



THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC READING IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Critical thinking is widely recognized as an essential skill for college students. Academic reading is an important means of fostering critical thinking because it engages learners in higher-order cognitive processes, such as analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection. However, existing research on the relationship between academic reading and critical thinking is fragmented across different educational contexts. Therefore, this study aims to systematically review the empirical evidence on the role of academic reading in developing critical thinking skills among university students. Using the PRISMA framework, we identified, screened, and analyzed relevant studies published between 2020 and 2026 based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings suggest that academic reading substantially contributes to critical thinking development by enhancing students' analytical reasoning, evaluative judgment, interpretive ability, and reflective thinking. Structured instructional strategies, such as critical annotation, guided questioning, comparative text analysis, reflective writing, and collaborative discussion, were particularly effective in promoting critical engagement with academic texts. The review also reveals that contextual factors, such as reading motivation, language proficiency, digital literacy, instructional design, and access to academic resources, influence the effectiveness of academic reading practices. Despite the demonstrated benefits of academic reading, several challenges remain, including teacher centered instructional approaches, limited critical reading support, and the impact of fragmented digital reading habits. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of integrating intentional academic reading strategies into higher education curricula to bolster students' critical thinking abilities and foster deeper intellectual engagement.

Keywords: *Academic reading; critical thinking skills; university students; higher education; systematic literature review*

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is an essential skill for the 21st-century workforce, and it is crucial for academic institutions to adopt a critical pedagogy approach to equip students with the skills necessary for the labor market, enabling graduates to make well-informed decisions while contributing significantly to society (Huang et al., 2024a).

Academic reading is widely acknowledged as one of the most important means of fostering critical thinking among university students. Unlike passive forms of reading, academic reading demands active and deep engagement with scholarly texts. It requires learners to move beyond mere comprehension to participate in higher-order cognitive processes, including analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection. Through academic reading, students encounter diverse perspectives, complex arguments, and evidence-based

claims that challenge their existing assumptions and compel them to think more rigorously. This intellectual engagement not only enhances their understanding of subject matter but also cultivates the cognitive habits essential for critical thought. Consequently, academic reading serves as a powerful pedagogical tool for developing the analytical and evaluative capacities that define critical thinking (Huang et al., 2024a).

Despite the widely accepted theoretical link between academic reading and critical thinking, the empirical evidence supporting this relationship remains fragmented across different educational contexts, disciplines, and methodological approaches. Existing studies have examined various aspects of this relationship, ranging from specific reading interventions to broader instructional strategies, yet these investigations are often conducted in isolation without a cohesive framework for synthesis. Some research focuses on collaborative reading practices, while others explore the impact of digital versus print reading, or the role of particular instructional techniques such as guided questioning or reflective writing. This fragmentation makes it difficult for educators and researchers to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how academic reading can be most effectively leveraged to enhance critical thinking on a broader scale. A systematic synthesis of the available evidence is therefore necessary to consolidate knowledge, identify effective practices, and illuminate the mechanisms that underpin the reading-critical thinking connection (Afandi et al., 2025).

The challenges in fostering critical thinking through academic reading are further compounded by several contextual factors. Students' reading motivation, language proficiency, digital literacy, and access to academic resources can significantly influence their engagement with academic texts. Moreover, instructional design and pedagogical approaches play a crucial role in determining whether reading activities promote surface-level comprehension or deep critical engagement. Teacher centered instructional approaches, limited critical reading support, and the pervasive influence of fragmented digital reading habits pose additional obstacles to effective critical thinking development. These challenges underscore the need for intentional, evidence-based strategies that can be integrated into higher education curricula to maximize the benefits of academic reading (Yang et al., 2025b).

the importance of this topic and the fragmented nature of existing research, this study aims to systematically review the empirical evidence on the role of academic reading in developing critical thinking skills among university students. Adhering to the rigorous PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, this review identifies, screens, and analyzes relevant studies published between 2020 and 2026. The review seeks to address several key questions: How does academic reading contribute to critical thinking development? What instructional strategies are most effective in promoting critical engagement with academic texts? What contextual factors influence the effectiveness of academic reading practices? By synthesizing findings from a diverse body of literature, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on this critical educational relationship (Li et al., 2022; Saidalvi et al., 2022).

