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Developing critical reading behaviors through guided close reading of research articles

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Abstract. The ability to construct well-reasoned arguments remains a challenge for many EFL undergraduates engaged in academic reading and writing. This study examines how guided close reading of research articles supports the development of critical reading behaviors and research-based academic writing. Using a mixed-methods design, the study was conducted in a Research in ELT course involving 24 fifth-semester EFL students selected through intact-class sampling. Data were collected through think-aloud protocols, reading logs, classroom observations, and two stages of academic writing drafts. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively and through paired sample comparisons, while qualitative data were thematically coded to capture analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors. The findings indicate a shift from surface comprehension toward deliberate engagement with claims, evidence, assumptions, and reasoning. These changes were reflected in clearer argument structures and improved integration of evidence in students' writing. The study recommends integrating guided close reading into academic literacy courses to strengthen critical reading and research-based writing practices.

Introduction

The ability to construct arguments through critical reasoning is a core expectation of higher education and a key competence for academic literacy in the twenty-first century. University students are expected to evaluate claims, assess evidence, identify assumptions, and justify conclusions when engaging with scholarly texts. Critical thinking frameworks emphasize skills including analysis, evaluation, and inference as essential for academic success and knowledge construction (Batdı et al., 2024; Liu & Puteh, 2025; Widana et al., 2021). In academic reading, these skills enable students to move beyond comprehension toward reasoned judgment and argumentation, which form the foundation of research-based writing.

Many EFL students struggle to question the author's main ideas, reasoning, and evidence in academic articles. Studies show that many EFL students focus on understanding only the surface meaning of texts. They read mainly to get information, not to evaluate the author's reasoning or think about the text as an argument (Castaño-Roldán & Correa, 2021; Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Heidari, 2020). These habits are clearer when students read research articles, which require them to notice methods, follow arguments, and see how evidence supports the authors' conclusions

(Groth & Choi, 2023; Hà & Abril, 2024). However, many students read texts like stories or descriptions, paying attention to separate facts instead of seeing how the authors build their ideas.

In the Research in ELT course, students demonstrated limited engagement with research articles. They predominantly focused on surface-level comprehension, highlighting definitions and summarizing content rather than evaluating claims, evidence, or reasoning. Prior coursework introduced reading and writing strategies, but students demonstrated limited experience analyzing argumentative structures or assessing methodological rigor. These patterns reflect the broader challenge in Indonesian EFL higher education, where undergraduates often treat research articles as information sources rather than as knowledge-building arguments (Gu & Xu, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2023; Trương et al., 2023; Jaya et al., 2025).

This issue becomes more urgent as higher education increasingly requires research-based writing. Academic writing demands accurate comprehension to judge the credibility, coherence, and logic of sources used to support arguments (Fitriyah et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2020). In the research context of this study, students were required to read international journal articles for course assignments, yet preliminary classroom observations and writing tasks showed limited engagement with argument structure and reasoning. Students' texts relied heavily on summaries and quotations, with minimal evaluation of claims or evidence, indicating a gap between expected academic standards and actual reading practices. Without sustained engagement with text structure, rhetorical intent, and reasoning processes, students struggle to move from summarizing to analyzing. Their writing often lacks clear arguments because they do not question the authors' claims, assumptions, and methods while reading (Kleemola et al., 2022; Li, 2024; Zhang, 2023).

The urgency of this study stems from the growing emphasis on research-based academic writing in higher education, which requires students to critically evaluate sources and construct reasoned arguments rather than reproduce information. Research shows that many EFL undergraduates enter advanced academic tasks without sufficient ability to analyze claims, evaluate evidence, and interrogate author assumptions when reading research articles (Allehyani, 2025; He & AlSaqqaf, 2025; Yulian, 2021; Widana, 2022). As a result, students often rely on surface-level summaries and uncritical citation practices, which weaken the quality of arguments and academic integrity (Dorgham Morsi & Rezk, 2025). If these reading practices are not addressed early, students risk carrying limited critical reading competence into thesis writing and professional academic work, undermining the quality of research-based arguments. Addressing this gap is therefore essential for aligning instructional practices with current academic literacy demands in EFL higher education.

