

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES ON CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL SPEAKING INSTRUCTION

Andi Rahmayanti¹, Iskandar Sulaiman², Amirullah Abduh³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Negeri Makassar, Jl. A. P. Pettarani, Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, Indonesia

Email: iskandar@unm.ac.id

Article History

Received: 26-05-2026

Revision: 13-06-2026

Accepted: 16-06-2026

Published: 18-06-2026

Abstract. Critical thinking is increasingly seen as an important competency in learning to speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but qualitative evidence regarding its implementation and development is still scattered and has not been comprehensively synthesized. This research aims to synthesize the results of qualitative research regarding the conceptualization, implementation, and experiences of students and teachers in developing critical thinking through EFL speaking learning. The research was conducted using a systematic literature review method following PRISMA guidelines. Data sources are reputable scientific articles published in the 2019–2024 period and obtained from various academic databases. Articles were selected based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, then analyzed using thematic synthesis techniques. The results of the study show three main themes, namely: (1) critical thinking is understood as the ability to analyze, evaluate, provide reasons and make decisions in speaking activities; (2) learning strategies such as discussion, debate, problem-based learning, argumentation, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are effective in encouraging the development of critical thinking; and (3) teachers and students view speaking activities as a potential means for developing critical thinking skills. This study also identified research limitations in aspects of assessment, longitudinal studies, and EFL contexts that are still underrepresented. Research findings emphasize the importance of implementing dialogical and reflective speaking learning to develop critical thinking skills optimally.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, EFL Speaking, Qualitative Research, Systematic Review, Language Pedagogy

Abstrak. Berpikir kritis semakin dipandang sebagai kompetensi penting dalam pembelajaran berbicara Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL), namun bukti kualitatif mengenai implementasi dan pengembangannya masih tersebar dan belum tersintesis secara komprehensif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mensintesis hasil-hasil penelitian kualitatif mengenai konseptualisasi, implementasi, dan pengalaman peserta didik serta guru dalam pengembangan berpikir kritis melalui pembelajaran berbicara EFL. Penelitian dilakukan menggunakan metode *systematic literature review* dengan mengikuti pedoman PRISMA. Sumber data berupa artikel ilmiah bereputasi yang dipublikasikan pada periode 2019–2024 dan diperoleh dari berbagai basis data akademik. Artikel dipilih berdasarkan kriteria inklusi dan eksklusi yang telah ditetapkan, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teknik sintesis tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan tiga tema utama, yaitu: (1) berpikir kritis dipahami sebagai kemampuan menganalisis, mengevaluasi, memberikan alasan, dan membuat keputusan dalam aktivitas berbicara; (2) strategi pembelajaran seperti diskusi, debat, *problem-based learning*, argumentasi, dan *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) efektif mendorong pengembangan berpikir kritis; serta (3) guru dan peserta didik memandang aktivitas berbicara sebagai sarana yang potensial untuk mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis. Kajian ini juga mengidentifikasi keterbatasan penelitian pada aspek penilaian, studi longitudinal, dan konteks EFL yang masih kurang terwakili. Temuan penelitian menegaskan pentingnya penerapan pembelajaran berbicara yang dialogis dan reflektif untuk mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis secara optimal.

Kata Kunci: Berpikir Kritis, *EFL Speaking*, Penelitian Kualitatif, *Systematic Review*, Pedagogi Bahasa

How to Cite: Rahmayanti, A., Sulaiman, I., & Abduh, A. (2026). A Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies on Critical Thinking in EFL Speaking Instruction. *Indo-MathEdu Intellectuals Journal*, 7 (3), 4170-4193. <http://doi.org/10.54373/imeij.v7i3.5890>

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educational discourse has increasingly emphasized higher-order cognitive skills, positioning critical thinking as a central learning outcome across disciplines. From a theoretical perspective, critical thinking can be understood as a disciplined process of reasoning guided by intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, relevance, and logic, as articulated by Paul and Elder (2019). This perspective is further supported by Facione (2015), who conceptualizes critical thinking as a set of core cognitive skills, including analysis, evaluation, and inference. These complementary perspectives highlight that critical thinking involves both cognitive processes and evaluative standards, making it a multidimensional construct relevant to language learning contexts.

