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**An Investigation into How Foundation Year Students Understand and Demonstrate Critical
Evaluation in Essay Writing**

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Abstract

Critical evaluation is widely regarded as a key aspect of academic writing, but its demonstration can be especially challenging for students at Foundation Year level. While existing research highlights the challenges students face in applying critical strategies, few studies examine how these strategies are interpreted and applied in Foundation Year EAP writing. This study investigates how international Foundation Year students at King's College London understand and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in a summative essay for the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module. This small-scale qualitative case study draws on paired questionnaire and essay data from five students, analysed through a hybrid framework combining Bloom's taxonomy, Toulmin's model, and the Academic Literacies perspective. The findings indicate that students generally recognised the importance of critical evaluation, but their understanding was often partial. While some showed alignment between their perceptions and written performance, many demonstrated a disconnect influenced by factors such as conceptual uncertainty, language, and limited instructional support. The study suggests a need for clearer assessment guidance, more explicit modelling, reflective activities, and targeted support to help students build confidence and develop an evaluative stance in academic writing.

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1 - Introduction

The ability to think critically is widely regarded as a core academic skill in higher education, particularly in academic reading and writing (Andrews, 2009; Wingate, 2012). Within EAP, expectations around critical evaluation are often implicit, inconsistently communicated, and difficult for students to interpret and apply (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Wingate, 2012; Hyland, 2006). Consequently, many international Foundation Year students struggle both to understand what critical evaluation entails and to demonstrate it effectively in their written assignments, especially those unfamiliar with the academic expectations and conventions of UK higher education (Tahira and Haider, 2019; Wingate, 2012).

My experience of teaching the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module on the King's College London International Foundation Programme has highlighted that, although critical evaluation is central to assessment, it can be difficult to define and teach in clear, actionable terms. While previous studies have explored broader issues related to critical thinking and academic writing in EAP - such as disciplinary variation (Moore, 2011), the implicitness of evaluative expectations (Wingate, 2012), and challenges faced by international students (Tahira and Haider, 2019) - few have examined how Foundation Year students interpret and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in assessed essays, particularly within an EAP module context. This study addresses that gap by investigating how international Foundation Year students understand and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in their writing. Drawing on my experience teaching students on the International Foundation Programme, it seeks to shed light on the challenges they face and considers how the findings might inform more targeted and effective teaching and assessment practices within EAP.

To investigate this, the study draws on paired questionnaire and essay data from five international Foundation Year students. It focuses on how their stated understanding of critical evaluation aligns - or fails to align - with their written performance in a summative assignment for the AECT module. The study is guided by three research questions:

- How do Foundation Year students understand the concept of critical evaluation in essay writing?
- How do they attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in their AECT summative essays?
- What are the implications of students' interpretations and practices for the teaching of critical evaluation?

A small-scale qualitative case study approach was adopted to allow for in-depth exploration of students' perceptions and academic writing. As a conceptual basis for this analysis, the term *criticality* is used as an umbrella concept encompassing both *critical thinking* and *critical evaluation*, with a particular focus on how these are interpreted and demonstrated in academic writing. Data were gathered through an open-ended online questionnaire and qualitative analysis of students' previously submitted essays. These were analysed using a hybrid framework combining Bloom's Taxonomy, Toulmin's model of argumentation, and the Academic Literacies perspective. Through this approach, the study brings together students' reflections and their written work to provide a fuller picture of how critical evaluation is conceptualised and demonstrated in Foundation Year EAP writing.

The findings highlight areas of alignment and mismatch between perception and performance and suggest implications for teaching, assessment design, and student support. This dissertation is organised into five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature, Chapter 3 describes the methodology, Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, and Chapter 5 summarises the study's contributions, limitations, and pedagogical implications.

2 - Literature Review

The ability to think critically is widely recognised as a core academic skill in higher education (Andrews, 2009; Wingate, 2012). Yet many international Foundation Year students struggle to demonstrate critical evaluation in writing (Tahira and Haider, 2019; Wingate, 2012). In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, where *criticality* is a core learning outcome - as reflected in the King's International Foundation Academic English Written Assignment Assessment Criteria, which allocates 35% of the overall grade to the 'Use of Sources' criterion, which includes 'critical evaluation and synthesis' - the concept is often poorly defined and inconsistently taught (Wingate, 2012). This review examines how critical evaluation is understood, taught, and assessed in academic writing, and identifies relevant conceptual and pedagogical gaps.

The literature reviewed includes conceptual texts, empirical studies, and pedagogical sources drawn from EAP, applied linguistics, and higher education, with a focus on studies that explore how critical evaluation is defined, taught, assessed, or demonstrated in academic writing. These were grouped thematically by definition, student challenges, teaching and assessment practices, and analytical frameworks. Researchers have examined how critical thinking is defined, taught, assessed, and applied, but no studies appear to focus on how Foundation Year students interpret and demonstrate criticality within EAP modules - a gap this study addresses.

This review is divided into four sections, covering: definitions of critical evaluation; challenges faced by students; teaching and assessment practices; and conceptual frameworks used to analyse student writing.

2.1 - Defining Critical Evaluation in Academic Writing

Although *critical evaluation* is widely emphasised in academic writing, it remains a contested and inconsistently defined concept, particularly within EAP contexts (Wingate, 2012; Moore, 2013). The broader term *critical thinking* is frequently used in the literature to describe a range of cognitive and metacognitive skills, but this study focuses specifically on *critical evaluation* as it applies to academic writing, which has been described as involving the assessment of evidence (e.g., Cottrell, 2023), the weighing of perspectives (e.g., Andrews, 2009), and the justification of claims within written argumentation (e.g., Wingate, 2012; Wallace & Wray, 2023). Where relevant, research on critical thinking is included to support the conceptual framing, particularly when it addresses evaluative judgement or reasoning in academic contexts. Building on this conceptual scope, this section reviews how critical evaluation has been defined and interpreted in the literature, laying the groundwork for investigating how Foundation Year students understand and attempt to demonstrate it in their writing.

2.1.1 - Definitions and Dimensions of Critical Evaluation

Building on this, Andrews (2009), Cottrell (2023), Wallace and Wray (2023), and Wingate (2012) agree that critical evaluation involves more than expressing opinion or summarising sources; it requires judgement, reasoning, and a clear position supported by evidence. However, there are also differences in how these authors conceptualise critical evaluation, with some presenting structured models and others linking it to more general concepts such as argumentation or questioning.

One influential view of critical evaluation focuses on reasoning as a dialogic process, involving comparison, detachment, and scepticism. Andrews (2009) frames this through concepts such as dialogic thinking, source comparison, and a "vow of suspicion." This provides a strong conceptual foundation for what students are expected to demonstrate in critical evaluation. His text, however, is conceptual but not analytical and it does not offer an applied framework for identifying criticality in texts. Cottrell (2023) also offers no practical model or framework for identifying criticality in written work. Despite this, she offers highly accessible ideas for encouraging metacognitive awareness of criticality. Wallace and Wray (2023) offer two practical frameworks for critical evaluation - one aimed at developing critical reading through a question-based checklist, and another designed to help students structure arguments in writing. However, these frameworks are primarily aimed at

postgraduate students, and their abstract language, conceptual complexity, and assumptions of prior academic experience may limit their accessibility for Foundation Year or EAP learners.

An alternative view sees critical evaluation as a sub-skill within argumentation, particularly involving the evaluation of evidence and engagement with alternative perspectives. Wingate (2012) adopts this approach, focusing on how students develop argumentative competence. Although her study focuses on first-year undergraduates, her emphasis on essay writing is highly relevant to my investigation of how Foundation Year students understand and demonstrate critical evaluation. Her finding that “students have only partial or incorrect concepts of argument” and that many difficulties stem from “their lack of knowledge of what an argumentative essay requires” (Wingate, 2012, p. 145) supports my focus on whether expectations around critical evaluation are clearly communicated and consistently understood.

These conceptualisations not only justify examining how students interpret critical evaluation in the AECT module but also inform the design of the coding framework used to analyse their essays and questionnaire responses.

2.1.2 - The Implicitness of Criticality Expectations in Higher Education

Extending this, the literature consistently highlights that expectations around criticality are implicit and poorly communicated, leaving many students uncertain about what to demonstrate in writing. This lack of explicit guidance is especially problematic for international Foundation Year students unfamiliar with UK academic norms. Lea and Street (1998), Lillis and Turner (2001), Wingate (2012), and Hyland (2006) agree that students are often expected to ‘pick up’ what is required. However, they differ in attributing this to institutional discourse (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Turner, 2001), ideological influences (Hyland, 2006), or insufficient curricular integration (Wingate, 2012).

Academic writing can be seen not as a neutral, transferable skill, but as a culturally embedded practice shaped by institutional and disciplinary values. Lea and Street (1998) argue that writing should be seen as a culturally embedded practice rather than a transferable skill, calling for greater visibility of institutional and disciplinary values in teaching and assessment. Similarly, Lillis and Turner (2001) highlight how educators treat terms like *structure* and *argument* as self-evident, creating mismatches with student understanding. However, both studies offer limited practical guidance on improving teacher communication.

Hyland (2006) challenges the notion of critical thinking as neutral, framing it instead as shaped by power, discipline, and institutional context. His work, however, is theoretical and lacks empirical data on student writing or outcomes, reinforcing the need to investigate how students interpret critical evaluation. Wingate (2012) advocates clearer teaching and feedback on argumentation, including critical evaluation as a sub-theme, but her study is confined to a single undergraduate cohort and does not analyse student texts in detail.

This widespread uncertainty justifies investigating how Foundation Year students experience and respond to these implicit expectations - particularly in how they attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in assessed writing.

2.1.3 - Disciplinary and Cultural Perspectives on Critical Evaluation

In addition, disciplinary traditions and cultural backgrounds strongly influence how critical evaluation is understood in academic writing. For international Foundation Year students, this variation can create confusion or mismatches between prior learning and new academic norms. Moore (2011), Lea and Street (1998), Lillis and Turner (2001), and Tahira and Haider (2019) agree that understandings and expectations of critical evaluation are shaped by disciplinary and cultural contexts. There is no single, universally accepted definition, and both institutional norms and student backgrounds play a key role in shaping practice. However, these authors differ in how they explain the influence of disciplinary and cultural contexts on students’ experiences of criticality.

Disciplinary perspectives suggest that critical evaluation cannot be taught generically across academic fields. Moore (2011) argues that definitions of critical thinking vary across disciplines, making generic instruction too narrow to support students in diverse contexts. Although he uses the broader term, his argument is relevant to this study's focus on critical evaluation, as it underscores the difficulty of defining or teaching such practices in generalised ways. He proposes that "a more useful conception of critical thinking is as a form of 'metacritique' – where the essential quality to be encouraged in students is a flexibility of thought, and the ability to negotiate a range of different critical modes" (Moore, 2011, p. 263), but does not explain how this adaptability is developed or recognised in writing. Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) argue that hidden curricula shape student writing but do not explore how students themselves define or demonstrate evaluation. This highlights the need to investigate how Foundation Year students understand what critical evaluation means and how they try to show it in their writing.

Lillis and Turner (2001) argue that university writing practices can disadvantage students from different educational or linguistic backgrounds. They explain that rhetorical conventions are socially and historically constructed but treated in HE as universal and natural, creating barriers to meaningful participation. These norms often remain invisible until students 'get it wrong,' placing those from unfamiliar academic contexts at greater risk of being marginalised. Given the cultural and linguistic diversity of international Foundation Year students - and the likelihood that many have had limited prior exposure to UK academic discourse - it is important to investigate how they understand what is meant by critical evaluation, and how they experience these often implicit expectations in practice.