The gap between exposure to research articles and deep comprehension contributes to persistent challenges in constructing persuasive arguments (Kaewneam, 2025; Šandová, 2023). Undergraduates often treat research articles as static repositories of information rather than as knowledge-building conversations shaped by disciplinary reasoning. This mismatch between what research articles require and how students read them results in written arguments that are underdeveloped, fragmented, or inadequately supported (Alexander et al., 2023; Basu et al., 2025). Guided close reading offers a pathway for shifting students' attention from surface features toward the logical, rhetorical, and evidentiary functions that define academic texts.

These difficulties are visible in classroom reading behaviors. When reading research articles, students tend to highlight definitions and topic sentences rather than trace the argument flow, evaluate the evidence, or question the methodological rationale. Analysis of students' reading logs and annotations revealed that most comments focused on content recall rather than reasoning, with few instances of critique or evaluative questioning. Research shows that EFL learners often

read academic texts line by line without noticing how ideas connect across sections or how authors justify claims (García-Gorrostieta et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2023). Their annotations remain descriptive, emphasizing what the text says rather than how and why the argument is constructed.

Empirical evidence indicates that EFL students experience persistent difficulties when engaging with research articles in academic courses. Studies conducted in university EFL contexts report that students predominantly read to extract information rather than to evaluate arguments, resulting in limited attention to claims, evidence, and reasoning (Abahussain et al., 2022; Ferdinandus & Simantuak, 2024; Silfia & Jaya, 2025). Classroom-based research shows that students' annotations and reading responses focus largely on definitions and topic sentences, with minimal critique or evaluative questioning (Antia & Vogt, 2022; Archila et al., 2025). In research writing tasks, these reading practices translate into texts that rely heavily on summaries and quotations, while lacking coherent argumentation and justification of evidence (Jarunthawatchai et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been documented in Indonesian and Southeast Asian EFL settings, where undergraduates report difficulty interpreting methodological rationale and linking evidence to claims in journal articles (Bram & Angelina, 2022). These findings demonstrate a clear mismatch between the cognitive demands of research articles and students' actual reading behaviors in the field.

This pattern reflects a wider trend in EFL contexts where students read mainly to collect information rather than to think through the author's reasoning (Olifant et al., 2020). Undergraduate readers seldom identify assumptions in research design or critique the adequacy of evidence, even though these skills form the core of critical thinking and academic literacy (Vieno et al., 2022; Wilson, 2016). The limitations become more pronounced in research articles because these texts rely heavily on disciplinary logic, methodological justification, and argument-driven structure (Koray & Çetinkılıç, 2020). Without explicit guidance, students struggle to navigate these conventions, resulting in limited comprehension and weak transfer to academic writing.

The study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives supporting the development of critical reading behaviors. The Paul Elder critical thinking model highlights core elements of reasoning such as claims, assumptions, evidence, and implications, positioning reading as a reasoning process rather than passive absorption (Paul & Elder, 2006). Critical literacy frames readers as active interrogators of author intent and knowledge construction (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). Close reading emphasizes slow and deliberate analysis of structure, logic, and rhetorical moves (Corson, 2025; Greenham, 2019). Metacognitive strategy theory explains how students monitor their understanding and regulate reading behaviors during complex tasks, which is strongly associated with critical comprehension (Ghimire & Mokhtari, 2025; Indriyani & Pertiwi, 2021; Momdjian & Chidiac, 2025). This pattern reflects a wider trend in EFL contexts where students read mainly to collect information rather than to think through the author's reasoning.

Despite extensive research on reading strategies, few studies examine critical reading as a developmental set of observable behaviors in EFL higher education. Most previous work focuses on strategy frequency, comprehension outcomes, or short-term training (Nilforoushan et al., 2023; Takallou, 2025; Xu et al., 2022). Research articles as pedagogical texts remain underused, even though they provide rich opportunities for developing analytical reading (Alexander & Leonarto, 2020). Moreover, long-term instructional designs tracing the growth of critical reading across a semester are limited, particularly in Southeast Asian and Indonesian contexts (Setiawan et al., 2023). Little is known about how guided close reading influences reasoning processes and how these reading behaviors transfer to students' academic writing (Panduwinata, 2025).

