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# Teachers' Challenges in Integrating 4Cs in General English Reading Instruction: Evidence from an Intensive English Program

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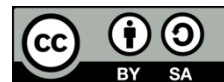
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## ABSTRACT

The integration of 21st-century skills (4Cs) in EFL reading instruction has become a central expectation in higher education; however, its implementation in General English contexts remains uneven, particularly in Intensive English Programs (IEPs). This study aimed to investigate the difficulties lecturers encounter in integrating critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity into reading instruction at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with three lecturers, and document analysis of instructional materials. The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed six interconnected challenges: procedural reading tasks, low cognitive demand, limited instructional time, superficial collaboration practices, insufficient cognitively directive instructional language, and assessment practices that prioritized accuracy over reasoning. These challenges indicate that the integration of the 4Cs is constrained not only by lecturers' pedagogical decisions but also by task design, classroom implementation, and institutional program demands. The study concludes that effective integration of 4Cs in reading instruction requires greater attention to micro-level instructional design rather than relying solely on general pedagogical awareness. It is recommended that lecturers incorporate cognitively directive tasks, structured collaborative activities, and assessment practices emphasizing reasoning and interpretation. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how 4Cs can be operationalized in intensive EFL contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a big change in how people think about reading in higher education EFL settings. Reading is no longer seen as a passive decoding activity; instead, it is seen as

a cognitive performance in which students must evaluate arguments, put together information, and make sense of texts and other forms of communication. Modern frameworks for 21st-century learning stress that literacy practices should include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (the 4Cs) as essential skills, not just extra ones [1], [2], [3]. From this viewpoint, reading serves as a platform for the application of these competencies through interaction with texts, necessitating that learners not only comprehend content but also analyze, interpret, and modify it. This orientation is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, which position knowledge construction as an interactive, reflective process shaped by inquiry, dialogue, and collaborative meaning-making. Empirical studies demonstrate that higher-order literacy develops when instructional tasks are organized around inquiry, problem-solving, and collaborative knowledge construction, as opposed to isolated comprehension routines [4], [5].

Even though this theory has improved, many EFL classrooms still use procedural methods to teach reading. The usual way to teach lessons still includes pre-teaching vocabulary, reading texts, and asking short-answer comprehension questions that mostly test surface-level understanding. Although these methods may enhance comprehension accuracy, they seldom engage evaluative reasoning, intertextual synthesis, or collaborative interpretation. 21st-century language education should emphasize profound comprehension over superficial knowledge; nevertheless, instructional resources and classroom methodologies frequently do not align with this transition [6], [7], [8]. The inconsistency between the conceptualization of reading as cognitive performance and its practical application in classrooms reveals a structural deficiency in pedagogical design.

This is especially true when it comes to Intensive English Programs (IEPs) and General English courses. IEPs are normally characterized by a mix of time constraints, varied learner proficiency levels, and curriculum demands that prioritize coverage. Teaching under these conditions often leads to a focus on efficiency and task completion rather than on cognitive depth. Reading activities tend to be structured as answer-finding rather than open-ended and analytical, which means students are likely to miss opportunities to critically evaluate, collaboratively construct, or creatively synthesize. Preliminary observations in the Intensive English Program at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon reveal a similar pattern: reading instruction is largely dominated by text-question cycles, with limited scaffolding toward higher-order thinking and minimal integration of 4Cs within task structures. **These findings resonate with broader research indicating that the challenge of integrating 21st-century skills lies not merely in teachers' awareness, but in the absence of task architectures that explicitly require such competencies [9], [10].**

Previous studies have discussed the integration of 21st century skills in EFL learning. Some studies reported that collaborative and inquiry-based reading activities can improve students' engagement and critical interpretation of texts [6], [7]. Other studies found that teachers often experience challenges such as limited training, insufficient resources, and curriculum demands in implementing 21st-century skills in classroom practice [8], [9]. However, these studies mostly discuss the issue at a general level and pay limited attention to how instructional structures within reading classrooms influence the integration of the 4Cs.

