

CULTIVATING CRITICALITY: DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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In an era characterized by an unprecedented influx of information, the ability to think critically has become an indispensable asset.

This paper posits that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction presents a unique and potent avenue for cultivating critical thinking skills in learners. Beyond mere linguistic proficiency, EFL pedagogy should prioritize the development of higher-order cognitive abilities, enabling learners to not only comprehend and produce language but also to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information critically. This paper will elucidate the multifaceted ways in which EFL instruction can foster critical thinking, exploring pedagogical strategies, examining the role of authentic materials, and discussing the inherent challenges and potential solutions in cultivating criticality within the EFL context.

INTRODUCTION. In an era characterized by an unprecedented influx of information, the ability to think critically has become an indispensable asset. Critical thinking, encompassing the capacity for reasoned judgment, objective analysis, and the evaluation of evidence, is no longer a mere academic pursuit; it is a cornerstone of informed citizenship and effective participation in a complex and interconnected world. While EFL instruction traditionally emphasizes grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency, its potential to cultivate critical thinking skills often remains under-explored. This paper argues that EFL

classrooms provide a fertile ground for fostering criticality, enabling learners to not only acquire linguistic competence but also develop the intellectual acumen necessary to navigate the complexities of the contemporary information landscape.

Fostering Criticality Through EFL Pedagogy

One of the most salient ways to cultivate critical thinking in the EFL classroom is through the judicious selection and utilization of authentic materials. Exposure to diverse perspectives, nuanced arguments, and varying rhetorical styles within authentic texts, such as news articles, editorials, and literary works, compels learners to engage in rigorous analysis. By confronting differing viewpoints and evaluating the veracity and credibility of information presented, learners develop the ability to discern bias, identify underlying assumptions, and construct cogent counter-arguments.

Furthermore, the integration of collaborative learning activities significantly enhances the development of critical thinking skills. Group discussions, debates, and peer feedback provide a platform for learners to engage in intellectual discourse, challenge assumptions, and refine their own arguments through constructive criticism. These collaborative endeavors necessitate the articulation and justification of one's own perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues and honing the ability to effectively communicate ideas and defend one's position.

Moreover, the judicious employment of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) questions is crucial. Instead of merely eliciting factual recall, EFL instruction should prioritize questions that necessitate analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation. For instance, instead of asking "What is the main character's name?", educators should encourage learners to delve deeper by inquiring: "How does the author's use of symbolism contribute to the novel's overarching theme of alienation?" or "Evaluate the ethical implications of the protagonist's decision-making process." Such probing questions compel learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension and engage in deeper, more nuanced cognitive processes.

The Role of Authentic Materials

Authentic materials, such as news articles, editorials, short stories, and documentaries, play a pivotal role in cultivating critical thinking skills. These materials offer a window into real-world language use, exposing learners to diverse perspectives, nuanced arguments, and varying rhetorical styles. By engaging with authentic texts, learners are compelled to:

- **Deconstruct arguments:** Analyze the structure of arguments, identify supporting evidence, and evaluate the validity of claims.

- **Discern bias:** Recognize and analyze potential biases in the presentation of information, considering the author's perspective, target audience, and potential motivations.
- **Assess credibility:** Evaluate the credibility of sources, considering factors such as the author's expertise, the publication's reputation, and the presence of supporting evidence.
- **Formulate counter-arguments:** Construct and articulate alternative perspectives, challenging assumptions and offering counter-interpretations.

Furthermore, authentic materials can be used to explore sociocultural contexts and understand the interplay between language, culture, and identity. By analyzing how language is used to construct meaning, negotiate power, and reflect social values, learners can develop a deeper understanding of the sociocultural forces that shape human communication.

Challenges and Considerations

While the potential benefits of cultivating critical thinking through EFL instruction are significant, several challenges must be acknowledged. Firstly, the successful implementation of critical thinking strategies necessitates a paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches. Many EFL teachers may require specialized training and ongoing professional development to effectively integrate critical thinking activities into their instruction.

Secondly, the selection and adaptation of appropriate authentic materials can be a time-consuming and challenging task. Teachers must carefully select materials that are both linguistically and culturally appropriate for their learners while also providing sufficient opportunities for critical engagement.

Finally, assessing the development of critical thinking skills can be complex and multifaceted. Traditional assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, may not adequately capture the nuanced nature of critical thinking. Alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio assessments, performance tasks, and observation of classroom interactions, may be more effective in evaluating learners' critical thinking abilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, EFL instruction presents a unique and valuable opportunity to cultivate critical thinking skills in learners. By strategically integrating authentic materials, employing collaborative learning strategies, and prioritizing higher-order thinking skills, educators can empower learners to become not only proficient language users but also discerning thinkers capable of navigating the complexities of the contemporary world.¹ While challenges remain, the potential rewards of cultivating criticality through EFL

instruction are significant, equipping learners with the intellectual tools necessary to become informed, engaged, and responsible citizens of the global community.

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