



## INVESTIGATING CRITICAL THINKING IN PAKISTANI ELT PRACTICES: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF PUBLISHED RESEARCH

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### Abstract

*This systematic review examines how critical thinking has been addressed in published research on Pakistani ELT practices, focusing on textbooks and materials, classroom practices, and assessment practices. The reviewed studies show that critical thinking is widely valued, but its implementation remains uneven across these domains. Textbook studies indicate a dominance of lower-order tasks, while classroom research suggests that critical thinking can improve learner achievement and engagement when deliberately integrated into teaching. However, structural constraints such as examination pressure, rigid curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and limited teacher preparation continue to restrict its development. Assessment studies further show that traditional testing practices remain dominant, with limited emphasis on reasoning, evaluation, and creativity. Overall, the review concludes that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT is not absent, but insufficiently supported through aligned materials, pedagogy, and assessment.*

### Introduction

Critical thinking has become an important concern in English language teaching, where learners are expected not only to understand language but also to interpret, evaluate, and respond to ideas in meaningful ways (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). This shift reflects a broader movement in language education toward higher-order engagement rather than simple recall or reproduction (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2024; Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024). In contexts such as Pakistan, where English plays a significant academic and professional role, the development of such skills becomes even more important (Ramzan & Khan, 2024). However, classroom realities often remain shaped by examination pressures, textbook dependence, and teacher-centered practices (Abdelrady et al., 2025; Akram & Li, 2024), which may limit opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022). Within Pakistani ELT, critical thinking is frequently acknowledged as a desirable outcome, yet its presence in actual teaching and learning processes remains uneven (Akram & Yang, 2021; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2023, 2025, 2026). Rather than being consistently embedded across materials, pedagogy, and assessment, it appears in fragmented forms across different educational settings. This creates a gap between what is expected at the level of educational discourse and what is practiced in classrooms.

Although a growing number of studies have examined ELT textbooks, classroom practices, and assessment methods in Pakistan, the evidence remains scattered across separate lines of inquiry. There is limited effort to bring these strands together to understand how critical thinking is represented and enacted across the broader ELT landscape. The present study addresses this gap by systematically reviewing published research on ELT practices in Pakistan, with a particular focus on textbooks and materials, classroom practices, and

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assessment practices, in order to examine how critical thinking is promoted, constrained, and understood within these domains.

### **Literature Review**

Critical thinking has been treated in language education as a core element of meaningful learning because it enables learners to move beyond recall and engage in interpretation, reasoning, evaluation, and independent response. In ELT, this is especially important because language proficiency is not merely a matter of form; it also involves the ability to process ideas, negotiate meaning, and communicate with judgment. Within Pakistani ELT research, critical thinking appears across several related but not always connected strands, particularly textbook studies, classroom practice studies, and assessment-focused work. These strands collectively suggest that while critical thinking is increasingly recognized as valuable, its presence across Pakistani ELT remains uneven and often structurally constrained.

One important strand of the literature focuses on textbooks and instructional materials. Because textbooks continue to shape classroom tasks, learning priorities, and exam preparation, they remain central to how cognitive demand is structured in ELT. Research in this area suggests that Pakistani English textbooks provide only limited space for higher-order engagement. Bhatti and Bashir (2025) found that exercises in Punjab's Intermediate English Textbook 1 were only moderately aligned with intended outcomes and were dominated by remembering and understanding, while analysis, evaluation, and creation appeared much less frequently. In a related study, Javed and Karim (2024) reported that textbook questions at the secondary level similarly leaned toward lower-order thinking skills, with creative and open-ended tasks underrepresented. Together, these studies suggest that textbook design in Pakistani ELT still tends to privilege examination-oriented, text-bound activity over tasks that cultivate sustained critical thinking. Textbook research also extends beyond question types and exercise design into the ideological and discursive dimensions of ELT materials. Shah (2025) argues that textbooks and pedagogy in Pakistan should not be understood as neutral vehicles of instruction. Her study shows that ELT textbooks reproduce dominant discourses in some respects, while also opening limited possibilities for negotiation and rupture through pedagogical engagement. This widens the meaning of critical thinking in the Pakistani ELT context. It is not only about whether learners are asked to analyze or evaluate a text, but also about whether classroom materials create space for questioning dominant representations, engaging with diversity, and resisting passive acceptance of ready-made meanings. This discursive perspective adds an important layer to more cognitive approaches and shows that critical thinking in ELT cannot be reduced to a checklist of higher-order verbs alone.

