



SYSTEMATIC INTEGRATION OF CRITICAL THINKING IN GRADES 5–9 EFL CLASSROOMS: A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE “GUESS WHAT!” COURSEBOOKS

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Abstract

This article explores how critical thinking skills can be systematically integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons for learners in grades 5–9 through the pedagogical use of coursebooks. Recognising the growing importance of critical thinking in language education, the study addresses the challenge of embedding higher-order thinking into everyday classroom practice, particularly in lower secondary education. Adopting a qualitative, framework-development design, the study analyses the “Guess What!” coursebook series to identify opportunities for critical thinking and examines how these can be pedagogically organised through lesson staging and teacher scaffolding. The findings reveal that while the coursebooks contain implicit cognitive potential, critical thinking remains fragmented without a structured instructional approach. In response, the article proposes a pedagogical framework that aligns recurring lesson stages with progressively complex critical thinking skills across grades 5–9. The framework emphasises developmental progression, teacher mediation, and the systematic use of existing tasks. The study contributes a practical, material-based model that supports the integration of critical thinking into EFL instruction and offers implications for classroom practice and teacher education in comparable educational contexts.

Keywords: Critical thinking; EFL instruction; coursebook-based pedagogy; Guess What!; lower secondary education; pedagogical framework.



Introduction

Critical thinking has increasingly been recognised as a core competence for learners in the twenty-first century, particularly within the context of formal education systems that aim to prepare students for complex social, academic, and professional environments. Beyond the ability to recall information or apply memorised rules, learners are expected to analyse information critically, evaluate alternative viewpoints, justify their opinions with evidence, and make reasoned decisions. These cognitive abilities are not developed automatically; rather, they require systematic pedagogical support and intentional integration into everyday classroom practices. As a result, critical thinking has become a central objective of contemporary educational reforms and international curriculum frameworks, including those related to foreign language education.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, the development of critical thinking presents both significant opportunities and persistent challenges. On the one hand, language learning naturally involves meaning construction, interpretation, and communication, all of which can support higher-order thinking. On the other hand, EFL instruction in many contexts continues to prioritise linguistic accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and examination-oriented outcomes, often leaving limited space for deeper cognitive engagement. This tension is particularly visible in lower secondary education, where learners are expected to progress linguistically while simultaneously developing more advanced thinking skills. Without explicit instructional support, critical thinking may remain an implicit expectation rather than an attainable learning outcome.

The challenge becomes more pronounced in the transitional stage represented by grades 5 to 9. During this period, learners experience substantial cognitive, emotional, and academic development. They move from concrete forms of thinking towards more abstract reasoning, while also facing increased academic demands across subjects. In EFL classrooms, this transition often coincides with more complex texts, tasks, and communicative expectations. However, instructional practices do not always evolve accordingly, resulting in a mismatch between learners' developmental potential and the cognitive level of classroom activities. Addressing critical thinking in this age range therefore requires



approaches that are both developmentally appropriate and pedagogically structured.

From this perspective, the integration of critical thinking into EFL instruction for grades 5–9 should not be treated as an additional or optional component, but as an essential element of effective language education. Rather than relying solely on teachers' individual intuition or sporadic higher-order questions, critical thinking needs to be embedded systematically within lesson design, classroom interaction, and learning materials. Establishing such integration is particularly important in contexts where teachers work with large classes, mixed-ability learners, and limited instructional time, conditions that are common in many EFL settings worldwide.

Within this context, instructional materials, particularly coursebooks, play a crucial role in shaping both the content and the cognitive orientation of EFL lessons. In many educational settings, coursebooks function not only as sources of linguistic input but also as implicit pedagogical guides that influence lesson structure, classroom interaction, and assessment practices. Teachers frequently rely on coursebooks to determine learning objectives, select activities, and manage time, especially in systems where centrally approved materials are widely implemented. As a result, the extent to which critical thinking is fostered in EFL classrooms is often closely linked to how coursebook tasks are designed and how they are pedagogically exploited.

