



Developing Critical Thinking Through English Language Activities

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is an essential competence that enables learners to analyze information, evaluate arguments, identify assumptions, compare viewpoints, and make reasoned judgments. English language education provides favorable conditions for developing these abilities because language activities naturally involve interpretation, communication, problem solving, and expression of personal viewpoints. This thesis examines the pedagogical potential of English language activities for developing critical thinking. A qualitative analysis of established research on critical thinking and English as a foreign language was conducted. The findings indicate that discussion, debate, problem-solving tasks, critical reading, argumentative writing, questioning, peer feedback, and reflective activities can simultaneously strengthen language proficiency and higher-order thinking. Effective integration requires purposeful task design, meaningful communication, evidence-based reasoning, and teacher guidance.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, English language learning, EFL, critical reading, argumentative writing, discussion, problem solving, reflective learning.

INTRODUCTION

Modern education requires learners not only to acquire information but also to understand, evaluate, interpret, and apply it appropriately. Critical thinking therefore occupies an important position in contemporary teaching. Halpern defines critical thinking as the purposeful use of cognitive skills and strategies that increase the probability of achieving desirable outcomes [1]. It involves analyzing arguments, evaluating evidence, drawing conclusions, solving problems, and making reasoned decisions.

English language learning offers particularly suitable opportunities for the development of these abilities. Language is not simply a system of vocabulary and grammatical rules. It is also a means through which learners interpret information, express opinions, defend positions, question ideas, and interact with different perspectives. For this reason, English lessons can combine communicative competence with intellectual development.

Research in EFL contexts indicates that explicit integration of critical-thinking tasks can contribute to both language development and academic achievement. Yang and Gamble found that learners engaged in critical-thinking-enhanced activities demonstrated stronger English proficiency and critical-thinking performance than learners involved in conventional activities



without an explicit critical-thinking focus [4]. The purpose of this thesis is to identify how English language activities can be used to develop critical thinking and to determine the pedagogical conditions that make such activities effective.

The research employed qualitative literature analysis and comparative synthesis. Sources dealing with critical-thinking theory, critical-thinking instruction, EFL learning, English literacy, writing, discussion, and technology-supported language activities were examined. Particular attention was given to research exploring the relationship between language tasks and learners' abilities to analyze, interpret, evaluate, infer, justify, and reflect.

The analyzed activities were considered from two interconnected perspectives: their contribution to English language development and their potential to stimulate higher-order cognitive processes. The synthesis focused on classroom practices that require learners to move beyond reproduction of information and use English as a tool for reasoning and meaningful communication.

The analysis shows that critical thinking develops most effectively when learners are required to work actively with information rather than simply reproduce it. Critical reading is particularly important because it requires students to identify the main idea, distinguish facts from opinions, recognize the author's position, evaluate evidence, identify possible bias, and compare information from different sources. Such tasks develop reading comprehension while simultaneously encouraging analytical judgment.

Discussion and debate also create productive conditions for critical thinking. When learners respond to controversial questions, they must formulate a position, provide reasons, listen to alternative arguments, and respond appropriately. These processes encourage students to use vocabulary and grammatical structures for authentic communicative purposes. They also teach learners that an opinion becomes stronger when it is supported by relevant evidence and logical explanation. Yang and Gamble emphasize the value of debates and peer critiques in critical-thinking-enhanced EFL instruction [4].

Writing activities provide another important context. Argumentative and problem-solution writing require learners to organize ideas, evaluate evidence, establish logical relationships, anticipate opposing positions, and formulate conclusions. Alagözlü connects weaknesses in critical thinking with difficulties in developing an independent voice in EFL writing [3]. Therefore, writing tasks should not be limited to grammatical accuracy. Students should be encouraged to explain why they support a particular position and how available evidence supports their conclusion.

Questioning is equally significant. Questions such as why, how, what evidence supports this claim, what alternative explanation is possible, and what might happen under different conditions encourage deeper processing of language content. Socratic-style questioning can transform a simple text or speaking activity into an analytical task. Instead of asking only what happened in a reading passage, the teacher may ask why a character acted in a particular way, whether the decision was justified, or how the situation could be interpreted differently.

Technology-supported English activities can extend these opportunities. Yang, Gamble, Hung and Lin demonstrated that critical-thinking-infused adaptive English literacy instruction can support both English literacy and critical-thinking development [5]. Online discussions, collaborative writing, digital source comparison, and structured peer feedback allow students to examine multiple viewpoints and reconsider their initial interpretations.

The findings suggest that critical thinking should not be treated as an additional topic separated from language learning. It can be embedded directly into reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. The decisive factor is not the activity itself but the cognitive demand built into it. A discussion based only on recalling facts may contribute little to critical thinking, while a discussion requiring comparison of evidence and justification of conclusions can stimulate deeper reasoning.

Explicit teacher guidance is also necessary. Abrami and colleagues showed that critical-thinking development is more effective when instructional objectives and pedagogical strategies are deliberately designed rather than left to develop implicitly [6]. In English classes, teachers should therefore model how to evaluate information, distinguish strong arguments from weak ones, question assumptions, and justify conclusions.

Peer interaction has particular value because students encounter viewpoints different from their own. Peer feedback can encourage learners to reconsider ideas and identify weaknesses in reasoning, but it should be guided by clear criteria. Learners need to understand that critical thinking does not mean criticizing others negatively. It involves careful examination of ideas, openness to alternative perspectives, and willingness to revise a judgment when stronger evidence becomes available.

The teacher's role consequently changes from being primarily a transmitter of correct answers to becoming a facilitator of inquiry. Brookfield argues that critical thinking involves identifying and checking assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives, and taking informed action [2]. English language activities can support these processes when learners are given sufficient linguistic support to express complex ideas. Vocabulary prompts, model expressions for agreeing and disagreeing, argument structures, and guided questions can prevent language limitations from becoming barriers to intellectual participation.

Developing critical thinking through English language activities provides an effective way to combine linguistic and cognitive learning objectives. Critical reading, discussion, debate, argumentative writing, questioning, problem solving, peer feedback, and reflective tasks encourage learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, justify opinions, and consider alternative perspectives while using English meaningfully. The effectiveness of these activities depends on purposeful instructional design, explicit critical-thinking objectives, appropriate language support, and opportunities for reflection. Integrating critical thinking into English learning can therefore contribute not only to stronger language proficiency but also to the development of independent, reflective, and responsible learners.

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