A second major strand concerns classroom practices and pedagogical enactment. Studies in this area repeatedly show that critical thinking is often acknowledged in principle but inconsistently realized in actual teaching. Parveen (2022) examined teachers' conceptions and practices of critical thinking in Pakistani higher education and treated classroom activities, assessment, content coverage, and teacher training as interconnected dimensions of the issue. Her study suggests that critical thinking in ELT is not a single classroom strategy but part of a wider pedagogical orientation. Irfan et al. (2025) likewise found that critical thinking was present in ELT programs, but rigid course specifications and limited emphasis on creativity and independent learning reduced its practical strength. These studies point to a recurring



pattern: critical thinking is visible at the level of aspiration, but not always sustained at the level of classroom design or program structure.

More focused pedagogical studies deepen this picture by showing where implementation is stronger and where it remains weak. Jamil and Rizvi (2025), in their study of teacher education in Pakistani higher education, found moderate overall implementation of critical thinking practices, with teaching strategies and learning environment practices more visible than assessment practices. Ali et al. (2025) similarly reported that teachers and students saw critical thinking as important for deeper understanding, learner autonomy, and improved English language skills, though students often lacked earlier exposure to such forms of learning. These findings indicate that critical thinking is not absent from Pakistani ELT classrooms, but it often depends on individual pedagogical effort rather than systematic institutional support. That makes its presence uneven across classrooms and levels.

Another cluster of studies shows that when critical thinking is deliberately built into pedagogy, student outcomes improve. Jabeen et al. (2025) found that a critical thinking intervention significantly improved English achievement among secondary school students, with the experimental group outperforming the control group after treatment. Khan et al. (2025), working from a critical pedagogy perspective, found that dialogic teaching improved cognitive engagement, learner agency, and communicative confidence, while also increasing student-initiated questioning and peer scaffolding. These studies are important because they move beyond abstract advocacy and provide evidence that critical thinking can produce measurable educational gains in Pakistani ELT. They also strengthen the argument that the problem lies less in the value of critical thinking itself and more in the conditions of its implementation.

At the same time, classroom-focused studies repeatedly identify structural barriers that make such implementation difficult. Khan et al. (2025) point to overcrowded classes, exam-driven curricula, and limited teacher preparation as major obstacles to dialogic pedagogy. Shaikh et al. (2024) report similar difficulties in the implementation of communicative language teaching, including weak teacher training, time pressure, low student proficiency, limited motivation, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate assessment tools. Karim and Harwood (2026) reinforce this broader pattern by showing a low level of compliance between intended and enacted pedagogies in Punjab, shaped by exam pressure, institutional limitations, infrastructure problems, and learners' low proficiency. Although not all of these studies use critical thinking as their central term, they identify the same contextual pressures that make critical and learner-centered ELT difficult to sustain in practice.

A third major strand in the literature concerns assessment practices, and this appears to be one of the weakest areas in relation to critical thinking. Fazli et al. (2024) found that English teachers at Pakistani universities relied largely on traditional assessment methods, with writing assessed more than other skills and alternative assessment tools used only in limited ways. Ajmal et al. (2022) similarly reported that English teachers in Punjab tended to use traditional assessment practices and preferred methods in which they already felt confident. Jamil and Rizvi (2025) also found that assessment was the least developed dimension of critical thinking pedagogy in higher education classrooms. Across these studies, the same pattern emerges: even where teachers may endorse critical thinking, assessment systems continue to reward routine performance more than reasoning, evaluation, or creativity. This is significant because



classroom priorities are often shaped by what is tested. If assessment remains conventional, critical thinking is unlikely to become central in ELT practice.

