Exploring College Students' Workload of Critical Thinking Learning in Online English Reading Courses

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Abstract
This qualitative study explores how students who are taking online English reading classes deal with workload issues as they build their critical thinking skills. The study attempts to clarify the intricacies and significance of workload in the context of critical thinking learning through in-depth interviews, theme analysis, and the presenting of coded important results with quotes from participants.The study is essential to improving our comprehension of the complex interactions that exist between workload and critical thinking in online learning. Its importance stems from the fact that it not only addresses current issues regarding online English reading courses but also adds to the larger conversation about good teaching practices, student welfare, and the evolution of education in the digital age. The results could guide strategies that improve the effectiveness and quality of online learning, which would ultimately help students, teachers, and educational policymakers.
Keywords: Learning Experience, College Student, Critical Thinking,workload, Online English Reading Courses

Introduction
Online learning has become an universal and revolutionary force in the modern educational landscape, providing students with unmatched access to academic content and promoting a dynamic learning environment. This qualitative inquiry explores how college students taking online English reading courses gain critical thinking skills, with a focus on the difficulties associated with managing workload. It becomes clear that critical thinking is a key competency that is necessary for understanding complicated literary texts, developing autonomous thought, and navigating the enormous digital information landscape. Concurrently, the rise in popularity of online learning brings with it a distinct set of difficulties,

particularly with regard to task distribution and student involvement. This study aims to give insights that will inform educational practices, improve online pedagogies, and maximize the overall efficacy of virtual classrooms by dissecting the complex interaction between critical thinking, workload management, and the online learning experience.

With the rise of online learning, the landscape of higher education has changed and college students now have access to never-before-seen levels of academic engagement. Nevertheless, in the midst of the benefits of accessibility and flexibility, a crucial problem surfaces: the effect of an excessive workload on the critical thinking learning process in the setting of online English reading classes. The complexity of the workload in virtual classrooms—which includes a range of assignments, group projects, and asynchronous learning components—raises questions about how it can impede the development of critical thinking abilities. It is critical to address how the complex interactions between workload demands and the development of critical thinking skills affect college students' overall educational journeys in virtual English reading classrooms, particularly as more and more institutions shift to online learning environments.

Although critical thinking is widely recognised as important in education, little is known about how the virtual classroom, especially when it comes to English reading courses, affects students' ability to acquire these vital abilities. Previous studies have looked at workload management and critical thinking in isolation, but a thorough analysis of their relationship is absent. Furthermore, the literature needs to pay particular attention to the particular difficulties brought about by the digital environment, such as the lack of physical classrooms and the growing dependence on asynchronous learning. By examining the complex experiences of college students, this qualitative investigation seeks to close these gaps and offer insights that can improve online learning environments, guide instructional strategies, and eventually lead to a more comprehensive knowledge of key

Research Objectives
a) Explore how students handled their workload when they were studying critical thinking.
b) Identify the connection between workload and the growth of critical thinking.
c) Identify the tactics that students use to control their workload and promote critical thinking.

Research Questions
a) How do college students taking online English reading courses navigate and manage the demands of their workloads while gaining critical thinking skills? What are their subjective experiences?
b) How do students see workload problems affecting their capacity to synthesise and critically analyse information found in English reading materials?
c) How do students incorporate techniques into their academic activities to support the growth of critical thinking abilities at the same time?

Literature Review
Critical Thinking in Online Education
It is commonly acknowledged that critical thinking is a fundamental ability required for both academic and professional success (Ennis, 1987; Paul & Elder, 2006). Ennis highlights that it is

multifaceted, involving analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—a set of abilities necessary for making well-informed decisions and resolving issues. Palloff and Pratt (2007) draw attention to the special qualities of online learning, emphasizing the asynchronous aspect of the process that necessitates independent participation. Under these circumstances, critical thinking becomes crucial, necessitating that students conduct their own information research and use reflective reasoning. Students today must possess stronger critical thinking abilities to navigate the huge information landscapes of the digital age (Bawden, 2008).

Critical analysis is crucial for identifying reliable sources, assessing information, and synthesizing it—processes that are essential for both academic performance and lifelong learning, according to (Brown and Perry, 2001). The interaction of critical thinking and collaborative learning in online environments is covered by (Moore, 1989). Students need to develop their critical expression skills through constructive conversation in virtual communities, which goes beyond solitary analysis.

