







# **LEARNING TO READ CRITICALLY THROUGH WRITING:**

## **A Guide for Teachers using Literature in the EFL Class.**

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*Yuranny Marcela Romero-Archila*

*Nancy Esperanza Barón-Pereira*



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Universidad Pedagógica y  
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**ENFOQUE:** FORMACIÓN  
**ÁREA OCDE:** IDIOMAS Y LITERATURA  
Disciplina: Idiomas específicos  
Colección N° 103

Aprender a Leer Críticamente a través de la Escritura: Una guía para Profesores que Integran la Literatura en la Clase de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.  
Learning to Read Critically through Writing: A guide for Teachers using Literature in the EFL Class

Primera Edición, 2025  
Impresión bajo demanda (POD)  
Versión digital (ePub)

© Yuranny Marcela Romero Archila, 2025  
© Nancy Esperanza Barón Pereira, 2025  
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ISBN (POD) 978-628-7863-10-1  
ISBN (ePub) 978-628-7863-11-8

Proceso arbitraje doble ciego  
Recepción: julio de 2024  
Aprobación: diciembre de 2024

Impreso y hecho en Colombia - Printed and made in Colombia

Aprender a Leer Críticamente a través de la Escritura: Una guía para Profesores que integran la Literatura en la clase de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera/ Learning to Read Critically through Writing: A guide for Teachers using Literature in the EFL Class / Romero Archila, Yuranny Marcela; Barón Pereira, Nancy Esperanza Tunja: Editorial UPTC, 2025. 118 p.

ISBN (POD) 978-628-7863-10-1  
ISBN (ePub) 978-628-7863-11-8

Incluye referencias bibliográficas.

1. Critical reading. 2. children's literature. 3. reading and writing processes. 4. Strategies. 5. Reflection..

(Dewey 370/21) (THEMA CJ- enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas)

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Romero Archila, Y. M. & Barón Pereira, N. E. (2025). *Learning to Read Critically through Writing: A guide for Teachers using Literature in the EFL Class*. Editorial UPTC.

[doi.org/10.19053/uptc.9786287863101](https://doi.org/10.19053/uptc.9786287863101)



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## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our acknowledgements to Professor Laura Carreño and the professors from Unisabana for their support and guidance during the initial phase of this book. Their insights, expertise, and encouragement played a fundamental role in shaping the vision and structure of our work. Their dedication to academic excellence and their willingness to share knowledge have been a source of inspiration throughout the process.

We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to all the team at Editorial UPTC. This book would not have reached its current form without their thoughtful contributions and constructive feedback. Finally, we would love to thank Harold Ortegón for his dedication and patience in designing the main images of our text.

## Abstract

In contemporary education, fostering critical reading has become crucial as it encourages reflective processes where students construct and articulate their own perspectives in dialogue with those from others. Accordingly, this book aims to provide EFL teachers with a set of strategies, activities, and worksheets, systematically grounded in theory to support their practice. The guided comprehension model, a teaching framework proposed by McLaughlin & Allen (2009), was adopted to provide a clear structure for teaching reading strategies through five progressive stages: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect. The book is organized into five units, each focusing on a reading strategy: summarizing and paraphrasing, distinguishing facts from opinions, questioning, juxtaposing ideas, and examining personal responses. Each unit comprises three lessons, structured through worksheets: an introductory lesson, a lesson for guided instruction and review, and a final lesson focused on practice. After completing the lessons, students are allowed to evaluate their progress through formative assessment activities. Finally, the worksheets provide a space for self-reflection, where students can write entries in their reflective journals. These entries encourage them to examine what they have learned regarding both the strategy and the content, reflect on their emotional responses during the lessons, identify strengths and challenges, and propose actions for further learning development.

This book contributes to the field of English language teaching as it engages with children's literature, articulating theory and practice with the aim of supporting your students' process of becoming more critical and reflective readers.

