

Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through English Writing Assignments at King Faisal University

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Abstract

Developing critical thinking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners remains a persistent challenge in higher education, particularly in contexts where writing instruction focuses primarily on language accuracy rather than analytical depth. In Saudi Arabia, university writing courses often emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and formal structure, leaving limited space for fostering students' reasoning, evaluation, and argumentation skills. This gap in instructional design results in graduates who may be linguistically competent but lack the higher-order thinking abilities needed for academic success and real-world problem-solving. While global research acknowledges the strong relationship between writing and critical thinking development, few studies have examined how culturally relevant and pedagogically structured writing assignments can enhance critical thinking in Saudi EFL classrooms. This study addresses this gap by investigating the effectiveness of integrating explicit critical thinking strategies, such as argumentative and problem-solution essays, peer feedback, and technology-supported revision, into English writing instruction at King Faisal University (KFU). The research targeted 80 undergraduate engineering students aged 19–23, divided into experimental and control groups, over a 16-week semester. Using a mixed-methods design, the study measured students' improvement through pre- and post-tests, rubric-based writing evaluations, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students in the experimental group showed significant gains in critical thinking performance, writing quality, and engagement compared to those in the control group. These results suggest that intentional instructional design—grounded in culturally meaningful topics and collaborative learning practices—can transform writing courses into platforms for developing both language and cognitive skills. The implications of this research extend beyond the classroom, offering practical insights for EFL instructors, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers seeking to promote 21st-century competencies. While the study's scope was limited by sample size and duration, it lays a foundation for broader implementation and future research into sustained, large-scale interventions in similar EFL contexts.

Keywords: critical thinking, EFL writing, argumentative writing, AI-assisted writing, higher-order thinking

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, critical thinking has become a foundational component of modern education, equipping learners with the capacity to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, and synthesize information to form reasoned conclusions (Akbar et al., 2020; Marquez, 2017). These skills are essential not only for academic success but also for navigating complex social, professional, and technological environments. Writing assignments—particularly in English—offer a valuable platform for cultivating such higher-order cognitive abilities, as they require learners to construct coherent arguments, critically assess multiple perspectives, and reflect thoughtfully on their ideas (Lee & Lee, 2025). However, integrating critical thinking into English writing instruction remains a significant challenge in many EFL settings. At King Faisal University (KFU), this difficulty is compounded by two primary obstacles: persistent language barriers and a reliance on rote-learning practices. Students often struggle with expressing complex ideas in English, which hinders their ability to engage in critical reasoning. At the same time, traditional teaching methods tend to prioritize memorization over analysis, limiting opportunities for students to develop and apply critical thinking through writing. These intersecting challenges have created a learning environment where writing is often reduced to formulaic tasks, rather than being used as a tool for intellectual exploration and growth.

Research indicated that well-designed writing tasks can significantly enhance students' ability to think critically by encouraging them to interrogate assumptions, evaluate evidence, and construct reasoned arguments (Jamshidi & Amraei, 2025). In addition, peer interactions and collaborative feedback have been shown to amplify the benefits of writing activities, further engaging students in reflective and analytical practices (Lysanets et al., 2024). However, the transition from a language-focused approach to one that emphasizes critical engagement remains a complex endeavor, requiring institutional commitment, teacher training, and innovative methodologies.

This article explores strategies for fostering critical thinking through English writing assignments at KFU. Drawing on the best global practices and evidence-based approaches, the study examines how writing tasks can be structured to challenge students' cognitive abilities. By using insights from contemporary pedagogical research, this study aims to provide a roadmap for integrating critical thinking into

English writing curricula, thereby aligning KFU's educational practices with global standards.

2. Literature Review

The development of critical thinking skills through English writing assignments has been extensively studied in the past. Researchers have explored various strategies such as argumentative writing, peer collaboration, reflective writing, technology integration, and curriculum design to enhance students' analytical abilities.

First, several studies emphasized the role of argumentative writing in improving students' critical reasoning and analytical skills. Writing structured arguments forces students to evaluate multiple perspectives, assess evidence, and construct logical arguments (Legroux, 2025). Research conducted by Alidmat and Ayassrah (2017) and Gómez (2010) found that students exposed to structured essay prompts in English courses demonstrated higher levels of critical thinking compared to those engaged in general writing tasks. Similarly, Hossain and Al Younus (2024) argued that persuasive writing assignments challenged students to analyze competing viewpoints, thereby enhancing their ability to critically assess and synthesize information.