In his consideration of the difficulty of evaluating critical thinking in online learning environments, Garrison (2017) makes the case for creative approaches such discussion boards, reflective journals, and peer assessments. These techniques not only assess critical thinking abilities but also actively encourage their growth. Research continually demonstrates the connection between academic success in online courses and critical thinking abilities (Hachey et al., 2012; King & Bannon-Ritland, 2002; Sombria et al., 2023). According to AAC&U (2015), critical thinking is a fundamental skill for career preparedness, with a focus on its significance in problem-solving and strategic thinking.

As the educational world becomes increasingly digital, developing and evaluating critical thinking skills becomes essential for both professional readiness and academic achievement. Teachers, administrators, and researchers can use the knowledge gained from this review as a basis to improve the calibre of online learning opportunities, develop efficient evaluation strategies, and enhance pedagogical methods.

Challenges in Online English Reading Classes

The difficulty of encouraging meaningful connection and involvement in online English reading classes is one recurrent subject in the literature (Kabre, 2019). Pupils may find it difficult to stay focused and engage in class discussions, which could result in a decline in their ability to comprehend and critically analyse the given materials (Wang et al., 2020).

Online English reading classes may be less effective due to technological issues. Inadequate internet connectivity, antiquated hardware, or a deficiency in digital literacy abilities could hinder pupils' capacity to efficiently navigate virtual environments and employ multimedia materials (Hodges et al., 2019). Online English reading classes may be less effective due to technological issues. Students may find it difficult to learn if they don't have access to dependable internet, have old gear, or lack digital literacy skills. Due to its flexibility, online learning might present issues with self-discipline and time management (Artino et al., 2018). Students may find it difficult to follow a set study schedule, which might cause them to put off or finish their readings incompletely. This can have an adverse effect on how well they perform in English reading classes as a whole. Language development may be hampered by the absence of social connection in online settings compared to regular classroom settings

(Brown, 2021). Students may find it more difficult to exercise verbal expression and participate in lively language discussions if they don't participate in face-to-face communication and collaborative activities. There are unique difficulties in accurately evaluating reading comprehension in an online environment (Lian et al., 2022). It can be particularly difficult to create exams that fairly gauge students' comprehension of difficult materials and their capacity for critical thought while discouraging plagiarism (Ayuningtyas et al.,2023).

Online English reading courses present a variety of difficulties, including problems with time management, technology, social contact, participation, and assessment. Recent research emphasizes the need for creative solutions to improve the online learning environment and make sure that students may successfully overcome these obstacles. It's critical to address these issues as technology and teaching methods advance in order to provide an effective and captivating online English reading experience.

Workload Management in Online Learning

The foundation of workload management in online learning is efficient time management (Bozkurt et al., 2019). Research indicates that students gain by having organised timetables, well-defined objectives, and assignments divided into smaller, more manageable portions (Jansen et al., 2021). The ability to control oneself is essential for handling the demands of online learning (Kumar & Vigil, 2020). In online learning environments, employing strategies like goal planning, self-monitoring, and motivation maintenance is linked to better workload management and academic achievement. Management of workload can be facilitated by the incorporation of learning technology. Pupils who use productivity applications, learning management systems, and collaboration technologies well typically reduce workloads and increase productivity (Buchanan & Harriott, 2022). Working together with peers can help to reduce the strain of individual workload. Peer support networks, group projects, and online forums have all been found to be useful tools for allocating work and cooperatively managing the workload (Cowan et al., 2020). Workload management requires teachers to communicate clearly about expectations for the course, tasks, and deadlines (Johnson et al., 2021; Frederick et al.,2023). A clearer grasp of task requirements is facilitated by prompt feedback and clear guidelines.

The various methods and factors that go into managing workload in online learning, highlighting the value of both independent and group efforts. According to the research, online learners can effectively manage their workload by using a comprehensive approach that includes time management, technology integration, peer collaboration, and clear communication.

