

## Triangulating Critical Reading: A Comparative Study of Written, Visual, and Oral Assessments in an EFL Context

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### ABSTRACT

Critical reading is a vital skill for tertiary EFL learners, as it helps develop deeper understanding and analytical thinking. However, most assessment practices still rely heavily on paper-based tests that primarily measure comprehension in a limited way, leaving a gap in understanding how students demonstrate critical reading through alternative methods. This study investigates how tertiary-level EFL students demonstrate critical reading through three assessment formats: a written paper-based test, a visual concept map, and an oral BookTalk presentation. Drawing on descriptive data from ten English Literature students enrolled in a Critical Reading course, the study compares performance across these modalities to understand how each format supports different dimensions of critical reading. Findings show that while paper-based assessments effectively measure basic comprehension, visual and oral tasks better reveal skills such as synthesis, interpretation, and personal response. Students who performed moderately on written tests often improved significantly in the visual and oral tasks, suggesting that multimodal assessments better capture learners' critical engagement. The results underscore the value of integrating varied assessment types to form a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of student learning. By including visual and oral formats, educators can support a wider range of learner strengths and foster deeper interaction with texts. This study contributes to expanding assessment practices in tertiary EFL contexts by highlighting the potential of alternative formats in developing students' critical reading skills.

**Keywords:** Critical Reading, EFL Assessment, Paper-Based Test, Performance-Based Assessment, Concept Mapping, Booktalk

### INTRODUCTION

Critical reading is a vital component of tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. It goes beyond literal comprehension to encompass analysis, interpretation, and reflection. In Indonesian university classrooms, however, critical reading is often assessed through conventional paper-based

tests that focus primarily on recalling information or identifying textual features. This practice may limit the students' opportunity to express their deeper understanding of texts, particularly in ways that highlight their analytical reasoning or personal interpretation.

Reading is increasingly seen as a meaning-making process, therefore,

alternative assessment formats have been explored to capture the complex ways students engage with texts. Concept mapping, for example, allows students to visualize relationships between key ideas, enhancing both comprehension and synthesis (Hazaymeh & Alomery, 2022). Studies by Novak and Cañas (2008) emphasize the pedagogical value of concept maps in promoting meaningful learning. Similarly, oral performance tasks like BookTalks provide a space for learners to articulate their interpretations, present arguments, and engage critically with reading material (Ly, 2024).

In addition, Huang and Eskey (1999) argue that effective reading assessment should include tasks that reflect authentic reading behaviors, not just discrete skill testing. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) also highlight the value of performance-based assessments, such as oral presentations and portfolios, in capturing students' higher-order thinking. More recently, Widodo (2018) underlined the need for assessment practices that incorporate multiliteracies and allow learners to demonstrate comprehension through diverse modalities, such as visuals, oral explanation, and interaction.

These studies reinforce the idea that multimodal assessments provide more comprehensive opportunities for students to express their critical reading abilities, especially in contexts where English is a foreign language.

Despite growing support for such multimodal assessments, limited research has examined how these formats affect students' critical reading performance in EFL contexts. There remains a gap in understanding how students perform across different

types of assessment tasks—especially when transitioning from text-based formats to visual and oral ones.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how tertiary EFL students demonstrate critical reading through three assessment formats: a paper-based test, a concept map, and a BookTalk presentation. Specifically, it explores how their performance varies across these tasks and what that reveals about their development of critical reading skills.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach to investigate the differences in how tertiary EFL students demonstrate critical reading skills across varied assessment types. The participants were all ten students from a second-semester English Literature Critical Reading class at Universitas Ary Ginanjar, Jakarta.

The data for this study consisted of student scores from three course assessments. The first assessment was a paper-based reading test, designed to evaluate comprehension and analytical skills through structured questions. The second assessment was a concept mapping task, where students visually represented the thematic structure and relationships within a text. The final assessment, the UAS, was a BookTalk presentation, during which students orally articulated their interpretation and critique of a selected reading.