The findings of this review are expected to offer valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance critical thinking through academic reading. By identifying effective strategies and highlighting contextual considerations, this study aims to inform the design of reading-intensive courses and pedagogical interventions that foster deeper intellectual engagement. Furthermore, by

revealing gaps in the existing literature, this review identifies directions for future research that can advance our understanding of the reading-critical thinking nexus. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of integrating intentional academic reading strategies into higher education curricula to bolster students' critical thinking abilities and prepare them for the intellectual demands of academic and professional life (Castillo-Martínez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021; Cita, Hartiningsih, & Widodo, 2026).

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical evidence regarding the role of academic reading in developing critical thinking skills among university students. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework to ensure methodological transparency, rigor, and replicability throughout the review process. The PRISMA framework consists of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. This structured approach allows for systematic selection and evaluation of relevant studies while minimizing researcher bias.

The systematic review approach was selected because it enables comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence across diverse educational contexts and instructional designs. It also facilitates the identification of research trends, effective pedagogical strategies, and contextual factors influencing the relationship between academic reading and critical thinking development.

Search Strategy

A systematic database search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar as a supplementary source to ensure broader coverage of relevant literature.

The search process used Boolean operators and combinations of the following keywords:

- ("academic reading" OR "critical reading" OR "scholarly reading")
- AND ("critical thinking" OR "critical thinking skills")
- AND ("university students" OR "higher education students" OR "undergraduate students")

To ensure relevance to contemporary higher education practices, the search was limited to studies published between 2020 and 2026. This timeframe was selected to capture recent developments in academic reading instruction and critical thinking research within higher education contexts.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure alignment with the objectives of this review, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established based on systematic review standards.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods)	Conceptual papers, editorials, book reviews, conference abstracts
Studies examining academic reading and its relationship to critical thinking development	Studies focusing solely on general reading comprehension without critical thinking dimensions
Research involving university or higher education students	Studies conducted in primary or secondary education contexts
Articles published between 2020 and 2026	Articles published before 2020
Articles written in English	Non-English publications
Studies with sufficient methodological detail	Studies lacking clear research procedures

These criteria were applied consistently throughout the screening and eligibility phases to ensure methodological rigor and thematic relevance.

Study Selection Procedure

The study selection process followed the four stages of the PRISMA framework:

Identification: All records retrieved from database searches were exported to reference management software, and duplicate entries were removed.

Screening: Titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine their relevance to academic reading and critical thinking development among university students.

Eligibility: Full-text articles were assessed against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion: Studies that met all eligibility requirements were included for final synthesis and analysis.

A PRISMA flow diagram was used to visually present the number of studies identified, screened, excluded, and included at each stage of the review process (He & AlSaqqaf, 2024a).

Data Extraction

A structured data extraction form was developed to ensure consistency in recording key study characteristics. The extracted data included:

- Author(s) and publication year
- Country and educational context
- Participant characteristics
- Research design and methodology
- Academic reading intervention or instructional strategy
- Critical thinking dimensions assessed
- Key findings
- Research limitations

This systematic extraction enabled comparison across studies and supported thematic synthesis.

Data Analysis

selected studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis to systematically identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns related to the role of academic reading in developing critical thinking skills among university students. This analytical approach was

considered appropriate because it enables the integration of findings from diverse empirical studies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research, while preserving conceptual depth and analytical coherence (H. P. Ilyas & Istaryatiningtias, 2025).

The analysis began with a close reading of all included studies to gain familiarity with their research objectives, methodological designs, and principal findings. Relevant findings were then coded inductively based on their relation to academic reading practices, instructional strategies, cognitive outcomes, and contextual factors influencing critical thinking development. The coding process allowed for the identification of both explicit and latent concepts emerging across the selected studies (Huang et al., 2024b).

Subsequently, codes sharing conceptual similarities were grouped into broader analytical categories. These categories were continuously compared and refined through an iterative process to ensure internal consistency and analytical relevance. Through this process, several overarching themes were generated, including the contribution of academic reading to higher-order cognitive development, the effectiveness of structured reading strategies, the influence of motivational and contextual variables, and pedagogical challenges associated with critical reading instruction (Nurhamidah et al., 2025).

