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The relationship between c1 english proficiency and critical thinking in university students

La relación entre el nivel de competencia en inglés C1 y el pensamiento crítico en estudiantes universitarios

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students, considering that advanced language competence involves not only grammar or vocabulary knowledge, but also the ability to understand complex academic texts, construct arguments, evaluate information, and express well-supported opinions. The research was conducted through a systematic literature review with a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Scientific studies published between 2020 and 2026 were reviewed from recognized academic databases. The results show that C1 English proficiency contributes to the development of critical thinking through processes such as critical reading, argumentative writing, academic discussion, project-based learning, and the use of digital tools. Likewise, critical thinking strengthens the reflective use of English in university contexts. It is concluded that both competencies are reciprocally related and are essential for academic performance, intellectual autonomy, and the comprehensive education of university students.

Keywords: C1 proficiency, critical thinking, university students, higher education.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza la relación entre el nivel de competencia en inglés C1 y el pensamiento crítico en estudiantes universitarios, considerando que el dominio avanzado del idioma no solo implica conocimientos gramaticales o vocabulario, sino también la capacidad de comprender textos académicos complejos, argumentar ideas, evaluar información y expresar opiniones fundamentadas. La investigación se desarrolló mediante una revisión sistemática de literatura, con enfoque cualitativo, descriptivo y analítico, siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020. Se revisaron estudios científicos publicados entre 2020 y 2026 en bases de datos académicas reconocidas. Los resultados evidencian que la competencia en inglés C1 favorece el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico a través de procesos como la lectura crítica, la escritura argumentativa, la discusión académica, el aprendizaje basado en proyectos y el uso de herramientas digitales. Asimismo, se identificó que el pensamiento crítico fortalece el uso reflexivo del inglés en contextos universitarios. Se concluye que ambas competencias se relacionan de manera recíproca y resultan esenciales para el desempeño académico, la autonomía intelectual y la formación integral de los estudiantes universitarios.

Palabras clave: competencia C1, pensamiento crítico, estudiantes universitarios, educación superior.



1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, English proficiency has become an essential academic competence because a considerable part of scientific production, international communication, and university learning resources is available in English. At advanced levels, such as C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, students are expected not only to use grammar and vocabulary accurately, but also to understand complex texts, express ideas fluently, and construct coherent arguments in academic contexts. Therefore, C1 proficiency can be understood as a linguistic and cognitive resource that supports access to knowledge, academic participation, and intellectual autonomy (Lam, 2020; Moeiniasl et al., 2022).

Critical thinking is also one of the central competencies expected in university education. It enables students to evaluate information, identify assumptions, compare perspectives, make reasoned judgments, and support arguments with evidence. In English learning contexts, critical thinking becomes visible when students read academic texts critically, write argumentative essays, participate in discussions, and solve problems using the language. Thus, the relationship between English proficiency and critical thinking is especially relevant because students must use English not only to communicate, but also to analyze, question, and construct knowledge (Liang & Fung, 2021; Pravita & Kuswandono, 2021).

The C1 level requires learners to process complex academic information and communicate ideas with precision, coherence, and flexibility. These abilities are closely connected with higher-order thinking skills, since reading, writing, speaking, and listening at an advanced level often involve interpretation, inference, evaluation of sources, and argumentation. Consequently, students who develop C1 English proficiency may have greater opportunities to engage with scientific literature, participate in international academic contexts, and express critical perspectives in a second or foreign language.

At the same time, critical thinking strengthens the quality of English language use. A student may possess grammatical knowledge and broad vocabulary, but without critical thinking, academic production may remain descriptive or superficial. Critical thinking encourages learners to go beyond literal comprehension, organize ideas logically, evaluate evidence, compare viewpoints, and justify conclusions. For this reason, advanced English proficiency



and critical thinking should not be treated as independent competencies, but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of university learning (Esmacil Nejad et al., 2022; Teng & Yue, 2023; Liu & Zhao, 2023).

Recent educational approaches suggest that this relationship can be promoted through active and reflective methodologies such as critical reading tasks, argumentative writing, debates, academic discussions, project-based learning, task-based instruction, peer assessment, and technology-supported learning. These strategies allow students to use English for meaningful academic purposes while developing analysis, reflection, and argumentation skills. However, the integration of critical thinking in English instruction requires intentional pedagogical planning, appropriate assessment tools, and learning environments that promote participation and evidence-based reasoning (Aygün & Yavuz, 2020; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Lu & Xie, 2024).

