

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN IMRAD-BASED THEORETICAL STUDY

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Abstract. *This article examines the theoretical and methodological foundations of developing students' critical thinking competence in modern English language teaching. The study is based on the premise that contemporary English lessons should not be limited to the transmission of vocabulary, grammar, and reproductive speech patterns, but should also form learners who can analyze information, evaluate evidence, justify decisions, cooperate with peers, and reflect on their own learning. The purpose of the paper is to systematize activity-based, systematic, and eclectic approaches and to show how they can be integrated in the design of English language instruction for senior secondary students. The research uses theoretical analysis, comparative interpretation, and methodological modeling of classroom practice. The results demonstrate that critical thinking competence develops most effectively when students are placed in meaningful communicative situations, work with authentic materials, solve problems, participate in debates and projects, and complete reflective writing tasks. The proposed model connects lesson goals, content, methods, tools, assessment, and learning outcomes into a unified didactic system. The study concludes that English language teaching can become a strong medium for intellectual development when active learning, systematic planning, and flexible methodological selection are combined.*

Keywords: *critical thinking; English language teaching methodology; activity-based approach; systematic approach; eclectic approach; communicative competence; critical reading; reflective writing; authentic materials; problem-based learning.*

Introduction

Developing students' critical thinking competence is one of the central didactic tasks of modern English language teaching methodology. In the conditions of globalization, digital communication, and intensive information exchange, learners are expected not only to understand English texts and produce grammatically correct speech, but also to interpret meanings, compare viewpoints, identify reliable evidence, and express independent positions. Therefore, critical thinking should be considered an integral part of communicative competence rather than an additional or optional skill. This position corresponds to the broader competence-oriented direction of contemporary education, where learning outcomes are connected with the ability to apply knowledge in complex social and academic situations [7; 9].

Critical thinking competence may be defined as a learner's ability to ask purposeful questions, analyze assumptions, distinguish fact from opinion, evaluate arguments, formulate conclusions, and reflect on the consequences of decisions. In English classes, these abilities are developed through language use: reading authentic texts, discussing controversial issues, solving situational tasks, participating in debates, preparing projects, and writing reflective essays. The linguistic and cognitive aspects of learning are therefore interconnected. When a student explains

a reason, challenges a claim, or compares evidence in English, language practice becomes a form of thinking practice.

The theoretical basis of this problem is connected with the works of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, V.V. Davydov, and S.L. Rubinstein, who argued that development takes place through activity, social interaction, and purposeful cognitive actions [1-4]. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is especially significant because it explains how cooperation with teachers and peers helps learners perform intellectual operations that would be difficult to complete independently [1]. In language learning, this means that pair work, group problem solving, and guided discussion are not merely organizational techniques; they are mechanisms of cognitive growth.

At the same time, English lessons require systematic planning. If the goal is critical thinking, then lesson content, materials, methods, assessment criteria, and expected outcomes must be coordinated. A random debate or occasional project cannot guarantee stable competence formation. The systematic approach makes it possible to organize the educational process as an integral didactic structure [5; 6]. The eclectic approach complements this structure by allowing teachers to combine communicative language teaching, task-based learning, problem-based learning, critical reading, digital tools, and reflective writing according to students' needs and classroom conditions [7-9]. Thus, the research problem addressed in this paper is how these three approaches can be integrated to develop critical thinking competence in English language teaching.

For senior secondary students, the issue is particularly relevant because this age group is preparing for higher education, professional choice, and participation in public communication. They are able to work with abstract concepts, compare cultural perspectives, and discuss social problems, but they still need carefully designed pedagogical support. English lessons can provide this support through a gradual movement from guided comprehension to independent argumentation. In this sense, the teacher's task is to create a learning environment in which linguistic development and intellectual autonomy reinforce each other.

Materials and Methods

The study has a theoretical and methodological design. It does not report an experimental intervention with human participants; instead, it analyzes established psychological, pedagogical, and language-teaching theories and translates them into a practical model for English lessons. The material for analysis includes classical works on activity theory and developmental education, systems methodology, communicative and learner-centered language teaching, and contemporary literature on critical thinking, active learning, and task-based instruction [1-20].

The first method used in the study is theoretical analysis. This method was applied to identify the conceptual foundations of the activity-based approach. The views of Vygotsky, Leontiev, Davydov, and Rubinstein were examined to clarify how purposeful activity, social interaction, and conscious action support the development of thinking [1-4]. The second method is comparative analysis. It was used to compare the activity-based, systematic, and eclectic approaches and to determine their specific functions in English language teaching. The activity-based approach explains the learner's active role; the systematic approach explains the coherence of the educational process; and the eclectic approach explains methodological flexibility.

