

From Clicking to Corroborating: Epistemic-Lateral Reading for EFL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Participating in critical reading in digital environments requires more than careful analysis of a single text. University EFL students are increasingly confronted with claims circulated throughout search results, news outlets, social media, institutional websites, and a multitude of interconnected resources. This theoretical paper establishes a framework for Epistemic-Lateral Reading (ELR) within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in tertiary education. A focused conceptual synthesis was conducted, integrating studies on Civic Online Reasoning and lateral reading, the RESOLV framework for task-driven reading, internet-specific epistemic validation, multi-document literacy, and EFL source evaluation. The synthesis indicates that the reliability of the source and the accuracy of the claim should be seen as interrelated but distinct assessments. It also suggests that EFL readers may conflate language accessibility, content relevance, or polished presentation with evidential reliability. ELR systematically organises digital critical reading into six coherent operations: articulating the thesis and purpose, scrutinising provenance, evaluating source reliability beyond the initial page, corroborating assertions through external sources, reconciling inconsistencies while modulating confidence, and constructing a judgment supported by sources in English. The framework is proposed as a theoretical model rather than an evidence-based strategy. It offers pedagogical applications and substantiated theories for subsequent exploration. ELR may enable a shift in EFL teaching from a checklist-based assessment of sources to an emphasis on evidence networks, provenance, corroboration, and justified uncertainty, while still providing language support for complex digital reading.

Keywords: Digital Critical Reading, EFL, Epistemic Cognition, Lateral Reading, Source Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The methodology of critical reading has transformed due to alterations in the information sources themselves. A university student may begin with a solitary homepage, transition to a search engine, consult news articles, analyze institutional profiles, juxtapose expert opinions, and subsequently revert to the original assertion. In this context, the caliber of reading relies not only on grasping sentences or recognizing arguments; it also depends on discerning the sources of information, assessing which sources deserve consideration, comprehending the relationships among independent sources, and evaluating the degree of trust to assign to a claim (Breakstone et al, 2021; Choudary, 2024).

This transition is essential for individuals acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL). Their online reading tasks involve at least two interrelated requirements: they must precisely comprehend English while concurrently evaluating the credibility and evidential

value of the information (Liu, 2025; Young et al., 2016). Recent studies on EFL university students suggest that the source assessment dimension in online searches remains underexplored. Liu (2025) discovered that while EFL learners utilize many source evaluation strategies, they generally emphasize task relevance and linguistic clarity rather than performing thorough assessments of source dependability or content validity. Data from Indonesia indicate that extensive engagement with social media does not inherently lead to proficiency in online trustworthiness evaluation (Silvhiany et al., 2021).

Consequently, the assessment of digital resources need not to be regarded solely as a continuation of traditional reading comprehension. Studies on Civic Online Reasoning reveal that learners frequently find it challenging to assess assertions, sources, and evidence they encounter online (McGrew et al., 2018). Instruction utilizing the lateral reading technique can improve students' skills in exploring unfamiliar websites and corroborating information outside the immediate homepage (Breakstone et al., 2021; Brodsky et al., 2021). Recent research provides significant clarification: examining source credibility and verifying the truthfulness of assertions are related tasks, but not synonymous (McGrew & Reynolds, 2026).

The following concern relates to how readers perceive the task. The RESOLV model asserts that the decisions made while reading are determined by the reader's understanding of the social context and the tasks they think must be fulfilled (Rouet et al., 2017; Britt et al., 2022). An individual who interprets the work as a quest to "identify useful citations" can respond differently than someone who regards it as a venture to "evaluate the validity of a claim. This differentiation holds considerable importance in EFL classes, since aims associated with language production might unintentionally elevate the value of easily paraphrased information over that which is backed by substantial evidence.

The third concern pertains to epistemology. Assessing digital information entails convictions about what qualifies as legitimate knowledge. Hämäläinen et al. (2021) found that convictions regarding justification derived from authority and other sources correlate positively with assessments of online trustworthiness. Investigations across several documents reveal that proficient readers integrate the attributes of sources, assertions, evidence, and inter-document connections, rather than viewing each text as a standalone source of information (Anmarkrud et al., 2014, 2022; Brante & Strømsø, 2018).

Against this background, the present paper proposes an Epistemic-Lateral Reading (ELR) framework for EFL higher education. It is a conceptual article rather than an empirical report (Brodsky et al., 2021; McGrew, 2023). No participant data, questionnaire responses, interviews, or statistical findings are presented. Its purpose is to integrate complementary theories into a coherent instructional and research framework for evaluating digital claims across multiple English-language sources.