Data collection involved obtaining students' raw scores from each assessment, supplemented by lecturer's notes on performance characteristics. The scores were then analyzed descriptively to observe individual and group performance trends. The analysis focused on how students' critical reading

competencies resulted differently across the three tasks. Patterns of score progression were examined to determine whether and how shifts in format—from written to visual to oral—affected the depth and clarity of student responses. The analysis did not involve inferential statistics but relied on thematic interpretation of numerical trends in relation to task characteristics.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' performance across the three assessments revealed distinct shifts in how critical reading skills manifested in response to different formats. As students moved from traditional written tests to visual and oral tasks, their levels of engagement and demonstration of analytical thinking evolved noticeably. These changes offer insight into both the strengths and limitations of each assessment format.

To examine these shifts more closely, the following section presents student performance data across the three assessment types. This comparative overview helps illustrate how learners responded to each format and what those responses reveal about their evolving critical reading competencies.

The table below summarizes student performance across the three assessments. This overview lays the foundation for understanding how different assessment formats may bring forward different dimensions of students' critical reading development.

Table 1 provides a summary of student performance across the three assessments. The comparative analysis highlights not only the differences in achievement, but also how each assessment format reveals

distinct aspects of critical reading development.

Table 1. Participant Demographic and Performance Overview

Student Code	Gender	Assessment 1 (Paper Test)	Assessment 2 (Concept Map)	UAS (Book Talk)
S01	F	71.0	96.0	88.0
S02	M	97.5	98.0	95.0
S03	F	67.0	84.5	70.0
S04	M	88.0	90.5	85.0
S05	F	68.5	98.0	80.0
S06	M	84.0	92.0	70.0
S07	F	57.0	60.5	70.0
S08	F	79.5	60.0	80.0
S09	M	85.0	87.5	83.0
S10	F	70.0	90.0	85.0

*Note: Scores are in percentage form (%). Gender coding is anonymized for privacy.*

Students who scored moderately on the initial paper-based test often showed substantial improvement in the concept mapping and BookTalk tasks. For instance, Student S01 moved from 71.0 in the paper test to 96.0 in the concept map and maintained a high score of 88.0 in the BookTalk. Similarly, S05 showed marked improvement, scoring 68.5 in the paper test and 98.0 in the concept map. This pattern suggests that traditional written tests might not fully capture students' analytical strengths, which become more visible in visual or oral formats.

On the other hand, a few students struggled to maintain their performance throughout the sequence. Student S03 scored 67.0 → 84.5 → 70.0 and Student S06 scored 84.0 → 92.0 → 70.0, both showing a drop in the final BookTalk. These declines may stem from issues such as public speaking anxiety, unfamiliarity with oral academic discourse, or limited experience articulating

abstract ideas in English. Such outcomes indicate that while oral tasks offer richer opportunities for critical expression, they also introduce performance pressure that may affect student outcomes.

The paper-based assessment (Assessment 1) primarily measured reading comprehension and inferential skills in a structured format. This aligns with Alderson's (2000) view that such tests often focus on isolated reading sub-skills. While convenient to administer and score, these assessments provide a limited view of a student's interpretative depth. Indeed, some students who scored well here (e.g., S02 with 97.5) remained consistent, but others underperformed compared to their performance in later assessments, indicating the restrictive nature of written testing.

In contrast, the concept mapping task (Assessment 2) allowed students to visually organize and synthesize ideas, demonstrating hierarchical thinking and intertextual awareness. Concept mapping helps learners externalize abstract thought processes and engage with texts structurally. Ruslaeni and Ramalia (2020) emphasize this capacity to scaffold meaningful learning. In this study, most students scored above 85 in the concept map, suggesting strong conceptual engagement when freed from linguistic or format constraints. Visual representation enabled students to prioritize meaning over form and flexibly relate ideas across text layers.

The BookTalk (UAS) as the final assessment offered students a more interactive and expressive avenue to demonstrate their critical thinking. Students were required to orally interpret texts, support their ideas

with examples, and sometimes compare perspectives. These elements require active engagement, real-time organization of thought, and persuasive delivery. The majority of students maintained high performance here, such as S10 (70.0 → 90.0 → 85.0) and S09 (85.0 → 87.5 → 83.0), indicating that the oral format was effective for sustaining deep textual engagement.