**Keywords:** critical reading, children's literature, strategies, reading and writing processes, reflection

## Resumen

En la educación contemporánea, fomentar la lectura crítica se ha vuelto fundamental, ya que a través de esta se promueven procesos reflexivos en los que los estudiantes construyen y articulan sus propias perspectivas en diálogo con las de los demás. Este libro tiene como objetivo proporcionar a los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera un conjunto de estrategias, actividades y talleres, sistemáticamente basadas en la teoría, para guiarlos en su aplicación. El modelo de comprensión guiada, un enfoque pedagógico propuesto por McLaughlin y Allen (2009), se incorpora con el propósito de ofrecer una estructura clara para la enseñanza de estrategias de lectura mediante cinco etapas progresivas: explicar, demostrar, guiar, practicar y reflexionar. El libro se divide en cinco unidades, cada una aborda una estrategia específica (resumir y parafrasear; hechos u opiniones; cuestionar; yuxtaponer; examinar respuestas personales) y se compone de tres lecciones diferentes enfocadas al desarrollo de talleres: una lección introductoria, una lección de instrucción guiada y repaso, y una lección final centrada en la práctica. Al término de cada unidad, se incluyen actividades de evaluación formativa que permiten a los estudiantes valorar su progreso. Finalmente, los talleres ofrecen espacio para la autorreflexión. Estas entradas les invitan a analizar lo aprendido en cuanto a estrategia y contenido, reflexionar con respecto sus respuestas emocionales durante las lecciones, reconocer sus fortalezas y dificultades, y plantear acciones para seguir avanzando en su aprendizaje.

Este libro contribuye al campo de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, en tanto que se acerca a la literatura infantil, articulando teoría y práctica con el fin de apoyar el proceso de tus estudiantes para convertirse en lectores más críticos y reflexivos.

**Palabras clave:** lectura crítica, literatura infantil, estrategias, procesos de lectura y escritura, reflexión



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## Introduction

Have your students ever finished reading a text without fully understanding the author's message? Or asked themselves what underlying meanings the text communicates? These challenges are common among our students, which led us to develop this book as a resource providing a structured sequence of steps and procedures to support deeper reading comprehension. First of all, it is essential to provide some definitions to enlighten the connection between theory and practice in this document. Beatty (2009) states that "*reading is a lifetime skill*" (p. 1), which emphasizes the role of reading as an integral part of daily life that extends beyond the simple decoding of written symbols to construct meaning. Readers apply several strategies to figure out what a text means. Following this assertion, Mikulecky (2008) defines reading as:

A conscious and unconscious thinking process. The reader applies many strategies to reconstruct meaning that the author is assumed to have intended. The reader does this by comparing information in the text to his or her background knowledge and prior experience (p.2).

Additional definitions focus on the characterization of different elements involved in the process of reading and writing, analyzing the latter as the first stage where meanings are created. One of these concepts has been provided by Israel and Duffy (2009) who argue "reading comprehension is a set of knowledge that reflects the communicative interactions among the intentions of the author/speaker, content of the text/message, abilities and purposes of the reader/listener, and the context/situation of the interaction." (as cited in Nampaktai et al., 2013, p.35).

These definitions are particularly relevant in foreign language contexts, where reading becomes even more complex. Learners are required not only to comprehend the literal meaning of words but also to interpret the text by considering the author's intent, their own perspective as readers, and broader contextual factors that influence meaning-making. Brown (2001, p. 299) "readers must, through a puzzle-solving process, infer meanings, decide what to retain and not to retain, and move

on.” Considering this explanation of what readers are required to do, it becomes clear the necessity for them to develop diverse reading skills when reading critically.

Building on this idea, Duke and Pearson (2002) assert that good readers are not passive recipients of information; instead, they actively engage with each text by taking notes, selecting what to read, summarizing, revising, evaluating, and questioning truth both during and after the reading process. These behaviors align with the goals of critical reading, which encourage interpretation and reflection.