This study addresses these gaps by implementing a semester-long guided close reading program in the Research in the ELT course, focusing on the observable development of analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors. Unlike prior studies that report strategy use or short-term comprehension gains, this research documents how critical reading behaviors emerge and evolve over time while directly examining their transfer to research-based academic writing. This focus offers a novel contribution to EFL higher education research.

Previous studies on EFL academic reading have primarily examined reading strategies, comprehension outcomes, or short-term instructional effects, often using isolated tasks or limited training durations (Hassan et al., 2025; Heydarnejad et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022). Although this body of research has established the importance of strategic reading, it offers limited insight into how critical reading behaviors develop over time or how students engage with research articles as argumentative texts. In contrast, the present study documents the longitudinal development of observable analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors through a semester-long guided close reading program. Unlike studies that focus on strategy frequency or test-based comprehension gains, this research traces how students learn to interpret claims, evaluate evidence, and regulate their reading when engaging with authentic research articles, and demonstrates how these behaviors transfer to the quality of students' research-based academic writing. By foregrounding behavioral development and the reading-writing connection, this study provides a novel empirical contribution to EFL higher education research.

The study investigates how guided close reading of research articles supports the development of critical reading behaviors among undergraduate EFL students during a semester-long academic literacy program. Its contribution lies in documenting these behaviors as they unfold over time, offering a developmental account that has received limited empirical attention in EFL higher education. By examining how students interpret claims, evaluate evidence, and regulate their reading across the semester, the study provides a more fine-grained understanding of reasoning-oriented reading processes. It also shows how these behaviors transfer to students' research-based writing, providing evidence for a reading-writing connection that remains underexplored in studies that use research articles as core instructional texts.

The study addresses the following research questions: 1) How did undergraduate EFL students demonstrate critical reading behaviors during guided close reading of research articles? 2) How did these behaviors develop across the semester? 3) How did guided close reading influence the quality of students' research-based arguments in their academic writing? Evidence is provided for instructional approaches that integrate close reading into higher education in EFL. The findings offer insights that can guide curriculum development to strengthen academic literacy and provide empirical grounding for linking critical reading to the quality of students' research-based arguments.

Method

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods design to trace the development of critical reading behaviors among undergraduate EFL students during a semester-long guided close reading program (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Quantitative data measured changes in performance and self-reported behaviors, while qualitative data captured students' reasoning processes as they engaged with research articles. This design enabled complementarity between numerical gains and process-level insights, yielding a comprehensive picture of how close reading supported analytical engagement with academic texts.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were twenty-four fifth-semester undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an academic literacy course in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu, Indonesia. The study was conducted during one academic semester as part of a compulsory Research in ELT course within the program. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were directly engaged in the instructional intervention and met specific selection criteria. These criteria included enrollment in the Research in ELT course, completion of foundational reading and writing subjects, and limited prior experience engaging with empirical research articles as argumentative texts. This sampling approach was appropriate for examining the development of critical reading behaviors within an authentic instructional context.

Participation occurred as part of regular coursework. At the time of the study, students had limited experience analyzing research articles beyond surface comprehension. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their learning artifacts, reading logs, think-aloud records, and writing tasks for research purposes. The course instructor served as the researcher, responsible for designing and implementing the instructional intervention, while students served as learners and research participants.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted over one academic semester lasting fourteen weeks. At the beginning of the semester, students completed a pre-course critical reading questionnaire to document baseline reading behaviors. The guided close-reading program was then implemented as part of regular classroom instruction. Instructional sessions involved structured modeling of close reading practices, guided analysis of selected research articles, and independent reading tasks. Throughout the semester, students completed weekly close-reading logs and participated in think-aloud activities to document their reasoning as they engaged with the texts.

Classroom observations were conducted during guided reading sessions to capture students' participation and use of analytical strategies. Midway through the semester, students completed a close reading performance task designed to assess their ability to identify claims, evaluate evidence, and examine methodological reasoning. At the end of the semester, students completed a post-course questionnaire and produced a research-based academic essay integrating evidence from the articles studied. All data collection procedures were embedded within regular instructional activities to maintain an authentic learning context.

