



## News in Levels website to sharpen students' critical thinking: Student's Perspective

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### Abstract

This study explores the explorer of News in Levels as a learning medium in enhancing reading skills and critical thinking among fifth-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas of Indonesia. News in Levels is an online news platform that presents current events in three levels of English proficiency, allowing students to engage with content suited to their language ability. The platform not only supports literal comprehension but also encourages students to analyze information, construct arguments, and compare news across levels—core components of critical thinking. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through interviews involving three students who actively use News in Levels in their learning process. The interviews focused on students' perceptions of how the platform helps them understand texts more deeply, identify main ideas, draw conclusions, and respond to current issues reflectively and critically. Findings indicate that News in Levels assists students not only in understanding English texts but also in developing analytical thinking about news content. All three participants reported that reading news across different levels enabled them to build layered comprehension, which eventually led to deeper analysis. The platform's audio features and simple yet informative structure made it easier for students to identify the writer's perspective and form their own opinions based on the information read. Thus, News in Levels proves to be an effective learning medium for improving not only reading skills but also critical thinking abilities, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language learning.

**Keywords:** *News in Levels, critical thinking, reading skills, English language learning, digital media*

## **Introduction**

In the age of information overload, critical thinking is vital for students to analyze, evaluate, and discern the credibility of vast data streams. This especially is needed in the learning of English language, particularly in the context of learning English as Foreign Language in Indonesian schools as it is most likely that in many if not all schools in Indonesia teach English (Agustina & Cahyono, 2017). It is imperative to not only learn English in classes from its technical contents (grammar, pronunciation etc) but also utilise critical thinking (R. Setiawan & Nungki Nurbani, 2023). It empowers them to question assumptions, synthesize diverse perspectives, and make informed decisions, fostering intellectual resilience and adaptability in an ever-evolving world (Facione, 2011).

Exposing students to a wide array of real-time news sources cultivates critical thinking by immersing them in diverse perspectives and challenging preconceived notions. Doing that is also one of the ways of teachers utilizing many ways to engage with students, because every students have different distinct learning style and way of processing information (Rahayu et al., 2023). Engaging with current events from multiple angles encourages deeper analysis, fosters empathy, and equips learners to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. This approach not only enhances intellectual curiosity but also empowers students to become informed, discerning participants in global discourse, shaping their ability to question, reflect, and contribute meaningfully to society (Paul & Elder, 2019).

The "News in Level" website serves as an educational tool for developing students' critical thinking by offering news articles at varying difficulty levels (Gardner & Davies, 2014). This website encourages students to actively engage with difficult subjects and makes current events more understandable for them both linguistically and cognitively. This study looks into how students feel about the "News In Level" website and how it could help them develop their critical thinking skills. The study looks at how the platform's organised content and range of difficulty levels aid students in researching, evaluating, and addressing global issues, thereby enhancing their ability to think critically and independently. It accomplishes this through user participation and comments.

Critical thinking is an essential component of modern education because it equips students with the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly complex and knowledge-rich society. It encourages active analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas from various sources, going beyond straightforward passive learning. By promoting inquiry and uncertainty, critical thinking enables students to assess the veracity of information, investigate its applicability, and consider multiple viewpoints.

In an age of misinformation and data overload, this is the ability required to make wise choices and come up with creative solutions to issues. Ultimately, it produces thoughtful, self-sufficient thinkers who can overcome challenges and significantly improve society. The shift in the fast-paced global landscape demands a fundamental evolution in the purpose of education itself. Paul and Elder (2019)

argue that amidst complex global challenges, the key priority must be to arm students with sharp analytical and evaluation skills. Therefore, the educator's role shifts from being merely a rigid provider of information to becoming a facilitator who ignites students' curiosity to explore diverse perspectives beyond the textbook. Ultimately, the goal is to shape learners capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world wisely.