Three inquiries direct this conceptual evolution. Initially, which theoretical frameworks most effectively elucidate the assessment of digital sources as a goal-directed, knowledge-seeking reading activity? Secondly, in what ways may "lateral reading" be modified for the EFL environment without diminishing it to a simplistic mechanical verification task? What design recommendations can inform forthcoming empirical research on digital credibility evaluation by EFL students?

METHOD

This paper utilizes a focused conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review. The aim is to formulate a hypothesis rather than conduct an exhaustive literature review. The scholarship was selected based on its direct significance with regard to one of four topics: judging online credibility, task-oriented reading, epistemic validation, or analyzing multiple documents/sources in EFL environments. Recent empirical studies were utilized to assess the

enduring relevance of traditional concepts and to identify aspects requiring adjustment for digital EFL reading. The synthesis proceeded through three analytical steps. Initially, structures bearing overlapping labels were differentiated by their function. The trustworthiness of the source, the correctness of the claim, the quality of the evidence, and the relevance to the task were regarded as separate evaluations. Secondly, ideas were contrasted on their explanations of reader behavior. COR elucidates investigative conduct, RESOLV delineates objective establishment, epistemic cognition articulates criteria for justification, and multiple-document literacy clarifies cross-source synthesis. Third, the ideas were restructured into an instructional cycle appropriate for demonstrable classroom activities.

Since this is a conceptual document, the recommended paradigm must not be shown as already substantiated. The components and claims require further corroboration based on novel empirical findings. Acceptable methodologies include performance activities on the open web, screen capture, browsing logs, think-aloud protocols, stimulated recall interviews, and source-based written assessments. This text is a conceptual manuscript. It does not employ participant data, questionnaire answers, interviews, tables, statistical information, or outcomes from prior empirical investigations. The ELR model is introduced for future validation and should not be deemed experimentally verified until new data are collected and assessed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual synthesis produced an integrated account of digital critical reading and a six-operation ELR framework. The sections below present the theoretical relationships, framework components, classroom implications, research propositions, and limitations.

FROM SINGLE-TEXT CRITIQUE TO NETWORKED EVIDENCE

Traditional critical reading activities often keep learners within a bounded text. Students may identify a thesis, distinguish fact from opinion, infer assumptions, or discuss bias. Those operations remain useful, but digital environments create an additional problem. A page can look professional, selectively cite evidence, omit conflicts of interest, or repeat a claim already circulating elsewhere. Close reading alone cannot establish an unfamiliar publisher's reputation or determine whether independent evidence supports the claim (Brodsky et al., 2023). Civic

Online Reasoning addresses this problem by emphasizing online investigation. Rather than asking readers to infer credibility mainly from a webpage's internal features, it encourages them to search beyond the page. Lateral reading involves leaving an unfamiliar source and consulting other sources to investigate who is behind it, what evidence exists, and whether the claim has been independently verified (Breakstone et al., 2021). College-level interventions indicate that this behaviour can be taught and can improve fact-checking performance (Brodsky et al., 2021).

The logic of lateral reading is compatible with, but not identical to, multiple-document literacy. Multiple-document readers construct relationships among documents, sources, claims, and evidence. Anmarkrud et al. (2014) showed that strategic processing of conflicting documents includes identifying information, monitoring understanding, and evaluating source-content relationships. Brante and Strømsø's (2018) review also indicates that sourcing instruction is strongest when source information is incorporated into interpretation. Explicit instruction can also strengthen integration across multiple texts (Barzilai et al., 2018).

EFL learners experience a certain strain associated with networked evidence. Valuable information may be linguistically comprehensible but lack epistemic depth. A text may be proficiently composed in English, featuring concise paragraphs and accessible citations, yet lack acknowledged authorship or external validation. An alternative source might possess a higher lexical complexity, although it is more credible. Liu (2025) notes that L2 readers

occasionally assess the pertinence, language, and integrative simplicity while selecting sources. These are legitimate concerns regarding the task, nevertheless they should not supplant the assessment of credibility.

This document regards digital critical reading as the interaction of three components: the claim, the source, and the evidential structure. The claim relates to what is being articulated. The source relates to the persons or organizations that created or distributed the information. The evidence network pertains to the extent to which independent and suitably qualified sources endorse, clarify, or refute the assertion. A strong digital understanding requires the amalgamation of all three components.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

CIVIC ONLINE REASONING AND LATERAL READING

Civic Online Reasoning (COR) highlights the competencies of locating, evaluating, and verifying information available on the internet. The evaluation literature indicates that superficial proficiency in digital media does not equate to effective online assessment (McGrew et al., 2018). COR diverts focus from superficial design elements to exploratory actions. Audiences seek to identify the source of the information, the evidence that substantiates it, and the perspectives of additional sources.