Cultural background can also affect students' confidence and ability to engage critically. In an interview-based study, Tahira and Haider (2019) found that international postgraduate students in the UK struggled to demonstrate criticality, often feeling unable to evaluate effectively. They linked students' difficulties with demonstrating critical evaluation to cultural background, particularly East Asian education systems, which tend to emphasise memorisation and teacher authority, offering limited opportunities to practise independent evaluation or critical questioning. They called for clearer assessment guidance to support students' development of criticality. Although focused on postgraduates, their findings offer relevant insight into challenges Foundation Year students may also face.

These varied academic and cultural influences reinforce the need to examine how Foundation Year students interpret critical evaluation, as well as how they attempt to navigate unfamiliar expectations in their assessed writing.

2.2 - Challenges International Foundation Year Students Face in Demonstrating Critical Evaluation

International Foundation Year students face a range of challenges in demonstrating critical evaluation, including linguistic barriers, conceptual uncertainty, and unfamiliar academic norms. This section reviews literature on how prior educational experiences, institutional contexts, and disciplinary expectations affect students' ability to interpret and apply critical evaluation in academic writing - issues central to my investigation in the context of the AECT module.

2.2.1 - Linguistic Challenges in Demonstrating Critical Evaluation

One such challenge is linguistic. Bruce (2016) and Hyland (2006) highlight that linguistic difficulties can hinder students' ability to convey critical stance and evaluation in writing, linking these challenges to deeper disciplinary, cultural, and identity-based factors, including genre conventions, rhetorical patterns shaped by discourse norms, and differences in how identity and stance are expressed across cultures.

Bruce (2016) argues that critical evaluation varies by discipline, making it harder for students to meet differing expectations. This is particularly relevant in International Foundation contexts, where students from a range of disciplinary pathways are often taught together in the same EAP module.

While this study does not focus on disciplinary differences directly, it recognises that such variation may shape students' prior experiences and expectations around evaluation. Similarly, Hyland (2006, p. 31) notes that "students and academics alike are judged by their control of the discourses of their disciplines," emphasising that strong academic writing requires more than language accuracy. For Foundation Year EAP students, these expectations may be unfamiliar, reinforcing the need to examine whether they receive adequate support to understand and apply them.

These findings are highly relevant to the context of this study and reinforce the need to investigate the challenges Foundation Year students encounter when attempting to demonstrate critical evaluation in academic writing.

2.2.2 - Conceptual Challenges and Disciplinary Expectations

Another challenge is conceptual. A number of studies emphasise that students struggle to demonstrate critical evaluation when academic expectations are unclear or inconsistent. Moore (2013), Bruce (2016), Brooke, Monbec and Tilakaratna (2019), and Wang and Newell (2025) all highlight that students struggle with critical evaluation, especially when expectations are unclear. Moore (2013) and Bruce (2016) attribute this to disciplinary differences, with Bruce (2016) emphasising the challenge of navigating unfamiliar academic norms. In contrast, Brooke, Monbec and Tilakaratna (2019) argue that students lack the theoretical tools needed for criticality and call for explicit instruction, while Wang and Newell (2025) similarly advocate scaffolded pedagogy to support its development.

Moore (2013) and Bruce (2016) focus on how disciplinary variation shapes students' experience of critical evaluation. Moore (2013) highlights inconsistency in how academic expectations are defined, noting that even when teachers prioritise critical thinking, their interpretations often differ. This is highly relevant to my study, as AECT students receive feedback from multiple teachers whose varying definitions may lead to inconsistent guidance. However, he does not examine how students themselves understand or demonstrate critical evaluation. Bruce (2016) similarly argues that critical evaluation is shaped by disciplinary norms and academic culture, and that students may struggle not due to lack of ability, but because they must navigate unfamiliar or conflicting expectations. While his focus is on undergraduates, his work reinforces the need to make expectations explicit for Foundation Year students new to UK academic contexts.

Other researchers place greater emphasis on the pedagogical tools and abstract knowledge students need in order to evaluate critically. Brooke, Monbec and Tilakaratna's (2019) classroom-based case studies of undergraduate EAP students found that learners often lack the theoretical tools, such as an understanding of how claims are supported in academic argument or how disciplinary conventions shape reasoning, needed for critical analysis, leading the authors to call for explicit instruction in abstract knowledge structures and evaluative language. Similarly, Wang and Newell (2025) examined how an EFL instructor in China integrated critical thinking into argumentative writing, offering valuable insights into the pedagogical challenges involved, such as balancing explicit instruction with independent thinking and supporting students in developing counter-arguments and justifying claims. Although their study focused on first-year undergraduates in a different context, both sets of findings reinforce the rationale for investigating how Foundation Year students understand and demonstrate critical evaluation in their writing.

Taken together, these studies reveal widespread ambiguity around what constitutes critical evaluation and how it should be taught or assessed. Overlapping definitions, disciplinary variation, and the absence of clear instructional models contribute to this uncertainty. For Foundation Year students, such confusion may be compounded by their limited academic experience and exposure to UK educational norms. These insights justify the focus on how students interpret the concept of critical evaluation and how they attempt to demonstrate it in assessed writing.

2.2.3 – Educational Background, Systemic Barriers, and Cultural Influences

A further set of challenges relates to background and systemic factors. Fell and Lukianova (2015), Shaheen (2016), Hyland (2006), Wang and Newell (2025), Catterall and Ireland (2010), Coffin et al. (2003) and Wu and Hammond (2011) all argue that systemic factors and students' educational and cultural backgrounds influence their ability to engage in critical writing. While some view cultural difference as a deficit and others emphasise identity and growth, the authors also vary in how they interpret institutional constraints and the role of student agency. These contrasting perspectives highlight the need to explore how background and context shape students' understanding and demonstration of critical evaluation.

Fell and Lukianova (2015) and Shaheen (2016) suggest that cultural background can hinder students' critical development, with prior educational experiences and values limiting their ability or willingness to critique sources. In contrast, Hyland (2006) and Wang and Newell (2025) argue that while culture shapes academic identity, it does not restrict potential; responsive pedagogy can help students engage critically. This contrast supports my focus on how Foundation Year students from diverse backgrounds interpret and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation. However, few of these studies examine student writing in Foundation Year contexts.

Other studies focus on how institutional structures and pedagogical interventions influence students' critical development. Catterall and Ireland (2010) highlight how short-term interventions - such as targeted writing workshops and guided practice with feedback - can support critical development even within institutional constraints. Coffin et al. (2003) focus on institutional shortcomings, such as unclear instruction and limited teacher training. Wu and Hammond (2011), by contrast, emphasise student agency and the value of peer support in overcoming such challenges.

These findings are highly relevant to the context of this study, as they emphasise the importance of exploring how Foundation Year students' prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and institutional environments shape their engagement with critical evaluation. They also reinforce the need to investigate not only how students understand the concept but how they respond to structural and pedagogical factors when demonstrating it in assessed writing.

2.3 - Teaching and Assessing Criticality in Academic Writing

Having considered how critical evaluation is defined and the challenges that international Foundation Year students face in demonstrating it, this section examines how criticality is taught and assessed in academic writing. It explores how teaching and assessment practices influence students' understanding and demonstration of critical evaluation.

2.3.1 - Explicit Instruction and Frameworks for Teaching Criticality

One approach to supporting students' critical development is explicit and structured instruction. Several scholars highlight its value in developing this skill – a key concern when teaching international Foundation Year learners. While Çavdar and Doe (2012), Karanja (2021), Wallace and Wray (2023), and Taghinezhad and Riasati (2020) all emphasise the importance of this type of instruction in developing critical thinking or evaluation in academic writing, they differ in their pedagogical focus. Çavdar and Doe (2012) and Karanja (2021) stress the role of task design and classroom practice, particularly scaffolding and staged support. Wallace and Wray (2023) adopt a metacognitive perspective, encouraging students to reflect on their reasoning through structured questioning. In contrast, Taghinezhad and Riasati (2020) advocate for the direct teaching of critical thinking skills as a distinct instructional goal.

Task design and feedback are central concerns for Çavdar and Doe (2012) and Karanja (2021), who emphasise scaffolding and staged support. Çavdar and Doe (2012) support the development of critical evaluation through deliberate scaffolding and clear assessment rubrics. They argue that carefully designed tasks and explicit feedback - such as written comments that highlight how well students evaluate sources or justify claims - can help students revise their arguments and clarify assumptions. Karanja (2021) also advocates for scaffolding and the importance of feedback, as well

as emphasising a staged approach to writing, in which students are supported through successive phases of planning, drafting, and revision. Although neither study focuses on EAP contexts, both offer relevant insights for the AECT module and inform not only my investigation, but also my own teaching practice, particularly in how I support students' understanding and demonstration of critical evaluation.

Wallace and Wray (2023) provide a metacognitive approach to developing critical reading and writing in the form of a checklist designed to encourage students to question assumptions, evaluate claims and make reasoned judgments. Their book focuses on postgraduate students, limiting its applicability to Foundation Year cohorts. However, their framework offers a highly transferable model for teaching critical evaluation, as it presents reasoning in clear, teachable steps suitable for less experienced learners. Their alignment of reading and writing is especially relevant to the AECT module, where students are expected to analyse sources and integrate that analysis into written arguments.

A more empirical approach is taken by Taghinezhad and Riasati (2020), whose study supports the effectiveness of explicit instruction. Their experimental research, conducted in Iran with first-year undergraduates, suggests that teaching critical thinking explicitly improves students' ability to demonstrate it in writing. Although the study used test scores rather than text analysis and was not conducted in an EAP context, its findings reinforce the need to explore how instructional practices influence students' understanding and application of critical evaluation.

These studies highlight the need to examine whether the AECT module provides students with effective support, and they justify the inclusion of both student perceptions and written texts in this investigation.

2.3.2 – Tensions between Teaching and Assessment

Another focus is the tension between teaching and assessment. Several studies point to a disconnect between how critical evaluation is taught and how it is assessed - a gap that can confuse students and limit their ability to meet academic expectations. Shaheen (2012), Tahira and Haider (2019), and Vyncke (2012) highlight a disconnect between teaching and assessment of critical evaluation in academic writing. Students often receive unclear or conflicting guidance, reflecting broader misalignment between teaching and assessment. While Shaheen (2012) focuses on how poorly critical thinking is communicated, Tahira and Haider (2019) and Vyncke (2012) emphasise inconsistencies between instruction and assessment.

Shaheen's (2012) doctoral study explores how unclear assessment criteria and teacher uncertainty contribute to student confusion about critical thinking. Her findings are based on interview data with international students at UK universities and highlight that marking criteria are often poorly communicated and that many teachers struggle to articulate or support the development of critical writing. Although the study does not cross-reference interview data with students' written work or teacher feedback, its emphasis on misunderstandings between students and teachers supports the rationale for investigating how critical evaluation is taught, understood, and communicated.

Similar concerns appear in the work of Tahira and Haider (2019) and Vyncke (2012), who both highlight the consequences of vague or inconsistent instruction. Tahira and Haider's (2019) study of Pakistani EFL students found that, although they valued critical thinking, they lacked clear strategies and support for enacting it. One participant explained, "At the beginning I had a little confusion, and I still don't know if I understand this term correctly, even now... I still don't feel I'm confident I can show critical thinking in my own assignments" (Tahira and Haider, 2019, p. 16). Similarly, Vyncke's (2012) study of international postgraduate students found that many received little guidance on criticality. Both studies highlight tensions between teaching, assessment, and student understanding - central issues for this Foundation Year EAP study.

