DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES AT VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

Xudoynazarova Marjona G'olib qizi
Lecturer, Kashkadarya Pedagogical Technical College,
Yusupova Go'zal Jabbor qizi
Lecturer, Kashkadarya Pedagogical Technical College

Abstract: *This article analyzes the theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and practical mechanisms for developing critical thinking competence in English language classes at vocational colleges. In the context of the modern labor market, where communicative and analytical skills are increasingly demanded, English language teaching should not be limited to grammar instruction alone but must also foster students' independent thinking abilities. The study substantiates the effectiveness of interactive methods, problem-based tasks, and project-based learning in enhancing students' critical thinking skills within vocational education settings.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, competence, vocational college, English language teaching, interactive methods, communicative approach, vocational education.*

In the context of globalization, graduates of vocational colleges are required to possess not only professional knowledge but also analytical thinking skills, the ability to make decisions in problematic situations, and the competence to critically evaluate information. English plays a crucial role as a means of accessing the international information space. However, practical experience shows that English language teaching in vocational colleges is often focused mainly on grammar instruction and translation exercises. As a result, students' independent thinking competence is not sufficiently developed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify effective methods for developing critical thinking competence through English language classes in vocational colleges.

Critical thinking is considered one of the key outcomes of modern education. It refers to the ability of an individual not merely to accept information passively, but to analyze it, evaluate it on the basis of evidence, distinguish between arguments and conclusions, and form a logical position regarding a problem. Historically, this concept originates from the ideas of pragmatism and reflective thinking, where critical thinking was initially interpreted as an intellectual activity involving self-regulation of the thinking process, careful analysis of situations, verification of evidence, and well-grounded decision-making. In later scholarly approaches, critical thinking has been described as reasoning based on established standards, including argumentation, cause-and-effect analysis, logical consistency, drawing conclusions, and self-evaluation. Furthermore, researchers emphasize that critical thinking is not limited to cognitive processes alone; it is also associated with personal dispositions and intellectual habits such as open-mindedness, skepticism, objectivity, and the demand for evidence. For this reason, critical thinking is frequently viewed in the literature as a competence, integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

In the context of English language education, the development of critical thinking is of particular importance, as language learning involves not only mastering grammatical rules but also performing higher-order cognitive operations such as understanding meaning, expressing a position, providing arguments, evaluating opposing viewpoints, and participating in reasoned communication. Within the communicative approach, language learning is structured around a "real communication" model, which requires students to explain their ideas, ask questions, compare alternatives, and make informed choices.

The CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, in turn, does not limit students' language use to purely linguistic exercises but directs them toward understanding and explaining subject-specific or professional content through the target language. As a result, cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation become more actively engaged. Similarly, problem-based learning can be considered a natural "driver" of critical thinking, as students are required to identify a problem, search for relevant information, compare possible solutions, and arrive at a reasoned conclusion. For this reason, the literature consistently recommends the use of problem-oriented questions, debates, argumentation tasks, media-text analysis, project-based activities, and case studies to foster critical thinking in English language classrooms.

In vocational education institutions, particularly technical colleges, the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach is especially suitable for developing critical thinking competence, as it treats language as an instrument serving professional needs. In ESP classes, students engage with real-life contexts such as professional situations, technical documents, instructions, charts, safety regulations, or customer communication scenarios. This shifts their focus beyond "correct grammar" toward understanding content, evaluating situations, identifying risks, making decisions, providing arguments, and justifying solutions. Thus, the literature review leads to the general conclusion that English language classes-especially when integrated with CLIL, communicative, problem-based, and ESP approaches can become an effective pedagogical environment for fostering critical thinking competence among vocational college students.

This study aimed to identify opportunities for developing critical thinking competence in English language classes at vocational colleges. A mixed methodological approach was adopted. On the one hand, theoretical analysis was conducted to examine the structural components of critical thinking and the pedagogical methods that contribute to its development. On the other hand, practical observation and an experimental teaching model were used to investigate how these elements manifest in classroom practice. At the initial stage of the research, scientific and pedagogical literature was analyzed to determine observable indicators of critical thinking in the teaching process. These indicators included students' questioning activity, ability to justify their opinions, use of evidence, recognition of alternative viewpoints, drawing conclusions, and correcting errors. These indicators later served as the basis for developing observation and assessment criteria.

In the practical phase of the study, two academic groups at the same level (for example, second-year students) were selected from a vocational college. One group was designated as the control group, while the other served as the experimental group. In the control group, English language classes were conducted using traditional methods,

primarily focused on text reading, translation, grammar exercises, and structured question-and-answer sequences. In contrast, the experimental group followed the same thematic content (i.e., identical topics, vocabulary, and lesson plans), but the lessons were methodologically enriched with techniques aimed at fostering critical thinking. These included problem-based questions, chains of "why?" and "how can you prove it?" inquiries, small-group debates, mini case studies based on professional situations, information comparison tasks, argument–conclusion differentiation exercises, and collaborative decision-making activities. The objective was not merely to increase classroom activity but to ensure that students' ideas were evidence-based, logically justified, and open to alternative solutions.