The third method is pedagogical generalization. On the basis of the analyzed literature, classroom practices such as debates, role-plays, case studies, project work, authentic text analysis, and reflective writing were grouped according to the components of critical thinking competence.

Finally, methodological modeling was used to construct an instructional cycle that can be applied in English lessons. The model includes four interconnected stages: problem context, evidence analysis, communicative interaction, and reflection. These stages correspond to the movement from motivation and inquiry to interpretation, argumentation, and transfer of learning.

The proposed model was also evaluated for internal pedagogical logic. Each stage was checked against three criteria: whether it requires meaningful English use, whether it includes a higher-order thinking operation, and whether it produces observable evidence for assessment. This procedure made it possible to avoid treating critical thinking as an abstract slogan. Instead, the model links competence development with concrete classroom actions, learner products, and teacher feedback.

Table 1. Methodological approaches for developing critical thinking competence in English language teaching

Approach	Core pedagogical idea	Classroom implementation	Expected competence outcome
Activity-based approach	Knowledge is formed through purposeful cognitive and practical activity.	Debates, role-plays, case studies, problem-solving tasks, group projects and communicative situations.	Learners analyze, compare, argue, cooperate and apply English in meaningful contexts.
Systematic approach	Goals, content, methods, tools, assessment and outcomes function as one didactic system.	Coherent lesson planning with authentic texts, digital platforms, rubrics, reflection and progressive task stages.	Critical thinking is developed consistently through connected lesson components.
Eclectic approach	Effective elements of different methods are integrated according to learners' needs.	Combination of communicative language teaching, task-based learning, problem-based learning, critical reading and reflective writing.	Students develop flexible communicative, analytical, reflective and creative skills.

Results

The analysis shows that the integration of activity-based, systematic, and eclectic approaches creates a productive methodological foundation for developing students' critical thinking competence. The activity-based approach is essential because it transforms learners from passive recipients of information into active participants in cognitive and communicative activity. In the English classroom, this means that students do not simply repeat language patterns. They investigate a problem, search for evidence, formulate arguments, cooperate in groups, and produce

oral or written responses. Leontiev's idea that knowledge is formed through a system of goal-oriented actions is directly reflected in problem solving, role-play, and project work [2].

The systematic approach provides the internal organization of the lesson. According to this approach, the goal, content, methods, tools, assessment, and outcome of instruction should function as a coherent whole [5; 6]. For example, if the lesson topic is 'Global Warming', the goal may be to develop students' ability to analyze environmental causes and propose solutions in English. The content may include an authentic article, an infographic, and short statistical information. The methods may include critical reading, group discussion, debate, and reflective writing. The tools may include multimedia, digital dictionaries, collaborative documents, and assessment rubrics. The expected outcome is not only knowledge of vocabulary on the environment but also the ability to evaluate causes, justify opinions, and communicate solutions.

The eclectic approach ensures that the teacher is not limited to one method. Critical thinking is a complex competence, and it cannot be formed through one teaching technique only. Communicative tasks develop interaction; task-based learning develops purposeful performance; problem-based learning develops inquiry; critical reading develops interpretation; and reflective writing develops self-assessment. Harmer, Nunan, and Richards emphasize that effective language teaching requires flexible selection of methods in accordance with learners' levels, objectives, and communicative needs [7-9]. The findings of the present analysis confirm that eclectic integration is especially appropriate for senior secondary students, because they can work with more complex texts, social topics, and argumentative tasks.

Table 1 summarizes the functions of the three methodological approaches. It demonstrates that each approach has a distinct role, but the greatest pedagogical effect appears when they operate together. Activity makes learning meaningful, system makes it coherent, and eclecticism makes it adaptable.