Lateral reading implements this transition. Readers often initiate alternative searches or open new tabs to investigate the organization, author, or assertion, instead of remaining on the landing page. Breakstone et al. (2021) found improvements among college students following asynchronous lateral-reading instruction. Brodsky et al. (2021) found that students instructed in fact-checking exhibited a greater propensity for lateral reading and effectively evaluating online material.

EFL instruction has been markedly improved by a recent advancement. McGrew and Reynolds (2026) differentiate the validation of a claim from the examination of a source's reliability. Misleading declarations can be disseminated by a notable entity, whilst authentic communications might be reiterated on an obscure platform. ELR upholds this differentiation to avert learners from amalgamating all credibility assessments into a singular question, like "Is this website reliable?"

RESOLV AND TASK REPRESENTATION

The RESOLV model asserts that reading constitutes a problem-solving endeavor shaped by the contextual and task representations held by readers (Rouet et al., 2017). Prior to and throughout the reading process, learners construct a task model that dictates the content they emphasize, the keywords they utilize, and the moment they discontinue reading. This clarifies why similar digital content might produce varied reading patterns.

The way tasks are presented in EFL contexts can produce unintended epistemic shortcuts. A request for students to "identify three sources for a paragraph" could foster an emphasis on both quantity and relevance to the issue. Nonetheless, a prompt that indicates 'assess which statement is most convincingly backed and clarify the reasoning' establishes a clear paradigm for the work. Thus, ELR initiates with an explicit declaration of the task and claim before proceeding to analyze the sources.

INTERNET-SPECIFIC EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

Epistemic cognition concerns concepts and evaluations of knowledge, as well as the process of knowing. In the online realm, it will be up to readers to choose what constitutes adequate justification. Hämäläinen et al. (2021) found that reliance on authority and corroboration from multiple sources predicted higher credibility assessments. Moreover, Kiili et al. (2022, 2023)

illustrate that reliable assessments can be achieved without sufficient justification and that evaluating trustworthiness requires two distinct processes: affirmation and inquiry. Lee (2022) additionally connects internet-based epistemic perspectives to the comprehension of various online documents.

Epistemic reasoning is especially vital when sources are at odds. Barzilai and Ka'adan (2017) demonstrated that strategic and metastrategic scaffolding can assist learners in synthesizing varied information. Barzilai et al. (2020) discovered that readers' perceptions of expert dissent can influence their assessment of conflicting claims. To adopt an evaluativist stance does not imply that all assertions hold equal value. Rather, it welcomes ambiguity, juxtaposing facts, understanding, approaches, and reasoning. Consequently, ELR arrives to a measured certainty, avoiding the reduction of every task to a simplistic true-or-false dichotomy.

MULTIPLE-DOCUMENT LITERACY AND EFL SOURCE EVALUATION

Multidocument literacy serves as the connective framework between source evaluation and synthesis. Proficient readers connect content to original sources and establish connections across documents (Anmarkrud et al., 2014). List et al. (2017) noted that the caliber of the responses was associated with sourcing behavior, trustworthiness assessments, and citation methodologies. Wiley et al. (2009) demonstrated that the assessment of sources forecasted learning outcomes and could be enhanced through teaching. Evaluations of sourcing and integration strategies advocate for the instruction of these processes as integral to meaning creation, rather than as isolated checklists (Barzilai et al., 2018; Brante & Strømsø, 2018).

The EFL evidence introduces a linguistically nuanced dimension. Silvhiany et al. (2021) indicate that Indonesian EFL learners had difficulty evaluating online resources presented across various digital media. Subsequently, Liu (2025) discovered that the requirements for language and writing, along with standards of trustworthiness, could affect the source-selection processes of EFL undergraduates. These results may indicate that EFL digital reading must clearly demonstrate linguistic advantages without compromising epistemic evaluation.

Table 1. Theoretical contributions to Epistemic-Lateral Reading

Foundation	Core concern	Contribution to ELR	EFL implication
Civic Online Reasoning	Investigating online claims and sources	Leave the page; investigate reputation; corroborate claims	Teaches observable verification actions beyond close reading
RESOLV	How task and context shape reading goals	Define the claim, purpose, and evidence standard before searching	Prevents language-production goals from replacing credibility goals
Epistemic justification	What counts as warranted knowledge	Coordinate authority, multiple sources, evidence, and uncertainty	Separates personal confidence from justified judgment
Multiple-document literacy	Integrating source-content relations across texts	Build an evidence network across supporting and conflicting sources	Supports source-linked synthesis in English

THE EPISTEMIC-LATERAL READING FRAMEWORK

The epistemic lateral reading framework is suggested as a cycle of six actions. The procedures are outlined sequentially for instructional clarity; seasoned readers may navigate them recursively. The structure begins with a description of the task and concludes with a substantiated, source-referenced assessment. The fundamental tenet is that credibility should

be evaluated by analysing the connections among assertions, sources, and independent corroboration rather than primarily relying on the quality of presentation.