Thematic interpretation was conducted comparatively across studies to identify dominant trends, converging findings, and inconsistencies within the existing literature. Particular attention was given to examining how different instructional approaches, educational settings, and learner characteristics shaped the effectiveness of academic reading in fostering critical thinking. This comparative synthesis enabled the identification of contextual variations and provided a broader understanding of the pedagogical mechanisms underlying critical thinking development through academic reading (Setiawan et al., 2025).

Finally, the synthesized findings were critically examined to identify methodological limitations and gaps within the current body of literature. This analytical stage informed the discussion of unresolved issues and directions for future research (Norman, 2023a). Through this systematic thematic analysis, the review provides a comprehensive synthesis of empirical evidence regarding the role of academic reading as a pedagogical tool for cultivating critical thinking skills in higher education contexts (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025a).

Quality Appraisal

To enhance the methodological rigor and credibility of this systematic review, all included studies underwent a structured quality appraisal process. Quality assessment is a critical component of systematic literature reviews, as it ensures that the synthesis is grounded in methodologically sound and analytically robust evidence. Since the selected studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, the appraisal process focused on evaluating methodological transparency and analytical consistency rather than imposing rigid design-specific criteria (Pujiastuti et al., 2025a).

The quality appraisal was adapted from established systematic review guidelines and was conducted using four core evaluative dimensions: clarity of research design, transparency of data collection procedures, appropriateness of analytical methods, and coherence between reported findings and conclusions. These dimensions were selected

because they reflect essential indicators of methodological quality across varied empirical traditions (Mhaibes Abdulrazzaq et al., 2024).

Each study was critically examined to determine whether it explicitly described its research objectives, participant characteristics, data collection instruments, analytical procedures, and interpretative framework. Particular attention was given to the extent to which the methodological procedures were sufficiently detailed to allow critical evaluation and whether the conclusions presented were adequately supported by empirical evidence (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025a).

Studies demonstrating substantial methodological limitations, including insufficient procedural transparency, weak analytical justification, or inconsistencies between findings and conclusions, were excluded from the final synthesis. This appraisal process ensured that only studies meeting acceptable standards of academic rigor contributed to the thematic analysis. The implementation of this quality assessment strengthened the trustworthiness of the review findings by minimizing the influence of weak or poorly reported studies and enhancing the overall reliability of the synthesized evidence regarding the role of academic reading in fostering critical thinking skills among university students (Gazela & Mukminin, 2026a).

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this systematic literature review, several methodological procedures were carefully implemented throughout the review process. Maintaining rigor is particularly important in systematic reviews examining educational constructs such as academic reading and critical thinking, as the included studies often vary in research design, instructional context, and analytical approaches. Therefore, this review adopted systematic and transparent procedures to ensure that the synthesis accurately reflects the current empirical evidence (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2024; Paige et al., 2024a).

1. the review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 framework, which provided clear procedural guidance for identifying, screening, selecting, and documenting relevant studies. Adherence to this framework enhanced procedural transparency and minimized potential selection bias.
2. predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were consistently applied to ensure that only studies directly relevant to academic reading and critical thinking development among university students were included. This ensured conceptual alignment between the selected studies and the objectives of the review.
3. trustworthiness in data interpretation was strengthened through the systematic application of thematic synthesis. The coding and categorization processes were conducted iteratively to allow continuous comparison across studies and refinement of emerging themes. This iterative analytical process enhanced interpretative consistency and reduced the possibility of selective analysis.
4. methodological credibility was reinforced through structured quality appraisal procedures. Each included study was critically assessed for methodological transparency, analytical appropriateness, and evidential coherence to ensure that the synthesized findings were derived from academically rigorous research.
5. transparency was maintained through explicit documentation of the search strategy, selection procedures, data extraction process, analytical framework, and quality appraisal criteria. This detailed reporting enhances the replicability of the review and

provides a clear basis for future studies examining the relationship between academic reading and critical thinking in higher education contexts.