Integrated methodological model for developing critical thinking in ELT

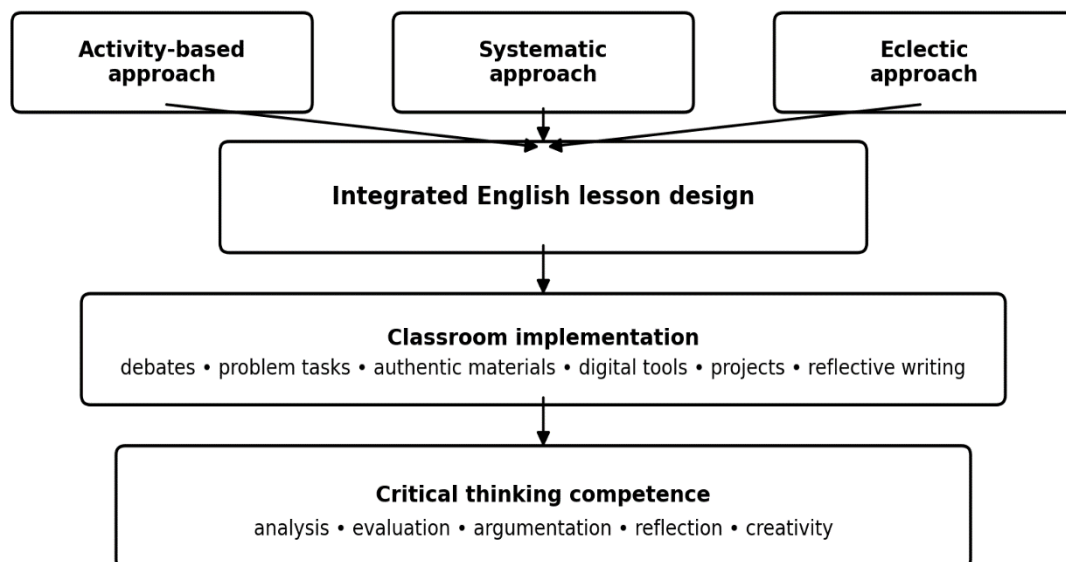


Figure 1. Integrated methodological model for developing critical thinking competence in English language teaching

The model also shows that critical thinking competence includes at least four interrelated components: analytical, evaluative, argumentative, and reflective. The analytical component is formed when learners identify main ideas, compare facts, classify information, and recognize relationships. The evaluative component develops when students judge the reliability of sources, assess the strength of evidence, and distinguish fact from opinion. The argumentative component is expressed when learners support claims with reasons, respond to opposing views, and use persuasive language. The reflective component appears when students evaluate their own learning process and transfer conclusions to new situations.

Authentic materials were found to be particularly valuable for competence development. Unlike simplified textbook passages, authentic articles, interviews, infographics, advertisements, podcasts, and digital media texts expose learners to real communicative purposes and diverse perspectives. Such materials make it possible to ask higher-order questions: What is the author's intention? What evidence is used? What information is missing? Is the conclusion justified? These questions correspond to the cognitive levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in Bloom's taxonomy [11].

Digital technologies extend these opportunities when they are used with a clear methodological purpose. Online articles, video fragments, electronic corpora, shared documents, and learning platforms can help students collect evidence, compare viewpoints, and present conclusions. At the same time, digital resources require media literacy. Students should learn to check authorship, publication context, bias, and the difference between evidence and emotional persuasion. For this reason, digital tasks should be accompanied by guiding questions and transparent criteria.

Discussion

The results indicate that critical thinking in English language teaching should be understood as both a cognitive and a communicative phenomenon. A learner cannot demonstrate critical thinking in a foreign language without adequate linguistic resources, but language resources alone do not guarantee critical thinking. For this reason, teachers need to design tasks in which language form and intellectual operation are combined. For example, a debate requires modal verbs, linking words, persuasive vocabulary, and pronunciation skills, but it also requires evidence, logical order, and respectful disagreement. A reflective essay requires grammar and paragraph structure, but it also requires self-analysis and conclusion.

The pedagogical value of the proposed model lies in its staged organization. At the problem-context stage, the teacher introduces a meaningful question or situation that creates motivation. At the evidence-analysis stage, students examine texts, data, or media sources and identify relevant information. At the communicative-interaction stage, they discuss, negotiate meaning, debate, or present solutions. At the reflection-and-transfer stage, learners write reflections, evaluate their arguments, and connect the lesson to real-life communication. Figure 2 presents this cycle visually.

Interactive methods are effective because they make students responsible for meaning. In a case study, students must understand a situation and decide what should be done. In a role-play, they must consider the position of another person and choose appropriate language. In a project, they must collect information, organize it, and present a product. In a debate, they must anticipate counterarguments and defend their position. These tasks correspond to the principles of active learning, which emphasize student participation, cooperation, and higher-order thinking [18; 19].