Furthermore, Legroux (2024) highlighted that students who practiced rebuttal and counterarguments in essays developed stronger reasoning skills than those who write purely descriptive essays. This finding aligns with Tarchi & Villalón (2022) who stressed that students who engaged in active reading before argumentative writing showed deeper analytical engagement and stronger argumentation skills.

Second, collaborative writing and peer review were widely recognized as effective strategies for promoting critical thinking. Hossain and Al Younus (2024) found that students who engaged in structured peer review sessions developed a greater ability to critically assess both their own and others' work, which led to improvements in clarity, coherence, and reasoning. Similarly, Jamshidi and Amraei (2022) introduced a peer interaction model in which Iranian EFL learners critiqued and revised one another's essays, resulting in enhanced analytical depth and stronger argumentative structures. Wissinger and Paz (2016) also supported this claim, demonstrating that group-based writing projects encouraged richer critical discussions. Additionally, Keys (1994) and McConnell et al. (2005) found that collaborative writing exercises improved logical reasoning, as students had to justify their choices and explain their perspectives to peers.

Third, reflective writing has been identified as an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills by encouraging students to evaluate their experiences, question assumptions, and synthesize ideas (Legroux, 2024). Stein et al., (2018) emphasized that students engaging in reflective essays exhibit greater cognitive flexibility compared to those completing traditional writing tasks. Ganapathy and Kaur (2014) explored transformational learning through writing, finding that students who participate in iterative writing cycles and self-reflection activities develop higher-order thinking skills. This is supported by Putri (2019) who highlighted that students engaged in self-assessment and revision demonstrate improved metacognitive awareness. Moreover, Lee and Lee (2024) investigated the use of multimedia and storytelling in reflective writing assignments, demonstrating that students who analyze narratives from Disney animation develop deeper critical insights and empathy.

In the context of academic writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), several studies have examined the challenges and opportunities for improving students' writing through various tools and approaches. For example, Abu Guba and Abu Quba (2020) investigated the perceptions of Arab English bilinguals towards the use of cliché in academic writing. The study revealed that these bilinguals often view cliché as more powerful and academic, a perception influenced by Arabic culture and rhetoric. This suggests a need for explicit instruction on the role of cliché in academic writing to raise awareness of their proper use. In a similar vein, Abu Guba, Awad, and Abu Quba (2024) explored the effectiveness of Grammarly in teaching writing to low-level EFL learners, finding that while the tool significantly improved basic aspects of writing, such as spelling and punctuation, it was less effective for more complex errors like word form and usage. This highlights the potential of Grammarly in addressing surface-level errors but suggests limitations for developing higher-order writing skills. Additionally, in the realm of academic writing assessment, Abu Quba, Abu Guba, and Fareh (2024) examined the reliability of Grammarly for evaluating English academic writing, concluding that while Grammarly can identify common writing issues, it tends to over-flag errors and overlooks optional usage, thus questioning its reliability for academic assessment. Lastly, the use of AI tools like ChatGPT has gained attention, with Abu Quba et al. (2025) exploring university students' reactions to using ChatGPT for academic writing. The study found that while students valued their capabilities for grammar correction and idea generation, challenges such as misinterpretation of prompts and maintaining a personal writing style persisted. The study advocates for a balanced approach to integrating such tools in writing courses, with structured guidance to promote autonomous writing and ethical use. These studies collectively suggest that while technological tools have the potential to enhance EFL writing, careful consideration of their limitations and the cultural context is essential for fostering critical thinking and writing proficiency.

Moreover, the integration of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) in writing has sparked debates regarding its impact on critical thinking skills. Ghimire (2024) argued that AI-powered writing tools, such as ChatGPT, can support students in structuring their arguments and improving coherence. However, the study also warned that over-reliance on AI may reduce students' ability to develop original ideas. Similarly, Biondi-Zoccai et al. (2023) raised concerns about the ethical and cognitive implications of AI-assisted writing, stating that while AI improves efficiency, it risks eroding students' independent reasoning skills. On the other hand, Rad et al. (2023) found that students who receive in-person writing support demonstrate stronger critical engagement than those relying solely on AI-based grammar checkers.

Finally, several studies emphasized the importance of curriculum design in fostering critical thinking through writing. Manzoor et al. (2022) analyzed English curricula in higher education and found that many programs lack explicit critical thinking objectives, focusing

primarily on grammar and fluency rather than analytical reasoning.

