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Unleashing Minds: Innovative Strategies to Foster Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Learners

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Abstract

The landscape of English language teaching has evolved, focusing on developing critical and creative thinking skills among learners and educators. Despite numerous efforts, no single method has emerged as universally superior for fostering critical thinking, though some strategies prove more effective. This study examines instructional strategies that enhance critical thinking in EFL/ESL classrooms using document analysis. Strategies investigated include explicit instruction, teacher questioning, group discussions, reciprocal peer questioning, case-based learning, Socratic seminars, project-based learning, metacognitive strategies, problem-based learning (PBL), debate, reflective journals, inquiry-based learning, visual thinking strategies, role-playing, and collaborative problem-solving. Findings highlight explicit instruction as particularly effective, improving students' metacognition and analytical skills. Teacher questioning techniques engage students in deeper analysis and inference, while group discussions and peer questioning facilitate collaborative critical analysis. PBL and debate further enhance problem-solving and reasoning abilities. Reflective journals and inquiry-based learning promote self-reflection and analytical thinking. Acknowledging instructional variability as a limitation, this study suggests integrating these strategies into teacher training and curriculum development. This research suggests that diverse critical thinking strategies can enrich EFL/ESL learning environments and foster essential skills for complex problem-solving.

Keywords: critical thinking, English language teaching, EFL classroom, growth mindset, instructional strategies

Introduction

The contemporary status of the English language has markedly diverged from its historical context. English has ascended to a global language, permeating nearly every domain of knowledge. As Crystal (2003) asserts that English has attained a unique status recognized universally. To make sense of the growing amount of information that comes in English every day, one must cultivate critical thinking skills. In this context, the crucial need to integrate critical thinking (CT) development into English language curricula has been emphasized (Sun, 2015; Tang, 2016). Proficiency in English now requires the ability to interpret texts

beyond their literal meanings, empowering learners to articulate their ideas with sound reasoning and to critically evaluate the arguments of others. It has been argued that mere linguistic proficiency is insufficient; a skilled learner must demonstrate critical thinking (CT) through their language use (Kabilan, 2000, as cited in Zhao et al., 2016). Thinking critically can enhance creativity and time management which involves logical and probabilistic thinking applied to real-life, context-dependent problems. Critical thinking also leads to a deeper self-understanding, allowing a person to be objective, less emotional, and more open-minded towards others' views (Facione, 2013; Ruggiero, 2012; Roth, 2012). By anticipating future challenges, one will gain confidence to present new perspectives and insights into complex issues. CT enables learners to assess existing ideas, concepts, and viewpoints impartially and logically, thereby enriching their learning experiences and making their education more profound, meaningful, and enduring.

Despite the acknowledged importance of cultivating critical thinkers, there is ongoing debate about the feasibility of teaching CT in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. Atkinson (1997) questions the practicality of imparting CT to EFL learners, considering it a "social practice"(as cited in Zhao et al., p. 14). Contrarily, research by Liu and Guo (2006) suggests that EFL learners can develop critical abilities with appropriate guidance and training. Atkinson's (1997) skepticism has prompted educators to be more mindful of their instructional strategies for fostering CT in EFL/ESL environments. Critical thinking skills are essential for a knowledge-based economy (Jones & Pimdee, 2017). Wallace and Jefferson (2013) found that college education develops critical thinking, which leads to higher-order thinking. Research indicates that critical thinking is crucial for college and career readiness (Kraisuth & Panjakajornsak, 2017; Costa & Kallick, 2014). Additionally, developing critical thinking is vital for individuals to fully understand and solve problems (Benavides-Caruajulca, 2021).