Through these procedures, this review ensures methodological rigor and provides a trustworthy synthesis of empirical evidence regarding the role of academic reading in fostering critical thinking skills among university students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The systematic literature search identified a substantial number of potentially relevant studies from selected academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. After duplicate records were removed, the remaining articles underwent title and abstract screening based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Subsequently, full-text screening was conducted to ensure that each selected study directly addressed the relationship between academic reading and the development of critical thinking skills among university students (Yang et al., 2025a).

The final selected studies were analyzed through thematic synthesis to identify recurring conceptual patterns and pedagogical implications. The synthesis revealed that academic reading occupies a central position in higher education as a pedagogical mechanism capable of stimulating analytical reasoning, evaluative judgment, interpretive thinking, and reflective engagement. Across the reviewed literature, the findings consistently indicate that academic reading contributes significantly to students' higher-order cognitive development when supported by structured instructional strategies and conducive learning environments (Rinalgi & Widiastuty, n.d.).

The thematic analysis generated four dominant findings. First, academic reading serves as an essential catalyst for the development of critical thinking skills. Second, structured reading strategies significantly enhance students' critical engagement with academic texts. Third, contextual and motivational variables strongly influence the effectiveness of academic reading practices. Fourth, several instructional and institutional challenges continue to limit the successful integration of critical reading instruction in higher education contexts (Ezquerro et al., 2024).

These findings collectively suggest that the relationship between academic reading and critical thinking is both dynamic and multidimensional, requiring intentional pedagogical support to achieve meaningful educational outcomes (Budianto et al., 2022a).

Academic Reading as a Catalyst for Critical Thinking Development

A major finding of this review is the consistent recognition of academic reading as a significant catalyst for critical thinking development among university students (Afandi et al., 2025). Academic reading differs fundamentally from general reading activities because it requires students to actively engage with scholarly arguments, interpret conceptual frameworks, evaluate supporting evidence, and formulate reasoned responses to complex issues. This active engagement transforms reading from a passive act of information reception into a cognitively demanding process of analytical inquiry.

The reviewed studies indicate that sustained engagement in academic reading tasks is associated with stronger analytical reasoning abilities, including increased capacity to

identify argumentative structures, detect logical inconsistencies, evaluate the credibility of evidence, and synthesize diverse scholarly perspectives (P. Ilyas, 2025).

Several studies further reported measurable gains in students' interpretive and evaluative skills following sustained exposure to academic reading tasks. These gains were particularly evident in instructional settings where students were required to critically respond to texts through analytical essays, oral discussions, or written reflections. Another important pattern observed in the literature is the role of academic reading in fostering metacognitive awareness (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025b).

As students engage with complex texts, they are encouraged to monitor their comprehension, question assumptions, reconsider interpretations, and evaluate their reasoning processes. This metacognitive dimension is crucial because critical thinking is not solely concerned with analytical performance but also with reflective self-regulation. The reviewed studies suggest that academic reading contributes to the development of this self-regulatory capacity by encouraging students to reflect on how they process information and construct meaning (Castillo-Martínez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021; Gabriela Martínez Mora et al., n.d.).

Furthermore, the relationship between academic reading and critical thinking appears reciprocal (Paige et al., 2024b). Students who possess stronger critical thinking skills tend to engage more deeply with academic texts, while regular engagement with academic reading further strengthens their analytical capabilities. This reciprocal relationship supports the view that academic reading is both a developmental pathway and an outcome of critical intellectual engagement.

The Effectiveness of Structured Reading Strategies

The second major finding concerns the effectiveness of structured instructional strategies in maximizing the impact of academic reading on critical thinking development. The literature consistently emphasizes that simply assigning academic texts is insufficient to promote higher-order cognitive engagement. Research indicates a decline in students' ability to critically extract meaning from academic texts (Paige et al., 2024b).

To address this limitation, many reviewed studies implemented structured reading strategies designed to scaffold students' critical interaction with texts. One of the most frequently reported strategies was guided annotation. Through annotation, students can mark essential information or integrate text markers with reflective notes to support engagement (Budianto et al., 2022b).

This process encourages deliberate engagement and promotes closer textual analysis. Comparative text analysis was another commonly reported strategy. By examining multiple scholarly texts addressing related issues, students develop the ability to identify conceptual contrasts, methodological differences, and competing interpretations (Setiawan et al., 2025).

