audit trail, including the observation protocol, coding scheme, and reflective journal, will be maintained to ensure the dependability of the data analysis process. This audit trail will allow other researchers to trace the steps taken in the analysis and assess the consistency of the findings.
4. **Confirmability.** The use of multiple data sources and the clear articulation of the data analysis process will enhance the confirmability of the findings. Direct quotes from the data will be used to support interpretations, providing concrete evidence for the claims made. This transparency in the data analysis process will allow readers to assess the extent to which the findings are grounded in the data.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, organized according to the key themes that emerged from the analysis of classroom observations, online discussions, and the instructor's reflective journal. These themes represent the instructor strategies

identified as effective in facilitating critical thinking in the blended critical reading class.

Theme 1. Designing Thought-Provoking Discussion Prompts

This overarching theme encapsulates the instructor's deliberate crafting of discussion prompts designed to stimulate higher-order thinking and move students beyond surface-level comprehension. The prompts were carefully constructed to challenge assumptions, encourage exploration of multiple perspectives, and promote in-depth analysis of the course material.

Sub-theme 1.1: Prompts that Challenge Assumptions

A recurring strategy was the use of prompts that explicitly challenged students' pre-conceived notions and encouraged them to critically examine their own and others' assumptions. For instance, in a discussion, the instructor posed the question, *"What are the underlying assumptions in the author's argument, and are these assumptions valid in today's context?"* This prompt wasn't simply asking students to identify assumptions; it pushed them to evaluate the validity of those assumptions in a different time and place, thereby promoting critical evaluation. As one student articulated in the online forum, *"I had initially accepted the author's argument at face value, but this question made me realize that their argument rests on assumptions that might not hold up anymore."* The instructor's reflective journal entry from that week noted, *"I'm consciously trying to design prompts that push them past summarizing and into analysis. Challenging their assumptions seems to be a good entry point for that."* This demonstrates a deliberate pedagogical choice on the instructor's part to foster critical thinking through carefully crafted questions.

Sub-theme 1.2: Prompts that Encourage Multiple Perspectives

Beyond challenging assumptions, the instructor frequently employed prompts that explicitly encouraged students to consider diverse viewpoints on a given issue. For example, in a discussion the instructor asked, *"How might someone with a different cultural background or set of socio-economic experiences interpret this text? Provide specific examples to support your viewpoint."* This prompt not only asked for different interpretations but also required students to ground their viewpoints in specific examples, promoting both perspective-taking and textual analysis. Observation notes from a face-to-face session captured the instructor saying, *"It's vital to remember that we all bring our own biases and perspectives to the table. Critical thinking involves acknowledging those perspectives and trying to understand how others might see things differently."* This emphasis on multiple perspectives reflects a commitment to

developing students' ability to consider diverse viewpoints, a key aspect of critical thinking.

Theme 2. Facilitating Active and Engaging Online Discussions

This theme highlights the instructor's proactive role in guiding and nurturing online discussions, creating a dynamic space for students to explore ideas, challenge perspectives, and construct knowledge collaboratively. The instructor's facilitation went beyond simply posting prompts; it involved actively engaging with student contributions, asking probing questions, and fostering a sense of community.

Sub-theme 2.1 Guiding Questions and Probing Responses

The instructor skillfully used questions not only to initiate discussions but also to guide the conversation and encourage deeper thinking. Instead of simply accepting initial responses, the instructor frequently asked follow-up questions that challenged students to elaborate on their points, provide evidence for their claims, or consider alternative viewpoints. For instance, after a student posted a summary of an article, the instructor responded, *"That's a good summary. Now, can you explain why you think the author takes this particular stance? What evidence from the text supports your interpretation?"* This probing question pushed the student beyond summarizing and into the realm of analysis and interpretation. The instructor's reflective journal noted, *"I'm trying to model the kind of questioning they should be doing themselves as critical readers. I want them to get used to digging beneath the surface."*

Sub-theme 2.2 Encouraging Interaction and Dialogue

The instructor actively fostered interaction between students, creating a sense of dialogue rather than just a series of isolated posts. They often encouraged students to respond directly to each other's ideas, ask clarifying questions, or offer alternative perspectives. For example, the instructor might say, *"That's an interesting point, student A. Student B, what do you think about Student A's interpretation? Do you see it differently?"* This strategy not only increased student engagement but also helped them to develop their listening and communication skills. Observation notes from a virtual meeting captured the instructor saying, *"I want them to see that online discussions can be a real conversation, not just a place to post their own thoughts and disappear."*

