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## Strategies Enhance Critical Thinking in Teaching EL as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract

The current study tries to explore the integration of teaching strategies designed to enhance critical thinking skills within English language instruction. The primary objective is to examine how English language instructors employ pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking in their classrooms and to explore the interplay between critical thinking development and the English language learning process. This study has conducted in the second semester for the academic year 2024/2025. The selected samples for this study are EFL students and the instructors in English Department/College of Education/Salahaddin University. Two tools have been used in this study: the first tool is a questionnaire for 3<sup>rd</sup> year EFL university students has been applied, and the second tool is the interview with EFL instructors who are teaching different modules through teaching the foreign language. By analyzing the relationship between critical thinking sub-skills—such as analysis, inference, comprehension, and evaluation—and the overall quality of English language acquisition, the research seeks to determine whether improvements in these cognitive skills contribute to enhance language proficiency. Additionally, the study proposes innovative teaching and learning strategies aimed at equipping the university instructors and EL students with practical tools to plan and implement effective critical thinking exercises. The findings of this

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research are expected to provide valuable insights into the dual objectives of improving critical thinking and language learning outcomes, offering actionable strategies that can be applied in the class for the sake of enhancing EL students' critical thinking skill.

**Keywords:** Strategies, Critical Thinking, Foreign Language

## استخدام تقنيات تعزز التفكير النقدي لطلبة الجامعة عند تدريس اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

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### المستخلص

تحاول الدراسة الحالية استكشاف دمج استراتيجيات التدريس المصممة لتعزيز مهارات التفكير النقدي في تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية. الهدف الأساسي هو دراسة كيفية قيام مدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية بتوظيف أساليب تربوية لتعزيز التفكير النقدي في فصولهم الدراسية، واستكشاف التفاعل بين تطوير التفكير النقدي وعملية تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية. ومن خلال تحليل العلاقة بين المهارات الفرعية للتفكير النقدي - مثل التحليل والاستدلال والفهم والتقييم - والجودة العامة لاكتساب اللغة الإنكليزية، تسعى الدراسة لتحديد ما إذا كانت تحسينات هذه المهارات المعرفية تسهم في تعزيز الكفاءة اللغوية.

بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تقترح الدراسة استراتيجيات مبتكرة للتدريس والتعلم تهدف إلى تزويد مدرسي الجامعة وطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية العملية بأدوات عملية لتخطيط وتنفيذ تمارين فعّالة في التفكير النقدي. وقد استخدم الباحث استبياناً موجّهاً لطلاب السنة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كما تم إجراء العديد من المقابلات مع المدرسين الذين يقومون بتدريس وحدات دراسية مختلفة في نفس القسم.

ان نتائج هذه الدراسة تقدم رؤى قيمة لتحقيق هدفين المتمثلين في تحسين التفكير النقدي ونتائج تعلم اللغة، مما يوفّر استراتيجيات عملية يمكن تطبيقها في الفصل لتعزيز مهارات التفكير النقدي لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at the university level, the integration of certain teaching strategies of critical thinking skills development remain a real challenge for the university instructors. While instructors may use various teaching strategies, it is unclear to what extent these methods effectively foster critical thinking skills during language instruction. For example most of the students face difficulties in analyzing a piece of literary text or making inferences about certain linguistic topics for certain reasons. Additionally, the relationship between students' critical thinking abilities and their language learning outcomes has not been adequately studied and investigated, leaving a gap in understanding how cognitive skills such as analysis, inference, comprehension, and evaluation contribute to improved language learning. There is also a need to specify which sub-skills of critical thinking most directly support the quality of English learning which is necessary action for both the instructors as well as for the students. Certainly without clear, evidence-based strategies efforts to promote critical thinking within EFL classrooms may remain ineffective and fruitless. This research aims to investigate the current instructional practices of the third stage EL students, examine the correlation between critical thinking and language learning, and propose actionable, student-centered strategies to enhance both cognitive and linguistic development.

1. The 3<sup>rd</sup> year students in English language Department /College of Education/ Salahaddin University for the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester in the academic year 2024/2025.
2. The instructors who are teaching the foreign language in English Department/College of Education/Salahaddin University.

The current study aims to the following:

1. Examining the use of teaching strategies by the instructors of English language to enhance the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students' critical thinking through teaching the foreign language.
2. Finding the relationship between the university students' critical thinking and English language learning process.
3. Finding out if the critical thinking sub-skills improve the university students' analysis, inference, comprehension and evaluation which will lead to high quality of English learning.
4. Presenting new learning strategies that help the instructors as well as the students plan for successful critical thinking improvement inside the class.