The findings across the three assessments—paper test, concept map, and BookTalk performance—show a pattern consistent with previous research on multimodal assessment and differentiated student competencies. Overall, students achieved the highest scores in the concept-map task, followed by the BookTalk assignment, while the lowest mean performance occurred in the paper-based test. This aligns with studies indicating that visual-organizational tasks such as concept mapping often enable students to demonstrate higher-order understanding more effectively than traditional tests (Ruslaeni & Ramalia, 2022). The higher median and greater variability in the concept-map scores also correspond with research showing that open-ended, visually supported tasks allow high-performing students to excel while still providing scaffolding for lower-performing learners.

These findings echo O'Malley and Valdez Pierce's (1996) advocacy for performance-based assessments that evaluate real-world academic skills. Ly (2024) similarly highlights how oral tasks promote learner autonomy, reflective thinking, and authentic communication. However, the observed fluctuations in scores also point to the need for scaffolding and support in oral expression,

especially for EFL learners who may lack confidence or exposure to academic speech genres.

The comparatively lower performance in the paper test echoes long-standing evidence that text-based assessments rely heavily on recall and linguistic decoding, which may disadvantage students who are strong conceptual or visual learners. This is further supported by the wider standard deviation in Assessment 1, indicating uneven mastery of discrete language knowledge—a trend frequently identified in studies of traditional testing formats in EFL contexts (Hurriyah&Nirmala, 2020).

Meanwhile, the BookTalk (UAS) scores occupy a middle position between the concept-map and paper-test results. This finding aligns with research suggesting that oral performance assessments activate both comprehension and production skills, creating moderate cognitive demands that can challenge some students while enabling others to demonstrate communicative competence (Arianti, 2024). The moderate standard deviation in UAS scores further reflects what previous studies describe as the balancing effect of authentic oral tasks: they provide opportunities for expressive ability but still require structured preparation and content understanding.

Taken together, the three assessments show a pattern well documented in prior educational research: students tend to perform better when tasks allow multiple modes of expression, particularly visual and conceptual modes, compared to linguistically dense or recall-based tests. At the same time, the results illustrate how multimodal assessments can reveal varied

dimensions of student ability. This supports the argument made by scholars of multimodal literacy that diverse assessment types provide a more holistic picture of learner performance than any single test format.

Overall, the findings support the idea that no single assessment format can fully capture the complexity of critical reading. Paper-based tests serve a foundational role, but concept mapping and BookTalks uncover deeper interpretive and reflective capacities. This triangulation of assessment types provides a more holistic and equitable picture of student learning. In particular, visual and oral assessments reveal hidden potential and individual variation that would otherwise remain unnoticed in traditional testing scenarios.

The implication for pedagogy is clear: EFL educators should adopt a multimodal approach to reading assessment. Integrating visual and oral formats alongside written tests can better support diverse learners and foster meaningful engagement with texts. Such practices not only evaluate skills but also cultivate them—aligning assessment with instruction in a mutually reinforcing cycle.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that while traditional assessment formats remain valuable for structured comprehension evaluation, they may not sufficiently capture the full spectrum of students' critical reading abilities. Multimodal approaches—such as concept mapping and oral BookTalks—uncover deeper critical reading skills, including synthesis, evaluation, and personal interpretation. These formats also

promote metacognitive awareness and foster learner autonomy, particularly when students are given opportunities to express understanding beyond the constraints of written responses.

The findings demonstrate that different students may perform better in different assessment modes. Whereas some excel in structured formats like paper-based tests, others thrive in visual or oral tasks where their interpretive and communicative abilities are more visible. This diversity highlights the importance of equitable and varied assessment methods in EFL classrooms, particularly in contexts where learners come from different

educational and linguistic backgrounds.

To build on this study, future research could incorporate student reflections or preference surveys to better understand how learners experience and perceive different assessment types. Longitudinal studies might also reveal how repeated exposure to multimodal assessment shapes students' academic confidence and critical thinking development over time. Ultimately, assessing critical reading requires more than just testing for correct answers—it calls for designing opportunities where students can articulate, construct, and share meaning across multiple modes of expression.

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