



INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS INTO EFL LESSONS FOR GRADES 5–9 THROUGH THE “GUESS WHAT!” COURSEBOOKS

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ABSTRACT

The development of critical thinking is increasingly recognised as an essential goal of modern education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. However, in many lower secondary classrooms, especially in grades 5–9, critical thinking skills are not systematically integrated into everyday lessons and often remain secondary to language accuracy and basic comprehension. Although widely used EFL coursebooks contain tasks with cognitive potential, these opportunities are not always fully realised in classroom practice.

This study aims to explore how critical thinking skills can be integrated into EFL lessons for grades 5–9 through the pedagogical use of the “Guess What!” coursebooks. The study adopts a qualitative, framework-based approach grounded in coursebook content analysis and pedagogical reasoning. The analysis focuses on aligning recurring lesson stages—pre-task, while-task, and post-task—with targeted cognitive processes such as predicting, analysing, inferring, evaluating, and justifying ideas.

The findings suggest that critical thinking can be developed systematically by organising existing coursebook tasks through purposeful lesson staging and teacher scaffolding. The proposed framework ensures developmental progression across grades 5–9 and demonstrates how higher-order thinking can be embedded into regular EFL lessons without the need for additional materials. The study offers practical implications for EFL teachers working in local educational contexts and contributes to more effective coursebook-based instruction.

Critical thinking is widely recognised as one of the core competencies required for learners in the twenty-first century, particularly in educational systems that aim to prepare students for complex academic and social environments. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, critical thinking plays an important role in enabling learners to

interpret information, evaluate ideas, and express reasoned opinions rather than merely reproducing language forms. Developing such skills alongside language competence is increasingly emphasised in contemporary educational discourse (Facione, 2015).

Despite this growing emphasis, critical thinking is often insufficiently addressed in everyday EFL classroom practice, especially at the lower secondary level. In grades 5–9, instruction frequently prioritises vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and text comprehension, while cognitive engagement remains limited. As a result, learners may successfully complete language tasks without being encouraged to analyse content, make inferences, or justify their responses. This creates a gap between the intended educational goals and actual classroom practices.

The issue is particularly significant during the transitional stage of grades 5–9, when learners gradually move from concrete thinking towards more abstract reasoning. At this stage, students are cognitively capable of engaging in higher-order thinking, yet classroom activities do not always reflect this potential. Addressing critical thinking in this age group therefore requires purposeful instructional approaches that integrate cognitive development into routine EFL lessons rather than treating it as an additional or optional component.

In response to the challenges identified in lower secondary EFL instruction, this study aims to explore practical ways of integrating critical thinking skills into English lessons for learners in grades 5–9. Rather than introducing new materials or separate thinking skills courses, the focus is placed on maximising the pedagogical potential of existing instructional resources that are already used in everyday classroom practice.

For this purpose, the “Guess What!” coursebooks were selected as the primary instructional material. As globally used EFL coursebooks, they are widely implemented in local school contexts and provide a variety of texts, visuals, and communicative tasks suitable for learners at different developmental stages. While these materials include activities that can stimulate prediction, interpretation, and personal response, such cognitive opportunities are not always explicitly highlighted or systematically developed. Previous research suggests that the effectiveness of coursebooks largely depends on how their tasks are pedagogically organised and mediated by teachers (Tomlinson, 2012).

By focusing on the “Guess What!” series, the study seeks to demonstrate how commonly used coursebook tasks can be pedagogically adapted to support critical thinking development across grades 5–9. This approach allows critical thinking to be embedded into regular EFL lessons in a realistic and context-sensitive manner, making it particularly relevant for school settings where teachers rely heavily on prescribed materials.

The study adopts a qualitative, framework-based approach grounded in coursebook content analysis and pedagogical reasoning. Instead of measuring learners’ achievement quantitatively, the focus is placed on examining how critical thinking can be embedded into routine EFL lessons through instructional design. This approach makes it possible to analyse existing tasks from a cognitive perspective and to identify ways in which they can be enhanced through purposeful teacher mediation.

The central idea of the study is that critical thinking development can be systematically supported by aligning recurring EFL lesson stages with specific cognitive processes. In this framework, pre-task, while-task, and post-task stages are not viewed merely as organisational

steps, but as opportunities to foster progressively higher levels of thinking. For example, pre-task activities can support prediction and initial inference, while-task activities can encourage analysis and interpretation, and post-task stages can promote evaluation and justification of ideas. Such alignment reflects widely accepted views on the gradual progression from lower- to higher-order thinking processes in education (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Teacher scaffolding plays a key role within this approach. Through targeted questioning, guided discussion, and structured interaction, teachers can transform routine coursebook activities into opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement. By maintaining a consistent lesson structure while gradually increasing cognitive demands across grades 5–9, the proposed framework aims to ensure continuity and developmental appropriateness in critical thinking instruction.

The analysis of the “Guess What!” coursebooks across grades 5–9 indicates that opportunities for developing critical thinking are present in most units, but they tend to appear in an implicit and unsystematic manner. Tasks often invite learners to observe visuals, respond to texts, or share personal opinions; however, without clear pedagogical guidance, these activities may remain at a surface level of cognitive engagement. The proposed framework addresses this issue by organising existing tasks into a coherent structure that explicitly targets critical thinking skills at each lesson stage.

The findings suggest that when lesson stages are purposefully linked to specific cognitive processes and supported through teacher scaffolding, coursebook-based activities can effectively promote higher-order thinking. Moreover, the framework ensures a gradual increase in cognitive demands across grades 5–9, allowing learners to move from simple prediction and inference towards more complex analysis and justification. In this way, critical thinking development becomes a continuous and integral part of EFL instruction rather than an isolated instructional goal.

The proposed framework offers practical value for EFL teachers by demonstrating how critical thinking can be integrated into everyday lessons through the effective use of existing coursebooks. By providing clear guidance on lesson staging and teacher scaffolding, the approach supports more purposeful classroom interaction and encourages learners to engage with content at a deeper cognitive level. This is particularly important in educational contexts where teachers work with large classes and mixed-ability learners and rely heavily on prescribed materials (Richards, 2015).

Overall, the study suggests that critical thinking does not need to be taught as a separate component of EFL instruction. Instead, it can be embedded systematically into regular coursebook-based lessons in a developmentally appropriate manner. By aligning cognitive goals with familiar instructional practices, the framework contributes to more meaningful language learning and supports the development of learners’ thinking skills alongside their linguistic competence.

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