Despite these insights, none of these studies examine how critical evaluation is demonstrated in Foundation Year writing or whether assessment guidance aligns with EAP instruction. These gaps highlight the need to investigate how clearly expectations are communicated within the AECT module. They also point to a broader lack of attention to how students' writing reflects their understanding of

evaluative criteria - reinforcing the value of exploring how learners interpret and attempt to meet these expectations.

2.3.3 – Assessment Tools and Feedback Practices

A further focus is on assessment tools and feedback practices. Clear assessment tools and feedback are essential for helping students demonstrate critical evaluation effectively. Vyncke (2012), Çavdar and Doe (2012), and Tahira and Haider (2019) all emphasise that rubrics and feedback comments can either clarify or obscure expectations, depending on how explicitly they are communicated. While they share this concern, their emphasis differs. Vyncke (2012) critiques institutional practices that fail to make evaluative criteria visible to students. In contrast, Çavdar and Doe (2012) focus on how structured assignments, scaffolded feedback, and clear rubrics can actively support students' critical development. Tahira and Haider (2019) add a student perspective, highlighting the confusion that can arise when instruction and assessment are not well aligned.

Vyncke (2012) focuses on the misalignment between student understanding and assessment expectations. Her study of academic writing among postgraduate students revealed a disconnect between students' conceptualisations of criticality and how it was rewarded in assessment. These students reported receiving limited guidance on how to demonstrate criticality in their writing, as well as a lack of formative feedback on how to improve. The study's use of interviews and writing sample analysis closely aligns with the methodology used in my research, but its focus on Master's students highlights the need to explore how Foundation Year students perceive and apply critical evaluation in their own writing.

In contrast, Çavdar and Doe (2012) examine how well-structured assignments and feedback can support the development of critical thinking. They describe a staged writing assignment that includes drafting, feedback, and the use of rubrics to guide student development. They argue that "through well-designed writing assignments, instructors can encourage students to reconsider concepts, critically evaluate assumptions, and undertake substantive revisions of their writing" (Çavdar and Doe, 2012, p. 298). While their approach is highly relevant to EAP pedagogy for Foundation students, the study's focus on political science and its lack of attention to EAP learners or marking interpretation limit its direct applicability to international Foundation Year contexts.

Tahira and Haider's (2019) study adds a student perspective, showing how unclear criteria and limited guidance can hinder critical engagement. Their research on Pakistani EFL university students found that, while marking criteria emphasised critical engagement, students did not receive enough support to understand or meet these expectations. The study also found that writing instructors themselves were sometimes unclear on how to assess criticality effectively. While these insights are valuable, it must be acknowledged that the study focused on student perceptions with no examination of assessment samples.

Few studies examine how assessment tools and feedback influence students' ability to demonstrate critical evaluation in Foundation Year EAP contexts. This gap supports the focus of this study, which explores whether AECT assessment practices communicate expectations clearly, and it justifies using student writing samples and questionnaire responses to examine how students interpret and respond to rubrics and feedback. To support this analysis, the next section reviews conceptual frameworks that offer tools for identifying and interpreting critical evaluation in student writing.

2.4 - Conceptual Frameworks for Analysing Criticality

This section examines the conceptual frameworks used by scholars to analyse and interpret criticality in academic writing. While the previous sections explored how critical evaluation is understood, taught, and assessed, this section focuses on how researchers have attempted to describe, model, and identify criticality in students' written texts. These frameworks offer tools for identifying when criticality is present or lacking in student writing and helped to inform the analytical approach used in this study.

2.4.1 - Bloom's Taxonomy as a Framework for Evaluating Critical Thinking

One framework for analysing criticality is Bloom's revised taxonomy. Krathwohl (2002) and Ybyrayeva, Shyrynbekova and Toltebayeva (2023) view it as key to developing and assessing critical thinking in academic writing. While Krathwohl (2002) revises its conceptual structure, Ybyrayeva, Shyrynbekova and Toltebayeva (2023) apply it in classrooms to scaffold writing and deepen argumentation.

Krathwohl's (2002) revised taxonomy offers a structured way to analyse levels of reasoning in student writing, particularly through the higher-order categories of analysis, evaluation, and creation (see Appendix A for a visual overview). Although not originally intended for academic writing, it provides a transferable framework for identifying criticality in essays and questionnaire responses. This is supported by Ybyrayeva, Shyrynbekova and Toltebayeva (2023), who use the taxonomy to design writing activities and assess responses based on higher-order thinking. Their study shows how the taxonomy can structure both instruction and evaluation of reasoning in student writing.

These insights support the use of revised Bloom's Taxonomy in this study's coding framework for student writing and questionnaire responses. Its higher-order categories provide a clear lens for identifying reasoning. Although not originally designed for academic writing or EAP, it has been widely adopted in higher education and writing pedagogy, including EAP contexts, due to its adaptability and structured approach to analysing cognitive engagement (Krathwohl, 2002; Ybyrayeva, Shyrynbekova and Toltebayeva, 2023). This makes it a useful tool for examining how Foundation Year students demonstrate criticality.

2.4.2 - Toulmin-Based Models of Argumentation in Academic Writing

Another framework is Toulmin's model of argumentation. Karbach (1987) and Liu (2022) highlight its usefulness for helping students construct more structured and critical arguments. While both authors see it as valuable for teaching and analysis, Karbach (1987) focuses on simplified classroom applications, whereas Liu (2022) offers a more detailed version to enable deeper analysis of student reasoning.

Karbach (1987) presents Toulmin's model as a practical tool for teaching argumentation, emphasising its core elements - *claim*, *data*, *warrant*, and *rebuttal*. She outlines clear strategies to help students construct and critique arguments, focusing on justifying claims and addressing counterarguments - key aspects of critical evaluation. However, there do not appear to be studies that have tested the model with Foundation Year or EAP students, and its lack of empirical data limits its direct applicability to this context.

Liu (2022) refines Toulmin's model by demonstrating how students construct reasoning across multiple sentences and by introducing categories for different types of justification. These additions support more detailed analysis of argument structure. Again, it appears that this model has not been explicitly tested in EAP or Foundation Year contexts, and its complexity may limit direct applicability without adaptation.

While the Toulmin model has not been widely applied in Foundation Year or EAP settings, its structured approach to argumentation makes it a valuable analytical lens for this study. It complements Bloom's taxonomy by focusing on how students construct and justify claims - key aspects of critical evaluation.

2.4.3 - The Academic Literacies Perspective: Writing as Social Practice

A further framework is the Academic Literacies perspective. Lea and Street (1998) and Lillis and Tuck (2016) argue that academic writing is not just a skill but a social and ideological practice shaped by

power, identity, and institutional norms. Both highlight how students are expected to follow academic conventions that are often left unexplained. Lea and Street (1998) present academic writing as shaped by social and institutional context, rather than as a set of neutral skills. Building on this, Lillis and Tuck (2016) use ethnographic research to argue that teaching should support students in challenging academic norms, rather than simply helping them conform to them.

Lea and Street's (1998) Academic Literacies model provides a useful way to understand student writing as shaped by social and institutional contexts. It questions deficit-based views and challenges the idea that academic expectations are always transparent - an issue particularly relevant for students unfamiliar with UK academic conventions. Although the model is highly influential and aligns closely with the focus of this study, it remains largely theoretical and lacks a clear method for analysing student texts or assessing criticality - a common criticism of writer-oriented Academic Literacies approaches (Tibbetts and Chapman, 2023).

Lillis and Tuck (2016) build on the academic literacies perspective by focusing on student voice and the social positioning of writing. Their work may help explain why Foundation Year students can feel marginalised or uncertain when asked to write critically in unfamiliar academic contexts. While their insights support this study's interest in how students interpret and respond to evaluative expectations, the discussion remains theoretical and offers limited practical guidance for analysing student writing or supporting EAP learners.

These insights support my focus on how Foundation Year students understand expectations around critical evaluation, not only how they demonstrate it in writing. The academic literacies perspective highlights the influence of identity, power, and institutional norms, offering a useful lens for examining how students respond to academic expectations. This justifies the analysis of both written work and questionnaire responses to explore their engagement with critical evaluation in context.

2.4.4 - Integrating Frameworks to Analyse Criticality in Student Writing

The final approach considered here is an integrated framework. Li (2022), Lillis and Tuck (2016), Krathwohl (2002), and Liu (2022) all acknowledge that academic literacy and critical evaluation are too complex to be explained by a single framework. Li (2022) points out that research in the field is fragmented, while Lillis and Tuck (2016) focus on social and institutional influences. In contrast, Krathwohl (2002) and Liu (2022) offer structured models for analysing reasoning and argument. Together, these sources support the use of a combined approach to analysing criticality in student writing.

Li (2022) provides a broad overview of academic literacy research and highlights how fragmented the field remains. While the article offers valuable insight into different conceptual and methodological approaches, it does not propose a clear method for applying these theories in practice. This supports the decision to combine multiple frameworks to better analyse how Foundation Year students express criticality in writing.

Lillis and Tuck (2016) provide a lens for understanding how students position themselves in relation to academic norms, complementing structured models such as Bloom and Toulmin. Their emphasis on identity and institutional expectations adds a sociocultural dimension that helps explain why students may interpret critical evaluation differently, even when responding to the same task. While their approach is not easily applied on its own, it provides valuable context for interpreting both essays and questionnaire responses in this study.

Krathwohl's (2002) revision of Bloom's Taxonomy offers a clear framework for identifying reasoning in student writing, particularly through its higher-order categories. It helps distinguish cognitive depth, despite not being designed for academic writing or EAP contexts. Liu's (2022) refinement of Toulmin's model, which examines how students justify arguments across multiple sentences, enables coding of extended reasoning. While both models are valuable for analysing student writing, they require adaptation to reflect Foundation Year students' language proficiency and limited familiarity with academic conventions.

These sources justify the use of a hybrid framework that combines Bloom's taxonomy (to identify reasoning), Toulmin's model (to analyse argument structure), and the academic literacies perspective (to account for context, identity, and institutional norms). This integrated approach provides a strong basis for analysing student essays and questionnaire responses, and for understanding how Foundation Year students perceive and demonstrate critical evaluation.

2.5 - Conclusion

This literature review has examined how critical evaluation is defined, taught, assessed, and analysed in academic writing, with a focus on issues relevant to international Foundation Year students. Section 1 showed that while criticality is widely valued, its meaning is contested and often implicit. Section 2 identified key challenges facing Foundation Year students, including linguistic, cultural, and educational barriers. Section 3 reviewed teaching and assessment practices, revealing a gap between institutional expectations and classroom realities. Section 4 reviewed conceptual frameworks that can help explain how critical evaluation can be identified and interpreted in Foundation Year student writing.

Although some research has explored how students understand critical thinking, few studies examine how they demonstrate critical evaluation in writing - especially within English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Foundation Year contexts. This highlights the need to investigate how students in these settings interpret and apply evaluative expectations in academic assignments. This review provides a clear rationale for examining how international Foundation Year students understand and attempt to demonstrate criticality in essays submitted for the AECT module. It also supports the study's use of a short questionnaire to explore students' interpretations of criticality, alongside a combined coding framework - drawing on Bloom's taxonomy, Toulmin's model, and the Academic Literacies perspective - to analyse how critical evaluation is expressed in their writing.