Instructional Context

The guided close reading program ran for fourteen instructional weeks within one academic semester, integrating structured modeling, guided practice, and independent analysis of empirical research articles. Instructional sessions emphasized identifying claims, interrogating assumptions, evaluating evidence, and tracing methodological reasoning. Students completed weekly close reading logs, think-aloud tasks, and writing assignments that required integrating insights from research articles into their own research-based arguments.

Instruction followed close-reading principles that promote a deliberate, slow, and text-centered examination (Corson, 2025; Greenham, 2019). It also incorporated critical thinking elements drawn from Paul & Elder's (2006) framework, critical literacy perspectives emphasizing interrogation of text purpose and stance, Luke, and metacognitive regulation strategies (Pressley & Gaskins, 2006).

Data Sources

Six complementary data sources were gathered to capture performance outcomes and the developmental processes underlying students' critical reading growth. Changes in students' perceptions and self-reported analytical behaviors were documented through a pre-post critical reading questionnaire administered at the beginning and end of the semester. A close reading performance task provided evidence of students' ability to identify claims, assumptions, methodological reasoning, and evidence chains in a research article. Think-aloud protocols provided real-time insight into how students interpreted and evaluated key sections of the texts as they verbalized their reasoning. Sequential reading logs were collected weekly to trace metacognitive monitoring and shifts in reading priorities as students progressed through the program. Research-based essays produced at the end of the semester served as indicators of how critical reading behaviors transferred to the construction of academic arguments. Finally, classroom observations showed how students used close reading strategies during guided sessions, including their participation and engagement in analytical tasks.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect quantitative data: (1) the critical reading questionnaire adapted from metacognitive reading research (Zhang & Seepho, 2013), (2) a close reading performance rubric aligned with Paul Elder's reasoning elements, and (3) an argument quality rubric based on academic writing literature (Hyland, 2003). Qualitative instruments included a think-aloud guide derived from Afflerbach's (1990) protocol procedures and a structured observation sheet used to document reasoning behaviors during reading discussions.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, all quantitative instruments were reviewed by two experts in EFL reading and academic literacy to evaluate alignment between the instrument items and the targeted constructs of critical reading and argumentation. The critical reading questionnaire was adapted from established metacognitive reading research (Zhang & Seepho, 2013), and its internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha following standard practices in educational measurement. Revisions were made based on expert feedback to improve clarity, relevance, and construct representation. The close reading performance rubric and the argument quality rubric were evaluated for reliability through inter-rater agreement, with two trained raters independently scoring a subset of student work. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached to ensure scoring consistency.

Data Analysis

To maintain analytic coherence and methodological transparency, a Data Analysis Map was constructed to organize all procedures. The map is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Analysis Map

Data Source	Analysis Procedures	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Lens	Outcome
Pre-Post Critical Reading Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics; paired-samples t-test; effect size	Perceived changes in analytical reading behaviors	Metacognitive Strategy Theory	Self-regulation and awareness gains
Close Reading Performance Task	Rubric scoring; pre–post comparison; correlation with writing scores	Identification of claims, assumptions, and evidence	Paul–Elder Reasoning Framework	Gains in analytical reading

Data Source	Analysis Procedures	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Lens	Outcome
Think-Aloud Protocols	Open and axial coding; thematic analysis	Reasoning, evaluation, inference-making	Constructivist Grounded Theory	Reasoning patterns
Sequential Reading Logs	Content analysis; coding of metacognitive reflections	Monitoring, revising, questioning	Metacognitive Regulation	Developmental shifts
Research-Based Essays	Argument quality rubric	Source integration and justification	Academic Writing Theory	Evidence of transfer
Classroom Observations	Structured coding	Engagement and strategy enactment	Close Reading Pedagogy	Contextual insights

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples tests to examine pre-post gains. Effect sizes were calculated to indicate the magnitude of change. A correlational analysis was used to examine relationships between reading performance and argument quality. Qualitative data from think-alouds, reading logs, essays, and observations were analyzed using open coding and thematic analysis to identify reasoning markers, evaluative moves, and shifts in metacognitive focus (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Mixed-methods integration occurred during the interpretation stage. Quantitative improvements were compared with qualitative evidence of behavioral and cognitive change. Convergence was observed when statistical gains aligned with coded reasoning behaviors. Complementarity occurred when qualitative insights explained why improvements emerged. Expansion occurred when qualitative data revealed new behavior types not captured by quantitative instruments. This integration strengthened the validity of findings and provided a multi-layered account of students' development.

