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## ABSTRACT

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education face challenges in developing critical reading and academic writing skills in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments. The study investigated the effectiveness of integrating critical reading blended online learning modules to support the development of EFL first-year college students' academic writing skills. This was a semester-long pedagogical action research study conducted at a leading federal university in the UAE across four first-year composition courses. The study involved designing and implementing online blended modules integrated within the content of a first-year composition course, either as classroom activities or additional supplementary practice for students. Data collection included student interviews, written artifacts, reflections, and an instructor's reflective diary. Qualitative findings indicated that integrating critical reading instruction through online blended modules supported the development of students' academic writing skills in L2 college composition courses within an EMI environment. Utilizing instructional technology and online blended learning enhanced the students' learning experience and promoted their critical reading abilities. The study offers several pedagogical implications for L2 composition instruction in English-medium higher education, emphasizing the importance of incorporating critical reading into EFL composition course design, maximizing learning through reading-writing connections and reflective practice, and maintaining accurate learner profiles regarding critical reading abilities. These factors could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the pedagogical approaches necessary for effective composition instruction.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study uniquely addresses critical reading within EFL composition courses through pedagogical action research and blended learning modules. It explores an under-researched area in EFL contexts, specifically the integration of critical reading in first-year composition courses. The study offers valuable pedagogical insights into technology-enhanced teaching practices that develop critical reading and academic writing skills.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions over the past two decades have revealed a concern that many L1 as well as L2 students are underprepared for the intricacies of post-secondary critical thinking, reading, and writing responsibilities (Bosley, 2008; Downs, 2000; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). Many first-year college students enter higher education without the ability to read critically or use higher-order thinking skills (Bosley, 2008; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). They particularly struggle with fundamental comprehension, main concept recognition, and interpreting critical perspectives in complex texts (Bosley, 2008; Li & Mak, 2022). Moreover, many do not adopt a questioning stance to

examine the underlying assumptions of a text to read beyond the surface level (Bosley, 2008). This, in turn, presents further challenges for students in writing, particularly in structuring content to clearly express key concepts and supporting ideas. Formulating a thesis statement or producing supporting evidence from source material is challenging for these students (Li & Mak, 2022). The problem is further aggravated for L2 students who enter college lacking adequate experience in critical reading and critical thinking required for them to cope with the learning demands of tertiary education (Albeckay, 2014; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014; Wilson, 2016). As Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2014) explained, the gravity of the problem in EFL writing is that students “leave large gaps” when transitioning from reading to reading-based writing, which deems them “unable to detect implicit assumptions in the text or to offer insights about them” (p. 25). This might be attributed to their cultural, social, and educational backgrounds, which generally influence their preparedness for a predominantly Western approach to higher education (Bali, 2015; Yu, 2015). Despite the recognition and acknowledgment of this problem, the formal instruction of critical reading and critical thinking skills in EFL college composition courses is largely overlooked (Barnawi, 2011; Bosley, 2008; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014; Yu, 2015). Bosley (2008) regrets that “reading pedagogy is an afterthought in many composition classrooms” (p. 287). Despite including the development of critical reading ability as an objective of many first-year composition courses, instructors vary greatly in how they conceive, define, and approach critical reading instruction (Bosley, 2008). There is also a dearth of research detailing the nature of instruction occurring in college composition classrooms (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). Not only are instructors challenged with working with underprepared students, but constant changes in course outcomes in introductory classes present additional challenges (Varelas, Wolfe, & Ialongo, 2015). Additionally, instructors must cope with shifting policies regarding the demarcation between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and composition courses, as well as their fit within the core curriculum and their placement within schools in the university.

With the advent of technology in higher education, blended learning (BL) has gained popularity in college composition courses. Blended learning is the use of a combination of online and face-to-face work mainly to enhance the learning experience in terms of time efficiency and possible supplementation of course material (Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013). Blended learning augments and facilitates learner-to-learner as well as learner-to-instructor interactions. This develops student literacy and interactive skills, as well as encourages instructors to create engaging material that fosters greater online learner collaboration (Pizzi, 2014). Students currently show greater attraction to technology and, thus, a preference for BL as it complements classroom teaching, provides a more personalized learning experience, supports independent and collaborative learning, accommodates different learning styles, and offers additional practice beyond the classroom in a less stressful environment (Bostanci & Çavuşoğlu, 2018). Research has also shown that there is a relationship between exposure to BL and the development of online critical literacy skills and writing skills (Fola-Adebayo, 2019). Nevertheless, the research on the use of online resources to develop critical reading and academic writing skills is still quite limited, as most studies focus on comparing online resources to traditional classroom interactions or are more concerned with other language skills, with almost no research on the relationship between students’ critical reading and critical thinking skills and online resources in the writing classroom (Zhang, 2018).