Within the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, speaking instruction represents a critical site for the enactment of higher-order thinking. Speaking is not merely a productive skill but an interactional process that requires learners to articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, and respond to others in real time. From an interactional perspective, speaking competence is closely associated with learners' ability to engage in reasoning and perspective-taking during communication (Sato & Ballinger, 2019). Empirical studies have further demonstrated that speaking activities such as debates, discussions, and problem-solving tasks provide opportunities for learners to justify opinions, evaluate arguments, and co-construct meaning (Tran & Duong, 2020; Nguyen & Yang, 2021).

The relationship between critical thinking and EFL speaking has been widely explored in the literature, with studies suggesting that speaking activities can serve as a medium for developing learners' critical engagement. However, much of the existing research has predominantly relied on quantitative approaches that emphasize measurable outcomes, such as performance scores or rubric-based assessments (Bataineh & Alqatanani, 2020). While these findings provide evidence of effectiveness, they often overlook the processes through which critical thinking is enacted during classroom interaction. As a result, the dynamic and socially mediated nature of critical thinking in speaking contexts remains insufficiently explored.

In contrast, qualitative studies offer a process-oriented perspective by examining how critical thinking is constructed through interaction, teacher mediation, and contextual factors in EFL classrooms. Such studies highlight the role of dialogic engagement, scaffolding, and collaborative meaning-making in fostering critical thinking during speaking activities (Zare & Othman, 2022; Kabilan, 2020). By foregrounding learners' experiences and classroom dynamics, qualitative research provides deeper insights into how critical thinking develops as a socially situated practice.

Despite these contributions, there remains a lack of systematic synthesis that specifically focuses on qualitative evidence in EFL speaking instruction. Existing review studies tend to integrate multiple language skills or combine different methodological paradigms, thereby obscuring the distinctive insights offered by qualitative research on speaking. Consequently, current understandings of how critical thinking is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in EFL speaking contexts remain fragmented.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to systematically synthesize qualitative research on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction. Specifically, this review seeks to examine how critical thinking is conceptualized, identify pedagogical practices that foster critical thinking through speaking, and explore learners' and teachers' perceptions of its development within EFL classrooms. In response to the limited synthesis of qualitative research in this area, this systematic literature review aims to explore how critical thinking is conceptualized, enacted, and experienced in EFL speaking instruction. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How is critical thinking conceptualized in qualitative studies on EFL speaking instruction?
- RQ2: What pedagogical practices and speaking activities are reported to foster critical thinking in EFL speaking classrooms?
- RQ3: How do learners and teachers perceive the development of critical thinking through EFL speaking instruction?
- RQ4: What methodological trends and research gaps emerge from qualitative studies on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction?

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize qualitative evidence on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction. The review focused exclusively on empirical qualitative studies to explore how critical thinking is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in speaking classrooms. To ensure a transparent and rigorous review process, study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion were conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Relevant studies were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar using keyword combinations related to critical thinking, EFL speaking, and qualitative research. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and

2024. Retrieved studies were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with only qualitative studies conducted in EFL speaking contexts being retained for analysis.

The quality of the selected studies was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist to ensure the credibility and methodological rigor of the synthesized evidence. Data analysis was conducted using Thematic Synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), involving the coding of study findings, the development of descriptive themes, and the generation of analytical themes. This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and the development of broader interpretations regarding the role of critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction.

The search was limited to studies published between 2019 and 2024 in order to capture recent developments in EFL pedagogy, particularly in relation to post-pandemic and digitally mediated learning contexts. Only articles published in English were included to ensure consistency in analysis and interpretation.