Integrating collaborative learning plays a crucial role in promoting critical thinking, as students work together to explore different perspectives and develop reasoning skills. However, Yazidi (2023) highlights the need for further research to evaluate its effectiveness across diverse educational contexts, as outcomes may vary depending on factors like culture, curriculum, and teaching methods. In contrast, many traditional classrooms still rely heavily on rote memorization and standardized testing, limiting opportunities for students to cultivate these skills (Facione, 2020). Moreover, the absence of metacognitive skills, which are essential for effective critical thinking, remains a common barrier for many learners (Halpern, 2014). Nonetheless, fostering critical thinking in the classroom yields significant benefits. It not only enhances students' academic performance but also better equips them to meet career demands, make well-informed decisions, and engage in more stimulating and meaningful learning experiences (Abrami et al., 2008; Ennis, 2011; Halpern, 2014; Choy & Cheah, 2009; Yazidi, 2023). Together, these insights underscore the value of diverse instructional strategies and the potential impact of critical thinking skills on students' academic and personal growth.

Given the globalization of English, the demand for proficiency in both communicative skills and critical literacy has intensified within diverse linguistic and cultural settings. However, fostering critical thinking (CT) in EFL and ESL contexts remains challenging due

to differing cultural expectations, instructional practices, and learning goals. This necessitates the adoption of targeted instructional strategies that not only enhance students' critical and analytical skills but also promote engagement with diverse cultural perspectives. Such strategies hold the potential to empower learners to question and navigate dominant cultural narratives embedded in English language curricula. This review study aims to explore instructional strategies effective in developing CT skills among EFL and ESL learners. By addressing challenges and solutions from existing literature, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on teaching CT across varied linguistic contexts. Its findings may inform curriculum development, teaching practices, and educational policies, offering a framework for more meaningful and globally responsive English language instruction.

Literature Review

Critical thinking is a multifaceted cognitive process that involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information to make reasoned judgments. Mick (2001) observes that critical thinking is a trendy buzzword these days, which educators will refuse to acknowledge that they are not teaching critical thinking? They all know that's what they should be doing, so they'll all claim that they are, however, it is simply untrue (as quoted in Hofreter, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, Leticia (2003) states, "Teachers wait a long time before they tell you, you can use your own brain" (as quoted in Hofreter, 2005, p. 1). Critical thinking is a complex cognitive process involving analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information to make reasoned decisions (Facione, 2020). It is essential for success in education, the workplace, and personal decision-making. These perspectives illustrate the vague, subjective, and complex nature of defining critical thinking. Sternberg (1986) offers a psychological perspective, defining CT as "the mental processes, strategies and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions and learn new concepts" (p. 3). This interpretation underscores how critical thinkers operate within personal and situational constraints.

The tradition of teaching to improve thinking dates back to Greek philosophy and was notably advanced by Dewey, later refined by Bloomfield in the 1950s, and gained prominence in the 1990s (Giancarlo & Facione, 2001). John Dewey, widely regarded as the father of modern critical thinking, described it as reflective thinking. He defined reflective thinking as the continuous, deliberate, and thoughtful examination of a belief or supposed knowledge, assessing the reasons that support it and the additional conclusions it leads to (Dewey, 1910). Dewey emphasized that critical thinking is an active process where learners engage with ideas, raise questions, seek relevant information, and draw conclusions from sufficient evidence and arguments. Ennis (2007) concurred, describing CT as "reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 44). Ennis (2007) further clarified that CT involves making decisions and developing decision-making power.

The concept of critical thinking gained traction in the 1970s, initially linked to problem-solving. Hofreiter (2005) notes that the 1977 Tbilisi Declaration highlighted the importance of preparing students to tackle complex social and environmental issues through critical thinking skills. UNESCO (n. d.) observed that many universities and state education departments began incorporating critical thinking objectives into their curricula in the 1980s, sparking debates on the definition and assessment of CT. Dewey's reflective thinking was further developed in pedagogy by Freire (1968), who, in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2010, p. 1), advocated for an education that prompts students to