12 Although a growing body of literature has examined the importance of 21st-century skills in EFL education, studies focusing on teachers' challenges often remain at a general level, emphasizing factors such as limited training, resource constraints, and institutional constraints. Such explanations, while relevant, risk oversimplifying the issue by attributing challenges primarily to teacher-related variables. Less attention has been given to how the structural features of reading instruction, such as task design, instructional clarity, and assessment practices, mediate the possibility of integrating 4Cs in actual classroom contexts [11], [12]. Therefore, a gap still exists in understanding how these challenges specifically manifest within Intensive English Programs, particularly in relation to the micro-level instructional practices used during reading instruction. In particular, it is necessary to examine how these challenges manifest in Intensive English settings, where time constraints and program demands shape pedagogical decisions.

3 This study aimed to examine a specific question: what obstacles do educators encounter when attempting to incorporate the 4Cs (critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration) into General English reading instruction in UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon's Intensive English Program? To address this problem, the study focuses on examining classroom realities, particularly task design, instructional processes, and assessment practices that may either support or constrain the integration of 21st-century skills. However, here is the thing: we did not want to think of these problems as separate issues with their own simple solutions. We see them as coming from the messy, changing space where teaching goals and lesson plans meet. So we focused on what really happens in the classroom, like how tasks are set up, how lessons are taught, and the choices that are made every day. We wanted to learn more about how reading instruction brings 21st-century skills to life.

1 Based on this focus, the research is guided by the following questions: 1) What challenges do teachers face in integrating 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) in General English reading instruction within the Intensive English Program? Moreover, 2) How do these challenges manifest in classroom practices, particularly in task design, instructional processes, and assessment?

2 By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion of 21st-century literacy in EFL contexts, particularly by foregrounding the structural dimensions of teaching challenges in intensive learning environments. The findings are expected to provide theoretical insight into the relationship between literacy pedagogy and the integration of the 4Cs, while also offering practical guidance to lecturers and curriculum developers in designing cognitively engaging reading instruction. The findings are expected to inform not only pedagogical reflection but also the design of reading materials and instructional practices that more effectively embed the 4Cs into cognitive-literacy performance.

## 2. METHOD

### *Research Design*

We used a qualitative case study design to answer these questions. This enabled us to examine the genuine, practical difficulties educators encounter while integrating the 4Cs

into General English reading instruction at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon's Intensive English Program. A qualitative approach was appropriate as we sought to understand the emergence of challenges in actual classroom practice, specifically in task design, instructional delivery, and the tangible constraints faced by teachers, rather than in precise numerical data or broadly applicable assertions. The case study design [13], in particular, allows us to look closely at a limited instructional setting, one in which teachers' goals are always at odds with program structures such as limited time and the need to cover certain materials.

#### Participants

The study focused on three lecturers who taught General English reading in the Intensive English Program. They were not chosen at random. We selected them purposively, based on two things: their active involvement in day-to-day classroom instruction, and how familiar they were with the materials used in the program. Their teaching experience ranged from about three to ten years, a mix that gave us a valuable window into different approaches. Even within the same institutional setting, we could see how instructional decisions and classroom practices varied depending on experience.

#### Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted twice for each lecturer, resulting in six sessions of approximately 90–100 minutes each to examine how reading instruction was enacted, including task implementation, student engagement, and classroom interaction, with a focus on the presence of the 4Cs. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the same lecturers (30–45 minutes each) to explore their understanding of the 4Cs, the challenges they faced, and the factors influencing their instructional decisions within the constraints of the Intensive English Program. In addition, document analysis was conducted on reading materials, task sheets, and lesson plans to examine how tasks were designed and whether they embedded 4Cs, as well as to identify alignment between instructional design and classroom practice.