1. Step 1: Write down the claim and the task. Learners restate the main claim in neutral language and figure out what kind of judgment is needed for the assignment. This lowers the chance of focusing only on quotes or information you can use right away.
2. Step 2: Check the source. Learners name the publisher, the author or group, the date of publication, the genre, and the stated goal. This is not the final word on trustworthiness. It makes questions that help with the next search.
3. Step 3: Leave the page and look into reputation. Learners look for sources other than the main one. They look at what reliable outside sources say about the author or publisher. This step makes horizontal reading workable.
4. Step 4: Show that the claim is true. Learners look for different pieces of evidence that support the same claim. They know the difference between repeat and confirmation. Ten websites that repeat the same news release don't give ten separate confirmations.
5. Step 5: Make peace and adjust the level of certainty. Learners look at relevant and contradictory evidence and compare them. Expertise, methods, recent events, freedom, and the reasons sources may disagree are among the things they consider. Getting sure isn't always the goal. It's possible for an outcome to be "well supported," "partly supported," "uncertain," or "not supported with current evidence."
6. Step 6: Write an English evaluation with a source link. Learners say what they think, list the strongest sources that support and disagree with their opinion, and explain the reasoning behind it. This final product keeps learning a language linked to being responsible with what you know.

Table 2. Six operations in the Epistemic-Lateral Reading cycle

Operation	Reader action	Diagnostic question	Observable output
1. Define claim and task	Restate the claim and specify the required judgment	What exactly am I trying to decide?	Neutral claim statement and task goal
2. Inspect provenance	Identify author, publisher, date, genre, and purpose	Who produced this, and for what purpose?	Provenance note with unanswered questions
3. Investigate reputation	Search outside the source for independent information	What do credible outsiders say about this source?	External reputation evidence
4. Corroborate claim	Compare independent sources addressing the same assertion	Is the claim independently supported?	Support/conflict evidence map
5. Reconcile and calibrate	Weigh evidence, expertise, methods, and disagreement	How certain should I be, and why?	Calibrated confidence judgment
6. Justify in English	Write a source-linked conclusion with reasoning	Can another reader trace my evidence?	Evidence-based paragraph or brief

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN FOR EFL COURSES

ELR should be taught through visible decisions rather than abstract warnings about misinformation. A classroom task can begin with one contestable English-language claim. The claim should be plausible enough to require investigation and should have accessible supporting and conflicting sources. Students work with an open or curated web environment, depending on proficiency and course level. Explicit instruction is pedagogically plausible because recent intervention research found gains in questioning less credible texts and justifying credibility evaluations after video-based instruction (Kiili et al., 2025).

Language scaffolding should support evaluation without predetermining the answer. Teachers may provide a small glossary for recurring terms such as evidence, expertise, affiliation, sponsored, independent, methodology, and conflict of interest. Sentence frames can support justification, for example: 'This source is relevant but not sufficient because ...' or 'The claim is partly supported by X, while Y provides conflicting evidence about ...' Such scaffolds target expression rather than judgment.

Teachers should also separate source reputation from claim verification. Students can first investigate the source, then evaluate the focal claim using independent evidence. This separation addresses the conceptual problem highlighted by McGrew and Reynolds (2026). It also prevents an overly simplistic rule that assumes reputable publishers are correct on every claim.

Assessment should reward traceable reasoning. A rubric can include claim definition, provenance investigation, independence of corroborating sources, handling of conflicting evidence, calibration of certainty, and quality of source-linked explanation. Grammar and vocabulary can remain part of the score, but they should not overwhelm epistemic criteria in a critical-reading task.