examine their relationships with the world. Freire (1993) argued that education should involve open dialogue and transformation, rejecting the traditional "deposit making" approach in favor of a process where students and teachers engage critically with each other and the world (as quoted in Hofreiter, 2005, p. 7). Freire's definition emphasizes the importance of multiple realities, subjective knowledge, and value-laden pedagogy. Critical thinking, or critical pedagogy, focuses on the relationship between teachers and students and the transformative, participatory, negotiated, and subjective nature of education. Critical Pedagogy (CP), which Freire (1968) contrasts with Mainstream Pedagogy (MP), has specific principles. Canagarajah (1999) contrasts Critical Pedagogy (CP) and Mainstream Pedagogy (MP). CP sees learning as personal and influenced by individual backgrounds, while MP views it as a detached cognitive process. CP argues that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent, whereas MP considers it universally true and impartial. CP also holds that knowledge is ideological and value-laden, unlike MP, which treats it as objective and value-free. Additionally, CP believes learning results from constant negotiation and is politically shaped, whereas MP sees it as transferring established facts and being autonomous and pragmatic.

Critical pedagogy, synonymous with critical thinking, requires teachers and students to engage critically with texts and ideas, developing their thoughts through argumentation, logic, and evidence. Facione (1990) described CT as "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual consideration upon which that judgment is based" (p.2). Critical thinkers possess skills to recognize problems, gather relevant information, interpret data, evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, and make judgments, as noted by Glaser (1941, as cited in Fisher, 2011, p. 7). Hargreaves and Grenfell (2003) emphasized the importance of skills like designing experiments, testing hypotheses, analyzing arguments, solving problems, and thinking creatively for developing critical capabilities. Onions (2009) argued that critical thinking begins with a mindset, requiring mental capabilities such as; thinking from any perspective, readiness to explore new ideas or conclusions, willingness to engage with different viewpoints, relating personal viewpoints to arguments, building supportable interpretations, and recognizing discourse reflects the author's argument and perspective.

Critical thinkers must be aware of cultural, contextual, and content differences. They need analytical judgment skills, adopting reflective, reflexive, questioning, dialogic, and comparative analytical skills (Clark, 2008; Paul, 1990; as cited in Onions, 2009, p. 2). Onions (2009, pp. 2-3) identified three critical thinking strategies: non-critical thinking, weakly critical thinking, and strongly critical thinking. Non-critical thinking involves describing facts without context. Weakly critical thinking involves analyzing situations and forming conclusions. Strongly critical thinking treats claims as subjective and value-laden, recognizing multiple realities. Chaiyasut et al. (2014) highlighted that critical thinking is one of the 13 lifelong learning indicators essential for Thai students' technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Similarly, the European Union (2015) emphasized the need for high-quality knowledge, skills, and competences through lifelong learning to enhance employability, innovation, active citizenship, and well-being. Both sources stress the importance of critical thinking in lifelong learning, yet the European Union focuses more broadly on societal benefits.

On the other hand, Costa and Kallick (2014) explored critical thinking's definition and the barriers to its widespread adoption in 21st-century classrooms, concluding that critical thinking is a mental process requiring individuals to conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. Unlike Chaiyasut et al. and the European Union, Costa and Kallick (2014) emphasized the cognitive processes involved in critical thinking rather than its societal implications. Moreover, Taylor (2012) argued that critical thinking strategies prepare students for university life and equip them with skills needed for global economic competition. While Taylor aligns with Costa and Kallick in recognizing the individual benefits of critical thinking, Taylor specifically highlights the practical applications for higher education and economic competitiveness. Furthermore, Paul and Elder (2014a) stated that critical thinkers must be clear, accurate, logical, and fair, applying these skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This perspective complements Taylor's by detailing the attributes critical thinkers need to succeed academically and professionally. However, Mendelman (2007) warned that children increasingly engage in passive activities like TV and video games, making the teaching of critical thinking a crucial and challenging task for educators. In contrast to the other authors who focus on the benefits and processes of critical thinking, Mendelman underscores the growing challenge of fostering these skills in a digitally distracted generation.

Studies indicate that students with strong critical thinking skills tend to perform better academically, as they engage deeply with content, which enhances retention and understanding (Abrami et al., 2008). Critical thinking also fosters essential skills for real-world problem-solving, such as analytical thinking, creativity, and the ability to evaluate solutions, which are invaluable in both personal and professional contexts (Facione, 2020). Additionally, critical thinking promotes independent and lifelong learning by encouraging students to question assumptions, analyze information, and draw their own conclusions (Halpern, 2014). A study by Saleh et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and academic achievement in nursing students, recommending workshops to develop these skills.