#### Data Analysis

The thematic analysis framework was used to analyze the data [14]. We started by getting to know the material by reading and rereading observation notes, interview transcripts, and other documents until we were sure we understood what they said. Next, we developed initial codes by identifying meaningful parts of the data related to 4Cs integration, focusing on task design, teaching methods, and how students interacted in the classroom. Next, the codes were put into larger groups based on patterns that showed up in different data sources. We looked over the themes again and made sure they were in line with the dataset and the research focus. Finally, we defined and explained each theme to show how teachers' problems arise when teaching reading. To boost credibility, we used triangulation with data from observations, interviews, and documents.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are grouped into six related themes that show the problems teachers have when trying to add the 4Cs to General English reading lessons in the Intensive English Program. Thematic analysis of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and program documents produced these themes. The analysis concentrated on discerning recurring patterns among the three data sources, especially those pertaining to task design, instructional methodologies, classroom interactions, and assessment frameworks. Significantly, each theme signifies a convergence of evidence rather than originating from a singular source. This shows that the problems we found are not just one person's opinion; they are always built into the way lessons are taught and the materials themselves.

#### 3.1. Results

These themes illustrate how the integration of the 4Cs is influenced by the interplay between teachers' aspirations and the limitations they encounter in their work. In other words, the results do not just talk about problems; they show patterns in the data. In these situations, reading instruction tends to remain procedural, time-driven, and focused on getting things done rather than engaging more deeply with the 4Cs. The table below summarizes each theme, supported by information from interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Findings: Teachers' Challenges in Integrating 4Cs

No	Theme	Evidence (Interview, Observation, Document)	Interpretation
1	Procedure of Reading Tasks	Interview data indicate that lecturers tend to prioritize task completion due to limited time. Observations show that reading activities are dominated by text-question cycles. Documents reveal that most tasks are structured as comprehension questions.	Reading instruction is organized around procedural routines, limiting students' opportunities to engage in critical thinking and deeper meaning-making.
2	Limited Cognitive Demand in Tasks	Lecturers report simplifying tasks to match students' proficiency levels. Classroom observations show students focusing on locating answers rather than analysing texts. Instructional materials contain few tasks requiring evaluation or synthesis.	The cognitive demand of reading tasks remains at a lower level, restricting the activation of higher-order thinking associated with 4Cs.
3	Time Constraint and Instructional Compression	Lecturers acknowledge time pressure to complete units within the program schedule. Observations indicate minimal time allocated for discussion or reflection after reading. Documents show dense material coverage within limited sessions.	Instructional time constraints shift the focus toward efficiency, reducing space for analytical discussion, collaboration, and creative engagement.
4	Superficial Collaboration Practices	Lecturers report using group work to engage students. However, observations show that students often work individually within groups. Tasks in the materials do not require shared outputs or interdependent roles.	Collaboration is present at the surface level but lacks cognitive interdependence, limiting its contribution to meaningful learning.

No	Theme	Evidence (Interview, Observation, Document)	Interpretation
5	Lack of Cognitive Direction in Instructions	Lecturers state that instructions are simplified to ensure clarity. Observations show that tasks are introduced with general directives such as “read and answer.” Documents confirm the absence of analytical or evaluative prompts.	Instructional language does not signal expected thinking processes, making 4Cs implicit rather than operational in classroom practice.
6	Assessment Focused on Accuracy over Reasoning	Lecturers emphasize correct answers as the basis for evaluation. Observations show feedback centred on accuracy rather than reasoning. Assessment formats in the materials rely on objective answers.	Assessment practices prioritize correctness over interpretation and justification, weakening the integration of critical thinking and other 4Cs.

**Theme 1: Procedure of Reading Tasks**

The first theme indicates that reading instruction in the Intensive English Program tends to be organized procedurally, with activities structured around task completion rather than cognitive engagement. This pattern emerges consistently across interview, observation, and document data, suggesting that the challenge of integrating 4Cs is closely related to how reading tasks are routinely designed and enacted.