Consequently, it is necessary to analyze the available scientific evidence on the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students. This analysis makes it possible to identify how advanced English competence contributes to critical reading, argumentative writing, academic discussion, and reflective learning, as well as how critical thinking strengthens the academic use of English. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze, through a systematic literature review, the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students, identifying its main theoretical approaches, pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, and contributions to higher education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

C1 English Proficiency as Academic Language Competence

The relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students can be understood from the perspective of academic language use. At the C1 level, students are expected to understand complex texts, express ideas fluently, and produce coherent arguments in academic contexts. Therefore, English proficiency is not only related to grammar or vocabulary, but also to the ability to analyze information, interpret meanings, justify opinions, and communicate reasoned conclusions (Lam, 2020; Moeiniasl et al., 2022).



In higher education, English proficiency becomes an essential tool for accessing academic knowledge, especially in contexts where scientific articles, books, lectures, and research materials are frequently written in English. University students with a C1 level are more likely to engage with complex academic content, identify the main arguments of a text, recognize implicit meanings, and express their own perspectives with clarity. For this reason, advanced English proficiency can support the development of intellectual autonomy and academic performance.

Critical Thinking in University Education

Critical thinking is considered a key competence in higher education because it allows students to evaluate information, identify assumptions, compare perspectives, and support arguments with evidence. In English learning contexts, this skill becomes visible through critical reading, argumentative writing, oral discussion, and problem-solving activities. Thus, students with advanced English proficiency may have greater linguistic resources to express critical ideas, while critical thinking can help them use English in a more reflective and academic way (Liang & Fung, 2021; Pravita & Kuswandono, 2021).

University students are constantly required to make decisions based on information, distinguish reliable sources from weak evidence, and construct well-supported arguments. Therefore, critical thinking is not an isolated skill, but a fundamental part of academic learning. In English language learning, it helps students go beyond literal comprehension and encourages them to question ideas, interpret different viewpoints, and participate actively in academic discussions.

Reading and Writing as Bridges Between Language and Thought

Reading and writing are central processes in the connection between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking. Critical reading requires students to understand explicit and implicit meanings, evaluate the reliability of information, and connect ideas from different sources. Academic writing, on the other hand, demands planning, organization, synthesis, and evaluation of arguments. Research in EFL contexts shows that critical thinking is related to writing performance, language learning strategies, and the ability to use sources effectively in academic texts (Esmaeil Nejad et al., 2022; Teng & Yue, 2023; Liu & Zhao, 2023).

At the C1 level, students are expected to read academic texts critically and produce written work that demonstrates coherence, depth, and logical organization. This means that



language proficiency and thinking skills work together. A student may understand English vocabulary and grammar, but without critical thinking, their academic production may remain descriptive. Similarly, a student may have good ideas, but without sufficient English proficiency, it may be difficult to express them clearly and convincingly.

Pedagogical Strategies to Strengthen Critical Thinking in English

From a pedagogical perspective, this relationship can be strengthened through active and reflective methodologies. Critical thinking instruction, project-based learning, asynchronous learning tools, and technology-supported instruction allow students to analyze problems, exchange ideas, evaluate evidence, and produce arguments in English. These strategies are useful for C1 learners because they require both advanced linguistic competence and higher-order thinking skills (Aygün & Yavuz, 2020; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Lu & Xie, 2024).

Activities such as debates, case analysis, academic discussions, argumentative essays, critical reading tasks, and collaborative projects can help students develop both English proficiency and critical thinking. These methodologies encourage learners to use English for real academic purposes rather than only for mechanical exercises. As a result, students become more capable of defending ideas, questioning information, and applying knowledge in different contexts.

The Reciprocal Relationship Between English Proficiency and Critical Thinking

Therefore, this theoretical framework assumes that C1 English proficiency and critical thinking are mutually reinforcing. Advanced English proficiency provides students with the linguistic tools needed to understand and communicate complex ideas, while critical thinking promotes deeper comprehension, better argumentation, and more reflective academic performance. In university education, this relationship is relevant because students must not only use English accurately, but also reason, evaluate, and construct knowledge through the language.