Results and Discussion

Students' Critical Reading Behaviors during Guided Close Reading

Students demonstrated four core critical reading behaviors during guided close reading of research articles. These behaviors included identifying claims, examining evidence, evaluating assumptions, and monitoring comprehension. Quantitative results showed that students performed strongest in identifying central claims, with high accuracy in locating thesis statements and primary arguments. Their performance was fairly strong in tracking how evidence supported claims but weaker in spotting assumptions and judging the coherence of the argument. This pattern is common in EFL academic reading, where students depend on clear textual cues and are still learning to interpret implied reasoning.

Qualitative data from think-aloud protocols and reading logs offer a clearer view of how students applied these behaviors. They moved beyond restating information and began questioning how authors built their arguments. Table 2 synthesizes the quantitative patterns, qualitative themes, and illustrative excerpts from six students (S1, S3, S7, S10, and S12). This table presents a consolidated view of how critical reading behaviors manifested across participants and of the triangulated evidence supporting the overall interpretation.

Table 2. Synthesizes The Quantitative Patterns, Qualitative Themes

Behavior Category	Quantitative Indicator	Quantitative Evidence	Representative Excerpts
Identifying Claims and Central Arguments	Highest mean score; strong accuracy in locating main claims	Students articulated the purpose of each section and traced the argument direction	S1: "I try to see why the author uses this method and how it supports the conclusion." S12: "The main point becomes clearer after I compare the introduction and discussion."
Examining Evidence and Justification	Moderate performance; improvement in linking data to claims	Students checked the coherence between findings and conclusions	S3: "The results make sense, but I need to check if the explanation really supports the claim."
Evaluating Assumptions and Logical Flow	Lowest but increasing across tasks	Students began noting hidden assumptions and potential reasoning gaps	S7: "The author assumes the students already know the strategy, but I am not sure if that is true."
Metacognitive Monitoring during Reading	Metacognitive Monitoring during Reading	Metacognitive Monitoring during Reading	Metacognitive Monitoring during Reading

The integrated evidence shows that identifying claims and central arguments was the most consistently demonstrated behavior. Students S1 articulated the author's purpose before analyzing methodological or conceptual decisions. S12 strengthened this pattern by comparing sections to trace how arguments developed from introduction to discussion, indicating emerging structural awareness.

Examining evidence appeared as a developing behavior. Several students paid closer attention to how results supported overarching claims. S3's reflections show a growing awareness of data-claim alignment, an important foundation for argument-based reading in academic contexts.

Evaluating assumptions remained challenging but showed clear progress. S7's comments illustrate how students began identifying the underlying premises of a study. Although their evaluations were still limited, they showed the early stages of critical inquiry. S12 also noticed shifts in logic across sections, showing growing awareness of coherence.

Metacognitive monitoring became more visible as the semester progressed. Students regulated their comprehension by rereading sections, verifying interpretations, and adjusting their strategies. S10's verification-oriented reading and S12's practice of revisiting logical structures underline the emerging reflective stance encouraged by the guided close reading process.

The quantitative trends and qualitative data demonstrate that guided close reading helped students move from simple information gathering to more disciplined analytical reading. They began to read research articles as coherent arguments, paying attention to logic, evidence, and how ideas connected. These emerging behaviors explain how their critical reading practices grew across the semester, as elaborated in the next subsection. Students' success in identifying main claims aligns with prior findings that EFL learners rely on explicit textual cues (Heidari, 2020;

Yapp et al., 2021). The current study adds depth by showing that section comparisons enabled students to map argument structures rather than rely solely on surface features.

Evidence examination developed gradually, reflecting a shift from noticing to relational evaluation. S3's reflections illustrate growing attention to whether findings supported claims, consistent with the movement toward a more mature analytic stance than typically reported in short-term strategy training (Allehyani, 2025; Chinpakdee, 2024).