Furthermore, critical thinking supports informed decision-making by analyzing evidence and weighing different perspectives (Orhan, 2022). Orhan’s (2022) study found that critical thinking dispositions predicted students' perceived problem-solving skills. Additionally, critical thinking enhances communication by encouraging clear expression and consideration of diverse viewpoints (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012), benefiting students in various contexts. For teachers, critical thinking fosters innovation and creativity in lesson planning, improves assessment methods, and helps identify areas where students need further support (Paul, 2005; Andania, 2021). This emphasizes the importance of integrating critical thinking into both teaching and learning processes.

However, there are challenges to integrating critical thinking into education. Assessing critical thinking is often subjective and difficult, as traditional testing may not effectively measure these skills (Bailin et al., 1999). Furthermore, implementing critical thinking strategies can be resource-intensive and time-consuming, with teachers facing constraints such as insufficient training and large class sizes (Kuhn, 1999). Cultural and contextual factors may also limit the effectiveness of critical thinking strategies, especially in educational systems that prioritize rote learning (Tsui, 2002).

From the aforementioned literature, it is evident that critical thinking is a complex activity involving a mindset and a range of skills to draw conclusions or make decisions. It integrates arguments, logic, evidence, analysis, and various processes for problem-solving and decision-making. While these reviewed literatures have highlighted the importance of CT in language learning and questioned its teachability, there remains a gap in comprehensive research that offers practical, evidence-based instructional strategies for EFL and ESL educators. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing actionable insights and strategies that can be implemented in language classrooms worldwide.

Methods and Procedures

This study adopted a qualitative research methods utilizing document analysis as the primary research design. Document analysis is a systematic method for reviewing and interpreting various sources, such as books, academic journal articles, policy documents, and reports, to identify trends, patterns, and themes related to a specific topic (Krippendorff, 1980; as cited in Al-Jardani, 2012). This approach was selected for its effectiveness in analyzing existing literature to explore instructional strategies that promote critical thinking in EFL/ESL classrooms. Data were collected through an extensive literature search across academic databases, including JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and university libraries, using keywords such as critical thinking, EFL/ESL instruction, instructional strategies, and teaching methods. Documents were selected based on their relevance, publication date, and credibility, with a focus on peer-reviewed sources and the context and theme of the content. The data were analyzed using content analysis into themes developed from the reviewed literature. Information was coded and categorized into five key themes unlocking the secrets of critical thinking: the theories that shape our minds, fostering critical minds: effective instructional approaches for developing critical thinking, igniting critical thinking: engaging learners through interactive techniques, enhancing critical thinking through questioning and cognitive strategies, and fostering critical thinking and a growth-oriented learning environment. Triangulation was employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, with consistent patterns across the selected documents. The adoption of document analysis was justified as it enables an in-depth exploration of the vast body of research available, providing a comprehensive understanding of how critical thinking strategies are applied in language teaching (Bowen, 2009). This method is particularly useful for reviewing the rich theoretical and practical knowledge embedded in educational literature, facilitating the identification of widely discussed strategies without the need for primary data collection. Ethical considerations were upheld by accurately representing the documents, citing all sources to avoid plagiarism, and ensuring the integrity of the original work.

Results and Discussion

The review study explores various instructional strategies for developing critical thinking (CT) skills in EFL and ESL contexts, organized into five different themes: unlocking the secrets of critical thinking: the theories that shape our minds, fostering critical minds: effective instructional approaches for developing critical thinking, igniting critical thinking: engaging learners through interactive techniques, enhancing critical thinking through questioning and cognitive strategies, and fostering critical thinking and a growth-oriented learning environment.