Research in language education has increasingly highlighted that coursebooks are not neutral tools; rather, they embody particular assumptions about learning, cognition, and classroom roles. While some materials prioritise mechanical practice and controlled language use, others provide opportunities for interpretation, problem-solving, and learner autonomy. However, even when higher-order thinking opportunities are embedded in coursebook activities, they are not always made explicit or systematically developed. Without a clear pedagogical framework, such activities may be reduced to surface-level comprehension tasks, limiting their potential to stimulate deeper cognitive engagement (Tomlinson, 2012).

In EFL classrooms, the relationship between coursebooks and critical thinking is further mediated by the teacher's instructional decisions. Teachers act as key



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agents who interpret, adapt, and implement materials in accordance with learners' needs and contextual constraints. Nevertheless, relying solely on individual teacher expertise can lead to inconsistent practices, particularly in contexts where teachers have limited access to targeted professional development in critical thinking pedagogy. Consequently, the presence of a well-structured coursebook alone does not guarantee the systematic development of critical thinking skills unless it is accompanied by clear pedagogical guidance and intentional instructional design (Richards, 2015).

This issue becomes especially relevant when global coursebooks are implemented in local EFL contexts. Internationally published materials, such as those produced by major educational publishers, are typically designed for broad audiences and diverse educational systems. While this global orientation allows for flexibility and wide applicability, it may also result in a mismatch between the cognitive demands of tasks and the realities of specific classroom contexts. Factors such as class size, learners' proficiency levels, assessment requirements, and cultural expectations regarding classroom interaction can all influence how materials are used in practice. As a result, teachers often face the challenge of bridging the gap between globally designed materials and locally situated learning needs.

In the case of lower secondary EFL education, this gap is particularly evident in relation to critical thinking development. Learners in grades 5–9 are at a stage where they are capable of engaging with more complex ideas, forming opinions, and justifying their reasoning, yet classroom practices frequently remain focused on reproduction of information and language accuracy. When coursebooks do not provide a clear progression of cognitive demands or explicit support for higher-order thinking, opportunities for developing critical thinking may remain fragmented or underutilised. Addressing this challenge requires not only recognising the potential of coursebooks but also rethinking how they can be systematically leveraged to support cognitive development alongside language learning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

From this standpoint, the integration of critical thinking into EFL instruction cannot be separated from the way coursebooks are analysed, adapted, and implemented. Rather than treating critical thinking as an additional skill taught



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independently of instructional materials, it is more productive to view coursebooks as platforms through which critical thinking can be embedded into everyday classroom practice. This perspective shifts the focus from whether coursebooks include critical thinking elements to how these elements are pedagogically organised, scaffolded, and sustained across lessons and grade levels.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of critical thinking in EFL education and the acknowledged pedagogical role of coursebooks, existing research reveals several unresolved issues. A considerable number of studies have explored critical thinking in language learning from a theoretical perspective or examined isolated classroom techniques such as questioning strategies, problem-based tasks, or discussion activities. However, fewer studies have addressed how critical thinking can be systematically integrated into everyday EFL lessons through widely used coursebooks, particularly across multiple grade levels. As a result, teachers are often left with general recommendations rather than concrete, implementable frameworks that align with the materials they are required to use. This gap is especially evident in relation to coursebooks designed for young and lower secondary learners. While some international materials implicitly include activities that may encourage prediction, interpretation, or personal response, these elements are rarely organised into a coherent developmental sequence. Consequently, critical thinking tends to appear sporadically rather than as a consistently cultivated competence. Moreover, existing studies frequently focus on either primary or secondary education in isolation, overlooking the transitional nature of grades 5–9, where learners' cognitive abilities, language proficiency, and academic expectations evolve simultaneously. Addressing this transition requires a framework that ensures continuity and progression in both language learning and thinking skills.