Table 3. Illustrative 40-minute ELR classroom sequence

Time	Activity	Teacher support	Student product
5 min	Restate one online claim and identify the task	Clarify terms; avoid giving a verdict	Neutral claim statement
7 min	Inspect provenance and list credibility questions	Model author/publisher/date checks	Provenance notes
10 min	Conduct lateral search on source reputation	Prompt source independence and search-result scanning	Two external reputation sources
10 min	Corroborate the claim across evidence sources	Ask whether sources are independent or merely repeating	Evidence map
5 min	Calibrate certainty	Provide confidence labels, not the answer	Confidence judgment with reason
3 min	Write a source-linked conclusion	Offer language frames for justification	Short evidence-based paragraph

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS AND EMPIRICAL AGENDA

1. Proposal 1. The manner in which a task is presented will influence the conduct associated with source assessment. Students tasked with assessing trustworthiness

- must engage in more extensive provenance and verification activities than those merely concentrating on information gathering.
2. Proposition 2. EFL students could unduly emphasize language accessibility and task relevance when these attributes are not distinctly separated from standards of credibility.
 3. Proposition 3. A strategy that aligns authority evaluations with corroboration from multiple sources is likely to yield more dependable conclusions than relying solely on checklist-oriented source inspections.
 4. Proposition 4. Separating source credibility from claim validation should enhance learners' ability to clarify why a reliable source may yet present a dubious assertion, and vice versa.
 5. Proposition 5. Written explanations linked to sources ought to demonstrate a higher level of digital critical reading skills than self-reported confidence or preferences.
 6. Proposition 6. The calibrated uncertainty of learners should be regarded as a positive outcome in situations of genuinely conflicting information, rather than assessed as indecisiveness.

An empirical examination must be rigorous and yield novel facts, rather than infer efficacy from a theoretical model. A single design might include screen recording and stimulated recollection alongside concerns regarding open-web trust. Participants may assess two or three assertions, with differing levels of source familiarity and evidence contradiction. The information generated during the process would disclose the positions of student clicks, the questions they pose, the duration they engage with essential pages, and the extent to which validation relies on genuine independent sources.

A supplementary performance rubric could evaluate six aspects related to ELR. The focus would encompass task representation, provenance, reputation assessment, corroboration quality, conflict resolution, and justification. Language proficiency ought to be evaluated autonomously to allow researchers to determine if the constraints of digital source assessment arise from English processing, epistemic strategy, or a combination of both.

Intervention studies may juxtapose ELR teaching with conventional close-reading pedagogy. Utilize unforeseen ideas and origins for a postponed transfer assignment. Superior performance absent of transfer could suggest acquired techniques rather than adaptable digital critical analysis.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The recommended model transforms the teaching segment of critical reading. The unit is characterized by neither a concise text nor a lengthy text. A dilemma arises from the distribution of evidence across various claims and sources. This change raises problems since digital disinformation infrequently presents itself as a distinctly delineated text. Students encounter fragments, reposts, screenshots, search results, summaries, institutional declarations, and conflicting interpretations.

ELR also resists two common simplifications. The first is technological familiarity. Being comfortable with phones, search engines, or social media does not, by itself, demonstrate credibility-evaluation competence. COR research has repeatedly shown that students can navigate digital environments while still making weak source judgments (McGrew et al., 2018). Indonesian EFL evidence points in the same direction (Silvhiany et al., 2021).

The following simplification involves literacy related to checklists. While author, date, domain, and design indicators are advantageous, they alone do not suffice. A source should be compared with other sources, and a claim must be corroborated by external evidence. The

essential contrast lies between the source's reliability and the allegation's confirmation. It makes the reasoning process harder, but also more realistic (Brodsky et. al., 2023; Kammerer, 2020).

In the context of EFL teaching, the framework might enable instructors to differentiate between language difficulties and epistemic quality. An arduous English source does not inherently confer more reliability, and a readily understandable source does not automatically imply inferiority. Teachers can bolster vocabulary or syntax while preserving the essence of the evidential assignment. This allows language support to serve critical reading rather than replace it (Wei, 2021).

The framework also has certain constraints. It is theoretical and has yet to be substantiated with EFL learners. Lateral reading techniques were primarily developed for civic-information scenarios, so their application to academic, scientific, commercial, or local contexts requires empirical validation. Search engines also tailor and prioritize content in manners that can affect the information students encounter. Ultimately, digital assessment is progressively centered on the utilization of AI-generated synopses and synthetic media, perhaps requiring expansions beyond the current structure.

CONCLUSION

Digital critical reading in EFL higher education must extend beyond only analyzing the content of a single book. Students must examine the origin of information, the transmission of claims between sources, the independence of evidence, the reasons for disputes among sources, and the degree of confidence the current evidence provides.

The Epistemic-Lateral Reading methodology integrates Civic Online Reasoning, RESOLV, epistemic justification, and multi-document literacy into six discernible actions. It is intentionally differentiated from preference-oriented or micro-format methodologies. It focuses on evidence networks, origin, validation, discord, and measured discernment. ELR is a theoretical notion that must now be assessed using recent performance metrics, process documentation, and transfer assignments prior to asserting any claims of efficacy.

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