Unlocking the Secrets of Critical Thinking: The Theories that Shape Our Minds

Critical thinking has been defined in various ways, with foundational theories emphasizing the processes involved in analyzing, evaluating, and reasoning. Theories like Dewey's reflective thinking and Ennis's structured steps provide a basis for understanding how critical thinking is developed and nurtured in learners. It is assumed that students who attend college can develop critical thinking by attending classes, listening to teachers, and actively participating in classroom discussions. However, the search for appropriate instructional methods to improve students' critical thinking remains a subject of study. McMillan (1987) reviewed 27 studies investigating the effect of various courses and programs on critical thinking abilities among college students and found that results have failed to support the use of specific instructional strategies or courses to enhance critical thinking (as cited in Reed, 1998, p. 30). According to Innis (2015), critical thinking involves several steps that most adults navigate effortlessly. These steps include identifying the issue, considering the goal, brainstorming possible solutions, evaluating potential outcomes, trying a solution, and finally assessing the results. However, Hayes and Devitt (2008) noted that early learners do not extensively develop or practice critical thinking strategies during primary and secondary education. Similarly, The University of Leeds (n.d.) outlines key steps in critical thinking: describing, reflecting, analyzing, critiquing, reasoning, and evaluating. In this regard, Dewey (1910) discussed critical thinking as reflective thinking, characterized by a reluctance to accept the status quo. He emphasized that critical thinking involves both emotional and intellectual components. Therefore, students should be taught to examine, question, and reflect on their learning, fostering skepticism and reflection. Drawing insight from this finding, this paper seeks to explore instructional strategies for developing critical thinking.

Fostering Critical Minds: Effective Instructional Approaches for Developing Critical Thinking

Instructional approaches to developing critical thinking (CT) can be divided into explicit and implicit methods, each offering distinct ways to foster critical thought in students. Explicit instruction, or the "infusion approach," intentionally integrates CT into the curriculum by making critical thinking skills clear and structured for students. Ennis (2011) emphasizes this approach as a way to teach students how to think critically through direct instruction. Research by Beyer (1991) and studies by Abrami et al. (2008) suggest that explicit teaching leads to more significant improvements in CT, particularly when teachers model, explain, and embed CT strategies into their lessons. In contrast, implicit or "immersion" approaches do not explicitly teach critical thinking, assuming it develops naturally as students engage with content. However, evidence supports the idea that CT requires deliberate practice, not just content learning (Beyer, 1991). In light of this, one instructional strategy that provides structured guidance for critical thinking is the Socratic seminar.

Socratic seminars, a form of structured dialogue, promote critical thinking through questioning and discussion. In this method, students engage in group conversations based on a text, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. This encourages critical analysis as students must support their arguments with evidence. According to Copeland (2005), Socratic seminars improve critical thinking, listening, and speaking skills. In EFL/ESL classrooms, this approach

can be adapted to discuss various topics, encouraging students to think critically while practicing English. While Socratic seminars emphasize dialogue and discussion, another effective approach for developing critical thinking involves cognitive apprenticeship, where teachers guide students through expert thinking processes.

Cognitive apprenticeship involves modeling, coaching, and scaffolding students' learning experiences to develop problem-solving strategies and metacognitive skills. Collins et al. (1989) advocate for this method as a way to cultivate critical thinking by embedding expert thinking processes into instructional practices. This approach helps students develop deep understanding, self-regulation, and the ability to analyze and refine their thinking independently, which are all crucial for critical thinking. Similarly, inquiry-based learning offers another method that encourages active participation and student-driven exploration, further promoting the development of critical thinking. Inquiry-based learning promotes critical thinking by engaging students in generating questions, conducting research, and drawing evidence-based conclusions. Pedaste et al. (2015) emphasize that inquiry learning involves exploration, investigation, and problem-solving, all of which foster analytical thinking. This method encourages curiosity and independence, empowering students to make informed decisions and navigate complex challenges. In addition to inquiry-based learning, debate and argumentation also serve as powerful tools for engaging students in critical thinking.