In contrast, Mateos et al. (2018) advocated for the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, where students apply subject-specific knowledge (e.g., science or history) in their English writing assignments. The study concluded that integrating interdisciplinary topics into writing enhances students' ability to synthesize information. Critical thinking (CT) is widely recognized as a core educational objective, encompassing the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a structured and reasoned manner. The development of CT skills is often grounded in theoretical models such as Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), which categorizes cognitive processes into hierarchical levels—from remembering and understanding to analyzing, evaluating, and creating—offering educators a roadmap to scaffold higher-order thinking through instructional activities. Similarly, Paul and Elder's Critical Thinking Framework (2001) emphasizes intellectual standards (e.g., clarity, accuracy, relevance, logic) and elements of thought (e.g., purpose, question, assumptions, inferences) as essential components of critical reasoning. These frameworks provide a theoretical lens through which writing can be employed to cultivate deeper thinking skills. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, writing assignments that align with these models—such as argumentative and analytical essays—offer opportunities for learners to engage in reflective judgment and structured inquiry (Lee & Lee, 2025). However, studies have shown that without explicit instruction in CT strategies, EFL students often struggle to move beyond surface-level writing, limiting their engagement with complex ideas (Aničić, 2024; Jamshidi & Amraei, 2025). This underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate CT frameworks into writing curricula to foster both linguistic proficiency and cognitive development. Further, Inoue and Candlin (2015), argued that task-based learning (TBL), which involves real-world writing assignments, fosters problem-solving and logical reasoning skills.

Despite the numerous benefits of integrating critical thinking into writing assignments, several challenges continue to persist. Luk and Lin, (2015) highlighted language proficiency as a major barrier, stating that students with limited vocabulary and grammar skills often struggle to express critical ideas effectively.

To wrap up, despite extensive research on critical thinking in English writing assignments, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies focused on general EFL/ESL settings, with limited research on higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, particularly King Faisal University (KFU). Additionally, while previous research highlighted the benefits of argumentative writing, peer feedback, and reflective tasks, fewer studies have explored how culturally relevant writing topics tailored to students' backgrounds can enhance critical thinking in non-Western educational settings.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. Investigating the impact of specific writing tasks, such as argumentative essays, problem-solving writing, or reflective essays, on critical thinking skills among KFU students.
2. Suggesting assessment rubrics designed to evaluate critical thinking in writing assignments

3. Methodology

This article adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore the development of critical thinking skills through English writing assignments at King Faisal University (KFU). The methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the proposed strategies which include structured argumentative writing tasks, peer feedback mechanisms, and culturally relevant topics. These strategies are designed to enhance students' critical thinking abilities by engaging them in reflective, analytical, and evaluative writing exercises. The study was conducted over one academic semester (16 weeks) and involved students from the College of Engineering at KFU.

The participants consisted of 80 undergraduate students enrolled in an advanced English writing course. The sample was divided into two groups: an experimental group (40 students) and a control group (40 students). Students in both groups were selected randomly to ensure diversity in terms of gender, proficiency levels, and academic performance. The experimental group was exposed to specific strategies for fostering critical thinking, while the control group followed the standard curriculum without any explicit focus on critical thinking.

In the experimental group, a series of carefully designed writing assignments were implemented to develop critical thinking skills, based on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Paul and Elder's Critical Thinking Framework (2001). The assignments included argumentative essays and problem-solution essays, both designed to engage students in higher-order thinking processes, such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information. Each assignment was accompanied by pre-writing activities, such as brainstorming sessions and guided discussions, which were intended to foster analytical thinking and ensure alignment with Bloom's cognitive hierarchy. Students were also required to engage in peer feedback sessions, where they critically evaluated each other's work using structured rubrics grounded in the principles of Paul and Elder's framework. Additionally, the integration of technology, such as online collaborative platforms, was used to facilitate peer interaction and to encourage reflective thought. These strategies aimed to create a supportive environment for developing critical thinking by combining writing, peer feedback, and digital tools within a structured pedagogical framework.

To ensure cultural relevance, the writing prompts were designed to topics aligned with Saudi Arabian societal and educational contexts, such as ethical issues, environmental challenges, and technological advancements. The assignments emphasized critical analysis, logical reasoning, and evidence-based argumentation. Technology integration was also a key component, with students using online platforms to submit drafts, receive feedback, and revise their work iteratively.