This comparative process strengthens evaluative judgment and supports synthesis of complex ideas. Reflective journals have been associated with improvements in reflective writing, although their superiority over other methods remains inconclusive (Mekuria et al., 2024a).

This process consolidates analytical engagement and promotes metacognitive reflection. Collaborative discussion also emerged as an important pedagogical tool. Interactive discussion environments expose students to alternative interpretations, encourage argument defense, and stimulate critical reflection (Suwandi, 2025).

The reviewed studies indicate that collaborative meaning-making significantly enhances students' capacity for evaluative reasoning. Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that intentional instructional scaffolding is essential for transforming academic reading into a productive vehicle for critical thinking development (He & AlSaqqaf, 2024a).

Contextual and Motivational Influences

The third major finding concerns the influence of contextual and motivational variables on the effectiveness of academic reading practices. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that the impact of academic reading is not uniform across educational contexts. Rather, its effectiveness is shaped by a complex interaction of individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Among individual-level variables, language proficiency emerged as one of the most significant. In EFL contexts, students often face substantial linguistic challenges when engaging with academic texts. Complex vocabulary, dense conceptual structures, and unfamiliar rhetorical conventions frequently create cognitive barriers. As a result, substantial mental effort is devoted to linguistic decoding, leaving fewer cognitive resources available for analytical interpretation and evaluative reasoning (Mekuria et al., 2024b).

Reading habits also significantly influence outcomes. Students with established reading routines demonstrated stronger engagement with academic texts and greater persistence when encountering conceptual difficulty. By contrast, students with limited reading experience often exhibited avoidance behaviors and superficial processing strategies. Motivation was another critical factor identified across the reviewed studies. Intrinsic motivation appears particularly important for sustaining engagement with demanding academic texts. Students who perceive reading as intellectually meaningful are more likely to invest cognitive effort in analysis and reflection (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025b).

Institutional support further shapes effectiveness. Access to appropriate academic resources, supportive classroom environments, and opportunities for guided discussion all enhance students' critical reading experiences. Conversely, limited access to relevant materials and inadequate instructional support constrain learning outcomes. These findings demonstrate that successful academic reading interventions require sensitivity to contextual realities. Instructional design must account for students' linguistic backgrounds, motivational orientations, and institutional learning conditions (Zami et al., 2025).

Challenges in Implementing Critical Reading Instruction

Despite strong evidence supporting the pedagogical value of academic reading, the reviewed literature identifies several persistent implementation challenges. A major challenge is the continued dominance of teacher-centered pedagogical models. In many higher education contexts, reading instruction remains heavily focused on content transmission and factual comprehension (Afandi et al., 2025).

Such approaches often provide limited opportunities for questioning, critique, and interpretive exploration. As a result, students may develop passive reading habits that inhibit critical engagement. Another significant challenge concerns digital reading practices. Although digital platforms have greatly expanded access to academic resources, several studies reported that digital reading environments often encourage fragmented attention and reduced concentration (Zami et al., 2025).

Students frequently engage in rapid scanning rather than sustained analytical reading. This tendency weakens opportunities for deeper cognitive processing. Instructor preparedness also presents a substantial barrier. Several studies noted that many instructors lack sufficient pedagogical training in critical reading instruction. Without explicit strategies for scaffolding analytical engagement, reading tasks are often assigned without meaningful guidance (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025b). Assessment practices constitute an additional challenge. When assessment systems prioritize memorization and factual recall, students have limited incentive to engage critically with academic texts (Gabriela Martínez Mora et al., n.d.).

This misalignment between instructional goals and evaluative practices undermines the development of higher-order thinking. The reviewed studies collectively suggest that addressing these challenges requires systemic pedagogical reform, curriculum redesign, and professional development initiatives (Yang et al., 2025b).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review provide substantial evidence that academic reading plays a critical role in developing critical thinking skills among university students. Across diverse higher education contexts, the reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that meaningful engagement with academic texts contributes to the enhancement of analytical reasoning, evaluative judgment, reflective interpretation, and metacognitive awareness. These findings reinforce the view that academic reading is not merely a receptive linguistic activity, but rather an intellectually demanding process that requires students to actively construct meaning, interrogate assumptions, and evaluate competing arguments (Paige et al., 2024b).