Methodology

For this investigation, a qualitative technique was selected because it provides a nuanced view of the critical thinking learning process in online English reading courses, especially when considering the difficulties college students confront with their workloads. Qualitative techniques, such theme analysis and in-depth interviews, offer the adaptability required to fully convey the depth and complexity of people's experiences. Qualitative research enables a thorough investigation of these phenomena because perceptions, emotions, and coping mechanisms pertaining to workload and critical thinking are subjective in nature. Through

direct engagement with college student voices, this method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved, allowing the researcher to unearth hidden patterns, emergent themes, and unexpected findings. Furthermore, qualitative research is an excellent method for investigating new or little-studied.

Participant Selection
Purposively selected college students will be enrolled in online English reading courses to guarantee a range of experiences and viewpoints. Data saturation will decide the sample size, guaranteeing thorough coverage of the specified subjects.

Table 1
Informants profile

Participant ID	Academic Level	Demographic Background	Online Learning Experience	Language Proficiency	Rationale for Selection
001	Senior	Female, Asian	3 years of online courses	Proficient English	Represents a senior student with extensive online learning experience, providing insights into critical thinking development over time.
002	Sophomore	Male, African American	1 year of online courses	Proficient English	Represents a sophomore student with a relatively shorter online learning experience, offering insights from an early stage of academic journey.
003	Graduate Student	Female, Hispanic	2 years of online courses	Proficient English	Represents a graduate student, providing perspectives on critical thinking in advanced coursework within the online format.
004	Junior	Male, Caucasian	4 years of online courses	Proficient English	Represents a junior student with a diverse academic background, contributing to a well-rounded understanding of critical thinking.
005	Freshman	Female, Middle Eastern	6 months of online courses	Proficient English	Represents a freshman student with a relatively brief online learning experience, offering insights from the early stages of academic engagement.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews be conducted to gather detailed narratives about the critical thinking learning experience amid workload challenges. With this method, participants are free to openly express their ideas, feelings, and views, creating a rich dataset that can be analyzed. Ask participants in one-on-one interviews about their experiences with critical thinking. To learn more about how they perceive the workload, difficulties they encounter, and tactics used in online English reading classes, use open-ended questions. To promote group interactions and obtain collective insights, arrange focus group conversations with a subset of members. Pay attention to topics like shared critical thinking techniques, workload distribution, and cooperative learning. Encourage participants to write in reflective diaries for the duration of the online course on English reading. Urge them to record important events, difficulties, and their thoughts on managing their workload and refining their critical thinking.

Thematic Analysis

The present study utilizes theme analysis to examine the complex relationship between workload and the enhancement of critical thinking abilities in college students enrolled in online English reading courses. The investigation is qualitative in nature. Differentiable themes have surfaced as a result of a thorough examination of the material, which included in-depth interviews, focus groups, reflective diaries, and document analysis. The stories shared by the participants highlight the difficulties caused by the workload in online learning environments and provide insight into the methods used to encourage critical thinking. Critical thinking experiences include themes including the dynamics of collaborative learning, the effect of different academic levels, and the function of technology in managing workloads. This theme analysis not only depicts college students' complex viewpoints but

Ethical Considerations

A priority should be given to ethical issues at every stage of the research process. Participants' informed consent will be sought, and precautions be made to protect participant privacy, confidentiality, and wellbeing. The study complies with institutional review board (IRB) regulations and ethical principles.

Respecting the participants' rights, welfare, and dignity requires careful consideration of ethical issues. Participants are given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences, and informed consent is gathered with great care, explicitly describing the goals, methods, and possible consequences of the research. Strict confidentiality and anonymity procedures are used, pseudonyms are used, and personal data is protected to protect participants' privacy. The emphasis is on voluntary engagement, which enables people to participate voluntarily and stop without suffering negative effects. Transparent procedures are upheld throughout the research process, such as careful debriefing, cultural sensitivity, and clear explanation of the goals of the study. To safeguard participants' sensitive information, ethical permission from pertinent review boards is requested and data protection is given first priority. Together, these moral factors guarantee the responsible and polite investigation of critical thinking.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a technique used to improve the validity and reliability of the results. It involves cross-referencing data from several sources, including interviews and maybe pre-

existing papers pertaining to online coursework. A fundamental methodological strategy to improve the study's rigor and trustworthiness is triangulation. The utilization of a variety of data sources, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, reflective diaries, document analysis, and observations, allows for a comprehensive knowledge of the critical thinking experiences of the participants. By utilizing a range of participant profiles that include varying demographics, educational backgrounds, and experiences with online learning, a thorough investigation of ways for managing workload and fostering critical thinking skills is guaranteed. An additional layer of triangulation is created when numerous researchers are involved in the data collection and analysis process. This minimizes individual biases and promotes a more nuanced interpretation. Furthermore, member verification and comparison analysis