From the lecturers’ perspective, the emphasis on procedural tasks is often justified by the need to maintain clarity and ensure that students can complete activities within limited instructional time. One lecturer explained:

*“If the tasks are too complex, students get confused. So I usually go straight to questions so they can understand the text more quickly.”* (INT-T1)

This orientation toward simplification reflects an attempt to make instruction manageable; however, it simultaneously narrows the cognitive scope of reading activities. The observed classroom practices reinforce this tendency. Reading sessions were repeatedly structured around a sequence in which students read a text individually and then moved directly to answering comprehension questions, with interaction largely limited to checking correct answers. Little time was allocated for discussing interpretations, questioning the text, or comparing perspectives, indicating that reading was treated primarily as an answer-finding activity rather than a meaning-making process. This procedural orientation is further reflected in the instructional materials. The reading tasks are predominantly framed in terms of directives, such as answering questions based on the text or identifying main ideas, which signal a focus on information retrieval rather than analytical engagement. The absence of prompts requiring evaluation, justification, or synthesis suggests that the tasks do not structurally demand the enactment of critical thinking or other components of 4Cs.

These findings indicate that the procedural aspect of reading tasks is not solely an instructional preference. It is a patterned condition in which the task design, the way the classroom operates, and the structure of the materials all work together. In this situation, reading turns into a series of small tasks that need to be done in order to finish exercises. Because of this, students do not have many opportunities to engage in the deeper thinking at the heart of 21st-century learning.

## Theme 2: Limited Cognitive Demand in Reading Tasks

The second theme reveals that the cognitive demand embedded in reading tasks remains limited, with instructional activities predominantly requiring students to locate information rather than to analyse, evaluate, or synthesize ideas. This condition constrains the integration of 4Cs, particularly critical thinking and creativity, as students are rarely positioned to engage with texts beyond surface-level comprehension.

Lecturers acknowledged that task simplification is often necessary due to students' varying proficiency levels, which influence the cognitive demand incorporated into reading activities. As one lecturer noted:

*"Students in this class have different proficiency levels, so if the tasks are too analytical, they struggle. So I usually focus on basic understanding first."* (INT-T2)

While this approach is pedagogically understandable, it has the unintended effect of stabilizing reading instruction at a lower cognitive level. Rather than gradually scaffolding students toward higher-order thinking, tasks tend to remain within the domain of identifying explicit information and confirming textual meaning. This tendency is reflected in classroom practices, where students' engagement with texts is largely oriented toward finding correct answers. During observed sessions, students approached reading tasks as exercises in locating specific details, with minimal indication that they were expected to interpret, question, or critique the content. Interaction patterns further reinforced this orientation, as classroom discussions (when they occurred) were typically limited to verifying answers rather than exploring alternative interpretations or reasoning processes.

The structure of the instructional materials also contributes to this limited cognitive demand. Tasks are predominantly framed in ways that direct students to identify main ideas, locate supporting details, or answer factual questions, with little variation toward tasks that require comparison, evaluation, or synthesis. As a result, the materials do not create conditions that compel students to engage in higher-order thinking, even when such competencies are emphasized in broader educational frameworks.

These results indicate that the difficulty of incorporating the 4Cs extends beyond pedagogical intent; it also involves cognitive architecture. Students do not have to use their analytical or creative skills when reading tasks always require lower levels of thinking. Consequently, the advancement of the 4Cs is still limited. However, this is not due to the absence of these competencies in pedagogical discourse. Instead, it is because the tasks students are given do not have them built in.

## Theme 3: Time Constraint and Instructional Compression

The third theme highlights how time constraints within the Intensive English Program shape instructional practices in ways that limit the integration of 4Cs. The compressed structure of the program creates a persistent pressure to complete materials within a limited number of sessions, which in turn influences how reading instruction is prioritized and enacted in the classroom.

Lecturers explicitly acknowledged that time limitation is a key factor affecting their instructional decisions. One lecturer stated:

*“The time is limited, so we have to keep up with the material. If we spend too long on one text, we won’t have time for the others.” (INT-T3)*

This emphasis on coverage over depth creates a form of instructional compression in which activities are streamlined to ensure that all planned materials are addressed. As a result, reading lessons tend to prioritize efficiency, often at the expense of deeper engagement with texts. This condition is reflected in classroom practices in which reading activities are conducted at a relatively fast pace, leaving little room for extended discussion, reflection, or collaborative exploration. After completing comprehension tasks, classes often move directly to subsequent activities without revisiting the text or encouraging students to elaborate on their interpretations. Opportunities for students to question ideas, compare perspectives, or justify their understanding are therefore limited, not necessarily by design intention, but by the need to manage time effectively.