Directly integrating critical thinking exercises into daily lessons is one of the most effective methods for sharpening students' analytical skills (Brookfield, 2013). Using real-world scenarios and current events as learning material is proven to trigger a structured mindset and the formation of evidence-based opinions among students. The use of this method aims to leave students feeling more prepared and confident in confronting the various problems they will face, to better prepare students for future challenges and boost their confidence, platforms like "News In Level" can be particularly effective. Introducing the usage of internet or technology based teaching tool (technology-mediated learning/TME) might help teachers to teach students in their language learning (Khabib et al., 2023).

Various studies have examined the advantages of the "News In Level" platform. Halpern (2013) highlights how this platform makes complex news easily accessible, thereby empowering language learners to participate in global discussions. Meanwhile, Ennis (2015) states that the use of three progressive tiers allows students to develop their abilities, ranging from mastering basic vocabulary to conducting in-depth critical analysis. This is supported by Kuhn (1999), who emphasizes that the wide variety of topics on the platform proves effective for maintaining engagement and enhancing students' overall comprehension.

As Vásquez and Ovalle (2019) argue that "News In Level" is an innovation in the world of education. The "News in Level" make easier to access information through a tiered approach. This platform effectively democratizes access to global news by bridging differences in understanding caused by differences in linguistic or cognitive abilities. Because of this platform not only functions as a learning tool, but also as a forum for fostering social inclusion, encouraging critical analysis, and training learners to form their own independent opinions based on information that is accessible to all groups.

By simplifying heavy topics such as world politics or climate change, students are encouraged to hone their analytical and critical thinking. According to Jonassen (2010), platforms such as "News In Level" offer a solution to this; heavy topics are simplified so that they can be easily accessed by students. The key to this solution is in the tiered content, which allows readers of all levels, both beginners and experts, to learn without feeling overwhelmed. As a result, the learning method using platforms such as "News in Level" will bridge the gap in understanding between each individual.

In addition to promoting critical thinking, the "News in Level" website serves as a valuable resource for enhancing students' reading and comprehension abilities. By engaging with articles that vary in complexity, students systematically develop their capacity to comprehend increasingly complex texts. Stated by Fisher (2016) as they advance through the different levels, they encounter more advanced vocabulary and intricate sentence structures, thereby contributing to the improvement of their reading proficiency (Prapelia & Fadhilawati, 2024). As stated by Garrison et al., his process further promotes students' critical engagement with texts, as it necessitates their assessment of the reliability of the information, comprehension of the primary arguments, and evaluation of the various perspectives presented in the news articles (Alias & Razak, 2023).

The website encompasses a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from local news to international affairs, thereby fostering students' engagement with a diverse array of perspectives. Through the exploration of news narratives from various regions of the world, students are introduced to viewpoints that may be outside their routine experiences. This exposure significantly enhances their comprehension of global issues and enables them to perceive the world through multiple lenses according to Kurfiss (Aboluwodi, 2016). Platforms such as "News In Level" that are able to present complex topics at the available levels are essential in developing an understanding of issues that have high complexity.

Expertly created platforms like "News in Level" allow users selected information depending on their interests and read articles at their own speed, thereby improving their involvement. This method encourages students' curiosity in self-directed learning by allowing them select courses and news that correspond to their academic level and personal interests. Moreover, the customising instrument of the platform enables students to develop their critical thinking skills and become responsible and prepared, so motivating them to take responsibility of their educational road (Chaffee et al., 2017). Although sites like "News In Level" offer several benefits, it's important for us to know how well students believe their capacity to grow critical thinking is (D. S. Nasution, 2023). The research's results presented in opposition reactions.

On the one hand, many students found the platform very helpful because it simplified the news, built confidence, and allowed them to gradually improve their understanding (Johansson, 2019). However, on the other hand, some students faced difficulties when moving to more complex levels, both in terms of cognition and vocabulary mastery (Cottrell, 2021). This gap is the focus of this study. Although there have been many studies on digital sources and critical thinking in the EFL context (Amelia, 2023; Nasution et al., 2023; Rangkuti et al., 2023), none have specifically examined the potential of a tiered news platform such as "News In Level" in the context of education in Indonesia.

