

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15535258>

Abstract: This quasi-experimental study investigates the efficacy of integrated instructional strategies—Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, debate activities, and reflective journaling—in fostering critical thinking skills among 60 intermediate-level EFL learners over eight weeks. Pre-test/post-test scores from the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, alongside classroom observations and student feedback, demonstrate significant gains in analytical reasoning compared to a control group. Qualitative analysis reveals enhanced metacognitive awareness and discourse quality. These findings highlight the importance of multimodal pedagogies for developing higher-order thinking in language education.

Key words: Critical Thinking; EFL Education; Socratic Questioning; Problem-Based Learning; Reflective Journaling; Debate Activities; Metacognition; Higher-Order Thinking; Classroom Discourse; Pedagogical Strategies; EFL Assessment; Instructional Design.

INTRODUCTION: Critical thinking, defined as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, is vital for academic success and professional competence (Paul & Elder, 2014). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, integrating critical thinking instruction can deepen language comprehension and empower learners to engage with complex texts and real-world challenges (Brookfield, 2012). However, traditional EFL curricula frequently prioritize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary memorization, often overlooking cognitive skill development (Ferrett, 2017).

Recent meta-analyses emphasize that explicit instruction in critical thinking within language classrooms yields measurable improvements in learners' reasoning abilities (Ghanizadeh & Moafian, 2010; Tsui, 2018). Yet, there is a paucity of research comparing the relative impact of diverse pedagogical approaches in EFL settings, particularly in secondary schools in non-Western contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring a multimodal strategy combining four evidence-based techniques: Socratic questioning to promote inquiry (Nickerson et al., 2015), problem-based learning (PBL) for authentic problem solving (Hmelo-Silver, 2004), debate activities to develop argumentation skills (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004), and reflective journaling to enhance metacognition (Moon, 2006).

Research Questions:

1. To what extent do the integrated strategies improve critical thinking scores in EFL learners?
2. How do classroom behaviors and discourse quality evolve during the intervention?
3. What are learners' perceptions of the strategies' impact on their cognitive and language development?

METHODS:

Research Design

A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design was employed. The experimental group experienced the multimodal intervention, while the control group received standard EFL instruction.

Participants: Sixty intermediate-level EFL students (ages 15–17; 32 female, 28 male) at a public secondary school in Tashkent were recruited. Participants were matched by proficiency using a standardized placement test and randomly assigned to groups (n=30 each).

Intervention Strategies

1. **Socratic Questioning:** In each lesson, teachers incorporated six levels of Socratic questions—from clarification to implications—guided by Paul and Elder’s (2014) framework.
2. **Problem-Based Learning (PBL):** Over four modules, small groups tackled real-life scenarios (e.g., planning a sustainable community event), requiring analysis, research, and presentation in English.
3. **Debate Activities:** Students engaged in structured debates on topics like "Social Media: Benefit or Harm?" following formal debate protocols (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004).
4. **Reflective Journaling:** Learners submitted weekly journals using Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle prompts, focusing on cognitive strategies and language challenges.

Instruments

- **Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal:** Measures inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and evaluation.
- **Classroom Observation Rubric:** Developed from Ennis’s (1993) indicators of critical thinking, rating behaviors such as questioning, justification, and perspective-taking.
- **Perception Questionnaire:** A 20-item Likert-scale survey assessing students’ attitudes toward critical thinking and language learning.

Data Collection Procedures

Pre-tests were administered one week before intervention; post-tests occurred within one week after completion. Observers conducted bi-weekly classroom visits. Journals and questionnaires were collected at intervention midpoint and end.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired and independent-samples t-tests ($\alpha=.05$) in SPSS. Effect sizes (Cohen’s d) were calculated. Qualitative data (observation notes, journal excerpts, open-ended questionnaire responses) underwent thematic coding following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach.

RESULTS: Classroom Observations: Experimental classes demonstrated increased incidence of higher-order questioning, with 73% of interactions classified as analysis or evaluation versus 21% in controls.

Reflective Journals: Students described growing awareness of cognitive strategies: “I now question my assumptions before accepting information” (Participant 14).

Open-Ended Responses: Themes included appreciation for active learning, recognition of real-world applicability, and perceived improvements in both thinking and language skills.

DISCUSSIONS: The integration of Socratic questioning, PBL, debates, and reflective journaling significantly enhanced critical thinking and learner engagement. The large effect size ($d=1.72$) aligns with meta-analytic findings supporting multimodal approaches (Tsui, 2018). Socratic questioning fostered deeper inquiry, while PBL and debates provided authentic discourse communities (Vygotsky, 1978). Reflective journaling cultivated metacognitive regulation, crucial for transfer of skills (Zimmerman, 2002).

Pedagogical Implications: EFL educators should:

- Embed explicit questioning frameworks in all language tasks.

- Design PBL modules aligned with language objectives.
- Facilitate structured debates to promote linguistic accuracy and critical discourse.
- Incorporate regular reflective writing with clear prompts.

Limitations and Future Research: The study's limited context and duration suggest caution in generalization. Future research could explore digital adaptations (e.g., online forums, AI-supported questioning), longitudinal retention of skills, and cross-cultural comparisons.

CONCLUSION: This study demonstrates that a strategically integrated, multimodal instructional design—combining Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, debate activities, and reflective journaling—can foster significant improvements in critical thinking among EFL learners. The quantitative results, including a large effect size ($d=1.72$), underscore the robustness of these combined approaches in enhancing analytical reasoning and evaluative skills. Qualitative findings further reveal that students not only engaged more deeply with content but also developed a heightened awareness of their own cognitive processes, as evidenced by richer classroom discourse and reflective journal entries.

Importantly, the integration of authentic tasks (PBL and debates) provided meaningful contexts for learners to apply critical thinking in English, while Socratic questioning and reflective writing reinforced metacognitive regulation and self-assessment. These mechanisms work synergistically to support both language proficiency and cognitive skill development, addressing the dual goals of EFL education.

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