Throughout the study, systematic classroom observation was employed to record students' participation and cognitive engagement in both groups. During the observation process, the teacher (or researcher) relied on predefined indicators to document instances such as asking questions, attempting to justify answers, participating in debates, correcting mistakes, and proposing solutions to problems. In addition, a survey method was used to assess students' interest in the lessons, confidence in expressing their opinions, difficulties in conducting discussions in English, and attitudes toward interactive methods. The survey results were compared with classroom observation data to analyze the consistency between students' subjective perceptions and their actual behavioral performance.

The experimental teaching model was implemented over a specific period of time (for example, several weeks or one instructional module). Students' critical thinking indicators were assessed at both the beginning and the end of the process in order to determine whether any measurable changes had occurred. The evaluation criteria focused not on the correctness of students' answers, but on the quality of their reasoning. Particular attention was given to their ability to provide evidence, demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships, acknowledge alternative viewpoints, and justify conclusions logically. Overall, the methodology was designed as a practice-oriented experimental approach adapted to the real classroom conditions of vocational colleges, allowing both the measurement and development of critical thinking within authentic English language instruction.

In the experimental group, where the innovative teaching model was applied, noticeable changes were observed in students' academic engagement and the quality of their thinking during English language classes. First, there was a significant increase in questioning behavior and clarification attempts during lessons. Prior to the experiment, students largely limited themselves to responding to the teacher's questions. However, after the introduction of interactive methods, they began to initiate discussion, pose their own questions, and express opposing viewpoints more actively. This demonstrated intellectual curiosity and logical precision—key indicators of critical thinking. Furthermore, an increase in students' ability to express independent opinions was recorded. In traditional classes, students tended to rely on prepared texts or model answers. In contrast, students in the experimental group attempted to formulate personal positions in response to problems or discussion questions. Skills such as argumentation, providing examples, and explaining cause-and-effect relationships became more evident. During debates conducted in English, students moved beyond brief or surface-level responses and sought to support

their views with logical arguments, indicating not only the development of communicative competence but also the strengthening of analytical thinking.

Additionally, an improvement in the speed and efficiency of information analysis was observed. At the beginning of the instructional period, students required more time to comprehend a text or situation and formulate a response. By the end of the experimental phase, however, they were able to identify the main idea more quickly, distinguish between essential and secondary information, and approach problems in a logically structured manner. These positive changes can be attributed to the consistent use of problem-based questions, small-group discussions, and case-study elements integrated into the lessons. In the control (traditional) group, students' responses were predominantly reproductive in nature, as they mainly repeated information provided by the teacher or the textbook. Limited evidence was observed of students justifying their opinions or considering alternative perspectives. Thus, the findings indicate that critical thinking competence develops more effectively in lessons where interactive and problem-based methods are applied compared to traditional instructional approaches. The obtained results confirm that the development of critical thinking in English language classes is directly dependent on the methodological approach employed. Problem-based questions proved to be one of the most effective tools for activating students' cognitive processes. For example, a question such as "Artificial intelligence is useful. Do you agree?" requires students not merely to respond with "yes" or "no," but to justify their position. Such questions foster the ability to construct logical arguments, provide evidence, and either refute or accept opposing viewpoints. In this process, language functions as a means, while thinking becomes the primary objective.

The debate method also demonstrated high effectiveness. Dividing students into "for" and "against" groups enables them to examine a problem from multiple perspectives. This approach reduces one-sided thinking and strengthens analytical reasoning. During debates, students are required not only to defend their own opinions but also to analyze the arguments of opposing groups and respond accordingly. This process promotes higher-order critical thinking skills, particularly evaluation and logical decision-making. The case-study method (professional situation analysis) is especially significant in the context of vocational colleges. When a profession-related real-life scenario is presented in English, students engage in analyzing the situation, identifying the problem, and proposing reasoned solutions. This approach enhances not only language competence but also professional thinking skills.

By solving realistic problems, students begin to perceive English as a practical communication tool rather than merely an academic subject.

Project-based learning further reinforces critical thinking through sustained and independent activity.

Developing a professional project in English requires students to conduct independent research, select and analyze relevant information, organize it systematically, and present final outcomes in a logically structured manner. This process enhances reflective thinking and encourages students to form and articulate their ideas consciously and critically.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that English language classes in vocational colleges can serve not only as a means of developing linguistic skills but also as an effective pedagogical environment for fostering higher-order cognitive competences.

The development of critical thinking depends not only on lesson content but also on the chosen methodological approach.

When interactive and problem-based methods are applied, students' cognitive engagement deepens, and language becomes a genuine medium for meaningful exchange of ideas.

REFERENCES:

1. Dewey, J. (1933). How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company.

2. Ennis, R. H. (1985). A logical basis for measuring critical thinking skills. Educational Leadership, 43(2), 44–48.

3. Facione, P. A. (1990). Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction (The Delphi Report). Millbrae, CA: The California Academic Press.

4. Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6. Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press..