Moreover, most of the current literature focuses more on quantitative methodology or survey-based approaches, so the results obtained are not optimal. Existing research still has significant shortcomings: there are very few in-depth

qualitative studies that focus on students' perspectives. Specifically, there are few studies that explore how students themselves perceive the impact of using simplified and tiered news content on the development of their critical thinking skills, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) which is characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity.

This study seeks to fill this gap, by concentrating on the reflections and experiences of Indonesian students who use News In Levels. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, this study is expected to produce deeper insights into how students interact with the platform and how it facilitates the development of their critical thinking skills by achieving this goal, the study intends to contribute to the theoretical discussion surrounding the integration of technology in language instruction and foster practical initiatives aimed at improving pedagogical strategies in EFL classrooms in Indonesia.

Numerous previous studies have examined how digital tools, particularly news-based platforms, aid in the development of critical thinking abilities in students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This study emphasizes that in order to encourage more intense cognitive involvement, language instruction must incorporate practical materials. Wang (2020) examined how level-adjusted news items were used in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context at a Chinese university. The results of this study showed that they were now more capable of interpreting and analyzing information. Furthermore, using simplified books is very beneficial for the development of better analytical skills, particularly for students who struggle with comprehension. It has been discovered that this type of structured education is effective in increasing students' confidence and proficiency when completing challenging and varied problems (Wang, 2020).

## Method

In the framework of English language acquisition, this study will employ a qualitative descriptive technique to address the question "How are student's perceptions of using the News In Levels platform site to train their critical thinking skills?" This approach is chosen in line with Sandelowski's view as it aims to offer a thorough and unambiguous description based on the perspective of participants directly, so relevant to research events or phenomena that have not been studied solely (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach is suitable for educational research focused on participants' practical experiences since it stresses clarity and correctness in presenting participant experiences instead of trying to develop a broader theoretical framework (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

Unlike interpretive methods like grounded theory or phenomenology, qualitative descriptions preserve a more definite clarity of outcomes with data, therefore providing a clearer and more easily available picture of reality.

This study creates a framework for comprehending the opinions of high school pupils free from imposing intricate theoretical assumptions. The approach applied lets researchers highlight how students view the platform as a necessary part of their learning process and study the function of news in Levels contextually and adaptably. The descriptive results of the research design match the research objectives since this study seeks to expose in-depth insights into the opinions and experiences of the students.

This strategy is supposed to get real responses from students in other words explaining the original educational context where students use digital reading tools to improve their English language skills and critical thinking competencies (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025). Three undergraduate students enrolled in an English language education program at a public institution situated in Indonesia will undertake this study. Purposive sampling was used to choose the participants; hence, persons having particular experiences or traits pertinent to the aim of the study were sought for (Palinkas et al., 2015). Either through official classroom teaching or self-directed learning, the selected individuals had earlier experience with the News in Levels platform.

The chosen participants differed in their degrees of academic success and English competency, so allowing multiple points of view on the effectiveness of the platform. The study was conducted in a conventional academic environment for students in which exercises aimed for English language acquisition surreptitiously included digital reading tools.

This study used semi-structured interviews since they offer a flexible and focused method for evaluating participant points of view. This particular approach was chosen since it allowed the researcher to probe personal experiences and guaranteed consistency throughout the conducted interviews. Participants were let to freely communicate their ideas while the interviewer used leading questions to match the objectives of the study. Depending on participant availability, every interview lasted more than forty-five minutes; it was conducted either online or in person to increase accessibility and convenience.

Designed methodically around five main themes—general use of News in Levels, appropriate content level, student engagement with the material, perceived impact of using the "New In Level" platform, and the type of their interaction with the platform—reading, summarizing, or discussing articles—the interview questions were: With participant permission, all sessions were audio recorded; then, physically transcribed to ensure accuracy and maintain student response authenticity. The interviewer also used probing techniques—follow-up questions and clarifying requests—to ensure replies were accurate and to get more complete information.

This method produced extensive qualitative data encompassing students' complex experiences with the platform as well as their assessments of its instructional impact. In qualitative research environments, where knowledge about a given phenomenon rests on the study of meanings and experiences, semi-

structured interviews are rather beneficial.