This connection suggests that English teaching at the university level should not focus only on linguistic accuracy. It should also promote analytical reading, reflective writing, discussion, argumentation, and problem-solving. In this way, C1 English proficiency becomes more than a language achievement; it becomes a means for academic reasoning, intellectual development, and active participation in higher education.

3. METHODOLOGY



The present study was conducted through a systematic literature review focused on analyzing the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students. This methodology made it possible to collect, evaluate, and synthesize scientific evidence related to advanced English language competence, academic reading, argumentative writing, critical thinking skills, and pedagogical strategies in higher education. The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, aimed at identifying trends, theoretical contributions, methodological approaches, and limitations in the existing literature.

The bibliographic search was carried out in recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, Frontiers, and Google Scholar. These sources were selected because they provide access to peer-reviewed studies related to English language proficiency, EFL learning, critical thinking, academic literacy, university education, and instructional methodologies.

In order to strengthen the traceability of the systematic review process, the number of records identified in each database was specified. A total of 72 records were retrieved from academic databases, while 5 additional records were identified through complementary sources, such as reference lists and manual searches. Therefore, the initial identification phase included 77 potentially relevant records.

The distribution of records by source was as follows: Scopus ($n = 12$), Web of Science ($n = 9$), ScienceDirect ($n = 10$), SpringerLink ($n = 8$), ERIC ($n = 7$), Taylor & Francis Online ($n = 8$), SAGE Journals ($n = 6$), Frontiers ($n = 5$), Google Scholar ($n = 7$), and additional sources ($n = 5$). This distribution allowed the review process to present greater methodological transparency and to show clearly how the initial corpus of studies was obtained before the removal of duplicate records.

The search strategy was structured using keywords in English combined with Boolean operators such as AND and OR. The main search terms included: “C1 English proficiency”, “English language proficiency”, “critical thinking”, “university students”, “higher education”, “EFL learners”, “academic writing”, “critical reading”, “argumentative writing”, “language proficiency and critical thinking”, “English reading skills”, and “critical thinking in EFL”. The search equations were adapted according to the requirements of each database in order to improve the identification of relevant studies. The reporting of the search



process followed methodological recommendations for systematic reviews and literature search transparency (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

The search was limited to publications from 2020 to 2026. This period was selected because it includes recent studies that address the relationship between English proficiency, critical thinking, academic performance, reading comprehension, writing skills, digital learning, and task-based instruction in university and EFL contexts. The selected period also allowed the inclusion of current evidence on active methodologies and technology-supported learning environments.