The search strategy employed structured keyword combinations using Boolean operators, primarily AND, to systematically retrieve studies at the intersection of critical thinking, EFL speaking, and qualitative research. This approach aligns with established guidelines for systematic search procedures, which emphasize the use of controlled and flexible keyword combinations to maximize retrieval sensitivity (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Core descriptors such as critical thinking, EFL, and speaking were combined with methodological qualifiers including qualitative study and case study to ensure the inclusion of empirically grounded qualitative research. To account for variations in terminology within EFL research, alternative expressions related to speaking were incorporated, including speaking instruction and oral communication. Accordingly, the primary search strings included, but were not limited to, the following combinations:

- “critical thinking” AND “EFL speaking” AND “qualitative”
- “critical thinking” AND “speaking instruction” AND “case study”
- “critical thinking” AND “oral communication” AND “EFL”
- “critical thinking” AND “speaking instruction” AND “qualitative study” AND “EFL”

The search strategy was applied flexibly across databases, with minor adjustments made to keywords and filters to accommodate database-specific indexing systems. This balance between systematic structure and flexibility was intended to ensure both precision and comprehensiveness in study retrieval. Following the initial search, all retrieved records were subjected to a multi-stage screening process, including title screening, abstract review, and full-text assessment, in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Studies

that met the predefined inclusion criteria were retained for final synthesis, while irrelevant or ineligible studies were excluded at each stage of the screening process

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the screening process to ensure transparency, consistency, and methodological rigor in study selection. In systematic literature reviews, the use of predefined criteria is essential to minimize selection bias and enhance the reliability of the review process (Kitchenham, 2004; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). These criteria were aligned with the objectives of the review, which focused on synthesizing qualitative evidence on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction. Studies were included in the review if they met all of the following criteria:

- **Publication Type;** Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure the academic quality and credibility of the synthesized evidence, as recommended in systematic review guidelines (Tranfield et al., 2003).
- **Research Design;** Studies employing qualitative or predominantly qualitative research designs were included. This encompassed methodologies such as qualitative case studies, classroom-based ethnographic research, interviews, observations, discourse analysis, and qualitative components of mixed-methods studies where qualitative findings constituted the primary analytical focus. This criterion aligns with the study's emphasis on capturing process-oriented and context-dependent insights.
- **Research Focus;** The studies had to explicitly examine critical thinking within the context of EFL speaking instruction. This included instructional practices, speaking tasks (e.g., debates, discussions, presentations, and role plays), and classroom interactions designed to promote critical thinking through spoken language use.
- **Context;** Only studies situated in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts were included. Studies conducted in ESL or native-English environments were excluded to maintain contextual consistency and comparability across studies.
- **Time Frame and Language;** Articles published between 2019 and 2024 and written in English were included to reflect recent developments in EFL pedagogy and ensure analytical coherence.

Studies were excluded from the review if they met any of the following conditions:

- **Methodological Mismatch;** Studies adopting quantitative-only, experimental, or quasi-experimental designs were excluded, as they do not provide the in-depth, interpretive insights characteristic of qualitative inquiry.

- Skill Focus; Studies focusing primarily on language skills other than speaking (e.g., reading, writing, listening, or grammar) were excluded, even if critical thinking was discussed, in order to maintain the specificity of the review focus.
- Publication Type; Conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, dissertations, and unpublished manuscripts were excluded due to variations in peer-review rigor and accessibility.
- Theoretical or Conceptual Scope; Conceptual papers, literature reviews, or theoretical discussions without empirical qualitative data were excluded, as the present study aims to synthesize findings derived from actual classroom or instructional contexts.

To ensure transparency and consistency in the study selection process, the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in this review are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. PRISMA Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Aspect	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, dissertations, unpublished studies
Research Design	Qualitative or predominantly qualitative studies (e.g., case studies, classroom-based research, interviews, observations, discourse analysis)	Quantitative-only, experimental, or quasi-experimental studies
Research Focus	Studies explicitly examining critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction	Studies focusing on other language skills (reading, writing, listening, grammar)
Context	English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts	ESL or native-English contexts
Participants	EFL learners and/or teachers engaged in speaking instruction	Participants not involved in speaking-related activities
Time Frame	Studies published between 2019 and 2024	Studies published outside the selected time range
Language of Publication	Articles written in English	Articles written in languages other than English
Nature of Study	Empirical studies with qualitative data	Conceptual papers, theoretical discussions, or review articles
Data Source	Studies indexed in major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar)	Studies not indexed in academic databases or lacking traceable publication sources

The study selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework updated by Page et al. (2021) to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability. The selection procedure was conducted through four sequential phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the identification phase, a comprehensive search across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar yielded a total of 286 records. After the removal of 47 duplicate entries, 239 records remained for further screening.