Debate and argumentation encourage critical thinking by engaging students in structured discussions where they analyze, synthesize evidence, and evaluate multiple perspectives. Mercer (2000) argues that debate sharpens students' reasoning abilities while enhancing their communication skills. This method promotes logical thought and persuasive argumentation, skills essential for academic and professional success. Alongside debate, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) offers another immersive approach that fosters critical thinking through real-world problem-solving. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) immerses students in real-world problems, requiring them to analyze and solve issues collaboratively. Barrows (1986) highlights PBL's effectiveness in fostering critical thinking by presenting complex, context-rich scenarios. This method enhances problem-solving skills and encourages students to apply their knowledge beyond rote memorization, promoting deeper understanding. Thus, when combined with strategies like explicit instruction, Socratic seminars, cognitive apprenticeship, inquiry-based learning, and debate, PBL offers a comprehensive approach to developing critical thinking skills.

Various instructional approaches explicit instruction, Socratic seminars, cognitive apprenticeship, inquiry-based learning, debate, and problem-based learning offer valuable strategies for fostering critical thinking. These methods not only enhance students' analytical and reflective skills but also prepare them for complex challenges by encouraging independent thought, logical reasoning, and effective communication. By integrating these approaches, educators can create an environment that nurtures critical thinking and equips students for success in both academic and real-world contexts.

Igniting Critical Thinking: Engaging Learners Through Interactive Techniques

Interactive techniques, such as teacher questioning, group discussions, peer questioning, case-based learning, project-based learning, role-playing, simulation, and

collaborative problem-solving, serve as effective strategies for promoting active engagement and critical thinking in the classroom. These methods encourage learners to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on ideas, fostering deeper cognitive processes that enhance both learning and critical thinking skills. By employing these strategies, educators create dynamic learning environments that stimulate students' analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving abilities.

One fundamental interactive technique for fostering critical thinking is teacher questioning. Questioning is a vital method for stimulating critical thinking in learners. Teachers can pose low-level or high-level questions, each with different impacts on students' cognitive engagement. Low-level questions, which are simple, factual, and literal, do not promote deep critical thinking (Zhao et al., 2016). In contrast, high-level questions require students to manipulate their previous knowledge and make decisions, encouraging analytical, evaluative, argumentative, and inferential skills (Orlich et al., 2013). High-level, open, or probing questions are especially effective in developing critical thinking as they require students to provide more detailed, complex responses. As Wu (1990) noted, probing questions encourage students to elaborate, thereby stimulating critical thought. Therefore, teacher questioning that focuses on higher-order thinking prompts, such as judgment and evaluation, plays a crucial role in nurturing critical thinking.

In addition to teacher questioning, group discussion is another highly effective strategy for enhancing critical thinking. Group discussions encourage active participation and the exchange of ideas, which fosters deep learning and critical engagement. Orlich et al. (2013) describe group discussion as a technique involving the active sharing and critique of ideas among students, which promotes the clarification and refinement of individual perspectives. Research by Dallimore et al. (2003) (as cited in Zhao et al., 2016) supports this by showing that group discussions enhance critical thinking as students hear alternative viewpoints, leading to a more thoughtful analysis of ideas. However, Garside (1996) found that group discussions alone do not necessarily improve critical thinking unless students are properly trained and instructed in the technique. Thus, for group discussions to effectively foster critical thinking, structured guidance and preparation are essential.

Building upon the concept of discussion, reciprocal peer questioning is an interactive technique that further promotes critical thinking. This strategy involves students working in pairs or small groups to generate and answer high-level questions, facilitating collaborative learning. King (1992) found that peer questioning led to more complex and elaborated explanations, fostering higher levels of critical thinking and learning outcomes. Teachers can scaffold this process by initially teaching students how to ask probing and referential questions. This method helps students engage with the content on a deeper level, encouraging them to think critically and evaluate information collaboratively.

Similarly, Case-Based Learning (CBL) provides an instructional strategy that immerses students in real-world scenarios, enhancing their problem-solving and decision-making skills. Herreid (2011) emphasizes that CBL encourages students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information within a practical context, fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking. In EFL/ESL classrooms, CBL can be applied by using case studies related to cultural contexts or linguistic challenges, enabling students to develop critical thinking skills through practical, language-related issues.