There is a need to further explore training in critical reading and academic writing, as insufficient attention has been given to this research area, specifically in EFL contexts. Critical reading skills in higher education seem to be overlooked in the research in comparison with the apparent interest in critical thinking studies (Van, Li, & Wan, 2022). Several research studies have explored the interconnectedness between critical thinking and writing (Afshar, Movassagh, & Radi, 2017; Barnawi, 2011; Elmouhtarim, 2018; Lin & Xiang, 2019; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014; Zhang, 2018) and the alliance between the instruction of critical thinking and argumentation in L2 writing has been acknowledged to sharpen the focus of students and improve the quality of their engagement in academic writing (Andrews, 2015; Harrell & Wetzel, 2019; Lu & Xie, 2019). However, few studies have closely examined critical reading within L2 first-year composition. With the greater move towards the use of technology in college composition

classes to simplify or speed practices and to situate students' learning in the online learning trend, very few studies have considered critical reading instruction in EFL first-year composition courses and its systematic inclusion in course design in a BL environment.

### 1.1. Research Question

The study aimed to examine reading and writing connections pedagogically by investigating the integration of critical reading and critical thinking blended online instruction to enhance the academic writing skills of EFL first-year college students. It explored L2 students' perspectives on their development of critical reading and critical thinking skills in relation to their academic writing ability, especially their experience with blended online instruction. To realize the above-mentioned objectives, the present study was guided by the overarching research question.

- Does the integration of blended online critical reading and critical thinking instruction support the development of the critical reading and academic writing abilities of first-year EFL college students at a leading federal university in the UAE?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This was a semester-long pedagogical action research study. Participants were students enrolled at a leading federal university in the UAE in four first-year English composition classes. The study involved the design and implementation of online blended learning activities that were integrated within the course material of a first-year composition course, either as classroom activities or additional supplementary practice for the students. Students were required to complete these activities as part of the coursework they normally received as part of the class instruction. The study followed the four phases of action research: planning, action, observation, and reflection (Burns, 2010). The planning phase involved the initial reconnaissance by identifying the problem and gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of the context, as well as the development of the content for the online blended instruction. This was followed by the action phase, which involved the administration of the online blended modules and data collection. In the observation phase, student performance was analyzed, and their progress was evaluated. Finally, the reflection phase involved the interpretation of the data and the evaluation of the effects of the intervention.

### 2.1. The Course

This research was conducted at a leading EMI federal university in the UAE, which has a general education program with a required series of three English composition courses. These courses hone students' academic writing skills while addressing possible language difficulties students might encounter during reading and writing. This course mainly focuses on persuasive writing in a variety of rhetorical contexts. Students are required to demonstrate critical reading and thinking skills in summarizing and employing the use of persuasive strategies in written and visual genres for specific audiences and purposes. The course starts with a review of summarizing skills. Next, the concept of rhetorical appeals is introduced as students are required to identify the appropriate use of persuasive appeals in advertisements and short texts in the corresponding midterm assessment. The remaining course time is dedicated to writing a persuasive essay in which students make use of sources to support their opinions. In this period, writing instruction is foregrounded with special attention given to the mechanics of writing a persuasive essay, the writing process, integrating sources, and proper citation.

### 2.2. Participants

The student participants in this study were Emirati undergraduate first-year students enrolled in the researcher's English II composition classes at one of the three federal universities in the United Arab Emirates. These students were enrolled in the university's general education program and are in their second semester at the university. A total of 89 students were involved in the action phase of the study and the administration of the developed online blended

modules in and out of the classroom. However, five focal participants from the same cohort were purposively selected to be the focus cases for data analysis. These students were interviewed in the planning and observation phases, and their written artifacts and reflections were the focus of the qualitative data analysis. This was a purposive sample as it involved selecting participants who are potentially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Perry, 2005). These students volunteered and confirmed their willingness to be interviewed for the research by emailing the researcher after the research study was introduced and explained. Ethical procedures were followed by obtaining consent from students. Table 1 presents the interviewed students' pseudonyms, gender, and age.

**Table 1.** Demographics of Interviewed Students.

Student Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Ahmed	M	18
Mostafa	M	18
Tarek	M	18
Malak	F	17
Manal	F	18

### 2.3. The Instructor/Researcher

My roles as the class instructor and researcher evoked issues of positionality. The roles of researchers and practitioners in action research are central issues that entail human concerns (Chen, Chou, & Lin, 2018). Insider research is undertaken by a researcher who is a member of or affiliated with the organization, group, or community in which the research takes place (Burns, 2010; Fleming, 2018). Fleming (2018) contended that the role of the researcher exists on a continuum that is shaped by the "closeness" of the researcher with the aspect being researched, and as such, the position of the researcher is not "static" and could shift along the continuum at different stages in the research. In this action research study, the researcher assumed the role of an insider researcher since it is a practitioner research inquiry conducted by the researcher in her teaching practice and classrooms. This positioned the researcher as a "reflective practitioner" and an instructor who wishes to contribute to instructional improvement.

### 2.4. The Phases

#### 2.4.1. The Planning Phase

For practitioner pedagogical action research, the first step involves observing and identifying a problem or issue that needs to be addressed. This initial reconnaissance should be as accurate and effective as possible, involving a wide range of perspectives, as it frames the entire action process in terms of the research design (McAteer, 2013). To better understand the complexities of the context and the problem, and to inform the research design and material development of the online blended activities to be implemented in the action phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four instructors and five focal students. The interviews explored the difficulties encountered with learning and teaching critical reading, its effects on academic writing, and suggestions for addressing them. The planning phase also included the process of developing the online blended modules in terms of their format, materials, activities, and assessments, considering best practices and pedagogy established by the literature on critical thinking and reading-writing connections, as well as the insights and suggestions of the interviewed students and instructors collected during the planning phase.