The study is limited to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students in English language Department /College of Education/ Salahaddin University for the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester in the academic year 2024/2025. Also it is limited to the instructors who teach different modules in English Department/College of Education/Salahaddin University.

This study holds particular significance for both English language instructors and students within the College of Education, English Language Department, as it addresses a very necessary component of language learning which is the integration

of critical thinking skills in EFL instruction by applying effective strategies. The students in this department must not only master English linguistically but also develop the ability to think critically, analyze texts, solve problems, and make informed decisions about their learning processes. The findings of this research will shed light on how current teaching strategies employed by instructors affect the development of students' critical thinking abilities. Understanding this relationship is essential for improving the overall effectiveness of EFL teaching and preparing students for academic success and real-world communication challenges. Moreover, the study aims to identify which critical thinking sub-skills—such as analysis, inference, comprehension, and evaluation—most directly support language learning. This knowledge will help instructors design more effective and engaging lessons that promote higher-order thinking alongside language learning.

Ultimately by presenting new, practical learning strategies, this research also empowers both instructors and students within the department to take a more active role in planning and implementing critical thinking activities. This aligns with the broader goals of the college of education: to produce competent future teachers who

## **2. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Critical thinking is one of the fundamental features that English language students should own it. So, the university students have the ability to make reasoned judgments for their subject areas and all the academic activities such as writing an essay, doing a field of research or participating in an argument. Basically, it is adopting criteria to evaluate and give an opinion about the quality of certain issues. Through teaching experiences, the researcher believes that critical thinking can be considered as an attempt to judge claims and arguments by thinking about good and real reasons and evidence to support that judgment. Most of the students in the department of English language /college of education /Salahaddin University seem to be unable to reach the level for being able to evaluate any situation by thinking critically. There are lacks of opportunities to think critically in the class because may be some university instructors do not consider them able to think and evaluate according to reasons and make their own judgments. Certain reasons can be led to these lacks of opportunities and one of them is the classical teaching methods that some of the instructors nowadays still apply them inside the class. Teaching methods that give no space for the students to express their opinions and show their characters. Enhancing the critical thinking of the students especially the students who doesn't want to learn requires creating circumstances when they find themselves obliged to apply critical thinking in one way or another. But when there are some lacks in creating such circumstances, the students will have no opportunities to improve these skills even if the applied teaching methods are productive linguistically. Critical thinking is not taught in context since most of the exercises in the class are not practical and do not help students start thinking critically in everyday when they perform the language in real-life situations, therefore to improve the students' abilities to think critically is considered to be one of the main goals of EL instruction at each level. Moreover, in a variety of

courses mainly in social sciences and science, critical thinking is accepted as the “desirable outcome” (Watson & Glaser, 1964).

## **2.2 Critical Thinking As Reflective Thinking**

There is no common agreement on a specific definition of critical thinking since their concern is critical thinking can or should be taught and some scholars use other concepts that indicate critical thinking such as higher order thinking (Halpern:1997). Dewey (1910) states that one of the leading researchers and thinkers in the field of philosophy of education, offered the following definition more than a century ago: “thinking in its best sense is that which considers the basis and consequences of beliefs”. It is believed that what the individual believes in affects his/her way of thinking and evaluation. In education context, it is affirmed the evaluative nature of thinking and the coming actions can be connected to these beliefs and evaluation (Jamiai and El Karfa, 2022). Dewey is considered as the father of modern critical thinking who called it a reflective thinking and defined it as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends”, it is confirmed that active part of this skill more than the passive part and for more knowledge the art of questioning is the only source (Dewey:1933). The researcher as an EFL instructor believes that critical thinking is a fixable skill that can be improved by involving different life situations. Critical thinking allows individuals to analyze information objectively and make well-reasoned decisions. They can weigh the pros and cons when they have different choices, and make informed decisions based on evidence and logic rather than modes and personal feelings.