The structure of the instructional materials further reinforces this pattern. Reading units are typically dense, containing multiple texts and exercises that are expected to be completed within a single or a limited number of sessions. This density implicitly encourages a pace-oriented approach to teaching, where progression through material becomes the primary objective. In such conditions, tasks that require extended thinking, such as analysis, evaluation, or synthesis, are less likely to be carried out, as they demand time that is not readily available.

Therefore, these findings suggest that time constraints operate not merely as logistical issues but as structural forces that shape the nature of reading instruction. The need to balance material coverage with limited instructional time leads to compressed teaching practices that favour procedural efficiency over cognitive depth. Within this compressed instructional environment, integrating the 4Cs becomes difficult to sustain, as the conditions for critical thinking, collaboration, and creative engagement are systematically reduced.

#### **Theme 4: Superficial Collaboration Practices**

The fourth theme reveals that although collaborative activities are present in reading instruction, they tend to operate at a superficial level, making only a limited contribution to meaningful knowledge construction. This condition indicates that collaboration, as one of the core components of 4Cs, is not fully realized as a cognitive process but rather functions as an organizational arrangement within classroom activities.

From the lecturers’ perspective, group work is often used as a strategy to increase student participation and manage classroom dynamics. One lecturer explained:

*“I usually ask them to work in groups so they become more active. If they work individually, they tend to be passive.” (INT-T1)*

While this approach reflects an effort to create a more interactive classroom environment, it does not necessarily ensure that collaboration leads to shared meaning-making or deeper engagement with the text. The intention to promote participation does not always translate into cognitively interdependent tasks. This limitation becomes evident in classroom practices, where students are observed working in groups but often completing

tasks individually within those groups. Interaction among students is typically minimal and tends to focus on comparing answers rather than negotiating interpretations or jointly constructing understanding. In many cases, one or two students dominate the discussion, while others remain passive, suggesting that the task's structure does not require equal contributions or collaborative reasoning.

The nature of the instructional materials further contributes to this superficial form of collaboration. Most tasks are designed to produce individual answers, even when completed in group settings. There is little evidence of task structures that require students to pool information, take on complementary roles, or synthesize different perspectives. As a result, collaboration is not embedded as a necessary condition for task completion, but rather as an optional or incidental feature of classroom organization.

It suggests that collaboration in reading instruction is present at the level of activity format but absent at the level of cognitive design. Without tasks that require interdependence and shared reasoning, group work does not function as a mechanism for developing communication, critical thinking, or creativity. Instead, it remains a surface-level strategy for classroom management, limiting the integration of 4Cs within the instructional process.

### **Theme 5: Lack of Cognitive Direction in Instructional Language**

The fifth theme indicates that the instructional language used in reading activities lacks explicit cognitive direction, contributing to the limited integration of the 4Cs in classroom practice. While instructions are generally clear and easy to follow, they tend to emphasize procedural actions rather than signalling the type of thinking students are expected to perform.

Lecturers acknowledged that simplifying instructions is often necessary to ensure that students understand what to do during the lesson. One lecturer explained:

*“The instructions have to be simple; if there is too much explanation, they won't understand what to do.”* (INT-T2)

This emphasis on clarity reflects a practical concern with student comprehension; however, it also results in cognitively undemanding instructions. Rather than directing students to analyse, evaluate, or justify their understanding, instructions are typically limited to general procedural commands such as reading the text and answering questions. This pattern is evident in classroom practices, where tasks are introduced using brief and generic directives, with little elaboration on how students should approach the text beyond completing the task. Students are rarely guided to consider alternative interpretations, question the author's perspective, or connect ideas across texts. As a result, the cognitive processes underlying reading remain implicit, leaving students to interpret tasks as exercises in completion rather than opportunities for deeper thinking.