3 - Methodology

This study aims to explore how Foundation Year students at King's College London understand and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in a summative essay written for the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module. It is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Foundation Year students understand the concept of critical evaluation in essay writing?
2. How do they attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in their AECT summative essays?
3. What are the implications of students' interpretations and practices for the teaching of critical evaluation?

A qualitative approach was adopted to enable in-depth exploration of students' perceptions and written work. Data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire and textual analysis of students' previously submitted essays, allowing for triangulation between expressed understanding and written demonstration.

3.1 - Research Design and Rationale

To address the research questions, this study used an exploratory qualitative case study design to examine how Foundation Year students understand and demonstrate critical evaluation in academic writing. It was informed by a constructivist ontology, which views reality as socially constructed and shaped by context (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Aligned with this is an interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises the researcher's role in interpreting meaning rather than seeking universal truths (Creswell, 2013). These foundations support the study's aim to understand how students make sense of academic expectations and position themselves in their writing.

This case study explores how students interpret and apply critical evaluation within a specific module - the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module of the King's College London International Foundation Programme. A qualitative case study approach was chosen for its suitability in exploring student understanding and academic practices in real-world educational contexts, where the subject is closely tied to its setting (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2013). The design enabled in-depth analysis of a small group of AECT students, using both their questionnaire responses and submitted essays. The small sample reflects the study's exploratory nature, which prioritises depth over generalisability (Denscombe, 2021). While context-bound, qualitative case studies can still offer valuable insights applicable to similar settings (Yin, 2014).

The first type of data used was a questionnaire designed to gather students' own definitions of critical evaluation, the ways they tried to show it in their writing, and any difficulties they faced. By combining a shared set of questions with open-ended response options, the questionnaire ensured that all participants addressed the same core topics while allowing them to explain their experiences in their own terms, supporting the study's aim to explore diverse student perspectives (McGrath and Coles, 2013). It also provided space to explore students' thinking without the pressure of a face-to-face conversation.

In addition, the study incorporated qualitative analysis of students' summative essays from the AECT module. These essays had already been submitted and assessed as part of the students' coursework, making them authentic academic documents. Document analysis allows researchers to examine how knowledge is constructed and demonstrated in written form (Lillis, 2008), and student writing has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate data source in education research (Bassot, 2022). Analysing the essays alongside questionnaire responses enabled triangulation, strengthening the study by comparing students' stated understanding with their written demonstration (Creswell, 2013).

Although interviews or focus groups were considered, these were ultimately rejected. Time constraints, students' summer availability, and the desire to minimise disruption led to the decision to use a flexible, time-efficient online questionnaire. Furthermore, as a teacher-researcher, the use of already submitted work and anonymous responses helped reduce the potential for power imbalance and influence (Drake and Heath, 2011).

3.2 - Context, Participants and Sampling

The research was conducted at King's College London, a UK Russell Group university, focusing on the International Foundation Programme. The research centred on the AECT module, taken by international students who enter the programme with an overall IELTS score of 7.0 or above. This module is designed to extend students' academic communication and critical thinking skills in preparation for undergraduate study. Students taking the AECT module typically progress to a wide range of disciplines, including business, law, international relations, and natural sciences. They represent over a hundred countries and a wide range of educational backgrounds, and are usually aged between 17 and 20.

All students from the two AECT seminar groups taught in 2024/25 (around thirty in total) were considered for inclusion. Only those who had consented on their essay cover sheet to the reuse of their summative work were invited to complete a questionnaire. Of the twenty-five students who received invitations, six submitted signed consent forms and completed the questionnaire. From these, I selected five whose responses were sufficiently detailed for analysis. I already had access to their summative essays, allowing me to create matched questionnaire–essay pairs.

The summative essay task, which contributed 40% of the module grade, asked students to: "Identify 1–2 key challenges for young people posed by the digital age, and evaluate the effectiveness of potential solutions." It was assessed using the King's International Foundation Academic English Written Assignment Assessment Criteria (Level 3), which included a 'Use of Sources' category carrying 35% of the overall grade for the essay - joint-highest among all criteria. The descriptors for this category explicitly referenced critical evaluation, making it directly relevant to the focus of this study. This assessment context supported the use of purposive sampling: the deliberate selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research aims (Palinkas et al., 2015), as opposed to convenience sampling based on accessibility (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). The aim was not to represent all AECT students, but to select responses offering detailed and relevant insights within a shared academic context.

As I had taught the students throughout the year, I was aware of my dual role as teacher and researcher. This study falls within insider research, where the researcher has a pre-existing relationship with participants and shares the same institutional context. While familiarity can support trust, it also raises concerns about power dynamics and bias (Mercer, 2007). To mitigate these risks, only previously submitted coursework was used, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were clearly communicated. Although the findings are not statistically generalisable, the study aimed for transferability by providing a detailed description of the module context, student backgrounds, and writing tasks, enabling readers to assess its relevance to similar educational settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.3 - Description of Data Collection

Data were collected from two main sources. One was a short online questionnaire. It was chosen due to its accessibility, low burden on participants, and ability to capture reflective responses at a distance from the original teaching context. This aligns with Oppenheim's (1992) view that a well-designed questionnaire can offer valuable insights into respondents' attitudes and perceptions, especially when questions are clear and focused.

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to capture a mix of focused and reflective responses. Closed items gathered concise information about feedback, available support,

and understanding of the marking criteria, while open-ended questions encouraged participants to explain their views in their own terms. The design aimed to be clear, accessible, and free of jargon, allowing students to reflect on their experiences without requiring specialist terminology. This semi-structured format supported both consistency and flexibility (McGrath and Coles, 2013; Oppenheim, 1992; Denscombe, 2021), and reflected Bassot's (2022) emphasis on qualitative methods that encourage meaningful, personal responses. A full copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

The questionnaire was not anonymous, as responses needed to be matched with students' summative essays. This was clearly explained in the questionnaire instructions, and participants were reassured that their identities would be kept strictly confidential and used only for research purposes. Although background questions on academic experience or language proficiency were considered, they were omitted to maintain a tight research focus. Instead, Question 9 invited students to reflect on how their educational background may have influenced their understanding or use of critical evaluation.

The questionnaire was reviewed by the supervisor prior to distribution to ensure clarity and alignment with the research aims. Ethical approval was obtained in advance, and participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures.

3.4 - Description of Data Analysis

To address the research questions, thematic analysis was used to examine both data sets: questionnaire responses and student essays. Written teacher feedback was available but excluded to maintain a manageable scope and focus on student voice. A hybrid approach combined inductive and deductive elements (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), enabling the identification of emergent themes and the assessment of critical evaluation using three analytical frameworks: Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy, Toulmin's (2003) model of argumentation, and the Academic Literacies perspective (Lea and Street, 1998).

The coding of open-ended questionnaire responses followed an inductive approach. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, responses were read repeatedly to build familiarity, then analysed by identifying and labelling key ideas, which were grouped into emerging themes. This process allowed both explicit meanings and underlying ideas to be identified. Codes were organised around students' perceptions of criticality, reported strategies, and difficulties in demonstrating evaluation, providing insight into how they experienced and understood academic writing. Closed-question responses were summarised using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were compared with students' essays through thematic analysis.

Students' scores for the 'Use of Sources' category in the marking criteria - which includes critical evaluation - were reviewed and compared with their scores in the four other categories and their overall grade for the essay. These scores helped contextualise how effectively participants demonstrated evaluation in their writing and were triangulated with questionnaire and essay data to support interpretation in the Results and Discussion chapter, particularly in relation to alignment between students' perceived and actual use of evaluation.

First, five categories drawn from Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) were used to evaluate the cognitive demands demonstrated in students' writing: Describing, Explaining, Analysing, Evaluating, and Creating/Integrating. These codes reflected progressively deeper levels of engagement with ideas and were applied to relevant passages within the essay to identify how far students moved beyond descriptive or surface-level content.

Second, Toulmin's (2003) model was applied to assess the structure of students' arguments. Essays were examined for the presence of five key components: Claims, Data, Warrants, Counterarguments, and Rebuttals. These elements were selected as the most relevant to the types of academic argumentation expected in the assessed essays. Other components from the model, such as backing and qualifiers, were excluded due to their typically implicit or infrequent use in student writing. This

aspect of the analysis helped determine whether students constructed logically developed, evidence-based positions or relied on unsupported or weakly structured argumentation.

Third, the Academic Literacies perspective (Lea and Street, 1998) was used to examine how students positioned themselves in their writing and engaged with academic expectations. This lens was applied to identify instances of Voice/Stance, Audience Awareness, and Source Use as Positioning, helping to reveal how students expressed judgment, adapted to academic norms, and aligned with or distanced themselves from source material.

A coding scheme of 13 categories - drawn from Bloom's revised taxonomy, Toulmin's model, and the Academic Literacies perspective - was applied to the full student essays and corresponding questionnaire responses to identify instances of critical evaluation and enable cross-case comparison (see Appendix C). A thematic familiarisation template was created to organise excerpts and early interpretations under emerging topic headings. These groupings, supplemented by inductive notes for patterns not captured by the frameworks, directly informed the four thematic headings used in the Results and Discussion chapter. Although the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, analytic rigour was supported through data familiarisation, repeated coding, and the use of multiple analytical frameworks (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Denscombe, 2021).

As the teacher of the participating students, I remained aware of my dual role as educator and researcher throughout the analysis. Although I had marked and provided feedback on students' formative essays earlier in the academic year, the summative essays were assessed by other AECT module teachers and analysed only after final grades were released, helping to reduce potential bias or power imbalance. During coding, I made a conscious effort to set aside prior knowledge of students' classroom performance and previous assignments, focusing solely on the content of their essays and questionnaire responses. This reflective stance supported confirmability by grounding the analysis in participants' own words and writing, rather than in my expectations or teaching experience (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In summary, this hybrid analysis combined inductive and deductive approaches to provide a systematic understanding of how students understood and demonstrated critical evaluation. The four resulting themes were developed by drawing on insights from both essays and questionnaire responses, revealing similarities and differences in students' interpretations and practices. These themes shaped the analysis in the Results and Discussion chapter and informed its consideration of implications for teaching, assessment, and support in Foundation Year contexts.

3.5 - Ethical Considerations

In line with university and professional standards, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Nottingham's Research Ethics Committee before any data collection began. Participation was entirely voluntary and students were provided with clear information about the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time.

This study required identifiable questionnaire responses so that they could be matched with summative essays. This was clearly explained in the questionnaire instructions, which assured participants that their identities would be kept strictly confidential and not disclosed. To protect participants' identities, all student names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms. To minimise discomfort or pressure, the voluntary nature of participation and data protection measures were emphasised.

All data were securely stored in line with university data protection policies and accessible only to me as the researcher. In addition to receiving approval from the University of Nottingham, I registered the study through King's College London's minimal risk ethics process. As noted earlier, my dual role as teacher and researcher was carefully managed to minimise risk and protect participant autonomy (Mercer, 2007). Only students who had given prior consent for their work to be used beyond assessment were included. Those who selected "No" to the reuse statement on the AECT cover sheet

were excluded. I followed BERA (2018) guidance and aimed to treat students fairly and respectfully by giving them a clear voice and representing their views accurately.

3.6 - Credibility and Limitations

Finally, this study sought to ensure trustworthiness through strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was supported through triangulation, comparing questionnaire responses with student essays to offer multiple perspectives on how critical evaluation was understood and demonstrated. Reflexivity was addressed through ongoing awareness of my dual role as teacher and researcher as well as efforts to bracket prior assumptions and focus analysis on students' own words. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick description of the AECT module context, student backgrounds, and writing tasks, enabling readers to assess relevance to similar settings. Dependability was supported through consistent procedures for data collection, coding, and analysis, with additional refinement via informal peer discussions. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in direct quotations and consciously setting aside prior assumptions to reduce potential bias (Berger, 2015).