## **2.3 Critical thinking in EFL classroom**

In the field of education, a great attention has been given to the concept of critical thinking and its impact on the development of the students’ cognitive skills. The interest to understand the cognitive domain of human being and identifying the intellectual skills that one can perform while thinking became main aims of the educators and the psychologist. The first explanations of the nature of cognitive skills go back to Bloom in 1956. The cognitive skills can be classified into six levels of thinking and his classification is known as Bloom’s taxonomy. These levels of thinking are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These thinking levels vary in their complexity. The lowest cognitive level is recalling information, and the second lower level understands the meaning of facts. The ability to apply the acquired knowledge is known as application, which is the third lower level of thinking. Following the application phase, knowledge is analyzed into parts in order to understand the relationship between these parts, and this analysis skill is considered as a higher level of thinking. Synthesis is another higher cognitive level which demonstrates the creation of new meaning. Evaluation is the highest cognitive level that is manifested in judgments and is based on defined criteria (Alnofaie, 2013).

Incorporation critical thinking into foreign language classrooms has become very necessary in many countries. Especially for in UK schools, the National Curriculum introduced thinking skills into Modern Foreign Language classrooms (MFL). It has been found out that the students can achieve high levels of communication when they are taught how to be critical thinker. Also teaching critical thinking skills to the students can facilitate language learning process and many other language learning skills such as drawing inferences from unfamiliar language items, reflecting on connections between

languages, being aware of their progress and certainly improve autonomous style in language learning (Ibid,2013).

The major skills and characteristics of critical thinking teaching are related basically to the teachers' and learners' relationship, classroom management, teaching practices and teaching materials, and the nature of the classroom interaction. All the activities that are applied in the class should support the learners' engagement in the development and practice of critical thinking skills. However, there are major obstacles that weaken the implementation of critical thinking education. They are related to: lack of training, lack of information, preconceptions, and time constraints. Also they are related to the nature of the teaching environment, the teachers' and the students' attitudes towards improving critical thinking skills and certainly the assessment procedures that are followed in the educational settings. Most of the teachers really spend their efforts to engage students in critical thinking activities but some students rarely use critical thinking skills to solve complex and real problems (Jamiai1i and El Karfa, 2022).

Clement (1979) explains that the answer may be that while "we should be teaching students how to think, we are teaching them what to think". Similarly, Norman (1981) points out "it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning".

#### **2.4 Strategies that Encourage Critical Thinking in the Classroom**

University instructors in English language department believe that developing critical thinking skills is necessary for achieving the academic purposes but few have experienced the appropriate strategies that enhance these skills. The instructors certainly need to know how these skills should be taught and learned, or how it should be assessed. They should be able to select the strategies and techniques that are adequate to be implemented in the classroom setting. The students' goals and their learning needs can guide the instructors to select the suitable strategy for specific class. The selection of the effective strategies can stimulate the students to think critically and enables the instructors to implement them in their teaching practices as one of the main objectives of their teaching practices. According to the literature of critical thinking teaching, there are many effective strategies are available and the instructors should know the suitable strategies with his students. Strategies such as active learning, collaborative learning, Socratic questions and reflective practices that if implemented correctly in the classroom setting they can promote the development of critical thinking in learners (Polanco, 2018).

Enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills can be improved in a great style if EL (English language)instructors apply different strategies and one of these strategies is called **7E strategy**. It supports students in analyzing information critically, evaluating data, and addressing challenges. By making the students have a desire to complete tasks that demand applying knowledge to real-life scenarios. Such strategy strengthens their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. It leads to create a more interactive and impactful learning environment (Badi and Rashid,2024).

#### **2.5 Active Learning**

The active learning is a concept that results knowledge from active interaction process that happens in the classroom among the main elements of teaching and learning processes. Elements such as the teacher, the student and certain the teaching environment (Clapp, 1996). In active learning the most important step is to guide the students towards being independent thinkers at certain levels of thinking ,levels that are mentioned by

Bloom Taxonomy such as application, analysis and evaluation and to be able to reflect upon the knowledge that they receive more than just memorizing and trying to recall that knowledge. In this strategy the aim is constructing the knowledge more than receiving it and saving it in their minds. Consequently student-centered methodologies are more useful when the aim is to enhance active learning because through this strategy sense making and mental construction take place and they start to gain meanings from their experiences. It is clear that active learning is more applicable with student-centered methodologies more than the traditional teaching methods that the teacher is the center and the only source for the knowledge (Polanco,2018).Active learning should be combined with the increasing the students' motivation to learn but instructors of English students often underestimate the role of students' motivation as a mediating factor in the learning process. Classroom dynamics are largely driven by the students by applying different learning strategies that enhance critical skills, and meaningful learning cannot occur if they lack the motivation to actively participate in the educational experience (Abubaker&Aziz.2024).