Concerning reading comprehension, Yang (2002) defines it as an ability that “involves an active, dynamic and growing process of searching for interrelationships in a text” (p. 1). This perspective reinforces the idea that readers must go beyond merely decoding messages and adopt a transactional approach, moving away from a transmission model of reading. On the same line of thought, Fountas & Pinnell (as cited in Mickelson, 2018, p. 1) propose the actions readers must undertake to accurately read a text, moving from understanding words to making connections and critically analyzing the information by developing pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading strategies, in a hierarchical order similar to Bloom’s taxonomy.

Additional author’s concepts approach reading comprehension, analyzing what it enables students to do in their contexts. For instance, Tankersley (2005) proposes that when students go beyond the comprehension level, they:

can analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and interpret the text they are reading at complex levels. They can process text at deep levels, make judgments, and detect shades of meaning. They can make critical interpretations and demonstrate high levels of insight and sophistication in their thinking. They are able to make inferences, draw relevant and insightful conclusions, use their knowledge in new situations, and relate their thinking to other situations and to their own background knowledge (p. 71).

It is paramount to note the parallel connection between higher levels of reading comprehension and critical reading, which is defined as “an individual’s justifying, questioning and analyzing what is read before reaching a conclusion” (Eskimen, 2018, p. 1892). Both processes require people to develop higher-level thinking skills, a challenging purpose for a vast number of students in our society. The aforementioned dissertation matches the definition provided by Kurland, who states that “critical reading refers to a careful, active, reflective and analytic reading” (as cited in Talebi & Talebi, 2015, p. 1180). Delving into this concept, active, reflective, and analytic reading refers to the articulations readers create between the knowledges and lessons they

explore through reading and their experiences in real life. On the same matter, Richards & Schmidt (2002) define critical reading as:

reading in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of the reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes, or beliefs, i.e. going beyond what is given in the text and critically evaluating the relevance and value of what is read (p. 134).

Based on the authors' approach, reading critically requires readers to evaluate and question the validity and the source of the information in the text. This enterprise supports the idea that reading cannot be seen as an isolated skill; to be purposeful and meaningful, it must relate to other abilities. Consistent with this view, Grellet (2008) asserts that "reading comprehension should not be separated from the other skills" (p. 8). Based on our experience, we have observed a strong interconnection between reading and writing. As noted by Zemliansky (2008) these skills function as active processes through which new knowledge is constructed. Therefore, it is essential to briefly examine the concepts of writing to learn and writing to read.

Sedita (2013) makes a distinction between learning to write and writing to learn. The former is related to knowing how to write, while the latter is concerned with using writing as an instrument for learning something additional. Similarly, Graham and Hebert (2010) emphasize that "writing can be a vehicle for improving reading" (p. 6). Under this idea, known as writing to read, argues that when students write about what they read, their comprehension deepens. Nevertheless, writing not only aids in summarizing stories but also fosters deep reflection about them. Through writing, readers can develop efficient practices to enhance understanding, such as connecting new information with prior knowledge and personal experiences, posing and answering questions, and reflecting on meaning.

In this sense, *writing to read* aligns closely with the principles of critical reading, as it engages learners in techniques that require developing more complex cognitive processes, including summarizing, inferring, and questioning. These practices are beneficial to explore beyond surface-level comprehension and foster deeper analytical thinking and consistent reflection. While writing, readers actively think about information; they organize it and interpret it in their own words. Simultaneously, they are pushed to assess or judge the text's accuracy, logic, and relevance. Further stages of critical thinking would require them to question the author's positioning, considering the reason for specific ideas to be included or excluded from the narrative. The previously mentioned processes consolidate as these writers propose informed conclusions in their texts.



