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Developing Critical Thinking Through English Language Teaching: Approaches and Challenges

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Abstract

The development of critical thinking has become a key objective in modern education, particularly in the context of English language teaching. Learning English today is no longer limited to mastering grammar and vocabulary; it also involves analyzing information, evaluating ideas, expressing personal opinions, and solving problems through language. This article examines the role of English language teaching in fostering critical thinking skills and explores the main challenges faced by teachers and learners. It discusses practical approaches that integrate critical thinking into reading, writing, speaking, and classroom interaction. The article emphasizes learner-centred methods, authentic materials, and technology-enhanced activities as effective tools for developing analytical and reflective skills. Based on teaching experience and contemporary educational perspectives, the article argues that English lessons can serve as a powerful platform for cultivating critical thinkers prepared for academic and professional communication.

Keywords

critical thinking; English language teaching; learner-centred approach; problem-solving skills; higher education; classroom interaction; educational technology

Introduction

In the modern educational context, the ability to think critically has become as important as linguistic competence. Students are expected not only to understand information but also to analyse, interpret, evaluate, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. English language teaching plays a significant role in this process, as language learning naturally involves interpretation, argumentation, and reflection. However, traditional approaches to English teaching often prioritize memorization and accuracy over independent thinking and meaningful communication.



The growing demand for graduates who can think critically, express ideas clearly, and participate actively in academic and professional discussions has led to a shift towards more learner-centred and interactive teaching approaches. English classrooms provide an ideal environment for developing these skills through discussion, debate, problem-solving tasks, and analytical reading and writing activities. Despite this potential, many teachers face challenges in integrating critical thinking into language instruction, including time constraints, rigid curricula, and students' limited experience with analytical learning. This article explores both the challenges and effective approaches to developing critical thinking through English language teaching.

Main Part

Critical thinking in English language teaching refers to the ability of learners to question information, analyse texts, compare viewpoints, justify opinions, and draw logical conclusions using the target language. One of the main challenges in developing these skills is students' reliance on passive learning habits. Many learners are accustomed to receiving ready-made answers rather than exploring ideas independently. This becomes particularly evident in reading and writing tasks, where students often focus on finding correct answers instead of interpreting meaning or evaluating arguments.

Reading activities offer significant opportunities for fostering critical thinking when approached strategically. Rather than limiting reading lessons to comprehension questions, teachers can encourage learners to analyse the author's purpose, identify bias, distinguish facts from opinions, and relate texts to real-life situations. Using authentic materials such as articles, opinion pieces, and online content helps students engage with contemporary issues and diverse perspectives. In my teaching practice, students demonstrate higher engagement when they are asked to express agreement or disagreement with ideas in a text and support their opinions with evidence.

Writing instruction also plays a crucial role in developing critical thinking. Traditional writing tasks that focus solely on grammar and structure often fail to stimulate analytical thinking. In contrast, tasks such as argumentative essays, reflective journals, and problem-based writing encourage students to organize ideas logically, evaluate information, and present coherent arguments. Providing clear writing frameworks and guiding questions supports learners in expressing complex ideas while gradually developing independence. Peer feedback activities further enhance critical thinking, as students learn to evaluate others' work and reflect on their own writing.

Speaking and classroom interaction are equally important in cultivating critical thinking skills. Discussions, debates, and role-plays allow learners to articulate opinions, respond to alternative viewpoints, and defend arguments in real time. These activities help students develop confidence and flexibility in language use. However, one challenge is that learners may feel hesitant to express opinions due to fear of making mistakes. Creating a supportive



classroom atmosphere where ideas are valued more than linguistic perfection is essential. Teachers should model respectful discussion and encourage students to ask questions and challenge ideas constructively.

Technology-enhanced learning provides additional opportunities for developing critical thinking in English classes. Online discussion forums, digital presentations, and collaborative platforms enable students to explore topics in depth and engage in reflective learning beyond the classroom. For example, students can analyse multimedia content, participate in online debates, or collaborate on research-based projects. Blended learning environments allow teachers to allocate classroom time for higher-order thinking activities while using online tools for preparation and reflection.

Despite these benefits, several challenges remain. Time limitations and exam-oriented curricula often restrict opportunities for extended discussion and analysis. Additionally, some students may lack sufficient language proficiency to express complex ideas. To address these issues, critical thinking tasks should be carefully scaffolded and integrated gradually into language instruction. Teachers play a key role in balancing linguistic support with cognitive challenge, ensuring that students are both linguistically and intellectually engaged.

Conclusion

Developing critical thinking through English language teaching is both a challenge and an opportunity. While traditional methods may limit students' analytical engagement, learner-centred approaches, authentic materials, and interactive tasks offer effective ways to foster higher-order thinking skills. Reading, writing, speaking, and technology-enhanced activities can all contribute to the development of critical thinkers who are capable of analyzing information, expressing informed opinions, and participating actively in academic and professional contexts. Classroom experience demonstrates that when students are encouraged to think critically, their motivation, confidence, and language proficiency improve significantly. Therefore, integrating critical thinking into English language teaching should be viewed as an essential component of modern education.

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