This study applied theme analysis techniques, more especially drew on the six-phase framework suggested by (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method was used since it helps to methodically analyze qualitative data and expose underlying trends in participant answers. The first phase involved familiarizing the researcher with the data, in which case he deeply interacted with the transcripts over several reads while simultaneously recording first observations. The first coding procedure then started, whereby research questions marked data units (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Third phase, which concentrated on theme identification, the researcher methodically arranged related codes into more general categories and compiled developing patterns of meaning. Validating themes in the fourth step meant the researcher had to hone and validate these themes by matching them with the gathered data so guaranteeing coherence and alignment with the main aims of the investigation. In the fifth step, which was devoted to defining and naming themes, the fundamental core of every theme was precisely identified and expressed to mirror its analytical concentration. Themes will be presented in a narrative form in the last phase, in the sixth phase, which deals with the report's preparation, supplemented with direct quotes from the participants, so preserving authenticity and openness in the research results.

The study was conducted utilizing an inductive approach, according to which subjects grow straight from the facts themselves rather than from a premeditated framework. This data-driven method ensures that, as it allows thorough interpretations anchored in their actual experiences, the points of view of the participants receive top attention throughout the analytical process. Educational research attempting to probe learners' points of view in depth and generate comprehensive, context-specific insights is believed particularly suited for this inductive theme approach in educate.

## Results

This part shows how students view using News as means of enhancing their critical thinking abilities generally. The study's findings will be arranged under various themes: general experience, content fit ability, engagement, influence on critical thinking, and interaction with news information.

### 1. Positive Overall Experience

Regarding News in Levels, all three participants said they had a general good experience. They valued how the platform made real news sources clear and easily available. "Very helpful," student 1 (Intermediate Level) said. I enjoy how easily comprehensibly the news is presented. Student 2 (Advanced Level) who said, "I had

a good experience," backed up this point. The straightforward structure enables me to daily improve my reading. "I think it's good for learning," Student 3 (Elementary to Intermediate Level) also said, describing the experience favorably. The language is straightforward; hence I could follow the narrative. The responses revealed that News in Levels' simplicity, clarity, and disciplined design produces a supporting the responses showed that News in Levels' simplicity, clarity, and rigorous design creates a useful setting for learners at all degrees of skill. This helps students to feel confident enough to interact with English news materials without feeling overwhelmed, which is a crucial basis for later in their education development of critical thinking.

## 2. Appropriateness of Content Levels

The students claimed often that the News in Levels' materials fit their English ability, thereby boosting their understanding and interaction with the material. "Level 2 fits me," student one said. Though it's not too easy, I can still grasp the idea without always checking a dictionary" (Interview, Student 1). "Level 3 works well for me," Student 2 said, finding it to be justly hard. "I like being challenged and learning new expressions," Student 2 said in an interview. Student 3, meantime, said, "It helps me learn step by step" (Interview, Student 3) describing using both Level 1 and Level 2. These answers show the effectiveness with which the platform supports differentiated learning so that students may choose items that were adequately hard but yet within reach. Furthermore, inspiring small progress—which is required to improve language acquisition and critical thinking abilities—the level system appeared to motivate.

## 3. Engagement and Interest

Students' enthusiasm in learning English was much raised by using the "News in Level" platform. Using global issues instead of traditional textbook material, students believed would boost their own drive. "I like to read real news." commented Student 1. It seems more practical than merely consulting a textbook. In a same vein, Student 2 said, "I feel more motivated to read the news topics since they are current and relevant." Third student underlined, "I prefer reading about real events instead of just doing grammar work." These points of view show that students find real things not only more interesting but also more significant. Reading about pertinent and contemporary issues could help them develop their critical thinking.



#### 4. Influence on Critical Thinking

Though the grades differed, all three students said that using "News In Level" helped them improve their critical thinking abilities. "Sometimes I think more about the topic, especially if it's about something important like global issues," Student 1 said. Regarding the evolution of critical thinking, Student 2 offered a quite solid argument saying, "Yes, especially when I compare the piece with news from other sources. It challenges the facts and forces me to consider things closely. Student 3 said, "I try to ask myself questions like, 'Why did this happen?' or 'What will happen next?'" acknowledging that changes still took place.