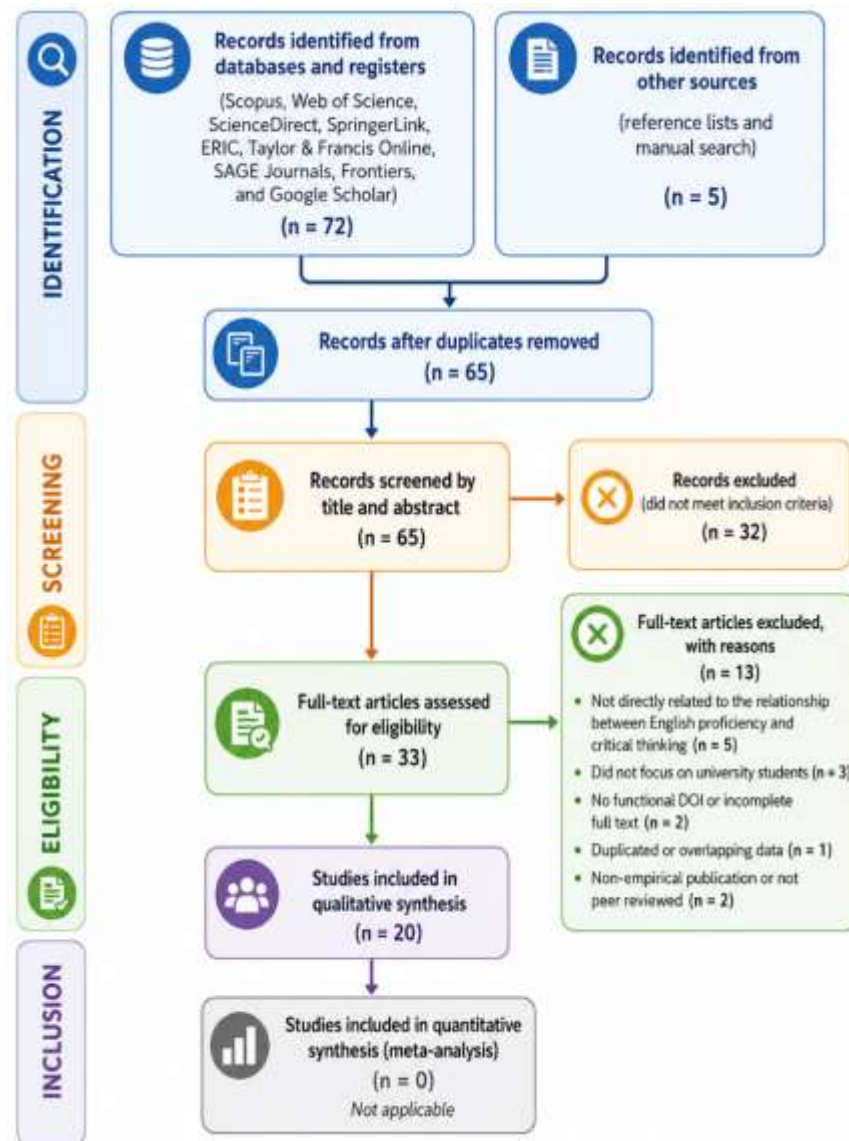
The inclusion criteria considered peer-reviewed scientific articles published in indexed journals, studies related to C1 English proficiency, English language learning, critical thinking, university students, academic reading, academic writing, and pedagogical strategies for higher education. Articles written in English and available in full text were also included. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria considered duplicated records, theses, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, opinion articles, studies without DOI, and publications that did not directly address the relationship between English proficiency and critical thinking.

The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency in the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases of the systematic review (Page et al., 2021). In the first phase, 77 potentially relevant records were identified through the selected databases and additional academic sources. After removing 12 duplicated records, 65 studies were screened by title and abstract. Then, 33 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, 20 scientific studies were selected as the final sample of the systematic review. These studies addressed topics such as English proficiency, critical thinking assessment, critical reading, argumentative writing, academic language competence, self-regulated learning, digital tools, project-based learning, and task-based instruction.

Figure 1.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram





Note. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 statement. The process allowed the identification of 77 potentially relevant records. After the removal of duplicates and the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 studies were selected as the final sample of the systematic literature review.

Study Selection Process

The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency in the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases of the systematic review (Page et al., 2021). A total of 77 records were initially identified through academic databases and complementary sources. After eliminating 12 duplicate records, 65 studies were reviewed by



title and abstract. During this screening phase, 32 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The reasons for exclusion at this stage were: studies not directly related to the relationship between English proficiency and critical thinking (n = 14), studies focused on educational levels other than higher education or university students (n = 7), studies that did not address critical thinking explicitly (n = 5), non-eligible publication types such as theses, books, book chapters, conference papers, or opinion articles (n = 4), and publications outside the 2020–2026 period (n = 2). After the screening phase, 33 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 13 articles were excluded for specific reasons: not directly related to the relationship between English proficiency and critical thinking (n = 5), not focused on university students (n = 3), lack of a functional DOI or incomplete full text (n = 2), duplicated or overlapping data (n = 1), and non-empirical or non-peer-reviewed publication type (n = 2). Finally, 20 scientific studies were included in the systematic review because they met all inclusion criteria and provided relevant evidence about C1 English proficiency, critical thinking, academic reading, argumentative writing, pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, digital tools, and task-based instruction.