This finding aligns strongly with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through cognitive engagement rather than passively received from external sources. Within this perspective, academic reading serves as an important medium through which students interact critically with scholarly discourse. As students encounter diverse perspectives, methodological approaches, and argumentative structures, they are required to interpret information, assess validity, and formulate reasoned responses. Such processes are central to critical thinking development because they involve higher-order cognitive operations that extend beyond surface-level comprehension (He & AlSaqqaf, 2024b).

The review further indicates that academic reading contributes to critical thinking development by encouraging reflective intellectual habits. Repeated engagement with academic texts appears to cultivate students' capacity for self-questioning, evidence evaluation, and interpretive reflection. This is particularly significant because critical thinking involves not only analytical performance but also reflective self-regulation. Students who critically engage with texts become more aware of their reasoning processes, more capable of identifying conceptual inconsistencies, and more inclined to reconsider assumptions in light of new evidence.

However, the findings also demonstrate that the effectiveness of academic reading is not automatic. Exposure to academic texts alone does not necessarily result in critical thinking development. Rather, the pedagogical value of academic reading depends significantly on how reading activities are structured and facilitated within instructional settings.

The consistent effectiveness of strategies such as guided annotation, critical questioning, comparative text analysis, reflective writing, and collaborative discussion highlights the importance of instructional scaffolding. These strategies function as cognitive supports that guide students toward deeper engagement with textual content. They encourage students to move beyond extracting information toward evaluating arguments, synthesizing perspectives, and constructing independent interpretations (Setiawan et al., 2025).

This finding has important pedagogical implications for higher education. Many university reading practices continue to prioritize content coverage and factual comprehension, often emphasizing information retention over analytical engagement. Such approaches may limit opportunities for students to develop the evaluative and interpretive capacities associated with critical thinking (Pujiastuti et al., 2025b).

The findings of this review suggest that higher education institutions should reconsider how academic reading is positioned within instructional practice. Reading should not be treated solely as a preparatory task for content acquisition but rather as an intentional pedagogical process designed to stimulate analytical inquiry (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2024).

The review also highlights the significant influence of contextual variables. Language proficiency emerged as a particularly important factor, especially within English as a Foreign Language contexts. Students encountering linguistic complexity in academic texts often devote substantial cognitive resources to decoding vocabulary and syntactic structures. This reduces the cognitive capacity available for higher-order interpretation and evaluative analysis (He & AlSaqqaf, 2024b).

This observation suggests that in EFL settings, effective academic reading instruction must integrate linguistic scaffolding alongside critical reading strategies. Without sufficient language support, students may struggle to progress from comprehension toward critical engagement (Gazela & Mukminin, 2026b; H. P. Ilyas & Istaryatiningtias, 2025).

Motivational factors likewise play a decisive role. The reviewed studies indicate that students who demonstrate intrinsic motivation toward reading are more likely to engage persistently with challenging texts and invest greater cognitive effort in interpretation and evaluation (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025b).

This finding suggests that fostering critical thinking through academic reading requires not only instructional design but also efforts to cultivate positive reading dispositions. Instructors may need to design reading activities that emphasize relevance, intellectual curiosity, and authentic inquiry to enhance student motivation. Institutional conditions also shape the effectiveness of academic reading interventions.

Access to relevant academic materials, supportive classroom cultures, and opportunities for interactive discussion significantly influence learning outcomes. Where institutional support is limited, even well-designed instructional interventions may struggle to achieve meaningful results (Suwandi, 2025).

This underscores the importance of viewing critical reading development as not merely an individual cognitive issue but as a broader pedagogical and institutional concern. A particularly important issue emerging from this review concerns the tension between traditional instructional practices and the demands of higher-order learning. The persistence of teacher centered pedagogical models remains a major obstacle.

When reading activities are framed primarily as exercises in information retrieval, students have limited opportunities to question, critique, and interpret texts independently.