These answers highlight varying levels of critical thinking involvement, from introspection to active review using cross-referencing of data. These findings show that the "News in Level" platform may inspire students to go beyond basic knowledge and motivate them to think critically including challenging, examining, and assessing the fundamental elements of critical thinking.

#### 5. Interaction with the News Content

Students' interactions with News in Levels pieces also demonstrated early phases of critical participation. Mostly reading the news, Student 1 occasionally engaged in class discussions stating, "Mostly reading, but I also discussed a few articles in class with my group" (Interview, Student 1). Saying, "I analyzed the news and sometimes shared it with my friends to hear their opinions," Student 2 went one step further by reading and breaking down news items (Interview, Student 2). By contrast, Student 3 participated in reading and sporadically in summary writing: "Mostly I just read it, but sometimes I write a summary in my notebook" (Interview, Student 3).

Among other forms of participation, reading, debating, evaluating, and summarizing expose many levels of interaction with the subject. Particularly when analyzing and evaluating news with others, one can develop several points of view and a greater knowledge—two absolutely essential components of critical thinking. Even the process of summarizing reveals an attempt to absorb, compress, and synthesize material meaningfully, as Student 3 proves.

### Discussion

The current research examined students' opinions on using News in Levels to improve critical thinking abilities. Results show students had a favorable view of News in Levels. Students mentioned easy access, suitable language complexity, interesting material as well as the possibility for promoting critical thought. These results agree with prior work and ideas about language acquisition, real resources next to critical thinking's growth. First, the positive overall experience reported by participants aligns with the theory of Comprehensible Input proposed by Krashen

and Terrell (1983), which emphasizes the importance of providing learners with input slightly above their current level to promote language acquisition (Bailey & Fahad, 2021).

Students in this study indicated that News in Levels provided readable and understandable material, facilitating both comprehension and motivation, echoing findings of Al-Shammari (2021) who found that simplified authentic materials increase student engagement and language acquisition. Similarly, Setiawan et al. (2021) demonstrated that accessible English texts enhance reading confidence among EFL learners.

Participants chose levels that fit their skills. This shows Scaffolding Theory is important. It gives learners help at a level that is right for them so they become more independent over time. It is given support by the person who emphasized how different reading materials help meet the different needs of learners. Huang stressed in 2022 that input suited to the learner improves both understanding and a student's ability to learn independently in English as a Foreign Language environment (Huang, 2022). Student interest is greater. Student participation is also greater when they read news about actual events.

This aligns with concepts that support Authentic Materials use for language instruction. Gilmore, A. (2019), stated that authentic texts, such as real news, help student motivation. This happens because students consider the material useful and relevant to real life (Walsh & Mann, 2019). Another person argued that authenticity helps emotional investment in language tasks. This person found that using real news in classrooms increases student motivation and linguistic awareness.

In contrast, certain researchers, such as Guo and Xu (2021), caution that the use of authentic materials, if inadequately adjusted to the learners' proficiency levels, has the potential to overwhelm students with lower language skills. Nevertheless, the current study indicates that the systematic categorization of the materials provided by News in Levels appears to effectively alleviate this concern. In the realm of critical thinking, the findings are consistent with Bloom's Taxonomy, which posits that higher-order thinking encompasses the processes of analysis, evaluation, and creation based on provided information.

Reports from students indicating their engagement in questioning factual information, comparing various sources, and reflecting on global issues suggest a progression towards the acquisition of higher-order thinking skills. According to Kurniawan and Novitasari (2023), the news content-centered teaching method encourages critical thinking engagement among EFL students. This is in line with the analytical results that have been carried out through this study, where students feel inspired to think about topics that interest them even though they are not reading the news. Tsui (2020) has the same opinion, the observed variability in the development of critical thinking skills among students is identified as a gradual and individual process that is significantly influenced by students' prior knowledge and level of cognitive engagement. Student 3's admission that they are just starting to

formulate critical questions illustrates the development in their thinking patterns (Martha et al., 2024).