#### 2.4.2. The Action Phase

This phase involved the administration of the developed online blended modules in and out of the classroom for all 89 students enrolled in the four classes. The action phase was conducted over seven consecutive weeks, during which three online blended modules were integrated into classroom instruction. The Critical Reading Module was implemented first over two weeks, followed by the Rhetorical Analysis Module in two weeks, and finally the

Argument Analysis Module over three weeks. Each module consisted of blended online content specific to the module focus, in addition to a module assessment and related reflections. Activities included three online modules focusing on critical reading, rhetorical analysis, and argumentation. These modules provided material to inform, offer practice, and evaluate students' knowledge and skills in these areas. The activities within the modules were integrated into the class syllabus and included both in-class and outside-of-class work that complemented classroom activities. To gauge student progress and achievement in each module, students completed a module assignment and reflection. The modules were designed to address broad concepts and skill sets that students primarily struggled with. They followed a consistent structure in terms of layout, formatting, and organization of content to facilitate student navigation and ease of access to materials.

#### *2.4.3. The Observation Phase*

This phase entailed detailed observation, monitoring, and recording, which enabled proper assessment of the effects of the intervention and the proposed change. The occurrence of observations and reflections by the researcher was not limited to this phase only but occurred throughout the action phase and data collection, continuing into the subsequent reflection phase, as the phases of action research are "spiral in nature and can organically overlap" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Accordingly, observations involved the analysis of student performance on online activities and the evaluation of their progress through the module assignments and the reflections of the five focal cases selected for data analysis purposes. Additionally, as part of the observation phase, follow-up interviews with the five focal students previously interviewed were conducted to gather their feedback on the experience of engaging with the blended online activities across the three modules. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to explore students' perspectives and experiences with the learning modules. The questions addressed their views on the inclusion of the learning modules and their effectiveness, as well as problems encountered and suggestions for improvement.

#### *2.4.4. The Reflection Phase*

This stage involves the interpretation of the data and evaluating the effects of the intervention and how it can be modified and enhanced for future implementation. Focused reflection is a key element of most action research models as it enhances metacognition and the researcher's combined consideration of technical proficiencies, theoretical assumptions, and/or moral and ethical issues (Chen et al., 2018). In this phase, the researcher attempted to consider the various elements that could have influenced the course of the study and its outcomes based on the data collected by scrutinizing the evidence of students' understanding of the concepts of critical reading and thinking and their manifestation in their academic writing.

### *2.5. The Modules*

The first learning module was the Critical Reading Module. It was designed to introduce students to the concepts of critical thinking and critical reading and to enhance their critical reading, note-taking, and summarizing skills. The module aimed to address the gap identified in the planning stage, that the composition course sequence does not include explicit instruction on critical reading. This module attempted to introduce students to the concept of critical reading as well as equip them with strategies for critical reading and note-taking. The module complemented four in-class sessions on defining critical reading and thinking, applying critical reading using the SQ3R method, reviewing summary writing, and an in-class summary writing activity. This module also served to prepare students for a course in-class summative assessment in which they were required to read and summarize a text.

The second module focused on rhetorical analysis. It was designed to familiarize students with the concepts of rhetoric, the rhetorical situation, and the rhetorical appeals. The module complemented three in-class sessions on understanding what is meant by rhetoric, the elements of the rhetorical triangle, and the importance of analyzing the

rhetorical situation of texts. It also introduced rhetorical appeals and how they are used in persuasion. This module stressed critical reading and thinking in the form of considering the importance of context, author, audience, and purpose in shaping how messages are conveyed in rhetorical pieces. It aimed at having students understand that rhetorical choices are deliberate in making meaning. The module culminated in a group writing assignment in which students were asked to collaborate with assigned partners in class to write a response to a given scenario. This was followed by reflection writing in which students were asked to examine their learning experience either with the module or the scenario assignment.

The third module focused on argument analysis. It introduced students to the basics of argumentation. It tackled defining arguments and identifying the elements of an argument, including premises, assumptions, supports, and conclusions. It also presented students with sample arguments to demonstrate how argument essays are written and to evaluate whether the arguments are logical and well-supported. The module targeted critical reading and thinking skills in reading texts and evaluating the line of reasoning presented. Additionally, it was demonstrated in the students' ability to formulate a thesis statement reflecting their opinion, integrate sources to provide evidence to support their reasons, and use rhetorical appeals effectively in their arguments. This module complemented six class sessions and the major writing assignment in the course, which is writing an argumentative essay to support the students' opinions on the use of a commodity of their choice. The blended material and activities were in the form of book chapters, videos, and websites on argumentation and writing an argumentative essay. Finally, students reflected on their overall experience with the module.