The instructional materials reinforce this tendency, as task instructions predominantly employ verbs associated with lower-order processes, such as identify, find, or answer. There is minimal use of verbs that signal higher-order thinking, such as analyse, compare, evaluate, or justify. Consequently, the language of instruction does not make the expectations of 4Cs visible within the learning process.

These results indicate that instructional clarity, although essential, is inadequate for cognitive engagement. Students can follow clear instructions, but that does not mean they know how to think. Students are not likely to do higher-order thinking on their own if the instructions do not explain what kind of thinking is needed, such as analysis, evaluation, or creation. In this context, the lack of cognitively directive language poses a subtle yet substantial obstacle to the incorporation of the 4Cs into reading instruction.

### **Theme 6: Assessment Focused on Accuracy over Reasoning**

The final theme highlights that assessment practices in reading instruction are predominantly oriented toward accuracy rather than reasoning, further limiting the integration of the 4Cs. Evaluation tends to focus on whether students' answers are correct, with less attention to how they arrive at those answers or justify their interpretations.

Lecturers acknowledged that assessment is largely based on measurable outcomes, particularly students' ability to produce correct responses. One lecturer stated:

*“What matters first is that the answers are correct, because that’s what is assessed. Once they understand, then it can be developed further.” (INT-T3)*

This orientation reflects a pragmatic approach to evaluation, particularly within a structured program that requires clear indicators of achievement. However, it also narrows the scope of what counts as successful reading performance. In classroom practice, feedback is typically limited to confirming correct or incorrect answers, with little emphasis on discussing reasoning, interpretation, or alternative viewpoints. Students are rarely asked to explain their answers, justify their interpretations, or reflect on their thinking processes. As a result, the assessment process reinforces a view of reading as answer retrieval rather than meaning construction. The structure of the instructional materials supports this pattern, as most tasks are designed with fixed answers that can be easily checked. There is little inclusion of open-ended questions or performance-based tasks that would require students to articulate reasoning, engage in discussion, or produce extended responses. Consequently, assessment remains aligned with lower-order cognitive processes, even when broader educational goals emphasize higher-order competencies.

These results show that how assessments are done has a big effect on what is taught first. When evaluation emphasizes accuracy, both educators and learners inherently prioritize generating correct responses over engaging in profound cognitive processes. In this situation, it becomes hard to keep the 4Cs integrated. The reason is simple: the assessment system does not value or measure the skills that go along with **critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.**

### **3.2. Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that teachers' challenges in integrating 4Cs within General English reading instruction are not primarily rooted in a lack of pedagogical awareness, but in the structural organization of instructional practice within the Intensive English Program. Across the identified themes, a consistent pattern emerges: reading instruction is shaped by procedural routines, limited cognitive demand, and time-driven

priorities, which collectively constrain the enactment of 4Cs. This indicates that the difficulty of integration lies less in teachers' intentions and more in the conditions under which teaching and learning are carried out.

One central issue concerns the procedure of reading tasks, where instruction is dominated by text-question cycles that prioritize completion over interpretation. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that many EFL reading materials remain focused on comprehension routines rather than analytical engagement [6], [7]. Within such structures, reading is positioned as information retrieval rather than cognitive performance, limiting students' opportunities to engage in evaluation, synthesis, and meaning construction. As emphasized in 21st-century learning frameworks, critical thinking and creativity emerge when tasks require inquiry and problem-solving, not when they are confined to locating answers [2], [3], [15].

The issue is further compounded by the limited cognitive demand embedded in tasks and instructional language. Even when reading activities are implemented consistently, they rarely require students to go beyond surface-level comprehension. This confirms the argument that higher-order thinking does not arise automatically from exposure to texts, but must be structurally embedded within task design [4], [16], [17]. In this study, the absence of cognitively directive instructions, such as prompts to analyze, evaluate, or justify, means that students are not explicitly positioned to engage in deeper thinking. As a result, 4Cs remain implicit rather than operational within classroom practice.