Several strategies—reading, discussing, and summarizing—which confirm that communication and interaction significantly help to build critical thinking skills—also support each other—within the framework of Social Constructivism. According to the discussion indicated by Student 2, which relates with Huang (2022), peer assessment of news articles fosters more comprehensive analytical thinking and appraisal of many points of view. Li and Zhang (2021) stress the need of group projects in motivating students to express and defend their points of view, therefore indicating their analytical skills.

While the use of real materials can raise student involvement, Luo et al. (2023) disagree and provide contradicting results implying that, unless accompanied by intentional guiding through particular questioning approaches, the use of authentic materials does not always encourage critical thinking. This implies that even if the News in Levels platform offers a strong structure, teachers should deliberately include critical engagement into their lessons. Furthermore, Student 3's method of summarizing news articles fits Sari and Putri (2022), who discovered that this basic process required for developing critical thinking patterns—cognitive restructuring—may be assisted by means of news item summaries. Li and Zhang (2021) that without active direction, the act of summarizing could remain uncritical and fail to become a meaningful exercise in critical thinking participation. The summary presented by Student 3 emphasizes the need of including real news items into language instruction.

From a summary, Student 3's conclusion demonstrated how much critical literacy skills improved not only linguistic ability but also Azarnoosh et al. (2016) contend that by using simplified news stories, students better able to grasp English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can participate in critical analysis free from the cognitive strain sometimes linked with materials meant for native speakers. Cho & Afflerbach (2019) argue that simplified articles on the News in Levels platform can inadvertently hinder the development of critical literacy. Presenting information in a simple and easy-to-digest format often sidelines the complexity needed to provoke critical thinking (Brevik, 2019).

Though the "News in Level" system surely helps EFL students become more confident and involved, it might not be able to develop the analytical and interpretative skills needed for a critical debate. This constraint indicates the need of combining strategies exposing students to ever advanced various knowledge. Teachers could combine using the "News in Level" program with actual items. These two approaches employed together can motivate students to question basic ideas, weigh several points of view, and develop better critical literacy. News in Levels is a fantastic starting point for learning and developing a language; yet, the platform can inspire more critical thinking but requires diverse and diversified

approach to be developed.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the study was to find out how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students felt about using the \*News in Levels\* platform as a tool to enhance critical thinking abilities. The results of this study showed that tailored to the level of the platform, structured real news items (News in Level) significantly increase student involvement; the "News In Level" platform can help to improve understanding and promote early development of critical thinking. Study findings show that kids truly enjoy websites like "News in Level". Customizing the levels on the "News In Level" platform lets them relate more to grasp the contents. Using current issues will inspire students to consider the material and probe the ideas.

The results of the study revealed that while some students engaged in more complex thinking, that is, analyzed several news sources or investigated prejudice, others demonstrated basic reflective thinking abilities—that is, they questioned the cause and effect of an occurrence. The findings revealed wide differences in participants' degree of critical thinking, implying that these skills develop in stages and the need continuous use. This variation suggests the importance of providing students with opportunities to engage in critical thinking activities, as this is not a skill that can be mastered in a single session.

Although the platform has many benefits, the study also identified some challenges. One of the issues is the difficulty that some students face when transitioning from one level to another on the platform. Although the material has been simplified to suit their language skills, some students still find the material confusing without adequate support. This finding suggests that guidance from teachers is still needed to help students understand the authentic material effectively. The study emphasizes that simply reading and understanding the meaning of news articles is not enough to develop higher-order thinking skills. This can be overcome by structured and guided activities from teachers to help students achieve higher-order (critical) understanding by engaging them in analyzing, evaluating, and comparing similar topics from different perspectives.

To overcome the obstacles found, this study recommends combining the two methods of presenting material and analyzing the latest topics obtained from the "News in Level" platform. Combined activities that can provoke or encourage critical thinking can be done by forming a discussion forum, where participants will ask questions with agreed topics from various different perspectives. Therefore, it can be concluded that the "News In Level" platform is a very valuable resource for honing critical thinking skills. Especially if accompanied by structured tasks and collaborative activities. The combination of these two things can create an effective and interesting educational environment, to encourage students to think critically.

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