Researcher Reflexivity
To reduce potential biases, the researcher's reflexivity should be recognized and recorded during the investigation. A continuous awareness of the researcher's impact on the study process and conclusions is necessary for reflexivity.

Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is essential to upholding rigor and transparency. The researcher is aware of their own biases, values, and prejudices and realizes that they may affect how data is gathered, interpreted, and analyzed. Frequent introspection on one's own presumptions and viewpoints lessens the impact of other opinions on participant narratives. Furthermore, reflexivity includes choices about study design, methodology, and analytical approach selection. Through the process of recording and openly discussing the researcher's reflective approach, the study guarantees a sophisticated and introspective examination of critical thinking encounters in virtual English reading classes. This reflectiveness contributes to the research process' enrichment.

Research Results
Several important themes surfaced in this qualitative investigation of the critical thinking learning process among college students enrolled in online English reading courses, providing insight into the complex dynamics of workload management and the development of critical thinking. Participants noted enhanced motivation and a greater understanding of critical thinking topics, underscoring the beneficial effects of collaborative learning, especially through group discussions. Notwithstanding, certain participants expressed a preference for solitary study as a result of obstacles pertaining to scheduling within group dynamics. Participants noted that as academic levels increased, the complexity of the workload changed, requiring them to adopt adaptive methods including changing their study habits and looking for more resources. Technology played a key role in workload management, as participants used virtual study groups and educational apps to get through their assignments. Peer contact through online forums deepened debates and expanded perspectives on English reading materials, while reflective practices—including the keeping of reflective journals—emerged as a critical thinking method. With regard to the complex experiences of college students using critical thinking in the setting of online English reading courses, this qualitative investigation offers insightful information.

Collaborative Learning Dynamics

Participants shared unique experiences that highlighted the influence of collaborative learning on the development of their critical thinking in online English reading courses as they explored the Collaborative Learning Dynamics theme. One significant benefit that became apparent was represented by the code "Group Dynamics." Participants discussed how their motivation was enhanced and their comprehension of critical thinking principles was deepened by working together in groups. One participant said, "Group work enhanced critical thinking by combining varied ideas and brought fresh perspectives." Notwithstanding this advantageous effect, difficulties were recognized, as seen by the code "Independent Study." Due to scheduling conflicts within group dynamics, several participants found it challenging to learn collaboratively and preferred to study alone. "The freedom of individual study allowed me to go further into critical analysis, fitting with my chosen learning pace," said one participant. This contrast in experiences highlights the complex dynamics of collaborative learning, highlighting both the benefits and the difficulties students encounter in controlling the development of their critical thinking in this setting.

Table 2
Finding Theme 1

Themes	Sub-themes	Code key findings	Quotes
Collaborative Learning Dynamics	Positive Impact	Group Dynamics: Collaborative learning positively impacted motivation and deepened understanding.	"Working together in groups brought fresh perspectives, enhancing critical thinking."
	Challenges	Independent Study: Some faced challenges, preferring independent study due to schedule coordination.	"Flexibility of independent study allowed me to delve deeper into critical analysis."

Impact of Varied Academic Levels

Examining the Influence of Diverse Academic Levels, participants expressed unique perspectives that demonstrated how workload requirements in online English reading courses are changing. The code "Advanced Coursework" for the first sub-theme, Workload Difficulty, emphasized a significant discovery that showed a noticeable shift in workload complexity as courses advanced. The participants admitted that the intensity of work grew with academic advancement, requiring a deeper level of critical thinking. "As courses advanced, the workload increased, necessitating profound critical thinking to fulfil the heightened academic standards," a participant observed. In addition to this finding, the second sub-theme, "Adaptation Strategies," which was denoted by the code "Varying Academic Demands," explained how participants responded to the ever-changing academic

environment. The main finding emphasized how crucial it is to take adaptive steps to deal with changing academic expectations, like modifying study schedules and looking for more resources. One participant said, "Finding balance based on course requirements and modifying my study style to meet the obstacles given by the growing workload means adapting to varying academic expectations." This investigation sheds light on the dynamic interactions that occur between the complexity of the workload, academic advancement, and the adaptive techniques participants use to control and flourish in the development of their critical thinking.