## 2.6. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from a variety of sources during the planning, action, and observation phases. Data collected in the planning phase involved the instructor and student initial interviews to inform the initial reconnaissance, exploring the perspectives of instructors and students to add further insights to the researcher's own experience, and providing a deeper understanding of the context, problem, and possible routes to address it. Data collected in the action phase included artifacts of student writing from their coursework and module assignments, and student reflections, while that collected in the observation phase was the researchers' reflective diary and student follow-up interviews. This gauged the effectiveness of integrating critical reading and critical thinking blended online learning activities in enhancing the academic writing skills of students and their perceptions of their learning experience. The data collection methods were varied to attend to methodological triangulation as the study draws on multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2015).

The multiple data collection methods aimed at triangulation and to provide a comprehensive description of the instruction and learning of critical reading and critical thinking in a composition classroom. In the data analysis process, interview transcripts, written artifacts, the instructor's reflective diary, and student reflections were systematically explored, and qualitative data analysis was carried out to present a more nuanced account of student experience and to accurately discern the effectiveness of the intervention. Data collected for qualitative analysis included that of the five focal students. For qualitative analysis, reflexive thematic analysis was implemented on student reflections, student follow-up interviews, and the instructor's reflective diary. Additionally, textual analysis was used to evaluate students' written artifacts. Qualitative data analysis was conducted in two stages: the planning phase and the reflection phase. Thematic analysis of the initial student and instructor interviews was performed during the planning phase, providing insights into the challenges faced by students with critical reading and those encountered by instructors in teaching critical reading in their classrooms. Concerns and suggestions indicated in the interviews informed the design and material development of the online blended activities. In the reflection phase, thematic analysis of the follow-up student interviews, student reflections, and the instructor's reflective diary was conducted, followed by textual analysis of student-written artifacts.



### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1. *Experience with the BL Online Modules*

Overall, students reported having a positive experience with the blended online learning modules in both the reflections and the follow-up interviews. They appreciated having a repertoire of material and activities that could be utilized outside of class at their own pace. Students repeatedly used the words “helpful” and “useful” to describe their experience with using the online blended modules. Their experience was generally positive as they related that it had contributed to their understanding of critical reading, thinking, and argumentation. Malak concluded that the modules generally facilitated her learning, as she “liked the idea of doing modules for things [they] are studying because it is easier to reach out for, and it's so helpful.” In addition, students appreciated the variety of material and activities posted to support their learning. Ahmed stated that students “were provided with sufficient links for videos and explanations to make [them] understand everything.” Students perceived the modules as a “good idea” and a “good source of information.” They valued it as a reference that they could use at any time, both inside and outside the classroom, as well as later in other courses. He thought it was a “good idea” to include the modules in the course, as “it gave time to reflect and also see if you actually learn fully about the topic.” Also, Malak considered the modules a useful resource since they had access to a variety of sources at their disposal to check. She mentioned that “they really helped us because instead of going and searching for these things that we need to know, we have many sources to check, and we have different types of sources. Like sometimes you can find videos and also there are some interesting articles.” Mostafa described the modules as a “home” that students can always “go back to when [they] need information.” Mostafa and Tarek agreed that the included material was especially “useful” when completing assignments. Tarek felt that the “critical reading module really helped me like doing the assignments then writing my essay. It helped like figuring out what I want to write and also in getting information.”

Students also felt that the blended online material and tools used in the modules complemented the course topics and fit well within the course sequence. Manal mentioned that the modules “fit well with the sequence of the course,” and Tarek thought “they went well with the flow of the class.” In addition, Ahmed believed that “every module was linked to one of the units that we were studying.” They believed that having access to material prior to it being addressed in class provided them with ample time to prepare, which contributed to making them more likely to read texts and materials outside of class. Ahmed thought “it’s always good to have like things to do outside the class as well,” as students use different resources than what you have inside the class.” He “liked” the idea of “reading at home rather than in class” and believed that other students “would be more into it” and more likely to read and “think about it more because the next whole class will be about it.” According to him, this would make students “more focused.”

#### 3.2. *The Value of Multimedia Content*

Regarding the content and assignments within the three online blended modules, students' feedback illuminated their significant role in enhancing reading and writing skills and assisting in the completion of course assignments. Even though students voiced two main concerns about the amount of work done for the modules and the difficulty of the module assignments, however, in hindsight, they felt that it was valuable. As the modules included a variety of material in the form of videos, websites, articles, book chapters, and interactive online mini-lessons, students asserted that they mostly utilized the videos and interactive mini-lessons, which they consistently resorted to for understanding and reviewing concepts. Students reported in their reflections their appreciation of the variety of material and activities posted for them to support their learning. Ahmed stated that students “were provided with sufficient links for videos and explanations to make [them] understand everything”.

### *3.3. Development of Critical Reading, Critical Thinking, and Academic Writing Skills*

From the students' perspective, these modules played an important role in promoting their critical reading, critical thinking, and academic writing abilities. They noted that having access to these resources affected how they actively engaged with texts.