Within this context, the “Guess What!” coursebook series represents a particularly relevant case for investigation. As a globally distributed EFL coursebook used in various educational systems, it is widely implemented in classrooms that aim to balance communicative language teaching with age-appropriate content. The series offers a range of visually rich texts, story-based activities, and communicative tasks that have the potential to support higher-order



thinking. However, these opportunities are not always explicitly framed as critical thinking tasks, nor are they systematically connected across lessons and grade levels. Without a clear pedagogical structure, teachers may focus primarily on surface-level comprehension and language practice, thereby underutilising the cognitive potential of the materials.

At the same time, there is a notable absence of research that examines the “Guess What!” coursebooks specifically from a critical thinking perspective, particularly in relation to learners in grades 5–9. Existing literature tends to discuss global coursebooks in general terms or concentrates on other widely researched series, leaving a gap in empirical and conceptual work related to this material. This absence is significant, given the widespread use of the coursebooks and their relevance to contexts where teachers rely heavily on prescribed materials to guide instruction.

In response to these gaps, the present article aims to propose a structured framework for integrating critical thinking skills into EFL lessons for grades 5–9 using the “Guess What!” coursebooks as a pedagogical foundation. Rather than evaluating the coursebooks themselves, the study focuses on how their existing tasks and lesson components can be pedagogically reorganised and scaffolded to promote critical thinking in a systematic and developmentally appropriate manner. The framework is grounded in qualitative coursebook analysis and informed by classroom-based pedagogical reasoning, ensuring that it remains both theoretically sound and practically applicable.

By articulating clear links between lesson stages, targeted critical thinking skills, and teacher instructional actions, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on critical thinking in EFL education. More specifically, it offers a practical model that supports continuity in critical thinking development across grades 5–9, addressing a key challenge in lower secondary EFL instruction. The proposed framework is intended not only for the context in which the “Guess What!” coursebooks are used, but also as a transferable pedagogical approach that can be adapted to other EFL materials and educational settings with similar instructional demands (Facione, 2015).

The study employed a qualitative, framework-development research design aimed at examining how critical thinking skills can be systematically integrated



into EFL lessons for grades 5–9 through the pedagogical use of coursebooks. This design was selected because the primary objective was not to measure learner outcomes statistically, but to analyse instructional potential, identify patterns of cognitive engagement, and develop a structured pedagogical framework grounded in authentic teaching materials. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex instructional processes and pedagogical reasoning, where the interaction between materials, teachers, and learners plays a central role (Creswell, 2014).

The principal data source for the study was the “Guess What!” coursebook series used across grades 5–9. The analysis focused on recurring lesson components that typically structure EFL instruction, including visual prompts, reading and listening texts, comprehension activities, communicative tasks, and post-task extensions. These components were examined in terms of the cognitive operations they invite from learners, such as predicting, analysing, inferring, evaluating, and justifying ideas. Rather than assessing linguistic difficulty or syllabus coverage, the analysis concentrated on the cognitive demands embedded within tasks and on the extent to which these demands could be pedagogically enhanced through teacher mediation.

A systematic content analysis procedure was applied to selected units from different grade levels. Tasks were first reviewed to identify implicit and explicit opportunities for higher-order thinking. They were then categorised according to the type of cognitive engagement required, drawing on established educational taxonomies that distinguish between lower- and higher-order thinking processes (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This categorisation made it possible to trace patterns in how cognitive demands recur and evolve across grades, as well as to identify areas where critical thinking is insufficiently scaffolded. Importantly, tasks were treated as flexible pedagogical resources rather than fixed instructional units, allowing for consideration of how teacher questioning and interaction can elevate their cognitive level.

In addition to coursebook analysis, the development of the framework was informed by pedagogical observation and reflective teaching practice in lower secondary EFL classrooms. These observations did not involve the collection or reporting of student performance data; instead, they served to contextualise the



material analysis and to ensure that the proposed framework remained feasible under typical classroom conditions, such as limited instructional time, mixed-ability groups, and varying learner participation. Insights from classroom practice were particularly relevant in shaping decisions related to task sequencing, questioning strategies, and the gradual increase of cognitive complexity across grade levels, an approach commonly adopted in applied linguistics research (Dörnyei, 2007).