### **2.6 Socratic Questions**

“Know the self” is the key word that describes the essence of this strategy for developing critical thinking skills. It can be described as practices of a unique kind of inquiry into human knowledge. It is also called Socratic Questioning (SQ), Socratic Method, Socratic Enquiry, or Socratic Dialogue; it is described as an effective means for self-discovery and self-healing of the diseased thinking. This strategy does not prevent the students from asking many questions but it requires deconstruct static notions, ideas or beliefs through critical thinking and reach facts and reconstructs new ideas( Venkatesan,2020). SQ is reflective inquiry that seeks f discovering answers by asking questions thoughtfully and reaching valid ideas (Trepanier 2018). This form of questioning should be spontaneous, exploratory, and issue-specific. The student must be an active listener and follows an argument map along which the questions proceed. Interactive dialogues with deep and serious questions are necessary to gain the knowledge. There should be a technique in selection the questions and planning the questions in advance is highly required. When the instructor follows this strategy certainly he aims to explore more ideas in depth.The instructor is required to apply this strategy continuously if he wants his students to be critical thinkers and able to solve their own problems. (Overholser 2018).

### **2.7 The Characteristics of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking can be recognized as the students ability to think through certain levels of thinking such as conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the information for the sake of finding the appropriate solution for any problem ( Virdiana,2021).There are five characteristics critical thinker cited from Paul and Elder (2006):

1. Raises vital questions and problems, formulates them clearly and precisely;
2. Gathers and assesses relevant information, uses abstracts ideas to interpret it effectively;
3. Comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, tests them against relevant criteria and standards;
4. Thinks openly within alternative systems of thought, recognizes and assesses, as need be, their assumptions. Implications, and practical consequences;

5. Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems. Meanwhile, G. S. Baker (2020) pointed the following characteristics of critical thinkers which are:

1. Receive the messages from various sources.
2. Not afraid to have a healthy debate with anybody.
3. Ready to admit the wrong opinion and willing to accept the right one.
4. Finding opportunities to develop their thinking skills.
5. seeking the knowledge.
6. Have creative, innovative, and original ideas.
7. Finding simple solutions after analyzing certain problems.
8. Good predications about everything, including themselves.
9. Developing behavioral habits to keep pace with the tendency to rethink.

So critical thinkers are people who are able to draw a conclusion from all issues or information using their thinking ability, which consists of identifying, analyzing, scaling the accuracy with open-mindedness. Therefore, such type of people needs to share their ideas and always try to find the correct information that help them to make the right decisions in any situation they find themselves (Viridiana, 2021).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

The researcher is going to apply a structured questionnaire for EL students so as to find out their opinions concerning their critical thinking improvement and its relationship with the learning process and the strategies that enhance this improvement. The researcher conducts a semi-structured interview with EL instructors in order to obtain information regarding their strategies to enhance critical thinking through the development of their students' performances. The combination between a structured questionnaire for EL students and interview with the instructors will build a solid basic for the data collection process and prevents the limitation of the type and the utility of the collected data.

#### **3.2 The Instruments**

The researcher has applied the following instruments for the data collection process which are :

1. A questionnaire for EL students.
2. Interview with EL instructors.

##### **3.2.1 The Results of the Students' Questionnaire**

In order to achieve the aims of the study a questionnaire with five main indicators that represent the main critical thinking skills that they should have improved through learning English language. These indicators which are specified by Facione – Angelo (2015) critical thinking model are:

1. Interpreting problems
2. Analyzing solution of the problem
3. Applying gained solution
4. Evaluating the gained solution
5. Concluding the results attached with supportive evidence

The questionnaire includes five items for each indicator and the students are required to select the option that is suitable to their opinions. The options are (strongly disagree, agree, neutral , agree ,strongly agree). The sample includes 25 third grade

students ,they are 12 male and 13 female students who were chosen randomly. This sample represents 25% of the whole population of the third grade students.

Table 1 illustrates the perceptions of ESL students towards CT skills. The results are classified into two levels include high scores and low scores. The context of interpretation the problems which scored 4.10 (SD.0.677) is considered the highest mean score. It is showed the students' abilities to find out the key points of any problem faces them and being able to read between the lines which requires deep contextual comprehension. While the second highest score is the context which is dealt with analyzing the solution of the problem. It is scored 4.10 (0.741) which shows that EL students recognize the importance of analyzing the details of the problem by thinking critically and being accurate, consistent and logical in dealing with kind of a problem. The third highest score is 4.11(SD.665 ) which is applying the gained solution. It shows the students' perceptions about the necessity of continuous practicing so as to develop the logical thinking and find solutions for real life. When the students experience solving of more problems ,they can reach different approaches and different scenarios to understand the problem. The lowest scores are the evaluation of the gained solution and the reaching conclusions with supported evidence. These two contexts show that the students are in need to find the effective strategies that improve their critical skills in these levels on thinking.( See Table 1)