Sub-theme 2.3 Synthesizing Ideas and Building Connections

As the discussions progressed, the instructor played a key role in synthesizing the various points made and highlighting connections between different ideas. They often

summarized key arguments, identified areas of agreement and disagreement, and helped students to see the bigger picture. For instance, at the end of a week-long discussion, the instructor post a summary that highlighted the main themes that emerged, acknowledged diverse viewpoints, and pointed towards areas for further exploration. This helped students to make sense of the complex and often multifaceted nature of the discussions. The instructor's reflective journal commented, *"I'm trying to help them see how all these different ideas relate to each other. It's not just about individual opinions; it's about building a shared understanding."*

Theme 3. Providing Specific and Actionable Feedback

This theme focuses on the instructor's approach to providing feedback that was not only specific but also actionable, meaning that it gave students concrete suggestions for how they could improve their critical thinking skills. The feedback was often tailored to individual student needs and focused on the process of critical thinking, rather than just the final product.

Sub-theme 3.1 Focus on the Critical Thinking Process

The instructor's feedback consistently focused on the students' critical thinking processes, such as their analysis of evidence, their evaluation of arguments, and their use of reasoning. Instead of simply saying "Good point" or "I disagree," the instructor would explain *why* a point was effective or *how* an argument could be strengthened. For example, in feedback on a student's essay, the instructor wrote, *"Your analysis of the first two sources is strong, but you could strengthen your argument by more explicitly connecting your analysis to your overall thesis. How does this evidence support your main claim?"* This type of feedback helped students to understand the connection between their analysis and their overall argument, promoting deeper critical thinking.

Sub-theme 3.2 Targeted Suggestions for Improvement

The instructor's feedback included specific and targeted suggestions for how students could improve their critical thinking skills. Instead of giving general advice, the instructor offered concrete strategies and resources. For instance, in feedback on a student's discussion post, the instructor wrote, *"You make a good point about the author's use of statistics, but you could strengthen your argument by considering the potential limitations of this data. You might find this article on statistical fallacies*

helpful." This type of targeted feedback provided students with concrete steps they could take to improve their critical thinking.

Theme 4. Scaffolding Learning Activities

This theme highlights the instructor's use of scaffolding to break down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, providing students with the support they needed to develop their critical thinking skills gradually. This involved providing clear guidelines, offering models and examples, and gradually releasing responsibility as students gained confidence.

Sub-theme 4.1 Breaking Down Complex Tasks

The instructor frequently broke down complex assignments, such as reading and writing critical analysis paragraphs, into smaller, more manageable tasks. For example, before asking students to write full paragraphs, the instructor might assign smaller tasks such as summarizing key arguments, identifying rhetorical devices, or outlining the structure of their paragraph. This approach made the larger task less daunting and allowed students to focus on developing specific critical thinking skills at each stage.

Sub-theme 4.2 Providing Models and Examples

The instructor provided students with models of critical thinking and examples of strong analytical writing. This helped students to understand what was expected of them and provided them with a framework for developing their own critical thinking skills. For example, the instructor might share exemplary student essays from previous semesters or create their own model essays to demonstrate how to analyze arguments effectively.

Theme 5. Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

This theme emphasizes the importance of a positive and supportive learning environment for fostering critical thinking. The instructor actively worked to create a classroom and online space where students felt comfortable taking risks, asking questions, and expressing diverse perspectives.

Sub-theme 5.1 Building Rapport and Trust

The instructor prioritized building rapport with students, creating a sense of trust and mutual respect. This involved getting to know students' names, being approachable and available, and creating opportunities for informal interaction. In the online

environment, the instructor used personal touches, such as addressing students by name and using emoticons or GIFs, to create a more welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

Sub-theme 5.2 Promoting Respectful Communication

The instructor established clear guidelines for respectful communication in both face-to-face and online settings. They emphasized the importance of listening respectfully to diverse perspectives and engaging in constructive dialogue. In the online discussions, the instructor actively monitored the conversations to ensure that all students felt safe to share their ideas.

This study explored and described the instructor strategies employed to facilitate critical thinking in a blended Critical Reading class at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University. The findings offer valuable insights into the specific pedagogical approaches that appear to be effective in this context and how these strategies manifest in the blended learning environment.