Based on the combined insights from coursebook content analysis and pedagogical reasoning, common lesson stages in EFL instruction were identified and mapped against targeted critical thinking skills. This mapping process formed the analytical foundation for the proposed framework. Each lesson stage was associated with specific teacher actions and types of questions intended to scaffold learners' thinking while remaining sensitive to their linguistic proficiency. The emphasis throughout the analysis was placed on practicality and adaptability, ensuring that the framework could be implemented by teachers with diverse professional backgrounds and within different institutional contexts.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analytical process, tasks and lesson components were reviewed iteratively to confirm the consistency of cognitive categorisation and the alignment between lesson stages and targeted thinking skills. Ethical considerations were addressed by avoiding the use of identifiable learner data and by framing the study as a pedagogical analysis rather than an evaluation of teachers or students. This approach ensured that the Methods section transparently reflects the research logic and provides a clear basis for interpreting the findings presented in the subsequent Results section.

The analysis of the "Guess What!" coursebook series across grades 5–9 revealed that opportunities for developing critical thinking are present in most units, yet these opportunities appear in an implicit and fragmented manner. Tasks frequently encourage learners to observe visuals, predict content, respond to texts, or express personal opinions; however, these cognitive demands are not systematically sequenced nor explicitly connected to lesson stages. As a result, similar types of thinking are often repeated at different grade levels without a clear progression, while more complex forms of reasoning remain underdeveloped. This finding highlights the need for a structured pedagogical



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framework that organises existing tasks into a coherent model for critical thinking development.

Based on the qualitative content analysis, a critical thinking integration framework was developed by mapping common EFL lesson stages onto targeted critical thinking skills and corresponding teacher instructional actions. The framework is structured around three core lesson stages that recur consistently across grades 5–9: pre-task, while-task, and post-task stages. Each stage is associated with a specific cognitive focus and a set of pedagogical strategies designed to scaffold learners' thinking while remaining sensitive to their linguistic proficiency.

At the pre-task stage, tasks were found to be particularly suitable for activating learners' prior knowledge and encouraging anticipatory thinking. Visual prompts, titles, and introductory questions embedded in the coursebooks provided natural entry points for prediction, observation, and hypothesis formation. Within the framework, this stage is aligned with lower-to-mid-level critical thinking skills such as predicting, identifying relationships, and making initial inferences. Teacher actions at this stage involve guiding learners' attention through open-ended questions, encouraging multiple possible answers, and prompting justification rather than accuracy-focused responses. The framework positions this stage as essential for preparing learners cognitively for deeper engagement with texts and tasks.

The while-task stage emerged as the central phase for analytical engagement. Reading and listening activities in the coursebooks frequently require learners to extract information, understand meaning, and follow narratives. When pedagogically scaffolded, these tasks can support higher-order thinking skills such as analysing cause–effect relationships, distinguishing main ideas from details, and interpreting implicit meaning. Within the framework, this stage is designed to move beyond surface-level comprehension by incorporating teacher-mediated questioning and peer interaction. Teachers are encouraged to prompt learners to explain their reasoning, compare ideas, and reflect on alternative interpretations, thereby transforming routine comprehension tasks into opportunities for analytical thinking.



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The post-task stage was identified as the most underutilised phase in terms of critical thinking development. Although coursebooks often include follow-up activities such as discussions, personal response questions, or creative tasks, these are not always exploited to their full cognitive potential. The proposed framework redefines this stage as a space for higher-order critical thinking, including evaluating ideas, justifying opinions, and making connections beyond the text. Teacher actions at this stage focus on facilitating reflection, encouraging evidence-based responses, and creating opportunities for learners to articulate and defend their viewpoints in spoken or written form.