This instructional orientation is fundamentally inconsistent with the development of critical thinking, which requires intellectual autonomy and analytical exploration. The increasing prevalence of digital reading environments presents another important dimension for discussion. While digital technologies have expanded access to scholarly resources, the reviewed studies suggest that digital reading often encourages fragmented attention and superficial processing. Students frequently engage in rapid scanning rather than sustained analytical reading, potentially limiting opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement (Cita, Hartiningsih, Widodo, et al., 2026).

This finding does not suggest that digital reading is inherently detrimental. Rather, it indicates the need for pedagogical strategies that promote deliberate, reflective engagement within digital contexts. The review also reveals a notable methodological gap in the current literature. Most existing studies examine short-term interventions, typically conducted within a single semester or instructional unit. Although these studies provide valuable evidence regarding immediate learning outcomes, they offer limited insight into the long-term developmental impact of academic reading on critical thinking. Critical thinking is a complex cognitive disposition that likely develops cumulatively over extended periods of academic engagement (P. Ilyas, 2025).

Therefore, future research should prioritize longitudinal designs capable of examining how sustained academic reading practices contribute to enduring intellectual development. Another gap concerns contextual diversity. A considerable proportion of the reviewed studies were conducted in relatively specific educational settings, often within particular disciplinary or regional contexts (Norman, 2023b).

Further research is needed to examine how academic reading functions across diverse institutional environments, disciplinary traditions, and linguistic backgrounds. Such research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the contextual mechanisms shaping critical thinking development. Overall, the discussion confirms that academic reading represents a powerful pedagogical pathway for cultivating critical thinking skills among university students. However, its effectiveness depends on intentional instructional design, contextual responsiveness, institutional support, and sustained pedagogical commitment (Suwandi, 2025).

The findings suggest that higher education institutions seeking to strengthen students' critical thinking capacities should integrate structured academic reading practices more explicitly into curriculum design and instructional frameworks. By positioning academic reading as an active process of inquiry, reflection, and evaluation, educators can create learning environments that support deeper intellectual engagement and more meaningful cognitive development (Rinalgi & Widiastuty, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has synthesized empirical evidence on the role of academic reading in developing critical thinking skills among university students. The findings conclusively demonstrate that academic reading substantially contributes to the enhancement of students' analytical reasoning, evaluative judgment, interpretive ability, and reflective thinking. When students engage meaningfully with academic texts through structured instructional strategies, they develop the intellectual habits necessary for critical engagement with complex scholarly discourse.

The review has established that structured instructional strategies including critical annotation, guided questioning, comparative text analysis, reflective writing, and collaborative discussion are particularly effective in promoting critical engagement with academic texts. These strategies function as cognitive scaffolds that guide students beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper analytical and evaluative processing. The effectiveness of these approaches underscores the importance of intentional instructional design in maximizing the pedagogical value of academic reading.

The review has also identified several contextual factors that significantly influence the effectiveness of academic reading practices. Reading motivation, language proficiency, digital literacy, instructional design, and access to academic resources all play crucial roles in determining whether academic reading interventions successfully promote critical thinking development. This finding highlights the need for context-sensitive pedagogical approaches that account for students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, motivational orientations, and institutional learning conditions.

Despite the demonstrated benefits of academic reading, several persistent challenges continue to limit its effectiveness in higher education. Teacher-centered instructional approaches, limited critical reading support, fragmented digital reading habits, and misaligned assessment practices remain significant obstacles that require systemic attention. Addressing these challenges necessitates pedagogical reform, intentional curriculum design, and sustained professional development initiatives for educators.

The review also reveals notable gaps in the existing literature that warrant future investigation. Most studies focus on short-term interventions conducted within specific educational contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that examine the sustained impact of academic reading on critical thinking development over extended periods. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse institutional, disciplinary, and linguistic contexts are needed to better understand the contextual mechanisms that shape the effectiveness of academic reading practices.

In conclusion, this review affirms that academic reading is an indispensable pedagogical tool for developing critical thinking skills among university students. However, realizing its full potential requires intentional instructional design, contextual sensitivity, institutional commitment, and ongoing pedagogical innovation. Higher education institutions should integrate intentional academic reading strategies into curricula to bolster students' critical thinking abilities and foster deeper intellectual engagement, thereby preparing graduates for the cognitive demands of professional and civic life in an increasingly complex world.

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