Time constraint emerges as a critical mediating factor that intensifies these conditions. The compressed structure of the Intensive English Program encourages a coverage-oriented approach, where completing materials becomes a primary objective. This finding resonates with the coherence in curriculum design, which is often compromised when time pressure leads to prioritizing breadth over depth [9], [18]. In such contexts, even when teachers recognize the importance of 4Cs, they may not have sufficient time to implement tasks that require extended discussion, collaboration, or reflection. Consequently, instructional decisions tend to favour efficiency, reinforcing procedural patterns observed in the findings.

Another significant issue concerns the superficial nature of collaboration in reading activities. Although group work is frequently implemented, it rarely functions as a space for shared reasoning or knowledge construction. This supports the view that collaboration is not achieved simply by arranging students into groups, but by designing tasks that require interdependence and joint meaning-making [2], [19], [20]. Without such design, collaboration remains organizational rather than cognitive, limiting its contribution to communication and critical thinking.

Finally, assessment practices play a decisive role in shaping instructional priorities. The strong focus on accuracy over reasoning reinforces a view of reading as answer production rather than interpretive engagement. This finding reflects broader concerns in EFL assessment, where measurable outcomes often prioritize correctness at the expense of analytical depth [3], [21]. When reasoning, justification, and interpretation are not explicitly valued in assessment, both teachers and students are less likely to engage in practices that support 4Cs.

Thus, these findings suggest that integrating the 4Cs in reading instruction requires shifting from viewing these competencies as additional goals to embedding them within the instructional structure. The challenge is not simply to “add” critical thinking or collaboration into existing practices, but to redesign tasks, instructions, and assessment in ways that require these competencies to be enacted [22], [23]. In this sense, the 4Cs should serve as the operational core of reading instruction rather than peripheral objectives. This study, therefore, contributes to the field by highlighting that meaningful integration of 21st-century skills depends on micro-level instructional design, particularly in contexts characterized by time constraints and intensive learning structures.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the challenges of integrating 4Cs in General English reading instruction within the Intensive English Program are closely related to the structural characteristics of classroom instruction rather than merely to teachers’ individual competence or awareness. The findings indicate that reading instruction is still predominantly shaped by procedural routines, efficiency-oriented practices, and assessment practices that emphasize comprehension accuracy over reasoning and interpretation. Consequently, opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity remain limited within everyday classroom interaction. These findings suggest that the implementation of 21st-century skills in EFL reading classrooms depends heavily on how instructional practices are designed and enacted at the micro-level of teaching.

Based on these findings, the study suggests that efforts to integrate 4Cs should move beyond general pedagogical recommendations toward more focused adjustments at the level of instructional design. Rather than requiring major curricular changes, small but deliberate shifts in task construction, instructional language, and assessment criteria can create space for cognitive engagement within existing classroom constraints. For instance, modifying task prompts to include analytical verbs, designing activities that require shared reasoning, and incorporating evaluation criteria that value interpretation and justification can gradually align reading practices with 21st-century learning goals. The study, therefore, contributes to theoretical discussions of 21st-century literacy and EFL pedagogy by emphasizing the role of instructional structures in shaping students’ cognitive engagement. Practically, the findings may provide guidance for lecturers, curriculum developers, and educational institutions in designing reading instruction that more effectively supports critical and collaborative literacy practices.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to one Intensive English Program context at UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon and involved a relatively small number of participants. In addition, the study primarily focused on classroom practices and lecturers’ perspectives, without examining students’ experiences or directly measuring learning outcomes. Future research may further explore how such micro-level design interventions function in different instructional contexts and how they can be sustained within intensive learning environments. Further studies may also investigate students’ responses toward 4Cs-oriented reading instruction and examine how instructional changes influence students’ literacy development

over time. Beyond academic contribution, this research highlights the importance of developing reading instruction that prepares learners not only to comprehend texts, but also to think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate meaningfully, and respond creatively in contemporary literacy environments.

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