## Justification

In a column published in *El Tiempo*, Vélez-Gutiérrez (2018) remarks on the urgent need to cultivate critical thinking across all educational levels in Colombia. He strongly critiques the country's polarized political landscape, noting that both left-wing and right-wing groups have a particular interest in preserving an education system that discourages independent thought, as it preserves a population of uncritical followers, who fail to question, challenge, and propose on the government's decisions. To face this concern, Vélez-Gutiérrez calls on educators from all levels to assume a leadership role by implementing pedagogical strategies to foster critical engagement with texts and ideas in and outside the classroom.

Nowadays, schools and universities increasingly report ongoing complaints from educators arguing that “Students do not know how to read in their mother tongue”. The primary concern revolves around their ability to decode the symbols and identify words and isolated phrases, while analysis of complex ideas and conscious processes of reflection are often absent. The previous statements evidence that some teachers are aware of the issues regarding the failed system to educate critical readers mentioned by Velez-Gutierrez. Nonetheless, few actions are taken to face the problem. Another matter arises when considering the role of the mother tongue. It is often argued that if students are unable to read critically in their first language, they will encounter difficulties doing so in a foreign one. Despite this, we assert that critical reading skills are not bound to a specific language; rather, once developed, reading skills can be transferred across languages and applied in both mother and foreign language contexts.

Krishnasamy and Noor (2015) have extensively argued that despite the progress critical reading has achieved, there are still multiple and varied actions to be done in the field of EFL. This book has been created to set a small step in the action path to guide you, as teachers, to use literary texts to aid reading comprehension, purposefully enriching critical reading in your classrooms.

In this book, you can find five different strategies that you can use for fostering your students' critical reading skills through writing. Each strategy is reasonably

supported through theory, displaying a brief description of classroom procedures, various teaching tips, some variations to activities, and three worksheets available to be incorporated into your lessons.






Finally, we firmly believe that learning a language widens far beyond the accurate use of grammar structures, vocabulary, and the development of traditional reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Language learning promotes intellectual development by nurturing people to access diverse sources of knowledge, comprehend multiple perspectives, critically evaluate information, reflect on complex issues, and become active participants in social change.

## **Book Structure**

The purpose of this book is to provide you, language teachers, and your students with a set of strategies, activities, and worksheets articulated with theory, to guide them. This material was designed considering universities as a main educational setting; however, due to their characteristics, all materials can be adapted to different settings, attempting to promote critical reading through a diverse range of writing activities.

The development of this book was informed by the teaching framework proposed by McLaughlin and Allen (2009), which outlines five sequential stages for applying reading strategies: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect. Such frames align closely with statements by Duke and Pearson (2002), who argue that “good comprehension instruction includes both explicit instruction in specific comprehension strategies and a great deal of time and opportunity for actual reading, writing, and discussion of the text” (p. 207). The main purpose of this book was to provide both teachers and students meaningful opportunities to engage in the practical application of each strategy, while progressively transferring responsibility for learning from teachers to students, a process McLaughlin (2012) has named the “gradual release of responsibility” (p. 436). The following section explores concrete explanations of each stage in the framework, along with the corresponding symbols used to represent them throughout the book.

**Table 1.** *Characterizing the Framework*

Stage and symbol	Definition
 <p data-bbox="453 631 544 662"><b>Explain</b></p>	<p data-bbox="735 488 1240 656">The teacher provides an explicit description of the strategy, outlining when and how it should be implemented to support students' comprehension and engagement with the text.</p>
 <p data-bbox="432 891 576 921"><b>Demonstrate</b></p>	<p data-bbox="735 774 1240 901">Teachers, students, or both apply the strategy by practicing thinking-aloud techniques to model and support comprehension.</p>
 <p data-bbox="469 1156 539 1187"><b>Guide</b></p>	<p data-bbox="735 1015 1240 1187">Students and teachers implement the strategy together. The role of the teacher focuses on advising the students' processes and clarifying doubts, in order for students to properly model language and ideas.</p>
 <p data-bbox="459 1422 549 1453"><b>Practice</b></p>	<p data-bbox="735 1306 1240 1412">Students work autonomously while applying the strategy. This stage is developed in and/or outside the classroom as independent work.</p>
 <p data-bbox="464 1708 544 1739"><b>Reflect</b></p>	<p data-bbox="735 1518 1240 1727">The purpose of the stage is to raise the students' metacognitive awareness by monitoring their use of the strategy, identifying their strengths and weaknesses. To carry out this process, they use a notebook to document their reflections and learning progress through several entries.</p>