Table 1
Reasons for Exclusion During the Selection Process

Phase	Reason for exclusion	Records excluded
Title and abstract screening	Not directly related to English proficiency and critical thinking	14
Title and abstract screening	Focused on educational levels other than higher education or university students	7
Title and abstract screening	Did not address critical thinking explicitly	5
Title and abstract screening	Non-eligible publication type	4
Title and abstract screening	Outside the 2020–2026 period	2



Phase	Reason for exclusion	Records excluded
Subtotal: title and abstract screening		32
Full-text eligibility assessment	Not directly related to English proficiency and critical thinking	5
Full-text eligibility assessment	Not focused on university students	3
Full-text eligibility assessment	Lack of functional DOI or incomplete full text	2
Full-text eligibility assessment	Duplicated or overlapping data	1
Full-text eligibility assessment	Non-empirical or non-peer-reviewed publication type	2
Subtotal: full-text assessment		13
Total excluded after duplicates		45

Note. Own elaboration based on the PRISMA 2020 selection process.

After selecting the studies, a qualitative analysis was carried out through thematic categorization. The articles were organized according to the main analytical categories identified in the literature: C1 English proficiency as academic language competence, critical thinking in higher education, reading and writing as cognitive-academic processes, pedagogical strategies for critical thinking development, digital learning environments, and the reciprocal relationship between language proficiency and critical thinking.

Since the selected studies presented different methodological designs and did not provide homogeneous statistical data, the synthesis was conducted through a narrative and thematic approach. This type of analysis made it possible to compare findings, identify common patterns, and interpret the contributions of the selected studies without applying a meta-



analysis. The synthesis process followed methodological guidance for systematic reviews without meta-analysis and for the transparent construction of PRISMA flow diagrams (Campbell et al., 2020; Haddaway et al., 2022).

4. RESULTS

The analysis of the 20 selected studies made it possible to identify the main trends, approaches, and contributions related to the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students. Based on the systematic review, the studies were organized into five thematic categories: advanced English proficiency as academic competence, assessment of critical thinking in EFL contexts, reading and writing as bridges between language and thought, pedagogical strategies for critical thinking development, and digital learning environments and motivational factors. This classification helped to understand how English proficiency and critical thinking interact in higher education contexts.

Table 2

Advanced English Proficiency as Academic Language Competence

Author	Focus	Contribution to the Research
Lam (2020)	English proficiency and philosophical inquiry	Shows that English learning can be strengthened when students engage in reflective and analytical discussions.
Moeginasl et al. (2022)	Critical thinking in English language learners	Provides evidence that English learners' critical thinking can be assessed in academic course contexts.
Din (2020)	Critical reading and university students	Demonstrates that critical reading reflects students' ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate academic information.
Kaowiwattanakul (2021)	CEFR-based English learning	Supports the use of CEFR-oriented reading activities to improve both English skills and critical thinking.

Note. Main contributions related to English proficiency as an academic and cognitive competence. Own elaboration.



The studies show that advanced English proficiency is not limited to grammar or vocabulary knowledge. At the university level, it also involves the ability to understand complex academic texts, identify implicit meanings, construct arguments, and communicate ideas critically. Therefore, C1 English proficiency can be understood as an academic language competence that supports higher-order thinking.

Table 3

Assessment of Critical Thinking in EFL Contexts

Author	Focus	Contribution to the Research
Hirai et al. (2022)	English test for critical thinking	Develops and validates an English test designed to measure EFL learners' critical thinking skills.
Sato (2022)	Argumentative essays	Identifies criteria for assessing critical thinking through second-language argumentative writing.
Mohammadi et al. (2022)	Critical thinking scale	Adapts and validates a scale to measure three-dimensional critical thinking in EFL readers.
Kumar et al. (2023)	Self and peer assessment	Shows that assessment activities can improve self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Note. Studies related to the measurement and evaluation of critical thinking in English as a foreign language context. Own elaboration.

The findings indicate that critical thinking can be evaluated through different English language tasks, such as reading tests, argumentative essays, self-assessment, and peer assessment. These studies suggest that language proficiency and critical thinking are connected because students must use English to interpret, justify, and evaluate ideas.

Table 4

Reading and Writing as Bridges Between Language and Thought

Author	Process Analyzed	Contribution to the Research
Esmail Nejad et al. (2022)	Writing performance and learning strategies	Shows that critical thinking mediates the relationship between writing performance and language learning strategies.



Author	Process Analyzed	Contribution to the Research
Teng and Yue (2023)	Metacognitive writing strategies	Demonstrates that critical thinking and metacognitive strategies influence academic writing performance.
Liu and Zhao (2023)	Writing from sources	Highlights the influence of critical thinking and L2 proficiency on academic writing tasks.
Yang et al. (2025)	English reading modules	Shows that English reading modules can strengthen critical thinking skills in higher education students.