Evaluating assumptions remained the most difficult behavior. Previous research highlights challenges in detecting implicit reasoning in EFL readers (Hussin et al., 2024; Liu, 2019). The study shows that students began questioning methodological assumptions and participant descriptions, with S7 demonstrating early critical inquiry without structured instructional support. Metacognitive monitoring showed the clearest growth. Whereas prior studies report that EFL readers often lack self-regulation and read linearly (Alfahid & Zai, 2024; Lap et al., 2025; Li et al., 2022), the current findings reveal that guided close reading encouraged rereading, verification, and reflective thinking. S10 and S12 exemplify the emergence of metacognitive control surpassing typical short-term programs.

A novel contribution of this study is its behavior-based perspective. Unlike prior research that focuses on strategy frequency or comprehension scores, this study shows how students engaged in critical reading of research articles in authentic ways. Students demonstrated reasoning, verification, comparison, and questioning, providing a richer, ecological view of reading.

Another key contribution is the use of research articles as primary texts. Earlier studies often use simplified passages, while research articles demand deeper reasoning due to dense arguments and methodological justification (Al-Hawamdeh, 2025; Rets et al., 2022). Findings show that students began reading these texts as arguments rather than sources of information, a shift rarely reported in EFL undergraduate contexts.

Overall, the results indicate that guided close reading supported the development of analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors among undergraduate EFL students. Across quantitative measures and qualitative evidence, students moved from surface-level comprehension toward deliberate engagement with claims, evidence, assumptions, and reasoning. These changes were consistently reflected in their reading practices and transferred to improvements in research-based academic writing, demonstrating a coherent relationship between critical reading development and argument quality.

The Development of Critical Reading Behaviors

The patterns that emerged across the semester show how students' analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive behaviors developed over time. Table 3 outlines this progression from early to late semester and includes short excerpts from six students to illustrate these changes. The table also highlights the indicators used in the coding process, which strengthens the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

Table 3. Development of Critical Reading Behaviors across the Semester

Behavior Domain	Early-Semester Characteristics	Mid-Semester Indicators	End-of-Semester Growth	Representative Excerpts
Analytical reading	Focus on summarizing surface details; difficulty	Recognition of argument flow and data claim connections	Ability to map claims, evidence, and reasoning across sections	"Now I follow how each section supports the argument,

	identifying claims			not only its topic." (S1)
Evaluative reading	Judgments based on clarity or interest; limited critique	Beginning to question methodological choices and conclusions	Consistent evaluation of assumptions, evidence, and reasoning	"The sample size weakens the conclusion even though the idea is strong." (S3)
Metacognitive monitoring	Minimal rereading or verification; passive reading approach	Increased rereading for clarification and vocabulary checks	Active regulation through verification, synthesis, and strategic rereading	"I reread the results and method to check consistency." (S10)

The developmental patterns indicate steady growth in students' analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors. The alignment between quantitative gains and qualitative reflections suggests that the program helped students move from a surface-level understanding to a more reflective, questioning engagement with research texts.

Analytical behavior showed the earliest improvement. Initially, many students focused on summarizing surface details and overlooked embedded claims in each section. Over time, they began to recognize how arguments were constructed and how evidence supported individual claims. This pattern aligns with previous research showing that EFL learners often struggle to trace argument flow in academic texts (Rousseau & van Gelder, 2024; Smith et al., 2023). The present study extends these findings by capturing students' own descriptions of their progress, revealing a more explicit understanding of argument structure. Unlike studies that rely mainly on post-tests, these ongoing reflections offer richer insights into the development of analytical reading in EFL academic settings.

The evaluative dimension also strengthened over time. Early judgments were often based on personal preference or general impressions. With repeated engagement, students began to question methodological choices, assess sample adequacy, and scrutinize the strength of conclusions. This contrasts with prior studies where EFL learners struggled to critique research methods even after instruction (Budhathoki, 2023; Orlov, 2021). In the current study, evaluation became more systematic, as students interrogated assumptions and examined the reasoning behind claims. This demonstrates that guided close reading offers a structured pathway for developing evaluative reading skills.