Some additional studies help explain the broader environment in which these patterns operate. Tasleem et al. (2025) show that Pakistani coursebooks differ in their communicative orientation, curriculum alignment, and cultural positioning, which means that opportunities for critical engagement are not evenly distributed across materials. Zaffar et al. (2025) argue that cultural misalignment in ELT materials may affect learner engagement and comprehension, indirectly shaping the conditions under which critical participation becomes possible. Khan et al. (2023), writing about undergraduate curriculum reform, describe an effort to move ELT away from delivery-based instruction toward project-based and culturally responsive learning. While these studies are not always framed explicitly in terms of critical thinking, they help reveal the curricular and material conditions that either enable or constrain it within Pakistani ELT.

Taken together, the literature suggests that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT is best understood as a fragmented field of practice rather than a settled pedagogical reality. Textbook studies show limited higher-order cognitive demand, classroom studies show partial and uneven enactment, and assessment studies reveal the continued strength of traditional evaluation patterns. At the same time, intervention and pedagogy-focused research indicates that critical thinking can strengthen English learning when it is deliberately supported. What remains missing is a synthesis that brings these separate lines of research together. This is where the present review contributes: by examining textbooks and materials, classroom practices, and assessment practices within a single analytical frame, it seeks to develop a more integrated understanding of how critical thinking is represented, promoted, and constrained in Pakistani ELT.

### **Methodology**

This review employed a systematic review design to investigate how critical thinking has been represented and examined in published research on Pakistani ELT practices. The review was guided by the understanding that critical thinking in ELT is not confined to one instructional domain; rather, it is shaped through the interaction of textbooks and materials, classroom practices, and assessment practices. For that reason, the review did not limit itself to one type of study, but brought together published research that addressed these three areas in relation to Pakistani ELT. The purpose was not simply to collect studies mentioning critical thinking by name, but to identify research that either directly examined critical thinking or indirectly illuminated the pedagogical, curricular, and evaluative conditions that enable or constrain it in English language teaching in Pakistan.

The review followed a structured process of identification, screening, categorization, and synthesis. In the first stage, potentially relevant studies were gathered from published research that focused on ELT in Pakistan. The search was oriented toward studies dealing with English language textbooks, ELT classroom practices, teacher practices, pedagogy, curriculum implementation, and assessment practices where critical thinking, higher-order thinking, critical pedagogy, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, or learner autonomy were either central concerns or clearly related constructs. Because earlier work in the area often uses different labels for similar concerns, the review remained open to studies that did not use the exact term



critical thinking but examined practices closely associated with it, such as higher-order thinking, dialogic pedagogy, communicative engagement, open-ended tasks, and non-traditional assessment. This broader but still controlled approach was necessary because the literature itself is distributed across different research traditions rather than organized under a single consistent vocabulary.

To make study selection transparent, three screening categories were used: include, maybe include, and background use. Studies were placed in the include category when they directly addressed critical thinking in Pakistani ELT or clearly examined textbook, pedagogical, or assessment practices that shape opportunities for critical thinking. These included studies on ELT textbook exercise design, curriculum-textbook alignment through Bloom's taxonomy, teachers' conceptions and practices of critical thinking, dialogic pedagogy, critical thinking interventions, and critical thinking pedagogy in higher education. Studies were placed in the maybe include category when they were relevant to ELT practice in Pakistan but their connection to critical thinking was more indirect, such as research on communicative language teaching, assessment habits, curriculum reform, and coursebook evaluation. Studies were placed in the background use category when they helped establish the broader Pakistani ELT context but did not directly contribute to the synthesis of critical thinking across textbooks, classroom practices, and assessment. This category included broader ELT contextual work, language policy studies, and non-ELT textbook studies that were useful for conceptual support but not for the main analytical dataset. The use of these three categories helped maintain a balance between focus and flexibility, which was especially important because some Pakistani ELT studies address critical thinking explicitly while others contribute to the issue more indirectly through pedagogical or curricular evidence.