#### *3.3.1. Meta Awareness of Critical Reading and Critical Thinking*

Student responses revealed that the modules reminded them of the utility of critical reading as a skill and contributed to raising awareness of their skill level. Ahmed pointed out that even though he had been introduced to critical reading previously in school, the modules acted as a reminder of the skill and its importance, not just academically but in life generally. For him, critical reading is recognizing the existence of various viewpoints, as he said, "It is very important because even in everyday life, you also need to think about things from different perspectives."

On the other hand, the modules helped Tarek realize that, contrary to his belief, his critical reading skills could use some improvement. Having gone through the material and the assignments, he concluded that he needs to work more on such skills, as he stated, "You know, I used to think, I know what is critical reading, but after taking that test and actually going through the assignments, I figured out that I need to practice more." In addition, he pinpointed that the modules helped him realize the value of having critical reading skills for text analysis, as he said, "I learned from this module the importance of critical reading and how it can affect the way I can interpret a certain text." As for Manal, she felt that generally, her "knowledge on critical reading and thinking has expanded." The modules served to raise her awareness about the way she reads and realize that she needs to change it. She explained that she started to "fully" read texts with more attention to details rather than quickly skimming, which in many cases led her to skip over important information.

She stated, "I always skimmed over things rather than like fully read them. Like I do miss out some points sometimes, I think that's an issue for me, but I need to deal with it." As for Mostafa and Malak, the modules introduced critical reading as a concept and presented them with a different way of reading and thinking. Mostafa highlighted the fact that the modules showed him "how to think when reading," while for Malak, the modules added to her knowledge and understanding of the skills, as she stated, "I really didn't know much about particular reading or thinking as I would hear about it, but I wouldn't know what it was. With the modules, I understood what it is."

#### *3.3.2. Identifying Main Ideas*

Student responses in the interviews revealed that having access to the modules not only changed the way they approach and read a text but also enhanced their ability to identify main ideas in texts. Mostafa had specifically reported on the critical reading skills that the modules had taught him, such as identifying main ideas and taking notes, as he stated, "I learned from the module how to differentiate between a main idea and a topic. I learned the meaning of how to read an article in a critical way."

Malak observed that she had altered the way she read texts, as she used to mainly skim and scan. However, having had access to the modules and in-class instruction on critical reading and thinking, she reads the full text and considers the main ideas and other elements of the text, as she clarified, "I think that it helped me, when I would read, I'm not just going to read the article in the way that I am just going through it. I need to read what the point of this article is, why they are writing this article, and who their audience is. I think these things helped me." Tarek also emphasized that the critical reading module had allowed him to closely examine "the point of the text" because "it really matters," in addition to determining "what the author really means."

According to him, it changed his mindset when reading a source; instead of just "looking for the information," he is now "looking for the point of the text." Ahmed also referred to learning specific skills such as summarizing and annotating, but added that the modules taught him how to approach a text critically and identify main ideas. He



reflected, saying, “I learned how to skillfully understand the context of a given text with the help of critical reading and thinking. Additionally, I learned how to write a summary by summarizing all the main ideas of the text and how to take notes from a given text.”

### 3.3.3. *Differentiating Fact from Opinion and Recognizing Bias*

One critical reading skill that most students referred to as being honed by the modules is recognizing bias. They disclosed that understanding and recognizing bias had been “difficult” for them prior to completing the modules. Ahmed expressed that earlier it was challenging for him to ascertain whether a text was biased, as he stated, “I always didn't really understand fully, or I had difficulty, actually knowing if something was biased or not,” and that the modules “helped [him] to actually understand.”

Manal also communicated that the modules helped her in differentiating fact from opinion, which in turn allowed her to evaluate texts for possible bias. It also fostered her ability to critically read and consider the authority behind the source and the motives involved, as she commented, “...but I know that the non-profit organizations, for example, they could be biased sometimes, so they could get the audience, like, to be a part of their organization or charity.” In addition, it supported her ability to evaluate the reliability of the information she used in her essay. She further clarified, “For my essay, most of the information that I got from those websites was facts. And even when I checked with the other articles, they were all similar.

So, I don't think that it was biased because they were facts.” Tarek also echoed the modules’ contribution in teaching him to differentiate between facts and opinions and to consider exigence and purpose when evaluating texts, as he mentioned, “It helped with evaluating the kind of text I'm reading because nowadays you don't know, like sometimes it's a fact and sometimes it's an opinion and people treat it as a fact, so you should know these things.” According to him, the modules also changed the way he thinks about texts and the aspects he should critically examine, as he stated.

I can get two texts about the same subject, but one is not good because it's biased or has other motives, and the other is straightforward. So, I think before I didn't know this, or I didn't think about it this way, but after we took critical reading, it was one of the things I should look out for and apply to the texts that I have read ever since. It really helped in seeing the text more clearly.

In addition, Tarek indicated that he has further extended the use of these critical reading skills whenever he is personally reading for pleasure and that he tends to consider the elements of the rhetorical situation, such as the author's purpose, when the text was written, and possible bias. He said, “I didn't know how I read or the way I read, because eventually I'm reading for pleasure. I'm reading this because I want to, but I can see more of the clicks of writing. Sometimes, I imagine when he's writing, what the author is thinking, and this is helpful”.