Instructional cycle for developing critical thinking in ELT

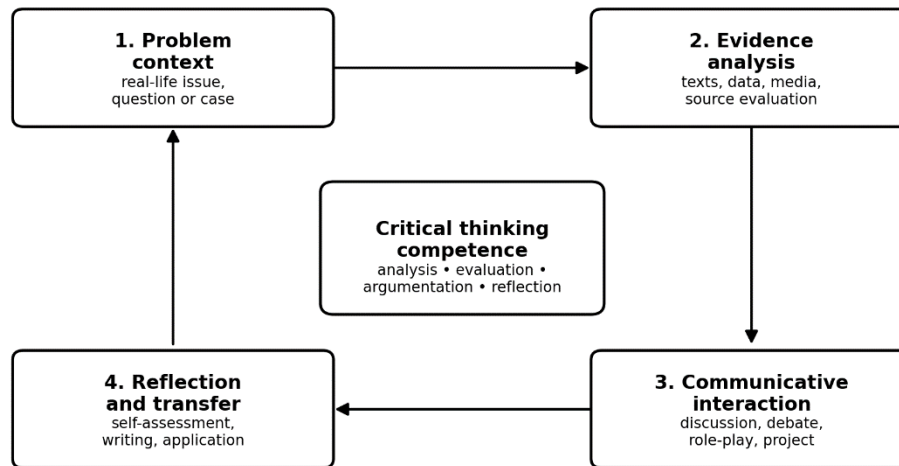


Figure 2. Instructional cycle for developing critical thinking competence in English language teaching

Assessment is also a decisive factor. If teachers evaluate only grammar accuracy and vocabulary recall, students may not recognize critical thinking as a learning objective. Therefore, assessment criteria should include analysis of information, quality of evidence, logical argumentation, creativity of solutions, cooperation, and reflection. Table 2 offers a practical assessment matrix that can be adapted for speaking, writing, project, and reading tasks. The matrix does not replace language assessment; rather, it broadens it by adding cognitive and reflective indicators.

Table 2. Assessment matrix for critical thinking competence in English language classes

Component	Observable indicator	Suggested classroom evidence	Assessment focus
Analysis	Identifies main ideas, causes, relations and implicit meanings.	Critical reading notes, text questions, graphic organizers.	Accuracy and depth of interpretation.
Evaluation	Judges evidence, source reliability and strength of arguments.	Source comparison, media analysis, evidence ranking.	Use of criteria and justified judgment.
Argumentation	Builds claims, supports them with reasons and answers counterclaims.	Debate speech, persuasive paragraph, oral presentation.	Logic, coherence and evidence-based support.

Reflection	Explains learning progress, difficulties and changed viewpoints.	Learning journal, reflective essay, self-assessment checklist.	Awareness, honesty and transfer of learning.
Language use	Uses English accurately and appropriately for critical interaction.	Discussion, project defense, written response.	Clarity, vocabulary range and communicative effectiveness.

The model has practical implications for 10th-11th grade English classes. Teachers can start with short critical reading tasks and gradually move to debates, projects, and independent reflective writing. Scaffolding is important: students need language frames for agreement, disagreement, cause and effect, comparison, and conclusion. Digital tools can support the process by providing access to multimedia input, collaborative documents, online surveys, and presentation platforms. However, technology should serve the didactic purpose. It becomes useful only when it helps students analyze, communicate, and reflect rather than merely consume information.

The teacher's role remains central throughout the cycle. Critical thinking cannot be imposed by simply assigning difficult texts; it requires scaffolding, feedback, and a classroom culture in which questions are welcomed. Teachers can model the process by thinking aloud, demonstrating how to verify a claim, and showing how to reformulate a weak argument into a stronger one. They should also normalize respectful disagreement, because students often need explicit language for challenging an opinion politely. In this way, the English classroom becomes a dialogic space where intellectual confidence and communicative competence develop together.

There are also limitations. Since this article is theoretical, the proposed model requires future empirical testing in real classrooms. Further research may examine how the model influences students' speaking fluency, written argumentation, reading comprehension, and motivation. It would also be useful to develop rubrics, lesson plans, and diagnostic tasks for different proficiency levels. Nevertheless, the theoretical synthesis demonstrates that critical thinking competence can be deliberately and systematically formed through English language education.

Conclusion

The study confirms that the development of students' critical thinking competence is an essential direction of modern English language teaching methodology. English lessons should not be limited to linguistic reproduction; they should create conditions for analysis, evaluation, argumentation, creativity, cooperation, and reflection. The integration of activity-based, systematic, and eclectic approaches offers a strong theoretical and methodological basis for this purpose.

The activity-based approach ensures that students learn through purposeful communicative and cognitive actions. The systematic approach connects lesson goals, content, methods, tools, assessment, and outcomes into a unified didactic system. The eclectic approach allows teachers to combine effective methods according to learners' needs and the requirements of a specific lesson. Together, these approaches help form learners who are communicatively competent, intellectually independent, and ready to use English as a means of critical inquiry.

Problem-based tasks, authentic materials, debates, case studies, project work, digital tools, critical reading, and reflective writing should therefore occupy a regular place in English language instruction. When these methods are planned coherently and assessed appropriately, English classes become not only a space for language acquisition but also a medium for developing mature, reflective, and socially active individuals.

For practice, the most important implication is that critical thinking should be planned as a continuous learning outcome, not as an isolated activity at the end of a unit. Each lesson can contain at least one question, one evidence-based task, and one reflective product that moves students toward independent judgment.

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