During the screening phase, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 167 records that were not relevant to the focus of the study. These studies were excluded primarily because they did not involve EFL contexts, did not address critical thinking, or focused on language skills other than speaking. Consequently, 72 articles were retained for full-text assessment. In the eligibility phase, the full texts of the remaining articles were examined in detail. A total of 45 studies were excluded at this stage due to methodological mismatch (e.g., quantitative or experimental design), lack of focus on speaking instruction, or absence of qualitative data. Finally, in the inclusion phase, 27 studies met all the inclusion criteria and were retained for qualitative synthesis. This relatively limited number of eligible studies highlights a notable imbalance between the growing scholarly interest in critical thinking in EFL education and the comparatively small body of qualitative research focusing specifically on speaking instruction (Page et al., 2021; Kitchenham, 2004).

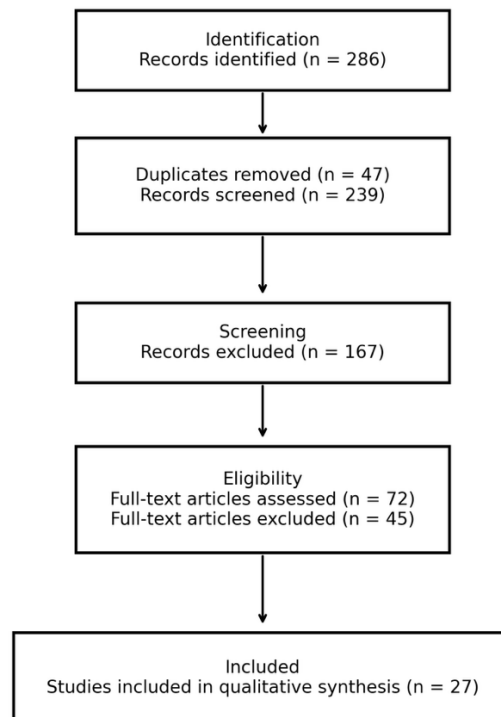


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process

RESULTS

Conceptualizations of Critical Thinking in EFL Speaking Studies (RQ1)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies indicates that critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction is conceptualized through multiple theoretical perspectives, reflecting both established frameworks and context-sensitive interpretations. Several studies explicitly draw on foundational models of critical thinking, particularly those proposed by Richard Paul and

Linda Elder (2019), which emphasize elements such as reasoning, questioning, and the application of intellectual standards in evaluating information and arguments. These perspectives are further supported by Peter Facione (1990), who conceptualizes critical thinking as a set of core cognitive skills, including analysis, evaluation, and inference.

Empirical evidence from the reviewed studies demonstrates that these theoretical orientations are operationalized in EFL speaking contexts through interactive and dialogic practices. For instance, Alghamdi (2021) and Zare and Othman (2022) highlight how critical thinking is embedded in classroom practices through questioning strategies and teacher-mediated interaction. Similarly, Fahim and Eslamdoost (2019) conceptualize critical thinking as a dialogic process that emerges through structured speaking tasks. Beyond these established frameworks, several studies adopt more situated and practice-oriented definitions, framing critical thinking as learners' ability to articulate opinions, justify arguments, and respond to counterarguments during speaking activities. This perspective is reflected in studies such as Nguyen and Yang (2021), which emphasize learners' capacity to express and defend viewpoints in oral presentations and interactive speaking tasks.