Quantitative data were collected using a pre- and post-intervention test designed to measure students' critical thinking skills. The test

included multiple-choice questions, short answers, and an essay-writing task, all aligned with critical thinking dimensions such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and reasoning. The results of these tests were compared to assess the effectiveness of the instructional intervention.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students in the experimental group. These interviews explored participants' perceptions of the writing assignments, the challenges they faced, and the perceived impact on their critical thinking abilities.

The quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests to compare the pre- and post-intervention scores of the experimental and control groups, allowing for the measurement of any statistically significant changes in critical thinking skills. Descriptive statistics were also employed to identify trends and patterns in students' performance, offering insights into the overall impact of the writing assignments on critical thinking development. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted using a coding process based on an inductive approach. The analysis followed a structured framework that involved identifying recurring themes related to the development of critical thinking skills, the effectiveness of the instructional strategies, and students' attitudes toward the intervention. This process involved multiple stages: initial open coding to categorize raw data, followed by axial coding to link themes with specific instructional strategies (e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy and Paul and Elder's Framework), and finally, selective coding to identify overarching patterns. Thematic analysis was conducted by two independent researchers to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, and the final themes were cross-referenced with existing literature on critical thinking in writing tasks.

Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Additionally, care was taken to ensure that the control group received equitable instruction, with additional resources provided to them after the study.

4. Results and Discussion

The study showed that the implementation of carefully designed writing assignments significantly enhanced students' critical thinking skills in the experimental group compared to the control group. The results are categorized into three main areas: improvements in critical thinking performance, enhanced writing quality, and positive student perceptions of the intervention. The results can be explained as follows:

1. Improvement in Critical Thinking Performance: The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in critical thinking skills after the intervention compared to the control group. This is clear in their pre- and post-test scores across critical thinking dimensions, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and reasoning as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score	% Improvement
Experimental Group	60	85	41.7%
Control Group	62	68	9.7%

2. Enhanced Writing Quality: The experimental group also produced essays of higher quality, characterized by well-structured arguments, logical reasoning, and evidence-based conclusions. Writing tasks were evaluated using rubric measuring dimensions like clarity, organization, coherence, argumentation, and critical analysis as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Rubric results

Dimension	Experimental Group Mean (out of 5)	Control Group Mean (out of 5)
Clarity	4.5	3.7
Organization	4.3	3.5
Coherence	4.2	3.6
Argumentation	4.4	3.4
Critical Analysis	4.6	3.3

3. Positive Student Perceptions: Qualitative data from interviews and surveys revealed that students in the experimental group found the intervention engaging and beneficial. They reported increased confidence in their ability to think critically and express ideas effectively in writing as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Interviews and surveys results

Perception Category	% Positive Responses (Experimental Group)	% Positive Responses (Control Group)
Engagement in writing activities	85%	60%
Confidence in critical thinking	90%	65%
Relevance of topics to real life	87%	58%

The results showed that integrating critical thinking strategies such as argumentative essays, problem-solution writing tasks, peer feedback, and pre-writing activities like brainstorming and guided discussions, into writing assignments has a transformative impact on students' critical thinking and writing skills. While the experimental group showed significant gains in all dimensions of critical thinking, the control group exhibited modest improvements due to regular exposure to English writing activities without explicit focus on critical thinking. The findings highlighted the importance of intentional instructional design in fostering higher-order cognitive skills in EFL learners.

The results highlighted the transformative impact of integrating critical thinking-focused strategies into English writing assignments as follows:

1. Improvement in Critical Thinking Performance: The significant improvement in the experimental group's critical thinking scores (from 60 to 85, a 41.7% increase) compared to a modest increase in the control group (9.7%) reflects the effectiveness of the intervention. The inclusion of critical thinking prompts, structured peer feedback, and pre-writing activities likely provided students with the opportunities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate ideas in a structured manner.

This finding aligns with previous research indicating that targeted writing interventions improve analytical and reasoning skills (Jamshidi & Amraei, 2025). The smaller improvement in the control group may be attributed to the natural cognitive development that occurs through exposure to writing tasks, albeit without explicit critical thinking components.

2. Enhanced Writing Quality: The experimental group outperformed the control group in all dimensions of writing quality. For example, clarity (mean score of 4.5 vs. 3.7) and critical analysis (4.6 vs. 3.3) scores demonstrated that writing tasks emphasizing evidence-based arguments and logical reasoning contributed to measurable improvements.