Furthermore, project-based learning (PBL) is an approach that also encourages critical thinking by involving students in extended, collaborative projects. Thomas (2000) argued that PBL fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. In PBL, students must research, plan, and execute their projects, which promotes critical evaluation of their findings and solutions. For instance, in EFL/ESL classrooms, students could create a multimedia presentation on a cultural topic or conduct research on a linguistic phenomenon, thereby enhancing their critical thinking and language skills in tandem.

Another interactive technique that fosters critical thinking is role-playing and simulation. According to Savery and Duffy (1995), role-playing allows students to immerse themselves in real-world scenarios, which requires them to apply their knowledge, make decisions, and evaluate outcomes. These activities promote perspective-taking, empathy, and problem-solving, all of which are key skills in critical thinking. By engaging in role-playing, students enhance their ability to think analytically about various situations and develop a deeper understanding of complex issues. Moreover, collaborative problem-solving tasks serve as another powerful strategy for engaging students in critical thinking. Johnson and Johnson (1999) argue that collaborative tasks encourage students to exchange ideas, negotiate solutions, and critique each other's reasoning. Through these activities, students develop analytical skills, learn to navigate diverse viewpoints, and engage in collective decision-making. This collaborative approach nurtures critical thinking by requiring students to work together to solve complex problems, fostering both cognitive and social engagement.

Interactive techniques such as teacher questioning, group discussions, peer questioning, case-based learning, project-based learning, role-playing, and collaborative problem-solving offer diverse and effective ways to promote critical thinking in the classroom. By integrating these strategies into instruction, educators can create dynamic learning environments that foster deeper cognitive processes and equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary for success in academic and real-world contexts.

Enhancing Critical Thinking Through Questioning and Cognitive Strategies

Questioning techniques and cognitive strategies are powerful tools for stimulating reflective and analytical thinking in learners. Among these, probing questions and metacognitive strategies play a pivotal role in developing students' ability to think critically. These methods not only engage students in active thinking but also encourage them to evaluate and refine their thought processes.

Metacognitive strategies, which involve teaching students to reflect on their thinking, are essential for fostering critical thinking. According to Schraw and Dennison (1994), these strategies enable students to monitor, regulate, and evaluate their cognitive processes. In EFL/ESL classrooms, teachers can incorporate metacognitive strategies by encouraging students to set personal learning goals, reflect on their progress, and engage in self-assessment. These practices help learners become more aware of their cognitive strategies, allowing them to take control over their learning and enhancing their ability to think critically.

In addition to metacognitive strategies, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) offer another effective approach for cultivating critical thinking. VTS leverages the analysis of visual

stimuli such as artwork prompting students to make observations, infer meanings, and justify their interpretations. Housen and Yenawine (2002) emphasize that VTS fosters cognitive flexibility and creativity by requiring students to construct reasoned arguments based on visual evidence. This strategy enhances critical thinking by encouraging students to think deeply and holistically about the materials they engage with, thereby refining their analytical and evaluative skills.

Reflective journaling is yet another cognitive strategy that supports critical thinking development by fostering self-awareness and introspection. As Moon (1999) notes, reflective journals encourage students to examine their learning experiences, question their assumptions, and explore alternative perspectives. This process of continuous reflection promotes deeper understanding and encourages students to refine their thinking strategies. By reflecting on challenges and proposing solutions, learners develop a habit of critical inquiry, making reflective journaling an effective tool for cultivating critical thinking.

Together, these questioning techniques and cognitive strategies; metacognitive strategies, visual thinking strategies, and reflective journaling work synergistically to engage students in deeper, more reflective thinking. By integrating these approaches into classroom practices, educators can foster a learning environment that encourages critical thought, self-awareness, and continuous intellectual growth.

Fostering Critical Thinking and a Growth-Oriented Learning Environment

Embracing challenges and viewing failures as opportunities for growth stimulates cognitive flexibility and adaptive thinking. Dweck (2006) asserted that cultivating a growth mindset promotes critical thinking by fostering resilience, perseverance, and a belief in one's capacity to learn and improve. A growth mindset nurtures a willingness to explore new ideas, seek feedback, and continuously refine strategies, enhancing students' ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives.

