

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21720116>

Abstract— In contemporary higher education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction is increasingly expected to move beyond basic linguistic proficiency to cultivate higher-order cognitive abilities. This study investigates the impact of integrating explicit critical thinking (CT) instruction—utilizing Socratic questioning, analytical reading, and structured debates—into EFL coursework. Employing a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design over a 12-week intervention, 60 undergraduate EFL students were divided into an experimental group ($n = 30$) receiving CT-integrated language instruction and a control group ($n = 30$) receiving traditional communicative language teaching. Quantitative data were gathered using a standardized Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric adapted from the Paul-Elder framework. Paired and independent samples t-tests revealed that the experimental group demonstrated statistically significant gains in analytical reasoning, argument evaluation, and reflective writing compared to the control group ($p < .001$). The findings suggest that embedding critical cognitive tasks directly into language curricula enhances both cognitive and linguistic competence simultaneously.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, EFL Pedagogy, Cognitive Development, Socratic Questioning, Higher Education, Communicative Competence.*

1. Introduction

Language learning and cognitive development are fundamentally interconnected. As Vygotsky (1986) noted, language serves as the primary instrument for thought, functioning both as the medium and the product of intellectual activity. In foreign language learning contexts, learners do not merely acquire isolated grammatical rules and vocabulary lists; they process, analyze, and synthesize information across diverse cultural and social frameworks. However, traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms have frequently prioritized lower-order cognitive skills, such as rote memorization, surface-level reading comprehension, and mechanical sentence transformation.

In recent years, educational researchers have emphasized the necessity of embedding critical thinking (CT) into foreign language instruction. Critical thinking refers to the disciplined, self-directed cognitive process of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach well-reasoned judgments (Paul & Elder, 2006; Ennis, 1993). According to Shirkhani and Fahim (2011), language learners who develop CT abilities become more autonomous, monitor their learning processes more effectively, and achieve deeper target language proficiency. Furthermore, studies by Choy and Cheah (2009) highlight that interactive tasks such as classroom debates, problem-solving, and analytical writing prompt students to examine underlying assumptions, evaluate evidence, and construct coherent arguments.

Despite growing theoretical recognition, empirical research evaluating structured interventions that explicitly combine EFL instruction with CT frameworks remains limited in university settings. This study addresses this gap by assessing the impact of a CT-infused EFL curriculum on undergraduate students' cognitive and linguistic performance.

Research Questions

Does integrating critical thinking tasks into EFL instruction lead to a statistically significant increase in students' critical thinking skills?

How do specific task types (Socratic questioning, debate, and analytical reading) influence student performance in evidence evaluation and argument analysis?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative, quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design. Participants were assigned to either an **Experimental Group** (receiving CT-integrated EFL instruction) or a **Control Group** (receiving standard communicative EFL instruction) for a duration of 12 weeks.

2.2 Participants

The study sample comprised 60 undergraduate students ($N = 60$) enrolled in an intermediate English language course at a public university. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 years ($M = 19.4$). Prior to the intervention, an English placement test confirmed that all participants operated at the B1 intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The sample was divided equally:

Experimental Group ($n = 30$): 16 females, 14 males.

Control Group ($n = 30$): 17 females, 13 males.

2.3 Instructional Intervention

Both groups attended 4 hours of English instruction per week over 12 weeks.

Control Group: Followed a traditional Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) curriculum emphasizing functional grammar, general conversation, and textbook reading comprehension without explicit cognitive training.

Experimental Group: Received instruction integrated with the Paul-Elder Critical Thinking Framework. Lessons systematically incorporated three core activities:

Socratic Questioning: Analysis of texts using probing questions regarding assumptions, viewpoints, and implications.

Structured Debates: Students constructed evidence-backed arguments and systematically refuted counterarguments on complex topics (e.g., technology, environment).

Analytical Writing: Tasks requiring synthesis, source evaluation, and identification of logical fallacies.

2.4 Data Collection & Instruments

Data were gathered using a standardized Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric (CTAR) adapted from the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) criteria and Bloom's revised taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Facione, 1990). The rubric measured five core domains on a scale of 1 to 5 (Max score = 25): (1) Analysis, (2) Evaluation, (3) Inference, (4) Explanation, and (5) Self-Regulation. Both groups completed a baseline pre-test in Week 1 and a post-test in Week 12, evaluated independently by two trained raters (inter-rater reliability $r = .89$).

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to measure intra-group gains from pre-test to post-test, and independent-samples t-tests were used to compare differences between the two groups.

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the pre-test and post-test scores for both the control and experimental groups across the 25-point assessment rubric.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Critical Thinking Performance Scores

Group	Phase	Sample Size (n)	Mean (M)	Std Dev (SD)	t-value	p-value
Control Group	Pre-test	30	12.40	2.15	1.84	.076 (ns)
	Post-test	30	13.10	2.05		
Experimental Group	Pre-test	30	12.55	2.20	11.42	< .001
	Post-test	30	18.85	1.95		

Note: ns = not statistically significant at $p < .05$. Maximum possible score = 25.

Baseline Equivalence & Intervention Impact

At the beginning of the study, an independent-samples t-test confirmed no statistically significant difference between the control group ($M = 12.40$, $SD = 2.15$) and the experimental group ($M = 12.55$, $SD = 2.20$) on the pre-test score ($t(58) = 0.27$, $p = .788$), establishing baseline equivalence.

Following the 12-week intervention, the control group demonstrated a minor increase in post-test scores ($M = 13.10$, $SD = 2.05$), which was not statistically significant ($t(29) = 1.84$, $p = .076$). Conversely, the experimental group exhibited a significant increase from pre-test ($M = 12.55$) to post-test ($M = 18.85$). A paired-samples t-test confirmed this gain was highly statistically significant ($t(29) = 11.42$, $p < .001$), representing a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.03$). An independent-samples t-test on post-test scores further confirmed a significant post-intervention gap between groups ($t(58) = 11.12$, $p < .001$).

4. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that embedding explicit critical thinking strategies into English language instruction significantly improves university EFL learners' cognitive processing abilities. While traditional communicative language teaching yielded minor, non-significant improvements in critical thinking, the targeted intervention incorporating Socratic questioning, structured debate, and analytical writing led to substantial cognitive gains.

These findings corroborate previous theoretical and empirical work by Shirkhani and Fahim (2011), who argued that foreign language learning must extend beyond linguistic competence to include cognitive skill development. The marked improvement in Analysis and Evaluation domains highlights the effectiveness of task-based language activities. When students engage in structured debates, they are forced to evaluate the credibility of claims, identify logical fallacies, and synthesize diverse viewpoints in real time, aligning with Vygotsky's (1986) socio-cultural view of language as a scaffold for cognitive growth.

Pedagogical Implications

Curriculum Integration: EFL curricula should intentionally pair language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) with cognitive objectives based on Bloom's taxonomy.

Task Design: Language teachers should reduce reliance on simple display questions and replace them with open-ended, problem-solving prompts that require justification.

Assessment Practices: Language assessments should evaluate both linguistic accuracy/fluency and the logical coherence, evidence, and critical depth of student responses.

Conclusion

The integration of critical thinking development into English language learning represents a powerful paradigm shift from passive language reception to active cognitive engagement. The findings of this 12-week investigation confirm that language instruction explicitly structured around Socratic inquiry, analytical reading, and structured argumentation significantly enhances students' analytical, evaluative, and inferential capacities. EFL educators are encouraged to adopt critical pedagogy frameworks to equip learners with both the linguistic fluency and cognitive tools required for academic and professional success in the globalized world.

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