After initial classification, the core studies in the include group were subjected to data extraction. For each study, the following information was recorded: author and year, title, study type, educational context or level, main focus, methodology or design, data source, critical thinking link, key findings related to critical thinking, category of practice, and final status. The category of practice was limited to four labels: textbooks, classroom practices, assessment practices, and mixed. The critical thinking link was also standardized using three labels: direct, indirect, and background only. This extraction structure made it possible to compare studies that differed in methodology and setting while keeping the synthesis anchored to the same review purpose. The procedure also helped prevent the review from becoming a simple descriptive summary of individual studies. Instead, it enabled cross-study comparison around recurring themes and patterns.

The synthesis itself was thematic. Once the included studies had been extracted and classified, their findings were read comparatively to identify repeated patterns across the literature. Three principal analytical strands were used in the synthesis: critical thinking in textbooks and materials, critical thinking in classroom practices, and critical thinking in assessment practices. These strands were selected because they emerged consistently from the reviewed research and because they reflect the major sites through which critical thinking is either promoted or constrained in ELT. Within each strand, the review examined both enabling and limiting patterns. For example, textbook studies were analyzed for the extent to which they supported higher-order thinking tasks, classroom studies were analyzed for teachers' conceptions,



enactment, and barriers, and assessment studies were analyzed for the degree to which assessment practices moved beyond traditional recall-based formats. In addition to this domain-based synthesis, the review also attended to cross-cutting issues such as examination pressure, teacher training, learner readiness, curriculum rigidity, and institutional constraints, since these appeared repeatedly across multiple studies. Thematic synthesis was especially appropriate here because the available studies varied considerably in method, including qualitative, mixed-methods, intervention-based, comparative, and content-analytic designs, making statistical aggregation neither feasible nor desirable.

Although the review was systematic in its procedure, it has certain limitations. First, the study relied on published research available within the selected pool and did not attempt a meta-analysis of effect sizes or a quantitative aggregation of all findings. Second, the review included studies from different educational levels, including secondary, intermediate, and higher education, because these were relevant to the broader question of critical thinking in Pakistani ELT practices. While this widened the analytical lens, it also meant that the reviewed studies were not perfectly uniform in context. Third, some studies were included because they shaped the conditions of critical thinking rather than naming it directly. This was a deliberate decision, but it also required careful interpretive judgment during classification. Even so, this approach was justified by the nature of the literature itself, where critical thinking is often embedded within broader discussions of curriculum alignment, pedagogy, learner autonomy, classroom interaction, or assessment reform rather than treated as a single isolated construct. Recent Pakistani ELT studies on textbook alignment, pedagogical enactment, dialogic instruction, and assessment practices show precisely this kind of overlap, which confirms the need for an integrative review design rather than an overly narrow one.

Taken as a whole, the methodology was designed to ensure that the review remained focused, transparent, and analytically useful. By moving from structured study selection to thematic synthesis, it became possible to build an integrated account of how critical thinking is represented, promoted, and limited across Pakistani ELT research. This methodological design is consistent with the aim of the study, which is not merely to list what has been published, but to synthesize what the literature collectively reveals about critical thinking in Pakistani ELT practices.

Author(s)	Year	Main Focus	Context / Level	Methodology
Parveen	2022	Critical thinking in ELT classrooms	Higher education, Pakistan	Mixed methods
Jamil & Rizvi	2025	Critical thinking pedagogy in teacher education	Higher education, Pakistan	Qualitative
Ali, Kalhoro, & Koondhar	2025	Role of critical thinking in improving English language skills	Undergraduate, Pakistan	Qualitative



Irfan, Alfares, Tahir, & David	2025	Critical thinking in ELT programs	Higher education, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia	Qualitative comparative study
Bhatti & Bashir	2025	Exercise design and learning outcomes in English textbook	Intermediate level, Punjab	Mixed-method content analysis
Shah	2025	ELT textbooks and pedagogy from a critical discourse perspective	Pakistan, Grades 1–12	Textbook analysis and interviews
Jabeen, Ali, & Hakim	2025	Critical thinking intervention and English achievement	Secondary level, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Exploratory sequential design
Khan, Malook, Khan, & Khan	2025	Dialogic pedagogy and critical pedagogy in ELT classrooms	Public secondary schools, urban Punjab	Convergent mixed methods
Javed & Karim	2024	Curriculum-textbook alignment and cognitive level of textbook questions	Secondary level, Punjab	Content analysis
Fazli, Azim, & Saeed	2024	Language assessment practices of university English teachers	Undergraduate level, Pakistan	Quantitative survey
Ajmal, Khalid, & Nazir Ahmad	2022	Classroom assessment practices of English teachers	Secondary level, Punjab	Quantitative survey
Karim & Harwood	2026	Alignment between intended and enacted pedagogies	Secondary level, Punjab	Classroom observation and interviews