### 3.3.4. *Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation*

During their interviews, students expressed their positive views and inclination towards the Rhetorical Analysis Scenario Assignment, highlighting its uniqueness and creative nature. They found the process of brainstorming and creating an outline before crafting their responses particularly valuable. This approach helped students thoroughly contemplate the various aspects of the rhetorical situation and make informed decisions about which rhetorical appeals and modes to employ in the given scenario.

Through the completion of these outlines, students effectively showcased their thought processes and demonstrated their critical thinking skills. Figure 1. presents an illustrative example of this can be seen in the excerpt from Malak's response.

Audience	Describe the reader in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age: Teenager - 18</li> <li>• Gender: Female</li> <li>• Occupation: Student</li> <li>• Education: University student</li> <li>• Position of power: No power or authority</li> <li>• Values : Education and success</li> <li>• Position on the situation : Wants the best for me</li> </ul>	How would this knowledge affect your response?  Since the audience is a friend who is similar to my age, the response does not have to be very formal. The response could be over text since the author has no time to talk to her after class.
Rhetor	Describe the writer in terms of : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age: Teenager - 18</li> <li>• Gender: Female</li> <li>• Occupation: Student</li> <li>• Education: University student</li> <li>• Position of power: Has power on the choices and decisions</li> <li>• Values : Education and success</li> <li>• Position on the situation : Ask my best friend on advice and what to do</li> </ul>	How would this knowledge affect your response?  The rhetor and the audience are friends of the same age so it does not have to be formal. Pathos can be used.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Malak's brainstorming table for the rhetorical analysis module assignment.

Malak's response demonstrates that she was able to consider elements of the rhetorical situation, such as the rhetor and the audience, and their impact on the choice of rhetorical appeal and tone in writing. There is evidence of critical thinking in her analysis of the situation and the audience in terms of reflecting on how the rhetor could possibly interact with the audience effectively to achieve the desired purpose. Moreover, Mostafa's response exhibited further evidence of critical thinking as he considered the appropriateness of the rhetorical mode with the situation and the audience. He demonstrates an understanding of how to effectively target the audience for effective communication. Figure 2 demonstrates Mostafa's response in brainstorming the appropriateness of the rhetorical mode to the audience.

Audience	Describe the reader in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Age: 40</li> <li>- Gender: Male</li> <li>- Occupation: Manager of the tire company</li> <li>- Education: M.A. in management</li> <li>- Position of power: No power over me</li> <li>- Values: He wants to keep the reputation of the company</li> <li>- Position on the situation: They are the people who are mistaken</li> </ul>	How would this knowledge affect your response?  This knowledge will make me communicate with him using e-mail or letter and should communicate with him in a formal language. I chose to use e-mail because it is faster, and he can read it sooner than a sending a letter.
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Figure 2. Excerpt from Mostafa's brainstorming table for the rhetorical analysis module assignment.

This awareness of the rhetorical situation and how the relationship between the audience and the rhetor shapes the written response was also clear in Ahmed's response. In the excerpt below in Figure 3, Ahmed contemplated the appropriate rhetorical appeal to approach the audience and achieve the purpose of persuasion.

Audience	Describe the reader in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age: <u>19</u></li> <li>● Gender: <u>Female</u></li> <li>● Occupation: <u>Student</u></li> <li>● Education: <u>1st-year University Student</u></li> <li>● Position of power: she can make the writer's parents understand the reason for his late</li> <li>● Values: a close friend of mine and smart student with good grades which my parents admire her for. <u>    </u></li> <li>● Position on the situation: Best friend of mine thinking I was careless about being class on time.</li> </ul>	Knowing that my audience is a close friend, so there is no need for formality. Knowing her personality, I would use partly pathos to get her to sympathize with me for arriving late to class. I also need her to believe me. Additionally, I might need to use ethos to establish my credibility so that she can persuade my parents to forgive me.
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Figure 3. Excerpt from Ahmed's brainstorming table for the rhetorical analysis module assignment.

However, the student responses revealed their struggle with understanding and critically thinking about some aspects of the elements of the rhetorical situation. For instance, when attempting to fill in either the "values" of the "position of power" when thinking about the audience, they all seemed to have difficulty in grasping the concept and comprehending what it entails to see how the audience could be in a position of authority with respect to the rhetor. This could be attributed either to the ambiguity of the concept or students' possible inability to critically consider how power and authority play between individuals.

### 3.3.5. Writing Argumentatively

Students reported that access to the modules and learning about critical reading and thinking helped them improve their argumentative writing in terms of both content and research and writing skills. In his reflections, Ahmed indicated that learning critical reading skills boosted his argumentative skills. For him, the content and assignments of both the Critical Reading and Rhetorical Analysis modules were "good and helpful," as they instigated his "thoughts about the actual supports that would be used in the argument" and "made [him] think deeper into how [he] would base [his] actual approach for the argument." Both Mostafa and Malak shared similar opinions, feeling that the content of the modules supported their writing of the argumentative essay. Mostafa stated, "From the module, I understood how I will write a good, well-supported argumentative essay," and Malak added, "The module helped me to understand what an argument is. There was a video about identifying premises and conclusions, and it helped me a lot. The articles were so easy to understand, and they also improved my skills on how to write a good argumentative essay." Manal reiterated this idea, saying, "I went through the articles that were posted in the module, and it gave me a better understanding of what an argument is and how to write a good argument." Finally, Ahmed and Tarek mentioned that they learned how to analyze the rhetorical situation of a text and effectively apply it in writing. Ahmed indicated that through the modules, "not only did [he] learn how to effectively select which appeal to use for convincing people, but also how to analyze them in different types of text."