Despite these efforts, the study has some limitations. The small sample size, shaped by the study's scope and exploratory nature, limits statistical generalisability. Because responses were matched with essays, they were not anonymous, which may have influenced how openly students expressed their views (Berger, 2015). Self-selection bias is also possible, as questionnaire participants may have been more motivated, confident, or engaged than those who did not respond (Denscombe, 2021). Although six students completed the questionnaire, one was excluded due to insufficient detail, further narrowing the sample. Selection was based on analytical richness, not representativeness. As the sole analyst, I acknowledge that subjective interpretation cannot be fully eliminated, though reflexive measures were taken to reduce bias. Member checking was not conducted due to time constraints and the timing of the research (after the academic year had ended), which would have made it difficult to re-establish contact with participants.

4 - Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings and interprets them in relation to the research aims, frameworks, and literature. It investigates how Foundation Year students at King's College London understand and attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in academic writing, particularly in the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the relatively small sample size, the chapter adopts an integrated format, combining results and discussion to enable a more contextualised interpretation of the data. This approach supports the use of illustrative quotations from student responses and extracts from essays to explore not only what students wrote or said, but how these reveal students' thinking, difficulties, and approaches.

The analysis draws on three complementary frameworks. Bloom's Taxonomy is used to assess cognitive level in students' writing and reflections, with attention to analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Toulmin's Model examines how students construct and justify claims. The Academic Literacies perspective is used to interpret how students' understanding and demonstration of evaluation are shaped by institutional expectations, prior learning, and emerging writer identity.

Four themes emerged from the analysis:

1. How students understand critical evaluation – how they define and conceptualise it
2. Strategies for demonstrating critical evaluation – what techniques or approaches they reported using
3. Challenges in demonstrating critical evaluation– including conceptual uncertainty, linguistic barriers, and assessment-related difficulties
4. Comparing perception and performance – how students' stated understanding of evaluation aligns or misaligns with their written demonstration, and the pedagogical implications for supporting students' development of critical evaluation.

Each theme is explored through triangulated evidence from questionnaire responses and essay extracts, and discussed in light of the literature and analytical frameworks. This integrated approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how international Foundation Year students engage with the complex and often implicit expectations of critical evaluation in academic writing.

4.1 - Theme 1: How Students Understand Critical Evaluation

4.1.1 - Introduction

This theme addresses Research Question 1: *How do Foundation Year international students understand critical evaluation in academic writing?* The analysis is based mainly on responses to four questionnaire items: Q1 (students' definitions of critical evaluation), Q2 and Q3 (how they tried to demonstrate it in their essays), and Q7 (their use of the marking criteria). Reflections from Q10 provide insight into how students believe their understanding of evaluation developed and how they see themselves as academic writers.

Three analytical frameworks guided the thematic analysis of student responses. Bloom's Taxonomy was used to identify the cognitive level in students' definitions of evaluation; Toulmin's model helped assess their awareness of argument components such as claims, evidence, and rebuttals; and the Academic Literacies perspective supported interpretation of stance, use of sources, and engagement with academic expectations. These frameworks helped reveal both surface features and underlying

conceptions of evaluation - a necessary approach given the often implicit expectations surrounding criticality in UK higher education (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Moore, 2013; Wingate, 2012).

4.1.2 - Student Conceptions of Critical Evaluation

The analysis first examines how the five students conceptualised critical evaluation, revealing differences in cognitive depth, argumentative structure, and academic stance. While some viewed evaluation primarily as a technique, others began to engage with it as a way of thinking and positioning themselves as academic writers.

Ayla (all names are pseudonyms) gave the most detailed and conceptually rich definition of critical evaluation. She described it as “analysing ideas, arguments, or sources rather than simply accepting them at face value,” and stressed the importance of “examining how well [information] is supported by evidence,” “considering alternative viewpoints,” and “acknowledging any limitations.” Her use of terms like *validity*, *relevance*, and *implications* indicates engagement at the *Evaluate* and *Create* levels of Bloom’s framework. She also showed awareness of Toulmin’s structure, particularly in recognising claims and comparing opposing views, even if explicit rebuttals were not mentioned. From an Academic Literacies perspective, her response suggests she sees criticality as a way of thinking and positioning herself as a writer, not just a technique.

Nina’s definition focused more on the steps involved in evaluation than on its purpose. She defined critical evaluation as “question[ing] the resources [students] use... analysing a resource around a specific focus while asking questions about what they read.” This shows thinking at the *Analyse* level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. She referred to checking for “relevancy” and “accuracy” and comparing views but didn’t mention reasoning or justification. Her definition treats evaluation more as a method than a stance. In Toulmin’s terms, she refers to evidence but not to warrants or rebuttals. This supports Moore’s (2011) argument that students often adopt surface-level strategies for critical evaluation without fully grasping the underlying reasoning or purpose.

Jade also focused on comparison, stating in answer to question 1 that critical evaluation means “going beyond simply describing something by analysing, comparing, and questioning ideas to show a deeper understanding.” Like Nina, she appears to be operating at the *Analyse* level of Bloom’s framework, while her reference to “deeper understanding” suggests some movement toward *Evaluate*. However, she gave little detail on how evaluation supports argument construction. Her focus on comparing sources, also seen in Q2 and Q3, suggests a strategy-oriented approach shaped by instruction. In Toulmin’s terms, she includes data from sources but does not clearly explain how that data supports her argument. From an Academic Literacies perspective, she appears aware of expectations but is still developing writer identity.

Erin defined critical evaluation as “analysing something critically, paying attention to even the smallest details and making sure to break down everything so that nothing remains unexplained.” This reflects engagement at the *Understand* and *Apply* levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Her emphasis on detail and thorough explanation suggests a procedural understanding of evaluation, focused on explaining all content clearly rather than making reasoned judgements or critical interpretations. Although she used terms like “analysing” and “critical,” her definition lacks reference to evidence, alternative viewpoints, or overall purpose. From a Toulmin perspective, there is little sign of awareness of claims, supporting evidence, or counterarguments. Her response suggests a focus on presenting all information accurately, rather than considering how an academic reader might evaluate or engage with her argument. This supports Cottrell’s (2023) point that some students confuse thoroughness with critical thinking, especially when expectations are unclear.

Tara, by contrast, gave a much more developed definition. She described critical evaluation as “assessing strengths, limitations, assumptions, and implications... weighing different perspectives and justifying one’s own position through evidence-based reasoning.” This shows clear engagement at the *Evaluate* level of Bloom’s Taxonomy and aligns closely with Toulmin’s model. She demonstrated awareness of key elements in argumentation, including claims, warrants, and rebuttals. Her mention

of “justifying one’s own position” shows a strong sense of voice and purpose, consistent with the Academic Literacies approach. While Erin aimed for thorough explanation of all content, Tara approached evaluation as a selective, purposeful process aimed at persuasion.

Looking across all five students, comparison was the most commonly mentioned feature of evaluation. However, only Ayla and Tara clearly described its purpose - to judge, justify, and take a position. The others tended to focus on method (e.g. questioning or comparing), without linking those actions to a broader academic or critical stance. This supports arguments by Wingate (2012) and Moore (2013), who note that students often adopt surface strategies for critical thinking without fully understanding the reasoning behind them.

Students’ responses to Q10 added further insight. While all five felt their understanding had improved, only Ayla and Tara described a change in how they think - not just in what they do. Ayla commented that “the module gave me a clearer understanding of how to approach critical thinking,” and Tara said she now feels “more equipped to approach academic work with an analytical and independent mindset.” These comments suggest a shift from viewing evaluation as a skill to seeing it as a way of thinking and engaging with ideas - a shift linked to developing academic identity.

4.1.3 - Synthesis and Implications

In summary, the five responses show that while most students associated critical evaluation with comparison or questioning, their understanding varied in depth and clarity. Three students (Nina, Jade, and Erin) described evaluation largely in terms of method - such as comparing sources or analysing details - without clearly explaining the purpose behind these actions. In contrast, Ayla and Tara demonstrated a more developed understanding, viewing evaluation as a process of weighing perspectives, making judgments, and justifying a position, reflecting deeper cognitive engagement and closer alignment with academic expectations.

This distinction reflects a key issue in the literature: expectations around critical evaluation are often unclear in UK higher education (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Lea and Street, 1998). Several researchers (e.g. Moore, 2011; Wingate, 2012) argue that students frequently rely on surface-level strategies - such as showing “both sides” - without fully grasping the reasoning behind them. This was evident in the responses of Nina, Jade, and Erin, who appeared to understand the steps involved but not the rationale. Cottrell (2023) and Andrews (2009) highlight the need to clarify what critical thinking entails, especially for students unfamiliar with academic conventions. The stronger responses in this study support Andrews’ idea that students benefit when they start to see argument as a conversation - one that involves questioning, evaluating, and taking a clear position.

These findings also suggest that understanding critical evaluation involves more than recognising techniques - it requires adopting a mindset that views knowledge as open to interpretation and debate. Both Ayla and Tara used language that reflected this shift, framing evaluation not just as analysis, but as judgment, reasoning, and personal positioning. This reflects an early development of the academic identity described in Academic Literacies research - one in which students begin to see themselves not just as learners, but as participants in academic discourse.

4.2 - Theme 2: Strategies for Demonstrating Critical Evaluation

4.2.1 - Introduction

This theme addresses Research Question 2: *How do students attempt to demonstrate critical evaluation in their summative essays?* It examines the strategies students reported using during the Academic Expression and Critical Thinking (AECT) module, alongside those evident in their assessed writing. The analysis draws mainly on responses to Q2 and Q3, with further insights from Q7 and Q10. It focuses on three dimensions: the strategies students reported, how effectively these were applied in practice, and what influenced their choices.

4.2.2 - Common Strategies Used Across Students

Across both questionnaire responses and essays, the most common strategy for demonstrating evaluation was comparison of perspectives. Students described it as a way to show they had considered more than one viewpoint. For example, Jade referred in Q2 to “showing both strengths and weaknesses” of contrasting arguments, while Ayla emphasised comparing ideas to demonstrate criticality. All five students included comparison in their essays, though its depth and purpose varied. Ayla contrasted top-down and bottom-up development approaches, weighing evidence and justifying her stance, while Tara critically compared case studies to highlight systemic bias in policy outcomes. Both used comparison to support judgement, integrating evidence and evaluative language. In contrast, other students applied comparison more descriptively, without clearly linking it to reasoning or stance - a pattern Moore (2011) identifies as common when comparison is treated as a surface feature of criticality.

A second common strategy was the use of evaluative language to signal judgement. Some students referred to this explicitly: Nina mentioned “using evaluative words to show which argument is stronger,” while Ayla cited phrases such as “more convincing” or “limited in scope” to show her reasoning. These claims were largely supported in their essays, where both students used hedging and evaluative verbs to express degrees of certainty or critique. However, such language was often absent or inconsistent in other students’ writing, suggesting they were either unaware of how language can signal evaluation or were unsure of how to use it.