This book is divided into five units. Each unit contains information about a specific strategy to foster critical reading through writing. Every single unit has been divided into three different lessons for the development of a special worksheet. There is one introductory lesson, one lesson for guiding and reviewing and a final lesson for practicing. At the end of each unit, there are opportunities to assess the work done through formative assessment. Finally, a space for self-reflection is given for your students to write entries on their reflective journals about what they learnt throughout the unit in terms of the strategy itself and content as well as how they felt during the lessons, their strengths and difficulties they experienced and further actions to be taken.

A self-reflective journal was chosen as a technique for the reflection stage because it allows students to express “their thoughts, feelings, experiences, personal values and beliefs” in a spontaneous and comfortable way (Farrah, 2012, p. 999); besides the fact of allowing a “conversation with oneself” (Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching, 2006, p. 1) provides your students with opportunities to think about their own learning – metacognitive strategies- as well as self-regulated and self-efficient learning. The structure of the units is summarized in the next table.

**Table 2.** Describing the Units

Units	Lessons	Worksheets	Assessment	Reflection
<b>Unit 1</b> <b>Summarizing</b> <b>and</b> <b>Paraphrasing</b>	Lesson 1: What is the difference? (Introductory lesson)	Worksheet #1	Formative	Self-reflective Journal
		Worksheet #2		
	Lesson 2: Hands-on the text (Guiding lesson)	Worksheet #3		
	Lesson 3: Time to practice (Practicing lesson)	Worksheet #4		

Units	Lessons	Worksheets	Assessment	Reflection
<b>Unit 2 Facts or Opinions</b>	Lesson 1: Distinguishing facts and opinions (Introductory lesson)	Worksheet #5	Formative	Self-reflective Journal
	Lesson 2: What is my opinion? (Guiding lesson)	Worksheet #6		
	Lesson 3: Fact or Opinion? (Practicing lesson)	Worksheet #7		
		Worksheet #8		
<b>Unit 3 Questioning</b>	Lesson 1: Raising Awareness (Introductory lesson)	Worksheet #9	Formative	Self-reflective Journal
	Lesson 2: Beyond literal questions (Guiding lesson)	Worksheet #10		
	Lesson 3: Asking and answering questions (Practicing lesson)	Worksheet #11		

Units	Lessons	Worksheets	Assessment	Reflection
<b>Unit 4 Juxtaposing</b>	Lesson 1: Moving beyond the obvious (Introductory lesson)	Worksheet #12	Formative	Self-reflective Journal
	Lesson 2: Juxtaposing non-fiction texts (Guiding lesson)	Worksheet #13		
	Lesson 3: Connecting with your knowledge (Practicing lesson)	Worksheet #14		
<b>Unit 5 Examining personal responses</b>	Lesson 1: Reading the World as a Path to Self-Reflection (Introductory lesson)	Worksheet #15	Formative	Self-reflective Journal
	Lesson 2: My thoughts and feelings (Guiding lesson)	Worksheet #16		
	Lesson 3: Are there viable solutions? (Practicing lesson)	Worksheet #17		

As a teacher using this book, you may choose to follow the full sequence of the five units or select the sections that best respond to your students' specific learning needs. This resource alone will not make your students critical readers; nevertheless, it offers a range of strategies that can easily be implemented and adapted. Moreover, it is intended to trigger your curiosity to explore and experiment with additional techniques that may be more effective in your particular teaching context.