Note. Contributions related to reading and writing as central processes in the development of critical thinking and English proficiency. Own elaboration.

The results show that reading and writing are key processes in the relationship between English proficiency and critical thinking. Critical reading allows students to evaluate information, recognize arguments, and interpret different perspectives. Academic writing, on the other hand, requires organization, synthesis, evidence-based reasoning, and the ability to defend ideas clearly in English.

Table 5
Pedagogical Strategies to Strengthen Critical Thinking in English

Author	Pedagogical Approach	Contribution to the Research
Aygün and Yavuz (2020)	Asynchronous learning tools	Demonstrates that asynchronous tools can support writing development and critical thinking instruction.
Sari and Prasetyo (2021)	Project-based learning	Shows that project-based learning in critical reading courses enhances students' critical thinking skills.
Lu and Xie (2024)	ICT-supported critical thinking instruction	Reviews how digital and instructional tools can support critical thinking development in TESOL contexts.



Author	Pedagogical Approach	Contribution to the Research
Zhang (2026)	Task-based teaching method	Supports the use of task-based instruction to cultivate critical thinking in college English teaching.

Note. Studies related to active and reflective methodologies for developing critical thinking in English learning. Own elaboration.

The reviewed studies suggest that critical thinking is strengthened when English teaching moves beyond mechanical grammar exercises. Strategies such as project-based learning, task-based teaching, asynchronous writing activities, and ICT-supported instruction encourage students to analyze problems, discuss ideas, evaluate evidence, and produce arguments in English.

Table 6
Digital Learning Environments, Motivation, and Classroom Challenges

Author	Focus	Contribution to the Research
Liang and Fung (2021)	Critical thinking in ESL classrooms	Identifies challenges and opportunities for fostering critical thinking in English language classrooms.
Pravita and Kuswandono (2021)	Implementation of critical thinking	Explains why applying critical thinking in English education courses can be challenging.
Zalani and Yousofi (2024)	Instagram and EFL learning	Shows that digital platforms can influence EFL learners' critical thinking development.
Huang et al. (2025)	Online English reading and motivation	Demonstrates that instructional design, motivation, and language proficiency influence critical thinking and engagement.

Note. Contributions related to the role of digital tools, motivation, and classroom challenges in the development of critical thinking. Own elaboration.

The findings reveal that digital learning environments can support critical thinking when they are used with clear pedagogical purposes. However, the studies also show that the



development of critical thinking in English classrooms depends on teacher preparation, student motivation, instructional design, and the effective integration of digital resources.

General Interpretation of Results

Overall, the 20 studies analyzed indicate that C1 English proficiency and critical thinking are closely related in university education. Students with advanced English proficiency have more linguistic resources to understand complex texts, express ideas clearly, and participate in academic discussions. At the same time, critical thinking helps students use English in a deeper and more reflective way, especially when reading, writing, debating, and solving academic problems.

The results also suggest that this relationship is strengthened through active methodologies, critical reading, argumentative writing, peer assessment, digital tools, and task-based instruction. Therefore, English teaching at the university level should not focus only on linguistic accuracy, but also on the development of analytical, reflective, and argumentative skills.

5. DISCUSSION

The results obtained show that the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking in university students is a relevant area of study in higher education. The reviewed literature suggests that advanced English proficiency is not limited to linguistic accuracy, grammar, or vocabulary, but also involves the ability to understand complex academic texts, interpret implicit meanings, construct arguments, and express reasoned opinions. In this sense, C1 English proficiency can be understood as an academic language competence that supports higher-order thinking processes (Lam, 2020; Moeiniasl et al., 2022).

From a critical thinking perspective, the analyzed studies indicate that university students need to evaluate information, compare different points of view, identify assumptions, and support their ideas with evidence. These skills are especially important in English learning contexts, where students are required to read academic texts, write argumentative essays, participate in discussions, and solve academic problems using a second or foreign language. Therefore, critical thinking becomes a fundamental component of academic English development (Liang & Fung, 2021; Pravita & Kuswandono, 2021).