Another shared feature was engagement with sources of information. All five students referred to external sources, and three (Ayla, Tara and Nina) explicitly mentioned in their questionnaire responses that they selected evidence to support or challenge particular views. While this shows awareness of how evidence can contribute to evaluation, in practice students used it in different ways. Ayla and Tara used evidence to build arguments, integrating it with reasoning and stance, whereas Erin and Jade presented information without clearly linking it to claims. This reflects a divide between surface-level and more developed academic argumentation - a pattern observed in undergraduate writing (Wingate, 2012) and in broader studies of student perceptions of criticality (Vyncke, 2012).

4.2.3 – Variation in Effectiveness of Critical Evaluation Strategies

The effectiveness of these strategies varied considerably. All five students used critical evaluation strategies, but with varying success. Some integrated evaluation into their argumentation effectively, while others relied on more formulaic approaches. These differences were most evident in how comparison, evidence, and evaluative language were applied.

Ayla and Tara offered the clearest examples of integrated critical evaluation. Their essays addressed different topics - Ayla focused on international development strategies, while Tara examined social policy and education - but both demonstrated purposeful use of evidence and evaluative reasoning. In her essay, Ayla compared top-down development initiatives led by international organisations with bottom-up strategies driven by local communities, weighing their effectiveness and long-term impact. She wrote that bottom-up strategies were “often more responsive to local needs” but also noted their scalability limits - a balanced evaluation that used evidence to support her stance. Similarly, Tara weighed competing arguments by drawing on examples and using evaluative phrases like “fails to account for” and “offers a more inclusive model,” highlighting both her engagement with complexity and her ability to justify a position. Both students went beyond listing views and used comparison and evidence to construct argument - supporting Wingate’s (2012) view that evaluation involves making judgements, not just outlining perspectives.

By contrast, Erin and Jade used similar strategies, but in a more formulaic manner. Erin’s essay included references to opposing perspectives, yet these were presented in a parallel structure with no clear conclusion or indication of which side she found more convincing. For example, she wrote, “Developed countries are seen as responsible for carbon emissions, whereas developing countries argue that their growth should not be limited” but gave no follow-up, making the comparison

descriptive. Similarly, Jade cited sources representing contrasting views but did not explore their implications or relevance to her argument. In both cases, comparison was present but not developed, suggesting a limited understanding of how comparison helps to build an argument or persuade the reader.

Nina presented a more mixed example. While she mentioned using “evaluative words” in her questionnaire response, her essay showed only minimal evidence of this. Her comparison between environmental policies in different countries was accurate but remained largely descriptive, and she missed opportunities to highlight which approach was more effective and why. This suggests that while she understood evaluation on a conceptual level, she may have lacked the language control or argumentative confidence to apply it fully. As Moore (2013) and Bruce (2016) observe, such difficulties often arise not from lack of effort or awareness, but from uncertainty about how to express evaluative judgement clearly and convincingly.

These differences show that the same strategies can be applied at very different levels of sophistication. While some students used comparison, evidence, and evaluative language to construct and justify a clear argument, others treated these features as structural requirements to be included, rather than as tools for critical reasoning or persuasion. This reinforces the view that demonstrating critical evaluation is not simply a matter of applying set techniques, but of understanding how those techniques contribute to the development of a logical argument.

4.2.4 - Reported Influences on Students’ Strategic Choices

Students also reflected on the factors influencing their strategic choices. Responses to Q7 and Q10 pointed to a range of influences, including marking criteria, teacher input, and prior learning experiences. At the same time, several students also expressed uncertainty about whether their strategic choices aligned with UK academic expectations.

The most commonly cited influence was the marking criteria, which several students referred to in their questionnaire responses. While some noted that it helped them prioritise analysis and evaluation, few gave detailed examples of how it informed specific writing choices. For example, Jade and Ayla referred to the criteria in general terms but did not explain how it influenced their strategies. This supports findings in the literature (e.g. Wingate, 2012; Vyncke, 2012) that students may recognise the importance of critical evaluation in assessment yet interpret criteria superficially, focusing on meeting stated requirements rather than understanding their purpose.

Several students cited teacher guidance or classroom activities as influences. Nina recalled being told to compare ideas, while Erin said lessons helped her “know what kind of words to use when evaluating.” These comments suggest a reliance on explicit instruction, consistent with research on the importance of scaffolded support in EAP (Çavdar and Doe, 2012; Karanja, 2021). However, the comments were vague, and none of the students recalled receiving specific instruction on how to evaluate effectively - suggesting that while teacher input was influential, its impact may have been limited by how clearly the purpose and function of evaluation were communicated.

Prior learning and educational background were also mentioned, though somewhat implicitly. Tara, for instance, stated that she “used to struggle with being too descriptive” but had learned to “justify points more” over time. Ayla referred to learning how to “support arguments with evidence” in earlier essays. These reflections suggest a developing metacognitive awareness - the sense that critical evaluation involves reasoning and justification, not just presentation of ideas. However, such comments were not present across all participants; Erin and Jade gave limited or no indication of reflecting on how their approach had changed.

Students also expressed uncertainty or hesitation in their responses. Jade wrote, “I think I showed evaluation, but I’m not sure if it was enough,” while Erin admitted she “found it hard to know what counts as critical.” These admissions point to unclear expectations, despite students’ efforts to apply strategies. This aligns with findings from Vyncke (2012) and Shaheen (2012), who both highlight the

gap between teaching and assessment and the confusion this creates for students attempting to meet academic standards.

Overall, the students' explanations of their strategy choices suggest that while they were aware of certain expectations - especially those related to assessment - they did not always feel confident in applying them. Their choices were shaped by teacher input and personal reasoning, often with limited awareness of instructor expectations - highlighting the need for clearer guidance on both how and why to use evaluation strategies effectively.

4.3 - Theme 3: Challenges in Demonstrating Critical Evaluation

4.3.1 – Introduction

This theme addresses Research Question 2 by exploring the challenges students faced when attempting to demonstrate critical evaluation in their AECT summative essays. Drawing on responses to Q3, Q4, Q5a, and Q10, it examines four key areas: uncertainty about expectations, language difficulties, limited modelling or practice, and student responses to these challenges. This theme offers insight into why students applied critical evaluation in varied ways and examines how they attempted to overcome the difficulties they faced.

4.3.2 – Uncertainty about Expectations

One key barrier to demonstrating critical evaluation was students' uncertainty about its meaning and what teachers expected. This theme emerged clearly in questionnaire responses, especially in Q3 and Q10, where students reflected on their attempts to evaluate and their confidence in doing so.

Jade described critical evaluation as “going beyond simply describing something by analysing, comparing, and questioning ideas to show a deeper understanding” (Q1). She stated that, in her essay, she aimed to demonstrate this by “comparing different academic sources on the same topic” and including counterarguments with rebuttals (Q3). However, she also noted struggling to move beyond summary and to “clearly explain why one source was more convincing than another” (Q4), suggesting that her evaluative judgement was still developing.

Erin emphasised thoroughness, stating that she “asked myself the question ‘why?’ after every point” and “looked for contradictory points” (Q2, Q3). Her definition focused on explaining all details (Q1). However, she commented that she struggled to balance covering all information within word limits while fully explaining relevance (Q4), reflecting a developing approach focused more on thorough explanation than on making evaluative judgments.

Ayla reflected on her early confusion: “At the beginning I just thought [critical evaluation] meant adding lots of sources or showing different opinions” but later gained clearer understanding (Q10). This echoes a common pattern identified in the literature, where students initially equate critical evaluation with presenting contrasting views rather than weighing or justifying them (Moore, 2011; Wingate, 2012).

From an Academic Literacies perspective, both Erin and Jade expressed hesitancy in adopting a critical voice. Erin noted she “didn’t want to sound too opinionated,” revealing a fear of being ‘wrong’ (Q10). Similarly, Jade admitted that she found it “sometimes difficult to clearly explain why one source was more convincing than another” (Q4), suggesting uncertainty about asserting evaluative judgement. These comments reflect how concerns around identity, authority, and perceived legitimacy can shape students’ critical engagement.

4.3.3 - Language Difficulties

Another barrier was language, which many students identified as an obstacle to demonstrating critical evaluation clearly and confidently. Questionnaire responses highlighted difficulty with phrasing evaluative comments, finding academic vocabulary, and expressing ideas with nuance.

Nina described critical evaluation as questioning resources for “relevancy” and “accuracy” and deciding whether to “agree or disagree with the author” (Q1). She explained how she tried to link “similar opinions from different sources” and show “how they’re relevant or how they disagree” (Q2). However, she admitted difficulty in “explaining how the two separate issues might be connected” and supporting “why some solutions might result in greater success” (Q4). This reveals challenges in making clear, coherent evaluative links between ideas.

Jade reported difficulty moving “beyond simply summarising sources to critically analysing and comparing them” (Q4). She found it “sometimes difficult to clearly explain why one source was more convincing or reliable than another,” highlighting a lack of linguistic resources to express evaluative judgement with clarity and precision.

Tara emphasised balancing “respect for expert views” with “confidence to critique them” (Q4). She initially struggled to “move beyond summary or agreement,” particularly when engaging with established academic perspectives, which points to difficulty in asserting a critical stance when responding to authoritative sources. Her comments suggest that expressing disagreement in a nuanced and academically appropriate way can require both confidence and familiarity with the conventions of critical writing.

Erin noted her efforts to “make the writing more critical by highlighting... contradictory points” (Q3) yet faced challenges in fitting all her ideas within the word limit “while also making sure everything was explained fully” (Q4). This points to the difficulty of combining comprehensive explanation with concise, evaluative language.

These responses align with literature showing that limited academic vocabulary and linguistic confidence can hinder students’ ability to express critical evaluation effectively (Wingate, 2012). While students may have the ideas and understanding, they often struggle to convey nuanced judgement clearly. This reinforces the need for targeted support in academic writing, vocabulary development, and expressing evaluative stance with confidence.

4.3.4 - Limited Modelling, Feedback and Practice

A further barrier was limited modelling, feedback, and practice, which several students felt affected their ability to demonstrate critical evaluation with clarity and confidence. While several students found the module support helpful, they also highlighted a need for clearer examples, more targeted feedback, and structured opportunities to develop evaluative writing skills.

Tara stated that, early in the AECT module, she “found it challenging to move beyond summary or agreement,” suggesting limited prior exposure to evaluative writing (Q4). She noted that the module provided helpful explanations but “at times, the guidance was a bit general,” and she “would have benefited from more discipline-specific examples or annotated excerpts” (Q5a). This suggests a need for clearer, more practical modelling of evaluation.

Ayla reflected that before the module, she “wasn’t greatly exposed to the techniques of critical evaluation” and initially “wasn’t entirely confident in how to go beyond description or engage with different perspectives effectively” (Q9a). Her growth during the module came through “seminars, feedback, and practical exercises” that helped her develop these skills (Q9a). This illustrates the value of scaffolded support but also points to gaps in prior learning.

Nina reported that during the AECT classes she learned about criticality through tasks designed to prepare her for the summative essay and received tutor feedback that helped her identify where she could “rewrite using more criticality” (Q5a). However, she still struggled to connect ideas clearly and

justify her reasoning in depth, noting that her essay's second body paragraph "could be stronger" if she had explained more clearly how the solutions she discussed might work effectively (Q4). This suggests that while the support was useful, limited opportunities for targeted formative practice may have hindered her ability to express evaluative judgement with clarity and confidence.

Erin approached critical evaluation by asking "why?" after each point and deliberately highlighting counterarguments in her writing (Q2, Q3). However, she found it difficult to decide what to include and how to explain relevance within the word limit, noting a tendency to include "anything and everything that could be argued" (Q4). While she found the module support "very useful," particularly in helping her distinguish "what was relevant and critical and what was not" (Q5a), her experience suggests that more explicit modelling and guided practice may be needed to help students use critical evaluation with clarity and focus.