A key feature of the framework is its emphasis on developmental progression across grades 5–9. While the overall structure of lesson stages remains consistent, the cognitive demands associated with each stage increase gradually as learners advance through grade levels. In lower grades, critical thinking is primarily supported through guided prediction, simple inference, and basic reasoning supported by visuals and familiar contexts. In higher grades, tasks are adapted to require more abstract thinking, extended justification, and independent analysis, reflecting learners' growing cognitive and linguistic capacities. This progression ensures continuity in critical thinking development rather than isolated or repetitive exposure.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the “Guess What!” coursebooks provide a viable foundation for integrating critical thinking into EFL lessons when supported by a structured pedagogical framework. The proposed model does not introduce additional materials or radically alter existing tasks; instead, it reorganises and enhances the cognitive use of coursebook activities through intentional lesson staging and teacher scaffolding. By making critical thinking objectives explicit and systematically aligned with lesson stages, the framework offers a practical and adaptable approach to fostering higher-order thinking skills in grades 5–9 EFL classrooms.

The findings of this study demonstrate that critical thinking can be meaningfully integrated into EFL lessons for grades 5–9 through the pedagogical organisation of existing coursebook tasks. Rather than introducing additional materials or restructuring the curriculum, the proposed framework shows how the cognitive potential already embedded in the “Guess What!” coursebooks can be activated



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through intentional lesson staging and teacher scaffolding. This supports earlier research emphasising that the effectiveness of instructional materials depends largely on how they are implemented in classroom practice rather than on their surface design alone (Tomlinson, 2012).

A central contribution of the framework lies in its systematic alignment of critical thinking skills with recurring lesson stages. By linking pre-task, while-task, and post-task phases to progressively complex cognitive operations, the framework addresses a key limitation identified in EFL pedagogy: the lack of continuity in thinking skill development. Previous studies have often focused on isolated strategies, such as questioning techniques or discussion activities, without embedding them into a coherent lesson-level structure. In contrast, the present framework integrates critical thinking into the natural flow of EFL lessons, making it more feasible for teachers working under time and curriculum constraints (Richards, 2015).

The emphasis on developmental progression across grades 5–9 further strengthens the pedagogical value of the framework. Existing literature frequently treats primary and secondary education as separate contexts, overlooking the transitional nature of lower secondary schooling. The findings suggest that maintaining a stable lesson structure while gradually increasing cognitive demands allows learners to develop critical thinking skills in a sustained and age-appropriate manner. This perspective aligns with views of critical thinking as a developmental process that requires repeated, scaffolded engagement rather than sporadic exposure to higher-order tasks (Facione, 2015).

From a classroom perspective, the framework highlights the pivotal role of teacher mediation in transforming routine coursebook activities into opportunities for higher-order thinking. While the materials provide content and structure, it is teachers' instructional decisions—particularly their questioning strategies and interaction patterns—that determine the depth of learners' cognitive engagement. This observation is consistent with applied linguistics research that positions teacher mediation as a central factor in fostering meaningful learning and learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 2007).

The framework also offers practical implications for EFL contexts characterised by large classes and mixed-ability learners. By embedding critical thinking



incrementally within familiar lesson stages and aligning cognitive demands with learners' linguistic resources, the model demonstrates that higher-order thinking can be fostered without compromising language learning objectives. This practical orientation enhances the transferability of the framework to a range of instructional contexts beyond the specific coursebooks examined in the study.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The framework was developed through qualitative content analysis and pedagogical reasoning rather than empirical measurement of learning outcomes. Future research could therefore explore the impact of the proposed model through classroom-based implementation studies. In addition, while the analysis focused on a single coursebook series, the underlying principles of lesson staging, cognitive progression, and teacher scaffolding are applicable to other EFL materials with similar structural characteristics.

This study has presented a pedagogically grounded framework for integrating critical thinking skills into EFL lessons for learners in grades 5–9 through the systematic use of the “Guess What!” coursebooks. By organising existing coursebook tasks around recurring lesson stages and aligning them with progressively complex cognitive processes, the framework demonstrates how critical thinking can be developed in a continuous and developmentally appropriate manner. The findings emphasise that the effectiveness of global coursebooks depends largely on teacher mediation and instructional design rather than on material content alone. Although the framework was developed within a specific instructional context, its underlying principles are adaptable to other EFL materials and learning environments, offering practical guidance for teachers and contributing to ongoing discussions on critical thinking integration in language education.

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