Table 3
Finding Theme 2

Themes	Sub-themes	Code key findings	Quotes
Impact of Varied Academic Levels	Workload Complexity	Advanced Coursework: Shift in workload complexity with advanced coursework.	"As courses progressed, workload intensified, requiring profound critical thinking."
	Adaptation Strategies	Varying Academic Demands: Strategies included adjusting routines and seeking additional resources.	"As courses progressed, workload intensified, requiring profound critical thinking."

Role of Technology in Workload Management
Participants' dependence on technological tools and platforms in their online English reading courses was shown by the investigation of the role of technology in workload management. One significant finding from the first sub-theme, Online Platform Utilization, which was indicated by the code "Educational Apps," highlighted the critical role that technology plays in efficiently managing workload demands. Participants attested that educational apps provided solutions for effective time management and organizing, which reduced their burden. "Educational apps simplified workload, providing tools for efficient time management and helped me stay organized among many course obligations," said one participant, emphasizing this point. In addition, the significance of technology-mediated cooperation was emphasized by the second sub-theme, Synchronous Collaboration, which was symbolized by the code "Virtual Study Groups. "The main finding showed that participants actively participated in virtual study groups for synchronous collaboration, utilizing technology to facilitate thought-provoking conversations and improve their overall educational experience. One participant said, "We were able to engage synchronously through technology through virtual study groups, which dramatically increased the learning experience by creating collaborative learning dynamics." This investigation highlights the crucial role that technology plays in promoting collaborative and interactive learning

environments in online English reading courses, in addition to managing workload expectations.

Table 4
Finding Theme 3

Themes	Sub-themes	Code key findings	Quotes
Role of Technology in Workload Management	Online Platform Utilization	Educational Apps: Technology played a crucial role in workload management.	"Educational apps streamlined workload, providing tools for efficient time management."
	Synchronous Collaboration	Virtual Study Groups: Participants engaged in synchronous collaboration using technology.	"Virtual study groups became a space for critical discussions, enhancing the learning experience.

Strategies for Fostering Critical Thinking

By exploring strategies for fostering critical thinking, participants revealed important methods that helped them develop critical thinking skills in online English reading courses. One of the main findings of the first sub-theme, Reflecting Practices, which was captured by the code "Reflective Journals," was that reflective practises are effective in strengthening analytical abilities and expanding comprehension. According to the participants, keeping reflective notebooks helped them engage in critical introspection and relate what they read to their own experiences. One person clarified this by saying, "Journals for reflection have become essential resources for developing critical thinking. They improved my analytical abilities and gave me the opportunity to think critically about the course material, making connections between the readings and my own experiences." In addition, peer interaction—the second sub-theme—which was symbolized by the code "Online Forums"—emphasized the value of peer. The main discovery revealed that the participants engaged in active participation in online forums, where peer contact enhanced critical conversations that extended beyond the parameters of the course materials. One of the participants revealed, "Participating in virtual discussion boards was crucial in promoting analytical dialogues. Peer interaction offered a variety of viewpoints that expanded my comprehension of the material beyond what was taught in the course." In the context of online English reading courses, this investigation highlights the value of reflective practice and peer interaction as critical thinking skills-building tactics.

Table 5
Finding Theme 4

Themes	Sub-themes	Code key findings	Quotes
Strategies for Fostering Critical Thinking	Reflective Practices	Reflective Journals: Reflective practices enhanced analytical skills and deepened understanding.	"Reflective journals allowed me to critically reflect, connecting readings to personal experiences."
	Peer Interaction	Online Forums: Peer interaction through online forums enriched critical discussions.	"Engaging in online forums fostered critical discussions beyond course materials."