Overall, these responses suggest that students' ability to demonstrate critical evaluation is closely linked to the modelling, feedback, and practice they receive. Without regular exposure to concrete examples, targeted formative feedback, and opportunities to apply techniques in guided tasks, students may struggle to internalise evaluative strategies and use them effectively in their writing.

4.3.5 – Student Responses to Challenges

In response to these barriers, students made deliberate efforts to engage with critical evaluation in their writing, reflecting motivation and emerging understanding.

Ayla noted that by the end of the module, she felt more confident: "I think I understood evaluation better by the end" and recognised that critical evaluation involves more than just "adding lots of sources or showing different opinions" (Q10). This shows progression from a surface understanding toward deeper engagement.

Tara described actively challenging key theorists, stating, "One thing I remember clearly is challenging the argument of a key theorist by highlighting its cultural limitations and supporting my critique with empirical studies" (Q3). She emphasised her attempt not to "take arguments at face value but instead examine their relevance in different contexts" (Q3), showing intentional critical engagement.

Nina described how she struggled to connect ideas and justify claims when writing her formative essay (Q4), but responded by revising sections of the essay based on tutor feedback and consciously trying to improve the depth of her analysis. These actions suggest a willingness to reflect and adapt, even if her evaluative writing was still developing.

These examples suggest that, despite challenges, some students made deliberate efforts to improve their critical evaluation. Their responses reflect not only developing understanding, but also a growing readiness to meet academic expectations when appropriate support is available.

4.4 - Theme 4: Comparing Perception and Performance: Implications for Teaching Critical Evaluation

4.4.1 – Introduction

This theme addresses the third research question: *What are the implications of students' interpretations and practices for teaching critical evaluation?* It compares students' questionnaire responses with their summative essays to identify patterns of alignment and mismatch, offering insight into how critical evaluation is understood, applied, or misinterpreted.

The analysis draws on both questionnaire data (Q1-Q3, Q7, Q8, Q10) and essay writing, examined through Bloom's Taxonomy, Toulmin's model, and an Academic Literacies perspective. The final section of this theme considers how teaching might better support students in bridging the gap between conceptual understanding and written performance.

4.4.2 - Alignment Cases

Some students showed a clear alignment between their understanding of critical evaluation and how they applied it in their writing. Ayla and Tara, in particular, demonstrated consistency between their questionnaire responses and essays, reflecting a strong grasp of evaluation as a process of weighing evidence, justifying a position, and engaging with sources critically. Their cases offer insight into how students can successfully internalise and apply evaluation, and what forms of support may enable this.

Ayla defined critical evaluation as "analysing ideas, arguments, or sources rather than simply accepting them at face value," and emphasised questioning validity, relevance, and considering alternative viewpoints (Q1). This understanding was evident in her essay, where she contrasted perspectives and evaluated their strengths and limitations. In Q2, she explained her aim to "explore - rather than simply list - issues," and in her discussion of education policy, she considered external factors such as parental involvement and broader social context. This reflected higher-order reasoning consistent with Bloom's taxonomy, as she moved beyond isolated arguments to evaluate how different influences shaped educational outcomes. She also noted in Q3 that she assessed solutions by questioning their practicality and long-term impact - an evaluative stance clearly demonstrated in her writing. Together, her responses and essay show a well-developed and consistent application of evaluation.

Tara also showed strong alignment between perception and performance. In Q1, she defined critical evaluation as "analysing arguments... assessing strengths, limitations, assumptions, and implications... weighing different perspectives and justifying one's own position through evidence-based reasoning." Her essay reflected this, as she challenged key theorists and supported her critique with empirical examples. In Q3, she recalled "highlighting [a theory's] cultural limitations," referring to her critique of a social policy model that she felt did not account for cross-cultural variation. This demonstrated both analytical skill and academic voice. She also applied Toulmin's model by using counterarguments and rebuttals to challenge dominant views in the literature. Her comment about "balancing respect for expert views with confidence in critiquing them" (Q4) shows reflective awareness of stance, aligning with the Academic Literacies perspective.

The alignment seen in these two cases suggests that when students develop a clear conceptual understanding of critical evaluation - and receive support that enables them to connect this understanding with their writing practices - they are more likely to meet academic expectations.

4.4.3 - Mismatch Cases

Other students showed a clear gap between how they understood critical evaluation and how they demonstrated it in their writing. Erin and Jade are two such cases. Both expressed confidence in their use of critical strategies in their questionnaire responses, but their essays often did not reflect these claims. This highlights how surface-level approaches, overconfidence, or misunderstanding of expectations can limit students' ability to meet academic standards for evaluation.

Erin defined critical evaluation as "analysing something critically... so that nothing remains unexplained" (Q1), emphasising a highly thorough approach. She described asking "why?" after each point and purposefully highlighting contradictions in her argument to enhance criticality (Q2, Q3). However, her essay showed limited evaluative judgement. While she included opposing perspectives, they were presented in parallel without commentary or justification - a descriptive rather than analytical approach. This suggests she may have equated critical evaluation with comprehensive coverage rather than with making judgements or taking a stance. Her focus on ensuring "nothing

remains unexplained” reflects engagement at the Understand or Apply levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, rather than the Evaluate level required for academic critique.

Jade also described her use of critical strategies with confidence. In answer to Q2, she stated that she compared sources and included counterarguments and rebuttals to strengthen her position, which made her ideas “more evidence-based and well-supported.” In Q10, she reflected that critical evaluation gave her the confidence to “challenge ideas thoughtfully in any situation.” However, her essay showed only limited engagement: comparisons were brief and lacked commentary, sources were introduced but not analysed, and rebuttals were underdeveloped.

These findings show how difficult it can be for students to assess their own use of critical evaluation. Erin and Jade believed they had demonstrated criticality by using strategies such as comparison, counterarguments, and citation - all of which are commonly taught as signs of critical thinking. It is therefore understandable that they assumed these features would meet academic expectations. However, their application lacked analysis, judgement, or stance. This was also reflected in their assessment outcomes: for both students, ‘Use of Sources’ was their lowest or joint-lowest scoring criterion. This supports Shaheen’s (2012) and Vyncke’s (2012) claim that students often overestimate their performance in areas like critical thinking, where expectations are implicit and culturally shaped.

4.4.4 – Synthesis and Pedagogical Implications

Overall, the five student cases reveal clear variation in how well students were able to align their understanding of critical evaluation with how they demonstrated it in writing. While Ayla and Tara showed consistency between their reflections and writing, Erin and Jade demonstrated discrepancies between what they reported in their questionnaires and what they produced in their essays. Nina fell somewhere in between: her questionnaire responses showed developing awareness of evaluation strategies, but her written performance was uneven, with some accurate comparisons but limited justification or stance. These differences suggest that while most students grasped the idea of critical evaluation, only some applied it in ways that met academic expectations. Notably, all five students scored either lowest or joint-lowest on the ‘Use of Sources’ criterion - the only category directly assessing critical evaluation - further highlighting the widespread difficulty of applying evaluation effectively in writing.

Across the group, students frequently cited strategies such as comparing perspectives, using evidence, and incorporating counterarguments, and most expressed confidence in their ability to apply them. However, these techniques were not always applied with the depth or stance needed for higher-level evaluation. As seen in the earlier discussion of students’ strategies, many treated evaluation as a checklist of strategies rather than as a process of reasoning and judgement. The comparison between students’ perceptions and written performance reinforces this, showing that confidence in these strategies does not necessarily lead to strong critical writing. This gap indicates that teaching should move beyond illustrating what evaluation looks like and place greater emphasis on how it functions and why it is essential in academic writing - enabling students to apply it purposefully rather than replicate its surface features.

A first step in supporting students’ critical evaluation may be to provide clearer guidance on how to interpret assessment criteria. As Shaheen (2012) and Vyncke (2012) argue, students often struggle when expectations are vague or inconsistently communicated, undermining their ability to demonstrate criticality. Several students noted the value of past essays or tutor explanations (Q8, Q10), suggesting that exemplars and guided discussion can help clarify what successful evaluation looks like. Making expectations more visible may help students move beyond surface features and better recognise the role of reasoning, stance, and judgement in argument.

Students may also need clearer models of how critical evaluation is expressed through language. Wallace and Wray (2023) advocate structured questioning and modelling to support the development of evaluative thinking, while Brooke, Monbec and Tilakaratna (2019) stress the importance of explicitly teaching abstract reasoning patterns and knowledge structures. Without such support, encouraging students to “compare sources” or “use rebuttals” can result in mechanical application. Annotated

student writing and contrasting examples of descriptive versus evaluative responses could help make these distinctions more visible and accessible.

Targeted feedback may also play an important role in helping students refine their approach to evaluation. As Çavdar and Doe (2012) argue, well-structured feedback can guide students in revising arguments and clarifying assumptions, while Tahira and Haider (2019) highlight how insufficient or vague feedback can limit students' ability to improve. This could include written comments on formative assignments or informal feedback during in-class tasks aimed at developing students' critical evaluation. By drawing attention to where evaluation is present or lacking, such feedback can support students in developing a more purposeful and critically engaged writing style.

Students may benefit from greater support in evaluating the effectiveness of their own critical thinking, particularly when they overestimate their use of evaluative strategies. As both Erin and Jade's cases suggest, students may feel confident about using strategies they associate with critical thinking, without recognising when their application lacks judgement or coherence. Wallace and Wray (2023) and Cottrell (2023) both highlight the importance of metacognitive strategies in helping students monitor their reasoning and reflect on the effectiveness of their evaluation. Supporting students in developing metacognitive awareness - for example, through peer review activities, guided self-assessment, or reflection tasks - may help them better understand how effectively they are using evaluation and recognise whether their writing communicates a clear position. These activities can promote a more deliberate and reflective approach to critical evaluation.

In summary, while many students understood the idea of critical evaluation in theory, their writing revealed important gaps in how it was applied. Those who demonstrated evaluation more successfully tended to use it not just as a technique, but as a way of shaping and positioning their argument. Helping students make this shift from surface strategy to purposeful evaluation may require a range of instructional strategies, such as providing more explicit guidance on assessment criteria, modelling evaluative thinking more clearly, offering targeted feedback, and scaffolding opportunities for reflection.

4.5 – Summary

This chapter examined how international Foundation Year students understand and demonstrate critical evaluation in academic writing, drawing on paired questionnaire and essay data. Each theme addressed one of the study's research questions. The first explored students' conceptualisations of evaluation, which were generally accurate but often abstract. The second analysed their written work, revealing frequent reliance on surface-level strategies. The third compared students' perceptions with their performance, identifying patterns of alignment and mismatch. The final theme synthesised these findings and considered how teaching practices might better support the development of evaluative writing. Together, the analysis offers insight into how students in a Foundation Year EAP context interpret and enact evaluation, and points toward implications for teaching practice, assessment, and future research. The following chapter expands on these implications by outlining the study's contributions, limitations, and pedagogical relevance.

5 - Conclusion

5.1 - Summary of Key Findings

This study found that Foundation Year students generally recognised critical evaluation as important. However, their understanding of it was often partial and inconsistently applied in writing. Most associated evaluation with strategies such as comparison or questioning, but struggled to connect these to deeper reasoning or argument construction. A recurring gap was observed between students' perceptions and their written performance, with essays often lacking clear stance or justification. The findings also highlight the influence of confidence, language, and limited modelling on students' ability to evaluate critically. Together, these patterns suggest that demonstrating evaluation requires not just strategic awareness, but a more developed understanding of its purpose and academic function.