Importantly, the synthesis reveals a consistent tendency among qualitative studies to conceptualize critical thinking as a socially mediated and dialogic process rather than solely an individual cognitive ability. Studies such as Sato and Ballinger (2019) and Widodo and Ferdiansyah (2020) highlight the role of peer interaction, collaborative dialogue, and teacher scaffolding in shaping critical thinking development. This interactional orientation distinguishes qualitative findings from outcome-oriented quantitative studies, which tend to conceptualize critical thinking as a measurable and individual construct.

Pedagogical Practices Fostering Critical Thinking (RQ2)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies reveals a range of pedagogical practices that consistently contribute to the development of critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction. Among these, debate-based activities emerge as the most frequently reported instructional strategy. Studies such as Bataineh and Alqatanani (2020) demonstrate that structured debates enable learners to construct arguments, evaluate evidence, and articulate positions orally, thereby fostering higher-order thinking skills within interactive speaking contexts. In addition to debate-based approaches, problem-based learning and discussion-oriented tasks are widely identified as effective pedagogical practices. For instance, Tran and Duong (2020) highlight how classroom discussions centered on real-world issues encourage learners to analyze information critically and collaboratively propose solutions. Similarly, Kabilan (2020)

emphasizes the role of online discussion platforms in facilitating reflective and critical engagement among learners in speaking activities.

Across the reviewed studies, teachers' roles are consistently conceptualized as facilitators of learning rather than mere transmitters of knowledge. Empirical evidence suggests that teacher mediation plays a central role in fostering critical thinking, particularly through scaffolding strategies such as open-ended questioning, prompting justification, and modeling critical responses (Alghamdi, 2021; Zare & Othman, 2022). These strategies create opportunities for learners to engage in deeper reasoning and reflective dialogue during speaking tasks. Furthermore, the synthesis highlights the importance of classroom environments that support dialogic interaction and reduce learners' anxiety related to linguistic performance. Studies such as Sato and Ballinger (2019) indicate that peer interaction and collaborative dialogue foster a supportive atmosphere in which learners feel encouraged to express and negotiate ideas. This suggests that the effectiveness of pedagogical practices in promoting critical thinking is closely linked to the extent to which classroom contexts facilitate meaningful interaction and minimize fear of making linguistic errors.

Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions (RQ3)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies indicates that learners generally perceive speaking activities integrating critical thinking as both cognitively demanding and pedagogically meaningful. Empirical evidence suggests that such activities enhance learners' confidence in expressing opinions and increase their awareness of multiple perspectives. For example, Nguyen and Yang (2021) report that learners engaged in oral presentation tasks demonstrate greater confidence and improved ability to articulate and defend their viewpoints. Similarly, Tran and Duong (2020) highlight that discussion-based speaking activities promote active engagement and critical reflection among learners. From the teachers' perspective, critical thinking-oriented speaking instruction is widely recognized as pedagogically valuable, particularly in fostering learners' higher-order thinking and communicative competence. However, several studies also reveal practical challenges in classroom implementation. For instance, Alghamdi (2021) and Zare and Othman (2022) report that teachers often face constraints related to limited instructional time, rigid curriculum requirements, and learners' varying levels of language proficiency, which may hinder the effective integration of critical thinking into speaking instruction.

A recurring theme across the reviewed studies is the tension between linguistic accuracy and critical engagement. While teachers aim to encourage open discussion and the expression of ideas, they also feel responsible for correcting language errors, creating a pedagogical dilemma. Studies such as Widodo and Ferdiansyah (2020) suggest that this tension often leads teachers to prioritize either fluency or accuracy at different stages of instruction. This finding highlights the need for more integrated pedagogical frameworks that balance language development with critical thinking, allowing learners to engage in meaningful communication without being constrained by excessive focus on linguistic form.