Critical thinking instruction aims to develop the cognitive skills of learners. Smith's (1977) study revealed three instructional factors that positively correlate with improved CT skills: (a) instructor's praise, encouragement, or use of students' ideas, (b) the amount of interaction among students, and (c) the amount and cognitive level of student participation (as cited in Zhao et al.,2016). Likewise, Bailin et al. (1999) argued that engaging students in tasks requiring judgment or evaluation, helping them develop intellectual resources, and providing a favorable environment where critical inquiry is valued are essential for effective CT instruction. From these ideas, it can be generalized that effective CT instruction includes introducing CT skills related to content areas, providing ample opportunities to practice these skills, allowing students to participate in classroom decision-making, and creating a conducive, secure classroom environment.

Conclusion

This study explored various instructional strategies to enhance critical thinking skills in EFL/ESL classrooms, including explicit instruction, teacher questioning, group discussions, reciprocal peer questioning, case-based learning, Socratic seminars, project-based learning, metacognitive strategies, and problem-based learning (PBL). Each strategy fosters analytical thinking, communication skills, and collaborative learning. Explicit instruction is particularly

effective, directly improving students' metacognition and analytical abilities. Teacher questioning, especially higher-level and probing questions, enhances cognitive engagement and critical thinking. Group discussions and reciprocal peer questioning promote critical analysis through collaborative learning, encouraging students to articulate thoughts and exchange knowledge. Case-based learning, Socratic seminars, project-based learning, and metacognitive strategies offer diverse approaches to applying knowledge in real-world contexts, engaging in discussions, and reflecting on learning processes. PBL immerses students in real-world problems, enhancing problem-solving skills and understanding beyond memorization. Debate and argumentation develop reasoning and communication skills, while reflective journals foster self-awareness and continuous personal growth. Inquiry-based learning promotes analytical thinking through exploration and evidence-based conclusions. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) enhance visual literacy and cognitive flexibility. Role-playing and simulation develop empathy, perspective-taking, and problem-solving skills. Collaborative problem-solving tasks and cognitive apprenticeship foster teamwork, decision-making, and metacognitive skills. Cultivating a growth mindset promotes resilience and adaptive thinking, encouraging exploration and continuous improvement.

Despite the strengths of the discussed instructional strategies, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, the effectiveness of these strategies may vary depending on contextual factors such as classroom environment, student demographics, and teacher expertise. Implementing these strategies effectively requires adequate training and support for teachers, which may not always be available. Second, while empirical evidence supports the benefits of explicit instruction and certain questioning techniques, more research is needed to establish their long-term impact on critical thinking skills development. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the sustainability of these effects over time and across different educational settings. Third, the generalizability of findings may be limited by the predominance of studies conducted in specific educational contexts or cultural settings. Cultural factors, language proficiency levels, and educational systems may influence the applicability and effectiveness of these strategies in diverse international classrooms.

Though it has several limitations, the findings of this study have several implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in the field of EFL/ESL education. First, integrating explicit instruction and effective questioning techniques into teacher training programs can enhance educators' ability to foster critical thinking skills among students. Professional development initiatives should emphasize the importance of pedagogical approaches that promote deep cognitive engagement and metacognitive awareness. Second, curriculum developers can benefit from incorporating diverse instructional strategies, such as case-based learning, project-based learning, and metacognitive strategies, to provide students with varied opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. By diversifying instructional approaches, educators can cater to different learning preferences and foster a more inclusive learning environment. Third, policymakers should consider supporting research initiatives that investigate the effectiveness of these instructional strategies across diverse educational contexts. Investing in educational research can provide evidence-based insights into effective pedagogical practices and inform policy decisions aimed at improving educational outcomes in critical thinking. This study underscores the importance of employing multifaceted

instructional strategies to cultivate critical thinking skills among students in EFL/ESL classrooms. By addressing the limitations and leveraging the implications outlined, educators can enhance their instructional practices and better prepare students for academic success and lifelong learning.

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