5.2 - Evaluation of Findings and Theoretical Contribution

Building on these findings, this study offers new insight into how Foundation Year students understand and demonstrate critical evaluation in academic writing. While previous research has shown that students often rely on surface-level techniques (Moore, 2013; Wingate, 2012), this study extends this by examining how such techniques are applied at an earlier stage of academic development. Although some students used strategies such as comparison, evidence, and rebuttal to construct thoughtful arguments, others reproduced these features in a more formulaic or descriptive way. This suggests that the core difficulty is not simply learning critical strategies, but grasping how evaluation functions as a process of reasoning, judgement, and stance.

These findings also echo concerns in the literature about the misalignment between what is taught and what is assessed. Students were encouraged to think critically, yet the assessment criteria did not always make clear how evaluation would be recognised or rewarded. This lack of alignment reflects a broader tension in EAP and higher education, where criticality is valued but not always explicitly defined in marking practices. As a result, students may struggle to apply evaluation meaningfully in writing, even when they aim to meet expectations.

Finally, this investigation contributes to existing knowledge by highlighting the role of confidence, identity, and stance in shaping how students attempt to engage critically. It builds on the Academic Literacies perspective by demonstrating that students' interpretations and use of evaluation are influenced by institutional expectations and by their developing role as academic writers. By examining both students' perceptions and their written work, the study offers insight into how critical evaluation is understood and enacted, providing a fuller picture of it as both a learned academic practice and a socially situated process.

5.3 – Methodological Reflections

Methodologically, this study adopted a small-scale qualitative case study approach to explore students' understanding and demonstration of critical evaluation within a specific EAP module. The combination of open-ended questionnaire responses and summative essays enabled triangulation between students' stated perceptions and actual writing, offering a richer insight than either method could provide alone. The use of previously submitted coursework and confidential questionnaires helped reduce potential power imbalances associated with the dual role of teacher-researcher.

The decision to use a hybrid analytical framework - combining Bloom's taxonomy, Toulmin's model, and the Academic Literacies perspective - allowed for analysis of both students' thinking and the contextual factors influencing how they demonstrated evaluation. While the small sample size and lack of follow-up interviews limited the depth of participant voice, the approach generated valuable insights into how students understand and perform critical evaluation in academic writing. However, as outlined in the following section, the study's small scale and design inevitably place some limitations on these insights

5.4 - Limitations

As with any small-scale, exploratory case study, this research is constrained in both scope and generalisability. The findings are drawn from five participants on a single Foundation Year module at one institution, so, while they offer insight into similar EAP or Foundation contexts, wider applicability is somewhat limited. Although care was taken to select information-rich cases, the study relied on self-selected participants who were potentially more motivated or confident than their peers. All five participants were female, which may also have shaped how evaluation was understood and expressed in their writing. The study focused exclusively on academic essays, rather than on other assignment types such as reports or reflections, limiting the extent to which findings can be generalised across other genres of academic writing. In addition, each student's work was represented by a single assignment, meaning that the analysis could not account for development over time or other situational factors that may have influenced their performance on this particular task. The absence of follow-up interviews also reduced opportunities to explore student reasoning in greater depth. Nevertheless, the study provides transferable insights into how students interpret and attempt to demonstrate evaluation in writing - particularly in contexts where expectations around criticality are not clearly communicated through teaching or assessment, highlighting areas where targeted interventions could make a difference.

5.5 - Implications and Recommendations

Despite these limitations, the findings have important implications for how critical evaluation is assessed, taught, and supported in Foundation Year EAP contexts, particularly in addressing the gap between students' perceived understanding and their ability to demonstrate it in writing. Firstly, students need clearer guidance in interpreting assessment criteria. All five participants received their lowest or joint-lowest score in the 'Use of Sources' category of the AECT summative essay marking criteria - the only category directly linked to evaluation. This suggests a disconnect not only between what students believe constitutes evaluation and how it is assessed, but also between their understanding of expectations and their ability to demonstrate evaluation in writing. Several participants expressed uncertainty about how their work aligned with the criteria, highlighting the need to demystify rubrics and clarify how critical evaluation is recognised and rewarded.

In addition to clarifying assessment expectations, more effective modelling is essential. While most students cited strategies such as comparison or rebuttal, their essays often reflected surface-level application. Annotated exemplars and discipline-relevant models could help illustrate how evaluation involves reasoning, judgement, and stance. Feedback also plays a key role. Rather than focusing solely on structure or clarity, feedback - on both written assignments and in-class activities - should highlight evaluative effort, helping students revise their arguments more purposefully. Students would also benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on their critical stance. Peer review, guided self-assessment, or reflective writing tasks could support metacognitive awareness and help bridge the gap between intention and performance.

Finally, some students hesitated to express strong viewpoints or critique expert sources, reflecting not only a lack of confidence but also uncertainty about their role as academic writers. For Foundation Year students with limited prior experience of evaluative writing, this may inhibit the development of a critical stance. Supporting students in this area requires regular opportunities to practise expressing judgement and taking a position - through low-stakes writing tasks, peer discussion, and formative feedback that explicitly encourages evaluative decision-making.

5.6 - Suggestions for Future Research

In light of these implications and the gap identified between students' perceived understanding and their ability to demonstrate critical evaluation, future research could explore instructional interventions that focus on developing students' conceptual understanding of evaluation, helping them not just use critical strategies but also understand the reasoning behind them. Comparing students' perceptions

with their written work could provide a fuller picture of how evaluation is interpreted and applied. Larger and more diverse samples might allow for comparisons across disciplines, institutions, or student backgrounds, while longitudinal studies could explore how students' evaluative writing develops over time, capturing shifts in understanding, confidence, and stance as they progress through an academic programme. Further work might also examine how assessment, modelling, feedback, reflection, and academic identity interact to support the development of evaluative stance.

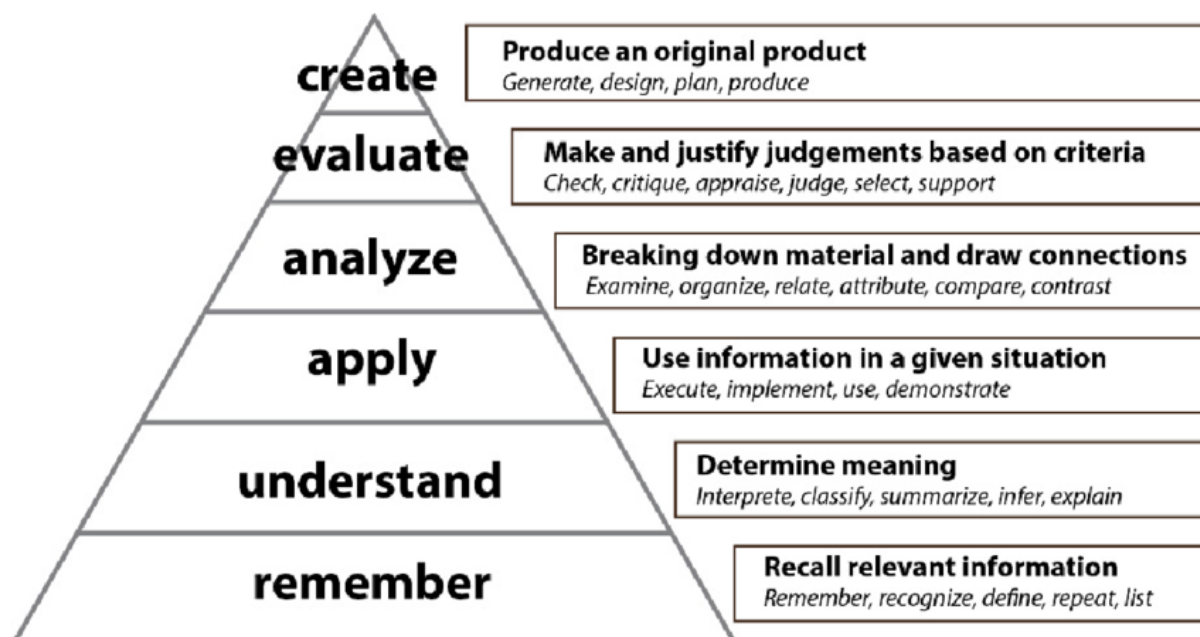
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Appendix A: Krathwohl's (2002) Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy



Appendix B: Student Questionnaire: Your Experience of Critical Evaluation in the AECT Module

This questionnaire is part of a research project for my Master's dissertation. Your responses will not be anonymous, as I need to match them with your AECT essay. However, all data will be kept strictly confidential, and your identity will not be shared in any way.

Please aim to write between 50 and 200 words per question. Shorter or longer responses are absolutely fine if you feel they're appropriate.

1. What do you think the term 'critical evaluation' means in academic writing?
2. How did you try to show critical evaluation in your AECT summative essay?
3. What's one thing you remember doing in your summative essay to try to show critical evaluation?
4. What challenges (if any) did you face when trying to demonstrate critical evaluation in your writing?
5. How useful was the support you received during the module in helping you understand how to demonstrate critical evaluation in your AECT essay? Please highlight one of the following options:

Very useful
Quite useful
Not very useful
Not useful at all
I'm not sure
- 5a. Can you explain your answer to the previous question?
6. How helpful was the feedback you received for your formative essay in supporting your understanding of critical evaluation? Please highlight one of the following options:

Very helpful
Quite helpful
Not very helpful
Not helpful at all
I don't remember

6a. Can you explain your answer to the previous question?

7. Did you read the marking criteria before writing your summative essay? Please highlight one of the following options:

Yes

No

I'm not sure

7a. If you did read the marking criteria, how (if at all) did it affect your understanding of what critical evaluation means or how to show it in your writing?

8. In your opinion, what could teachers do to help students better understand and demonstrate critical evaluation?

9. Do you think your previous educational background influenced how you understood or used critical evaluation in this module? Please highlight one of the following options:

Yes

No

I don't know

9a. Can you explain your answer to the previous question?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience of learning or using critical evaluation in the AECT module?

Appendix C: Analytical Coding Framework

Code	Framework	Definition/Usage
Describing (Bloom: Understand)	Bloom	Summarising, paraphrasing, or restating ideas without deeper engagement
Explaining (Bloom: Apply)	Bloom	Clarifying, sequencing, or giving examples to explain a concept or point
Analysing (Bloom: Analyse)	Bloom	Breaking down arguments, comparing viewpoints, identifying relationships
Evaluating (Bloom: Evaluate)	Bloom	Judging value or strength of evidence; assessing implications or assumptions
Creating/Integrating (Bloom: Create)	Bloom	Synthesising ideas to form original insights or propose new interpretations
Claim (Toulmin)	Toulmin	A statement or assertion that the writer wants to prove
Data/Evidence (Toulmin)	Toulmin	The facts, statistics, or examples used to support a claim
Warrant (Toulmin)	Toulmin	The reasoning that connects data to the claim, often implicit
Counterargument (Toulmin)	Toulmin	Acknowledging an opposing viewpoint or limitation
Rebuttal (Toulmin)	Toulmin	Responding to or refuting a counterargument
Voice/Stance (Academic Literacies)	Academic Literacies	Expression of author identity, judgment, or confidence in argument

Audience Awareness
(Academic Literacies)

Academic Literacies

Adapting writing to audience
expectations or disciplinary
norms

Source Use as Positioning
(Academic Literacies)

Academic Literacies

Using citation strategically to
align with, distance from, or
critique sources