The rubric-based assessment highlighted the effectiveness of culturally relevant topics and iterative revision cycles in enhancing students' ability to produce coherent, well-structured essays. These results reinforced findings from studies by Aničić (2024), which emphasized the role of structured feedback and good writing prompts in fostering advanced writing skills.

3. Positive Student Perceptions: The experimental group's overwhelmingly positive feedback (e.g., 90% reported increased confidence in critical thinking) indicated that students found the intervention meaningful and engaging. This suggests that culturally designed writing tasks not only enhanced their analytical abilities but also motivated them to actively participate in the learning process.

The control group's relatively lower engagement (e.g., 60% engagement compared to 85% in the experimental group) suggested that conventional teaching methods may lack the depth needed to fully engage students in higher-order thinking.

These results emphasized the importance of integrating explicit critical thinking strategies into English writing curricula. By demonstrating measurable improvements in both critical thinking and writing skills, the study provided evidence for the need to move beyond traditional, rote-based instruction toward a more reflective and analytical approach. Furthermore, the use of culturally relevant topics and peer-based learning aligns with the educational and social context of Saudi Arabia, making the findings highly applicable to institutions like King Faisal University.

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically and are presented in the subsequent section, where recurring themes related to the development of critical thinking skills, the effectiveness of the instructional strategies, and students' attitudes toward the intervention are discussed in detail.

The findings emphasized several important takeaways for EFL educators and curriculum designers. First, incorporating structured writing tasks, such as argumentative and problem-solution essays, can significantly foster critical thinking while enhancing language skills. Second, selecting culturally relevant topics that align with students' cultural and societal contexts can boost both engagement and motivation. Third, implementing peer feedback mechanisms through structured review sessions promotes collaborative learning and critical evaluation, as evidenced by the success of the experimental group. Finally, integrating technology, such as online platforms for submitting drafts and receiving feedback, can streamline the writing and revision process, making it more interactive. These practices can serve as a model for incorporating critical thinking into English curricula at KFU and other institutions in Saudi Arabia.

To strengthen the takeaways, they should be linked to the study's theoretical framework and previous research. For example, using structured writing tasks like argumentative and problem-solution essays supports the development of higher-order cognitive skills, such as analyzing and evaluating. Additionally, selecting culturally relevant topics aligns with the idea that context plays a crucial role in fostering critical thinking. Peer feedback mechanisms, as demonstrated in this study, reflect the importance of collaborative learning, where social interaction enhances cognitive development. Finally, integrating technology into the writing process supports the notion that digital tools can positively impact engagement and improve writing skills. These connections reinforce the validity of the findings, and the effectiveness of the strategies used.

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrated the transformative potential of integrating critical thinking strategies into English writing assignments at King Faisal University (KFU). Through the implementation of structured writing tasks, peer feedback mechanisms, and culturally relevant topics, students in the experimental group exhibited significant improvements in critical thinking skills, writing quality, and overall engagement compared to their peers in the control group. These findings underscored the value of moving beyond traditional language-focused instruction to embrace pedagogical approaches that encourage higher-order thinking.

The results aligned with global research emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between writing and critical thinking, showing that well-designed assignments can simultaneously enhance cognitive and linguistic abilities. Importantly, the study addressed a critical research gap by contextualizing these strategies within the unique cultural and educational landscape of Saudi Arabia, providing a framework that can be adapted to similar EFL contexts. While the practical recommendations are clear, discuss potential challenges or limitations in implementing these strategies and if they are generalizable beyond the context of KFU.

Despite the promising results, the study encountered several limitations. One challenge was linguistic barriers, as some students have struggled with the demands of critical writing, which have affected their ability to fully engage with the tasks. Another limitation was the sample size; while the study included 80 students, larger-scale studies are necessary to generalize the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the 16-week intervention period may have restricted the ability to observe the long-term effects of critical thinking development. Future research should address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies, including larger and more diverse samples, and exploring the lasting impacts of critical thinking interventions.

In conclusion, fostering critical thinking through English writing assignments not only equips students with essential academic skills but also prepares them to navigate complex real-world challenges. By adopting the strategies outlined in this study, KFU and other institutions can empower students to become reflective, analytical, and globally competent thinkers, aligning their educational practices with 21st-century learning goals.

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Authors' contributions

The author (Jassim) was solely responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study. Additionally, the author drafted and revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and is accountable for all aspects of the work.

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No additional data are available.

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