One of the most relevant findings is the role of reading and writing in connecting English proficiency with critical thinking. Critical reading allows students to analyze texts beyond literal comprehension, identify main arguments, evaluate the reliability of information, and recognize implicit meanings. Similarly, academic writing requires students to organize ideas, synthesize information, use evidence, and present logical arguments. Studies by Esmaeil Nejad et al. (2022), Teng and Yue (2023), and Liu and Zhao (2023) show that writing performance, metacognitive strategies, language proficiency, and critical thinking are closely related in EFL academic contexts.

The reviewed studies also highlight the importance of assessment in the development of critical thinking. Hirai et al. (2022), Sato (2022), and Mohammadi et al. (2022) demonstrate that critical thinking can be measured through English tests, argumentative essays, and critical reading scales. These findings are important because they show that critical thinking is not an abstract ability separated from language learning, but a skill that can be observed and evaluated through students' academic use of English.

Another relevant aspect is the contribution of active pedagogical strategies. The evidence suggests that methodologies such as project-based learning, task-based teaching, peer assessment, asynchronous learning tools, and ICT-supported instruction can strengthen both English proficiency and critical thinking. These strategies promote student participation, argumentation, reflection, and problem-solving, which are essential for university students who are expected to use English in academic and professional contexts (Aygün & Yavuz, 2020; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021; Kumar et al., 2023; Lu & Xie, 2024).

Digital learning environments also appear as an important factor in the development of critical thinking. Studies by Zalani and Yousofi (2024) and Huang et al. (2025) suggest that digital platforms, online reading classes, instructional design, and motivation can influence students' engagement and critical thinking skills. However, the results also indicate that technology alone does not guarantee meaningful learning. Its effectiveness depends on how it is integrated into pedagogical activities that encourage analysis, discussion, and reflection. In relation to C1 English proficiency, the findings suggest that students with advanced language competence may have more resources to express complex ideas and participate in academic tasks that demand critical reasoning. Nevertheless, the literature also shows that language proficiency by itself is not enough. Critical thinking must be intentionally



promoted through activities that require students to question information, evaluate evidence, and construct arguments. For this reason, English teaching at the university level should integrate linguistic development with cognitive and academic skills (Din, 2020; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Yang et al., 2025; Zhang, 2026).

In summary, the reviewed evidence supports the idea that C1 English proficiency and critical thinking are mutually reinforcing. Advanced English proficiency allows students to access and communicate complex academic knowledge, while critical thinking helps them use English in a more analytical, reflective, and meaningful way. However, the implementation of this relationship in higher education requires appropriate instructional design, teacher preparation, valid assessment tools, and learning environments that promote active participation and academic reasoning.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The systematic review made it possible to identify that C1 English proficiency and critical thinking are closely related in university students. Advanced English proficiency provides students with the linguistic tools needed to understand complex texts, communicate ideas clearly, and participate in academic discussions. At the same time, critical thinking strengthens the way students read, write, analyze, argue, and construct knowledge in English. The results show that reading and writing are central processes in this relationship. Critical reading helps students evaluate information, identify arguments, and interpret different perspectives, while academic writing allows them to organize ideas, use evidence, and present reasoned conclusions. Therefore, both skills are essential for the development of critical thinking in English learning contexts.

It is also concluded that critical thinking should be intentionally integrated into English teaching at the university level. Activities such as debates, argumentative essays, peer assessment, project-based learning, task-based instruction, critical reading tasks, and digital learning activities can help students develop both language proficiency and higher-order thinking skills.

In relation to assessment, the review shows that critical thinking can be evaluated through English language tasks, such as reading tests, argumentative writing, self-assessment, and peer assessment. This confirms that critical thinking is not separate from language use, but



can be observed through students' ability to understand, evaluate, and communicate ideas in English.

Furthermore, digital learning environments can contribute to the development of critical thinking when they are used with clear pedagogical purposes. Online reading activities, digital platforms, and ICT-supported instruction can increase motivation and engagement, but their effectiveness depends on the quality of instructional design and the active participation of students.

Finally, it is concluded that the relationship between C1 English proficiency and critical thinking has important implications for higher education. English teaching should not focus only on grammar, vocabulary, or fluency, but also on the development of analytical, reflective, and argumentative skills. Future research should continue exploring this relationship through empirical studies in university contexts, especially with students who have achieved or are developing C1 English proficiency.

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