Shaikh, Khan, & Ahmed	2024	Challenges in implementing communicative language teaching	Higher secondary level, Sindh	Qualitative phenomenology
Khan, Ahmad, & Qamar	2023	Culturally responsive teaching in undergraduate ELT reform	Undergraduate level, Pakistan	Critical analysis
Tasleem, Arif, Munawar, Komal, & Latki	2025	Comparative evaluation of English coursebooks	Grade 8, Pakistan	Qualitative
Zaffar, Younus, & Amjad	2025	Cultural compatibility of ELT materials	Intermediate level, Punjab	Mixed methods
Raza & Coombe (Eds.)	2022	ELT in Pakistan	Pakistan, multiple levels	Edited volume
Sharif & Zeeshan	2023	ELT in large classes	Universities, Quetta	Qualitative
Farooqui, Ahmed, & Azmat	2024	Conflict of teaching methods in Pakistan	Pakistan	Mixed methods
Naseer, Muhammad, & Jamil	2022	Critical thinking skills in Pakistan Studies textbook	Secondary level, Punjab	Qualitative content analysis
Soomro & Siddiqui	2025	Language policy and marginalization of Sindhi	Private school, Sindh	Qualitative

The reviewed studies reflect a growing but uneven body of research on critical thinking in Pakistani ELT. Most of the core studies focus on classroom practices, while a smaller number examine textbooks and materials directly. Assessment practices appear less frequently as a primary focus, although they emerge as an important concern across several studies. The reviewed literature spans secondary, intermediate, undergraduate, and higher education contexts, with methodological variation across qualitative, mixed-methods, content-analytic, intervention-based, and survey designs. This spread of focus and method suggests that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT has been approached from multiple angles, yet the evidence remains fragmented across distinct but related domains.

### Findings

Studies on Pakistani ELT textbooks and materials suggest that critical thinking is present in limited and uneven ways rather than as a consistent design principle. Bhatti and Bashir (2025)



found that exercises in Punjab's Intermediate English Textbook 1 were only moderately aligned with intended learning outcomes and were dominated by lower-order processes such as remembering and understanding, while higher-order skills remained marginal. Similarly, Javed and Karim (2024) reported that textbook questions at the secondary level leaned heavily toward lower-order thinking, with creative and open-ended tasks underrepresented. Shah (2025) further showed that ELT textbooks in Pakistan are not neutral tools, as they reproduce dominant discourses while allowing only limited space for negotiation and critique. Supporting this broader picture, Tasleem et al. (2025) highlighted major differences in communicative orientation and pedagogical design across coursebooks, while Zaffar et al. (2025) found that cultural misalignment in ELT materials may weaken learner engagement. Taken together, these studies indicate that Pakistani ELT materials tend to privilege examination-oriented and text-bound learning, which restricts the regular development of analysis, evaluation, creativity, and broader critical engagement.

Studies on classroom practices show that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT is generally valued by teachers and researchers, but its implementation remains uneven and heavily shaped by contextual constraints. Parveen (2022) found that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT classrooms must be understood through interconnected dimensions such as classroom activities, assessment, content coverage, and teacher training, while Jamil and Rizvi (2025) reported only moderate implementation of critical thinking pedagogy, with assessment practices emerging as the weakest area. Likewise, Ali et al. (2025) showed that teachers and students viewed critical thinking as important for improving English language skills, autonomy, and deeper understanding, yet students often lacked prior exposure to such learning. More intervention-based and pedagogy-focused studies strengthen this picture: Jabeen et al. (2025) found that critical thinking interventions significantly improved students' English achievement, and Khan et al. (2025) showed that dialogic pedagogy enhanced learner agency, questioning, and communicative confidence. However, Irfan et al. (2025), Shaikh et al. (2024), and Karim and Harwood (2026) all point to barriers such as rigid curricula, examination pressure, overcrowded classrooms, low student proficiency, and weak teacher preparation, suggesting that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT classrooms is less absent than structurally under-supported.