Metacognitive monitoring showed the most visible transformation. Students shifted from reading once and relying on intuition to deliberately regulating their reading. They reread key sections, verified terminology, and compared results with methods to ensure consistency. While earlier research highlights the importance of metacognitive strategies, it often finds that EFL learners struggle to apply them independently (Chou, 2021; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2021; Rivas et al., 2022). In contrast, the present study documents the emergence of an active strategy over the course of the semester. Students described how they applied these strategies and reflected on their effectiveness, providing concrete evidence of how metacognitive behaviors develop when guidance is integrated directly into reading practice.

These findings suggest that guided close reading provides a structured approach for advancing critical reading in higher-education EFL contexts. The study's novelty lies in documenting the

developmental sequence of analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive behaviors more clearly than prior research. Rather than reporting only general improvements in reading comprehension, this study demonstrates how students' behaviors evolve in real time and how they articulate these changes, offering a richer and more transparent account of critical reading development when students engage with research articles as arguments.

Influence of Guided Close Reading on Students' Research-Based Academic Writing

Improvements in critical reading behaviors were reflected in students' academic writing, particularly in how they formulated claims, integrated evidence, and justified reasoning. Table 4 presents the quantitative gains supported by representative excerpts from student reflections.

Table 4. Improvement in Argument Quality across Drafts

Dimension of Argument Quality	Early Draft Mean (n=24)	Final Draft Mean (n=24)	Change	Representative Excerpts
Clarity and specificity of claims	2.1 / 5	3.9 / 5	+1.8	"My argument is more focused because I learned how authors justify their claims." (S1)
Evidence integration and source use	2.4 / 5	4.0 / 5	+1.6	"I tried to show how the data supports my point, not only list it." (S3)
Justification and reasoning	1.9 / 5	3.6 / 5	+1.7	"I checked the assumptions behind the studies before using them." (S7)

Clearer claims in the final drafts reflect students' strengthened ability to identify and follow argument structures in research articles. As they engaged in authorial reasoning during close reading, they began to construct more precise positions and align them with the purposes of their papers. S1's reflection shows that students increasingly viewed claims as central organizing elements rather than simple topic statements.

Growth in evidence integration resulted from students' attention to how authors linked data and claims. The shift from listing citations to explaining their relevance mirrors the analytical routines practiced during close reading. S3's reflection illustrates this shift, as students began to justify their selection of particular sources and explain how the evidence supported their arguments.

Students also demonstrated improvement in reasoning and justification. Their enhanced ability to evaluate assumptions, identify limitations, and question methodological choices during reading carried over into their writing. S7's reflection shows that this evaluative stance shaped their decisions about source credibility and methodological alignment when constructing their arguments.

The additional excerpts reinforce these developmental pathways:

> *S12: "Close reading helped me understand how evidence works, so my writing became more analytical than descriptive."*
> *S10: "I checked if the study design matched my point, not just if the article looked interesting."*
> *S5: "Seeing how authors connect claims and evidence made me follow the same pattern in my paper."*

These patterns show that guided close reading led to substantial improvement in students' argument quality. By learning to read research articles as structured arguments, they developed clearer claims, used evidence with greater purpose, and articulated stronger reasoning. These gains indicate that critical reading plays an important role in shaping research-based academic writing in EFL higher education.

The findings indicate that students' developing critical reading behaviors supported meaningful advancement in their writing. Earlier studies acknowledge a connection between reading and writing, but the present study provides behavioral evidence that clarifies how the transfer occurs. Students' claims became more focused as they learned to treat them as positions requiring justification. This differs from earlier work, which reported that EFL learners struggle to formulate well-defined claims due to limited experience with academic argumentation (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Taye & Mengesha, 2024). The present findings demonstrate that guided close reading offers a more immediate route to developing claim-focused thinking.

Growth in evidence integration further shows the influence of close reading. Students examined how authors linked data to claims, which helped them move beyond mere citation lists. By the end of the semester, they explained why each source mattered and how it supported their position. Previous studies often attribute the practice of citing to weak analytical reading habits (Alexander & Leonarto, 2020; Maab et al., 2024; Evi Yupani & Widana, 2023). This study expands that view by presenting clear evidence of students' increasing ability to justify source use, supported by their own reflections.