The analysis of classroom observations, online discussions, and the instructor's reflective journal revealed several key instructor strategies crucial for promoting critical thinking. The five overarching themes—designing thought-provoking discussion prompts, facilitating active and engaging online discussions, providing specific and actionable feedback, scaffolding learning activities, and creating a supportive learning environment—resonate with and extend existing research on effective teaching practices for critical thinking in online and blended learning (Atif et al., 2024; Foo & Quek, 2019; Islam et al., 2022). For example, the emphasis on designing prompts that challenge assumptions and encourage multiple perspectives aligns with Brookfield's (2017) work on fostering critical reflection through questioning, but this study provides concrete examples of how such prompts can be crafted and implemented within a blended critical reading context. The findings related to active facilitation and the creation of a supportive environment emphasize on creating a "space for courageous conversations," but this study delves into the specific technique's instructors can use to achieve this in both online and face-to-face settings (Abrami et al., 2015b; Tiruneh et al., 2018).

A significant finding is the nuanced way these instructor strategies were adapted and implemented across the face-to-face and online components of the course, capitalizing on the unique affordances of each modality. Face-to-face sessions became spaces for dynamic, interactive discussions, allowing for spontaneous dialogue, immediate feedback, and the development of a sense of community (Gherheş et al., 2021). Virtual meetings facilitated whole-class discussions and presentations, leveraging online tools for sharing resources and engaging students synchronously,

albeit with different dynamics than in-person interactions (Vaughan et al., 2013). SPADA, as the LMS, provided a crucial platform for asynchronous activities, allowing students time for reflection and deeper engagement with the course material at their own pace. The instructor strategically used SPADA's discussion forums, assignment tools, and feedback features to extend learning beyond the physical classroom and create a continuous, interconnected learning experience. This finding underscores the importance of thoughtfully and intentionally integrating the various modalities of blended learning, as suggested by (Istenič, 2024), rather than simply treating them as separate and distinct components. The study also highlights the challenges of maintaining a consistent sense of community and engagement across the different modalities, a point that warrants further investigation.

The findings of this study both support and challenge some of the existing literature on promoting critical thinking. While the identified strategies align with established best practices, the study also reveals the complexities of implementing these strategies in a real-world blended learning environment. For example, while research emphasizes the importance of providing specific and actionable feedback this study found that providing such feedback in online environments could be time-consuming and challenging for instructors (Maier & Klotz, 2022; Steele, n.d.). The instructor's reflective journal revealed the tension between wanting to provide detailed feedback on every student's post and the practical constraints of time management. This finding highlights the need for further research on effective strategies for providing efficient and impactful feedback in online learning contexts.

Furthermore, the study revealed that while the instructor actively facilitated online discussions, student participation varied significantly. Some students were highly engaged, contributing thoughtful and insightful posts, while others were less active. This raises questions about the factors that influence student participation in online discussions and the strategies instructors can use to encourage greater engagement from all students. It also points to the need to consider the role of student motivation, self-regulation, and prior experience with online learning in the development of critical thinking skills (Duha et al., 2022; Pereles et al., n.d.; Sansone et al., 2011). This variability in student engagement underscores the importance of differentiated instruction and the need for instructors to be responsive to the diverse needs of their students (Xie & Correia, 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored the instructor strategies employed to facilitate critical thinking in a blended critical reading class at FKIP Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University. The findings illuminate the crucial role of the instructor in cultivating critical thinking skills in this blended learning environment. Five key, interconnected instructor strategies emerged as central to this process: designing thought-provoking discussion prompts, facilitating active and engaging online discussions, providing specific and actionable feedback, scaffolding learning activities, and creating a supportive learning environment. The study demonstrated how these strategies were adapted and implemented across the face-to-face and online modalities of the course, leveraging the unique affordances of each. The findings underscore the importance of a holistic and intentional approach to instruction, where these strategies are not viewed as isolated techniques but as integrated components of a comprehensive pedagogical framework. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing concrete examples of how instructors can effectively promote critical thinking in a blended critical reading context. It highlights the complexities and nuances of implementing these strategies in real-world classroom settings, particularly in online environments. The study also emphasizes the importance of considering the interplay between different instructor strategies and the need for instructors to be responsive to the diverse needs of their students. While acknowledging the limitations of this study, including its limited scope and reliance on the instructor's perspective, the findings offer valuable insights for instructors seeking to enhance critical thinking development in their students.

Ultimately, the development of critical thinking skills is essential for student success in higher education and beyond. This study demonstrates that blended learning environments, when combined with thoughtful instructional design and active facilitation, can be powerful tools for fostering these crucial skills. By understanding the specific strategies that are effective and how they can be implemented in blended learning contexts, instructors can create more engaging and effective learning experiences that empower students to become critical readers, thinkers, and lifelong learners. It is through the cultivation of these skills that we equip students to navigate the complexities of the 21st century and contribute meaningfully to society.

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