As for the content, instruction on critical reading and thinking helped students consider the counterargument and evaluate sources and information to be included in their essays. Having access to the modules supported their writing process and their ability to consider the counterargument. The modules "helped in argumentation and recognizing opposing points of view." According to them, "critical thinking is like seeing things from different perspectives to think in a different way," allowing them to "argue with people and to know how to make your points." Moreover, Manal reported that it made her evaluate the authority and reliability of sources when writing the argumentative essay, as she mentioned, "for example, when we looked at the author and, like all these things, it helped me with the reliability of the source, because most of my sources, I didn't truly get them from the university library. I think even most of them were non-profit organizations. They were like .org. So, I had to look at the author and the

organization.” She also indicated that it supported her rhetorical analysis of texts, especially the use of appeals in argumentation. She stated, “I think about their use of ethos or pathos; it's always on my mind from the Critical Reading and Rhetorical Analysis modules, the reporting verbs that they were very helpful and useful.”

In addition to contributing to the content of the argumentative essay, instruction and access to the modules promoted the students’ writing and research skills. Tarek believed that his research and writing skills had improved as a result of the modules. He mentioned, “I think, um, the best thing in this course that really helped me in my writing since we were assigned to write so much, also I think that it helped me when I had to research.”

Malak pointed out that the instruction and modules “helped [her] to think critically and to organize [her] notes”. She also believed that the instruction and modules made her “know how to write the summary, and it needs to be clear”. Mostafa echoed that it did help him with note-taking by saying that he realized that he “needs [s] to take notes to help him in writing”. He realized that he “learned a lot”, specifically with the organization of the content in an argumentative essay, saying, “I learned the way of writing an argumentative essay, how to include each part, and how to write each part and how to start it. I learned this thing that for each paragraph, you put a topic and then a major point and minor points before, like I wrote it, that's all, giving only the information”. Tarek also believed that it helped him evaluate the reliability of the source as “when doing the writing assignment and when reading, [he is] trying to judge the article”.

Samples of the argument essay reflected students’ engagement with the topic of choice and their ability to formulate thesis statements that reflect their position on a topic of choice. Malak, for example, stated a clear position on fast fashion by mentioning, “Nevertheless, fast fashion poses many threats as it is annihilating the environment and the well-being of employees’ lives; therefore, consumers should invest in ethical, sustainable brands.” Manal also expressed her opinion on contract cheating in her thesis statement: “Contract cheating has to stop since it is unfair for students who try to do their best.” Tarek presented his argument on the use of alternative fuels in a clearly stated thesis: “All vehicles in the future should run on alternative fuel since they are not just eco-friendly, but they are also economical.” Some students still struggled with expressing a clear thesis that reflects a standpoint or an assertion, as Ahmed stated, “This essay looks at the vitality of solar energy as an alternative to the current energy sources.” Mostafa had the same issue in terms of asserting his position despite attempting to convey an opinion, as he stated, “Studies show that child labor should be eliminated in developing countries because it instigates poor development of the future generation, blocks their access to education, and leads to long-term health problems.”

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings provide several insights for educators designing similar courses or interventions in EFL college composition programs. First, the integration of critical reading and critical thinking instruction in the form of online blended modules supported the development of students’ academic writing skills in L2 college composition courses in an EMI environment. Students appreciated having a repertoire of material and activities that could be utilized outside of class at their own pace, providing them with ample time to prepare, which contributed to making them more likely to read texts and material outside of class. This is echoed in the literature by Sharma and Barrett (2007), who supported the use of blended learning in an EFL context as it matches learners’ current expectations of using technology in the classroom and offers flexibility in learning at any time or place.

Second, the use of blended learning requires creatively planned and seamlessly integrated content within an L2 composition course syllabus and timeline. Students perceived the online blended modules to be effective in terms of their organization, content, assignments, tools, and applications. This aligns with Pizzi (2014), who advocates the use of blended learning, combining face-to-face instruction with active learning assignments and online activities, to promote greater interaction between learners and instructors. Interestingly, the findings highlighted students’ general preference for videos and interactive mini-lessons as the most useful materials for enhancing their understanding of different concepts. The literature also supports the use of online tools and Web 2.0 technologies,

which have the potential to increase essential literacies that promote learner success in undergraduate education (Mendenhall & Johnson, 2010). When used efficiently, it can enhance learner engagement in the educational process and potentially improve their overall skills development (Mendenhall & Johnson, 2010).