Assessment-focused studies suggest that critical thinking remains one of the weakest dimensions of Pakistani ELT practice because assessment continues to rely largely on traditional and lower-order formats. Fazli et al. (2024) found that university teachers in Pakistan mainly assessed writing through short- and long-answer questions and used only limited alternative assessment techniques, while listening and other skills received comparatively less attention. In a similar way, Ajmal et al. (2022) reported that English teachers at the secondary level in Punjab predominantly relied on conventional assessment methods and tended to use practices in which they already felt skilled. This pattern is reinforced by Jamil and Rizvi (2025), who identified assessment as the least developed area of critical thinking pedagogy in higher education classrooms, and by Khan et al. (2025), who argued that exam-driven curricula and weak assessment rubrics continue to discourage reasoning-oriented learning. Taken together, these studies indicate that although critical thinking may be supported at the level of classroom aspiration or intervention, Pakistani ELT assessment still privileges



recall, routine writing, and familiar testing formats over evaluation, creativity, and analytical judgment.

### **Discussion**

The reviewed studies collectively suggest that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT is better understood as an acknowledged educational aim than as a fully realized pedagogical practice. Across textbooks, classroom instruction, and assessment, the same broad pattern appears repeatedly: higher-order engagement is valued in principle, yet lower-order routines continue to dominate in practice. Textbook studies show that ELT materials still privilege remembering and understanding over analysis, evaluation, and creation, which means that learners are often introduced to English through exercises that reinforce reproduction more than independent reasoning. Classroom-based studies, however, show that teachers and researchers do recognize the importance of critical thinking, and intervention-based evidence further confirms that when critical thinking is deliberately embedded into teaching, students' English achievement, confidence, and agency improve. This suggests that the problem does not lie in the educational worth of critical thinking, but in the conditions under which ELT is organized and delivered in Pakistan (Bhatti & Bashir, 2025; Jabeen et al., 2025; Javed & Karim, 2024; Khan et al., 2025; Parveen, 2022).

A second important pattern is that the limitations identified across the literature are not isolated but structurally connected. Examination pressure, rigid curricula, overcrowded classrooms, weak teacher preparation, and traditional assessment habits appear across multiple studies and across different educational levels. In that sense, textbooks, pedagogy, and assessment do not function as separate domains; rather, they reinforce one another. When textbooks emphasize lower-order tasks, teachers are more likely to teach toward recall, and when assessment continues to reward routine responses, the space for critical engagement narrows further. At the same time, discourse-oriented work shows that critical thinking should not be reduced only to cognitive levels, since ELT materials and pedagogy also shape how learners encounter culture, identity, and authority in the classroom. Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT remains fragmented, partially implemented, and structurally under-supported, even though the evidence strongly suggests that it can enrich language learning when it is intentionally and consistently integrated across materials, pedagogy, and assessment (Akram, 2020; Fazli et al., 2024; Irfan et al., 2025; Jamil & Rizvi, 2025; Shah, 2025; Shaikh et al., 2024). Taken together, the findings imply that curriculum objectives, textbooks, teaching practices, and assessment systems must be aligned if critical thinking is to become a meaningful and sustained part of English language education in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

The review concludes that critical thinking in Pakistani ELT is recognized as an important educational goal, yet its actual presence across textbooks, classroom practices, and assessment remains limited and uneven. The reviewed studies show that ELT materials still lean heavily toward lower-order tasks, classroom implementation of critical thinking is often partial and constrained by structural pressures, and assessment practices remain dominated by traditional formats that reward recall more than analysis, evaluation, and creativity. At the same time, the literature also shows that when critical thinking is deliberately integrated into pedagogy, it can



improve learner engagement, autonomy, and English achievement. Overall, the evidence suggests that the challenge is not the absence of interest in critical thinking, but the lack of systematic alignment across curriculum, materials, teaching, and assessment in Pakistani ELT practice

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