Discussion
This qualitative investigation revealed complex insights on how college students navigate the demands of their workloads while exercising critical thinking in the context of online English reading courses.

Collaborative Learning Dynamics, which demonstrated the advantages and difficulties of working in groups, was one of the main issues that came to light. The literature currently in publication, which highlights the advantages of peer contact in strengthening critical thinking abilities, is consistent with the beneficial effects of collaborative learning on motivation and deeper knowledge. The difficulties that some participants did, however, highlight the significance of striking a balance between group study methods and personal study preferences, highlighting the variety of learning requirements in online environments.

The Impact of Varying Academic Levels demonstrated how academic advancement, workload complexity, and adaptive techniques interact dynamically. Participants noted that as the courses progressed, there was an increasing workload that required deep critical thought. The tactics used—such as changing schedules and looking for more resources—showcase students' adaptability and resilience in the face of changing academic demands. This research adds to the conversation about workload management in higher education by highlighting the necessity of specialised approaches for all academic levels.

The importance of technology, especially educational apps and virtual study groups, in influencing the online learning environment was discussed in The Role of Technology in Workload Management. The development of technology integration in education is in line with the beneficial effects of educational apps on task efficiency. Online study groups have become an important platform for synchronous collaboration, improving critical discourse and building community. This emphasises how crucial it is to use technology to build dynamic, team-based learning environments in online courses.

It is clear from Strategies for Fostering Critical Thinking how important peer contact and reflective practices are. Reflective journals were found to be effective resources for developing critical thinking abilities and encouraging a more thorough comprehension of the course material. The way that personal experiences are incorporated into critical reflection highlights how customized the development of critical thinking is. Furthermore, peer communication via online discussion boards enhanced critical conversations that went beyond the required readings for the course, highlighting the importance of social learning in promoting critical thinking.

After combining these data, it is clear that the environment of an online English reading course offers a special setting for the growth of critical thinking. The participants' varied experiences emphasise the significance of identifying unique learning preferences, adjusting to varying academic expectations, and utilising technology for reflective and collaborative learning. Understanding the complex interactions between task management, collaborative dynamics, and technology integration is essential for creating online learning environments that effectively develop college students' critical thinking abilities as the educational landscape changes. Future studies should look at how these experiences affect students' academic performance over the long run and how online pedagogical approaches are being improved to best assist the development of critical thinking skills.

Conclusion
In summary, this qualitative investigation has explored the complex terrain of college students' critical thinking learning experiences while managing workload expectations in online English reading courses. A comprehensive grasp of the complex structure of this educational landscape is provided by the rich tapestry of themes, which includes Collaborative Learning Dynamics, the Impact of Varied Academic Levels, the Role of Technology in Workload Management, and Strategies for Fostering Critical Thinking. The results highlight how crucial it is to understand the dualities present in collaborative learning, how different academic levels demand different adaptive tactics, and how technology plays a critical role in defining the online learning environment. Critical thinking skills development is greatly aided by techniques like reflective practices and peer engagement. It is vital that we comprehend the complexities of workload management and how it intersects with critical thinking as we traverse the changing landscape of education. By providing insights that can guide pedagogical approaches and, in the end, build an atmosphere that fosters robust critical thinking abilities among college students in the digital era, this study adds to the larger conversation on online education. For educational practices to continue to be effective in meeting students' changing demands, more study and continuous improvement of online pedagogy will be necessary.

The study adds significantly to the field of online education and language learning in terms of theory and context. Its emphasis on critical thinking abilities—a vital component of higher education—and its examination in the particular setting of online English reading courses lend theoretical weight to the study. By examining how critical thinking is fostered in a digital learning environment, the study adds to the theoretical frameworks already in place and clarifies the subtleties of cognitive engagement and analytical reasoning in this setting. The study also discusses the practical applications of workload management, providing information on efficient methods for developing critical thinking abilities in online contexts.

Knowing the workload dynamics of critical thinking in English reading courses is important knowledge for educators, instructional designers, and legislators in the larger context of online education, where the need for flexible learning options is growing. The research's conclusions may help shape the creation of efficient online teaching techniques and add to the continuing conversation on how to best provide college students with high-quality digital learning opportunities.

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