Third, not only did students have a positive perception of the blended integration of critical reading and critical thinking skills instruction in the composition classroom, but their responses also revealed that it had a positive effect on their skills and academic writing. Having access to the modules changed the way they approach and read a text, and also enhanced their ability to identify main ideas in texts. In turn, the modules helped them in their argumentative writing in terms of both the content and their research and writing skills. Through learning specific skills such as summarizing, annotating, and identifying main ideas, students approached texts more critically. Other critical reading skills that students felt they have developed are differentiating fact from opinion and recognizing bias. Some reported that the content of the modules enhanced their ability to critically read and consider the authority behind the source and the nature of their motives. Such a perspective has been widely adopted in the field of academic reading and writing as it emphasizes argumentation and focuses on a set of skills that readers need to possess while engaging with a text (Bosley, 2008; Wilson, 2016).

Fourth, the constructivist model of rhetorical reading strategies can be applied to the instruction of critical reading and critical thinking in L2 composition courses. This suggests that students need to be aware that meaning is constructed through context, and their instruction should involve understanding the three levels of reading strategies: content strategies, function/feature strategies, and rhetorical strategies. More attention should be given to rhetorical strategies by familiarizing students with the concepts of the rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals to achieve critical reading (Haas & Flower, 1988). Creative and engaging activities and assessments that focus on solving problems in real-life situations or have themes related to students' daily lives foster critical thinking and writing skills. Such activities, such as composing rhetorically appropriate responses to real-life scenario assignments, enhance student motivation and are more likely to promote critical reading, critical thinking, and writing skills.

Findings from the study support the need for the formal introduction of instruction in critical reading and critical thinking in L2 composition courses. As Downs (2000) argues, first-year composition courses are the "practical" and "felicitous" place for conscious and formal instruction in critical reading (p.9). Barnawi (2011) also believed that the direct instruction of critical thinking is neglected in L2 college writing classrooms, especially in the Gulf.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The direct instruction of critical reading and critical thinking skills needs to be formally introduced in L2 college composition courses in EMI environments. Despite being acknowledged for its importance for academic success and its inclusion in most learning outcomes, critical reading instruction is not given much attention and is not being catered to as an objective of college composition courses. This begins with reaching an agreement within departments on a conceptual and operational definition of critical reading and the methods used to teach it in freshman composition. As instructors themselves struggle to define critical reading, there could be greater consistency in establishing the link between critical reading and critical thinking, while also considering the connections between reading and writing. Therefore, instructors should be equipped with the necessary theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and tools to do so effectively. A strong professional development program, promoting action research, is a solid step toward fostering "a reflective lens" through which pedagogical issues can be "methodically" addressed using a "series of steps to take action to resolve those issues" (Norton, 2009). Instructors possess the practical expertise to make professional judgments about evaluating and improving their own work (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Action research connects reflection to action and thus enables educators to overcome barriers to pedagogical change through awareness of social and systemic factors influencing their educational context (Clark, Hodges, & Jenkins, 2020). It provides opportunities for professional learning that is tailored to the educator's current pedagogical focuses, issues, and needs. Consequently, action research could offer the space for further investigations of the direct



instruction of critical reading and critical thinking in L2 composition courses and how it can be effectively implemented using blended learning. Conversations among instructors in English and Rhetoric and Composition should be encouraged and supported to instill a broader view of reading and stronger pedagogy in teaching critical reading. This could promote an environment in which there is much more agreement on the way critical reading is defined and pedagogically approached through explicit instruction. Such conversations are beneficial in providing less experienced instructors opportunities for being mentored by more experienced faculty members. Additionally, open discussions could spearhead curriculum reforms and syllabi changes in which critical reading is formally integrated with proper time and resource allocation. It could possibly contribute to teacher collaboration on building repertoires of usable texts and activities or conducting relevant research. Institutions of higher education, as well as departments of language or rhetoric and composition, should reconsider their commitment to helping students gain the critical reading skills crucial to their success in college. As first-year composition courses are the main space in which students might receive explicit instruction in critical reading and critical thinking strategies, a strong argument is made for greater emphasis on and consistency in teaching critical reading. This is a call for the necessity of having open conversations within language and composition departments on the role of critical reading in first-year composition. As Downs (2000) asserts that composition courses should treat critical reading equally to writing, "it's time we recognize that reading, too, is productive, both as the crucial flipside of writing and as a significant part of the conversation that leads to production and affirmation of new meaning and knowledge". Such attempts can lead to having a clear vision or a redefinition of what constitutes critical reading, considering the limitations of language in capturing meaning and the complexity of the comprehension process, and the inclusion of critical thinking processes.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study demonstrated that integrating critical reading instruction through online blended learning modules supports the development of EFL students' academic writing skills in English-medium instruction environments. Blended learning approaches not only augmented students' learning experiences but also strengthened the essential connections between reading and writing in L2 composition courses. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating critical reading as an essential component of EFL composition course design, emphasizing how reflective practice and accurate assessment of learners' critical reading abilities can inform more effective pedagogical approaches. These results contribute valuable insights to the field of L2 composition instruction in higher education, particularly in EMI contexts where students must simultaneously develop language proficiency and academic literacy skills. Future research could explore the long-term impact of such interventions and investigate how these blended learning approaches can be adapted across diverse institutional contexts to maximize their effectiveness in developing critical academic literacies.

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