Methodological Trends and Research Gaps (RQ4)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies reveals several methodological patterns in qualitative research on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction. A predominant trend is the use of classroom-based case study designs, which enable in-depth exploration of interactional processes and contextualized learning experiences. Studies such as Fahim and Eslamdoost(2019), as well as Zare and Othman (2022), exemplify this approach by employing data sources including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and discourse-based analysis. Similarly, Widodo and Ferdiansyah (2020) utilize reflective practices and classroom interaction data to capture the dynamics of critical thinking development in speaking contexts. Despite the richness of these qualitative insights, the synthesis indicates that most studies are limited in duration and highly context-specific, often focusing on a single classroom or instructional setting. This methodological tendency restricts the transferability of findings and provides only a snapshot of critical thinking development. As noted in studies such as Tran and Duong (2020), short-term interventions may capture immediate engagement but do not sufficiently account for the sustained development of critical thinking over time.

Several critical research gaps emerge from the analysis. First, there is a notable lack of longitudinal qualitative studies that examine how learners' critical thinking evolves across extended instructional periods. Second, limited attention has been given to assessment practices in speaking-oriented critical thinking, despite its prominence as an instructional objective. While studies such as Alghamdi (2021) acknowledge instructional practices, they rarely provide systematic frameworks for evaluating critical thinking in speaking tasks. The difficulty of assessment in this domain is partly attributable to the inherently subjective nature of interactional competence in spoken discourse. Unlike written tasks, spoken critical thinking is co-constructed in real time and embedded in the social dynamics of the classroom, making it challenging to isolate and evaluate individual reasoning skills using conventional rubrics.

Furthermore, the dynamic and emergent character of oral interaction means that critical thinking may manifest differently across speakers, contexts, and task types, complicating the standardization of assessment criteria. This points to a gap in assessment literacy among practitioners, underscoring the need for empirically grounded frameworks that integrate formative assessment strategies, peer-based evaluation, and discourse-oriented criteria capable of capturing the interactional dimensions of critical thinking in speaking.

Furthermore, the geographical distribution of the reviewed studies indicates an underrepresentation of EFL contexts from developing regions, suggesting that current understandings of critical thinking in speaking instruction may be context-bound. As illustrated in Table Y below, the majority of the 27 included studies originate from East Asian and Middle Eastern EFL contexts (e.g., China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam), while regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia outside of Vietnam remain largely absent from the qualitative literature. This geographical imbalance suggests that findings may not be readily transferable to EFL contexts characterized by different institutional structures, resource constraints, and sociocultural norms. It is worth noting, however, that this imbalance may partly reflect a limitation of the present review itself specifically, the English-language inclusion criterion rather than solely indicating a genuine gap in global research output. Qualitative studies addressing similar themes may exist in local languages within these regions but fall outside the scope of this synthesis. In addition, relatively few studies investigate teachers' professional development in relation to critical thinking pedagogy. This gap is particularly significant given the central role of teacher mediation identified in previous findings (e.g., Zare & Othman, 2022).

Table 2. Geographical Distribution of the 27 Included Studies

Region	Representative Countries	No. of Studies	% of Total
East Asia	China, South Korea, Japan	8	29.6%
Middle East	Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan	7	25.9%
Southeast Asia	Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia	6	22.2%
Europe / Other Developed	Turkey, Spain, Taiwan	4	14.8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana	1	3.7%
South Asia	Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal	1	3.7%

Note. Highlighted rows (yellow) indicate underrepresented regions. Distribution is approximate, based on the 27 studies meeting full inclusion criteria.

Taken together, these findings suggest the need for more methodologically diverse and contextually inclusive research, particularly studies that integrate longitudinal designs, assessment frameworks, and teacher development perspectives to advance the field of critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review underscore the significant contribution of qualitative research in illuminating the complex and socially situated processes underlying critical thinking development in EFL speaking classrooms. By foregrounding interaction, perception, and contextual dynamics, qualitative studies complement outcome-oriented quantitative research and provide deeper insights into how critical thinking is enacted in real classroom settings. In relation to RQ1, the reviewed studies demonstrate that critical thinking is not conceptualized merely as an individual cognitive construct but as a dynamic and interactional process, aligning with the theoretical perspectives of Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2019), as well as Peter Facione (1990).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce a socio-constructivist and socio-cultural understanding of learning, in which critical thinking emerges through mediated interaction rather than isolated cognitive processing. Classroom talk, peer negotiation, and task-based engagement function as sites where learners articulate reasoning, challenge assumptions, and co-construct meaning. This supports the view that speaking activities serve a dual function, acting not only as platforms for linguistic production but also as cognitive spaces for higher-order thinking development. In this regard, qualitative evidence provides nuanced accounts of how interactional practices mediate both language learning and critical engagement.