**Table 1 The Percentages, Mean and Standards Deviations of Critical Thinking Skills**

No	Contexts	Percentage	Mean	SD.	Level
1.	Interpretation the problems	25%	4.15	0.677	High
2.	Analyzing the solution of the problem	15%	4.10	0.741	High
3.	Applying the gained solution	35 %	4.11	0.665	High
4.	Evaluating the gained solution	15%	3.86	0.496	Low
5.	Concluding the results attached with supportive evidence	10%	3.20	0.433	Low

### **3.2.2 The Results of EL Instructors' Interview**

The researcher has prepared certain questions so as to be included in the interviews that have been done with a group that includes six EL instructors who are specialized in teaching modules that require promoting critical thinking skills such as EL communication, writing essay and . The sample includes 8 instructors who are MA and PHD holders and specialized in English Language Linguistics with more than five years of teaching university level students. The interview includes questions that are related to EL instructors' being familiar with using specific strategies that enhance the students' critical thinking skills and if the critical thinking present in their classes , their techniques in asking the questions that require students to evaluate options and make decisions, the techniques that are used to assess the improvement of the students' critical thinking skills and if they believe that critical thinking is important in the process of language learning. Certain research results have been achieved in an interview with English language instructors, focused on certain aspects that belong to critical thinking strategies, techniques, and perceptions in the context of English as foreign language learning:

#### **1. Familiarity with Strategies to Enhance Critical thinking**

The results of the interviews showed that most of EL instructors pay attention and value

to the necessity of enhancing the critical thinking skills in language learning situations. EL instructors who have trained on different pedagogical methods or critical thinking frameworks try to integrate strategies such as Socratic questioning, problem-solving tasks, and debates into their lessons. But generally most of the instructors believe that they are in need for additional professional development to deepen their understanding and application of these strategies effectively.

## **2. Presence of Critical Thinking in Classes**

Most of the instructors try to engage their students in certain critical thinking activities such as analyzing literary texts so as to reach certain perspectives, making the students to engage in discussions that require them to defend their viewpoints effectively and presenting open-ended questions regularly during reading and writing exercises. But most of the instructors report that the application of such activities has limitation due to certain reasons such as the duration of the lesson and curriculum demands.

## **3. Techniques in Questioning for Evaluation and Decision-Making**

EL instructors depend on many questioning techniques that facilitate evaluation and decision-making process among students. Techniques such as asking students to compare and contrast ideas or concepts so as to reach their own perceptions, encouraging the students to support their answers and opinions with evidence. Most of the instructors agree that asking layered questions, which increases the students' engagement with a topic, is one of the effective techniques that should be present in the class.

## **4. Assessing Improvement in Critical Thinking Skills**

Most of the instructors depend on one of the main assessment methods for evaluating students' critical thinking skills which is group projects that requires collaborative problem-solving and presentation. They believe that this method is practical since they prepare rubrics for each student in these groups which makes the assessment process to be totally objective.

## **5. Perception of Critical Thinking's Importance in Language Learning**

A majority of instructors believe that critical thinking is a basic for effective language learning. They argue that it not only enhances linguistic competence but also improves their linguistic performance and equips the students to engage more meaningfully with authentic texts and real-world communication scenarios. Some instructors emphasize that critical thinking promotes deeper comprehension and allows students to express themselves more actively.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

English Language university instructors are required to enhance their students' critical thinking ability in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Also it is vital for developing students' linguistic proficiency and equipping them with skills to improve their academic achievements. The combination of critical thinking strategies such as problem-solving activities, inquiry-based learning, collaborative discussions, and authentic material integration with the regular daily teaching activities, the educators can foster a classroom environment that encourages analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Moreover, embedding reflective practices and encouraging open-mindedness can deepen EL students' engagement with the language and improve both their linguistic and cognitive growth.

Ultimately, the combination of well-designed instructional strategies, appropriate teaching practices, and a supportive learning atmosphere empowers students to think

critically and apply their skills meaningfully in academic and real-world scenarios. As educators, prioritizing these approaches not only enhances language acquisition but also prepares the students for lifelong success in their career as critical thinkers and even in their social life.

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