Students' reasoning and justification also became more principled. Their practice in evaluating assumptions and methodological strength while reading shaped how they assessed the credibility and relevance of sources during writing. Earlier research reports that EFL writers often rely on surface features rather than substantive evaluation (Chen et al., 2024; Li, 2021). The current findings show a different trajectory. Students engaged in deeper assessment by repeatedly practicing evaluative reading. This demonstrates how evaluative reading directly supports evaluative writing.

The reflections from S12, S10, and S5 make these developments more explicit. They show that close reading enabled students to internalize how authors construct arguments through claim, evidence, reasoning, and connections. Once students recognized this structure, they transferred it into their writing, producing manuscripts that were more analytical and more aligned with research-based argumentation.

The study demonstrates that guided close reading played a central role in shaping students' academic writing. The contribution lies in documenting how changes in reading behavior directly supported improvements in claim formulation, evidence integration, and reasoning. Earlier research often examined reading and writing separately and focused on final products. This study provides a clearer explanation of how the two domains interact and how structured reading instruction can yield meaningful gains in research-based academic writing in EFL higher education contexts.

Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the small number of participants drawn from a single institutional context may limit the transferability of the findings to other EFL settings. Second, the intervention was conducted within one academic semester, constraining conclusions about the long-term sustainability of students' critical reading development. Third, the instructor's dual role as teacher and researcher may have influenced

student engagement, although the use of multiple data sources helped strengthen credibility. These limitations indicate the need for cautious interpretation and further research across diverse contexts and longer instructional periods.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to critical reading research by conceptualizing critical reading as a set of observable and developing behaviors rather than isolated strategies or fixed outcomes. This view aligns with process-oriented perspectives that frame reading as dynamic meaning construction involving evaluation and self-regulation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Olifant et al., 2020). By tracing the emergence of analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive behaviors over time, the study extends models of academic literacy that position reading as disciplinary reasoning. The findings also clarify the reading–writing relationship by showing how reasoning-oriented reading practices inform the construction of academic arguments, rather than merely supporting information uptake (Castillo-Martínez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021; Jarunthawatchai et al., 2025; Liu & Puteh, 2025; Supardi & Rahman, 2025).

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings suggest that guided close reading of research articles can be systematically embedded in academic literacy and research-focused EFL courses. Explicit attention to claims, evidence, assumptions, and reasoning supports students' movement from surface-level summarization toward analytical reading and argument-driven writing. Consistent with prior research, structured engagement with complex texts develops academic reasoning and disciplinary literacy among EFL learners (Kim & Zagata, 2024; Tegegne & Mezgebu, 2025; Tilahun et al., 2022). The instructional approach presented in this study, therefore, offers a feasible model for aligning reading and writing tasks to strengthen students' research-oriented literacy skills.

Conclusion

This study examined how guided close reading of research articles supported the growth of analytical, evaluative, and metacognitive reading behaviors and strengthened students' research-based academic writing. The findings show that sustained attention to claims, evidence, assumptions, and reasoning helped students read research as structured argumentation rather than as informational text. These behavioral gains transferred to their writing, where students formulated clearer claims, used evidence more purposefully, and justified their arguments with greater coherence. The study contributes to academic literacy research by clarifying how specific reading behaviors develop over time and how these behaviors shape writing quality in EFL higher education. Several limitations warrant consideration. The study focused on a single cohort in a single academic literacy program, which may limit its broader applicability. The evidence reflects one semester of development, so longer-term changes remain uncertain. Future studies can follow students across programs and disciplines to trace how these behaviors evolve in more complex settings. Research that examines variations in instructional design or compares print and digital reading environments would deepen understanding of how reasoning develops during academic reading. Despite these constraints, the findings indicate that guided close reading offers a productive route for integrating critical reading with research-based writing. When instruction makes reasoning visible, students gain a clearer sense of how knowledge is constructed in research, which in turn supports the production of more coherent academic texts. These insights can inform curriculum design, teacher preparation, and academic literacy initiatives in EFL higher-education contexts.

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