In relation to RQ2, the predominance of dialogic and interaction-oriented pedagogical practices, such as debates, problem-based discussions, and reflective speaking tasks, highlights the central role of instructional design in fostering critical thinking. However, the findings also indicate that the effectiveness of these practices is contingent upon teacher mediation, task structuring, and classroom norms. Teachers are not merely facilitators but active agents who model critical inquiry, scaffold reasoning processes, and create conditions that enable equitable participation. This underscores the importance of teacher agency in shaping critical thinking-oriented speaking instruction.

With regard to RQ3, the findings reveal that while learners perceive critical thinking-oriented speaking activities as meaningful and empowering, they also experience cognitive and linguistic challenges. At the same time, teachers recognize the pedagogical value of such practices but encounter practical constraints related to time, curriculum demands, and learners' proficiency levels. A key insight emerging from the synthesis is the tension between linguistic accuracy and critical engagement. This tension reflects a broader pedagogical dilemma in EFL contexts, where teachers must balance the development of language form with the promotion

of meaningful communication and critical reasoning. This tension can be theoretically interpreted through the lens of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which posits that human working memory is limited in its capacity to process multiple complex demands simultaneously. When learners in EFL speaking contexts are preoccupied with monitoring grammatical accuracy, word choice, and pronunciation, their available cognitive resources for higher-order reasoning may be substantially reduced. Consequently, the cognitive demands of linguistic processing may “crowd out” the mental space needed for critical analysis, argument construction, and evaluative thinking. This theoretical perspective suggests that pedagogical scaffolding strategies — such as pre-task vocabulary preparation, structured speaking frames, and explicit modeling of reasoning moves — may reduce extraneous cognitive load and thereby create greater cognitive space for critical engagement during speaking tasks.

In relation to RQ4, the review highlights several methodological and contextual limitations within the existing body of research. The dominance of short-term, context-specific qualitative case studies suggests a reliance on localized and time-bound perspectives, which may limit the generalizability and transferability of findings. Furthermore, the uneven geographical distribution of studies indicates that current understandings of critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction remain culturally situated and potentially biased toward specific educational contexts. Another critical issue concerns the limited attention to assessment practices in speaking-oriented critical thinking. Although critical thinking is widely recognized as a key instructional goal, few studies provide systematic frameworks for assessing it in speaking tasks. This lack of alignment between pedagogy and assessment points to a gap in assessment literacy, highlighting the need for more integrated approaches that combine formative assessment, peer feedback, and discourse-based evaluation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while qualitative research has significantly advanced our understanding of critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction, the field would benefit from greater methodological diversity, broader contextual representation, and stronger integration between pedagogy and assessment. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing more coherent, context-sensitive, and pedagogically grounded approaches to fostering critical thinking in EFL speaking classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesized qualitative studies on critical thinking in EFL speaking instruction published between 2019 and 2024. The findings indicate that critical thinking in EFL speaking is primarily developed through dialogic and interactive learning activities, such

as discussions, debates, and problem-based speaking tasks. These activities provide opportunities for learners to engage in reasoning, evaluation, and meaning-making while simultaneously developing their speaking skills. The review also shows that the successful integration of critical thinking depends not only on instructional activities but also on teacher mediation and classroom interaction. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating reflective dialogue and creating learning environments that encourage critical engagement. However, the literature remains dominated by short-term studies, with limited attention given to assessment practices and diverse EFL contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that critical thinking and speaking development are closely interconnected and are best fostered through socially mediated and communicative learning experiences. These results highlight the importance of designing speaking instruction that promotes both language use and critical engagement in EFL classrooms.

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