



INTEGRATING A WESTERN-CENTRIC CONCEPT OF CRITICAL THINKING INTO EFL CLASSES IN UZBEKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: This study explores the integration of Western-centric critical thinking concepts into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes within non-philological higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. It examines the compatibility of Western pedagogical approaches with the local educational and cultural context, identifies challenges faced by instructors and students, and proposes solutions for effective implementation. The findings suggest that a localized, incremental adaptation of critical thinking methodologies can enhance language acquisition and cognitive skills while respecting cultural and educational norms.

Keywords: Critical thinking, EFL, Uzbekistan, Western-centric education, pedagogy, non-philological institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking, a cornerstone of Western pedagogy, is increasingly recognized as crucial for effective learning in the 21st century. It encompasses a range of cognitive skills, including analysis, evaluation, inference, and problem-solving, enabling individuals to engage with information critically and form reasoned judgments. In educational contexts, critical thinking empowers learners to move beyond rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge, fostering instead active engagement with ideas, the ability to question assumptions, and the



development of independent thought. This is particularly important in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing global landscape, where individuals need to be able to adapt to new information, solve complex problems, and make informed decisions.

However, the integration of Western-centric critical thinking into non-Western contexts, particularly Uzbekistan's EFL classrooms within non-philological higher education, presents unique challenges. While the benefits of critical thinking are widely acknowledged, its implementation requires careful consideration of the local cultural and educational context. Western pedagogical approaches, often emphasizing open debate, questioning authority, and individual expression, may not always align seamlessly with the established norms and traditions of non-Western societies. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the educational system has historically emphasized respect for authority and rote learning, which can create a potential mismatch with the principles of critical thinking.

This paper investigates the effective incorporation of Western-centric critical thinking into EFL instruction within non-philological higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, where English serves primarily as a tool for professional and academic advancement. These institutions, focusing on disciplines such as economics, engineering, and medicine, require students to develop strong English language skills to access international research, collaborate with foreign partners, and compete in the global marketplace. Critical thinking skills are essential for these students to effectively process information in English, analyze complex problems within their respective fields, and communicate their ideas persuasively. However, the integration of critical thinking into their EFL training requires careful attention to the specific needs and challenges of this student population.

METHODOLOGY



This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the integration of critical thinking into EFL classrooms. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 EFL instructors at three non-philological institutions in Uzbekistan. The interviews explored instructors' experiences with integrating critical thinking, their perceptions of student challenges, and their strategies for overcoming these challenges. Quantitative data were collected via surveys administered to 200 students at the same institutions. The survey assessed student perceptions of critical thinking activities, their preferred learning styles, and their perceived challenges in engaging with critical thinking tasks. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the interview data, while descriptive statistics and inferential analysis were applied to the survey data. This combined approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating critical thinking into the Uzbek EFL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Existing research emphasizes the importance of critical thinking in EFL education, highlighting its role in developing analytical, problem-solving, and independent learning skills (Brookfield, 2012; Ennis, 2011). However, studies also indicate potential mismatches between Western critical thinking models and the educational philosophies and cultural values of non-Western societies (Atkinson, 1997; Holliday, 2005). These mismatches can stem from differing cultural norms regarding argumentation, questioning authority, and expressing dissenting opinions. This review examines the literature on critical thinking in EFL instruction, particularly within Central Asia and other post-Soviet educational systems (e.g., Kushnarenko & Nieuwenhuis, 2002), analyzing successful adaptation strategies and potential pitfalls. It also explores the specific cultural and educational context of Uzbekistan, considering the influence of its post-Soviet legacy and its evolving educational landscape.



Instructor Interviews: Instructors reported significant initial student resistance to activities involving open debate and questioning, often rooted in traditional respect for authority and a preference for rote memorization. Many expressed a need for further training in implementing critical thinking methodologies, particularly in adapting Western techniques to the Uzbek context. Contextualizing critical thinking tasks within students' specific fields of study (e.g., economics, engineering) proved effective in increasing relevance and engagement. A gradual, incremental approach to implementation, starting with less challenging activities and progressively introducing more complex tasks, was found to be more successful than sudden pedagogical shifts. Instructors also emphasized the importance of creating a safe and supportive classroom environment where students felt comfortable expressing their opinions.

Student Surveys: Students initially found critical thinking tasks challenging, often preferring rote memorization and structured learning activities. However, after exposure to contextualized activities and a supportive learning environment, a majority reported an increased understanding of the importance of analysis and problem-solving. Students participating in collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and project work, demonstrated improved confidence in expressing their opinions in English. A significant number expressed a desire for more examples of how critical thinking skills can be applied to their future careers, highlighting the need for practical application and relevance. Students also reported benefiting from explicit instruction on critical thinking strategies, such as argumentation, analysis, and evaluation.

The results highlight the complexities of integrating Western-centric critical thinking into Uzbek EFL classrooms. While the benefits are evident, successful implementation requires careful consideration of the local educational and cultural context. The findings suggest that a culturally responsive approach, which balances global pedagogical standards with local traditions, is essential. Specifically,



contextualizing critical thinking activities within students' fields of study, providing adequate teacher training focused on culturally sensitive pedagogy, and gradually transitioning pedagogical methods are crucial for fostering cognitive engagement and language proficiency. Addressing initial student resistance by explaining the rationale behind critical thinking and providing clear connections to future career applications are also key to successful integration. Creating a safe and supportive learning environment is paramount

CONCLUSION

Integrating Western-centric critical thinking into EFL instruction in Uzbekistan's non-philological institutions offers significant opportunities for enhancing language acquisition and cognitive skills. However, successful implementation hinges on a culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate approach. By adopting a structured, incremental adaptation of critical thinking methodologies, Uzbek EFL classrooms can effectively cultivate analytical and problem-solving abilities essential for students' academic and professional success in an increasingly globalized world.

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating critical thinking into Uzbek EFL classrooms, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of this approach on student learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking students' academic and professional trajectories could provide valuable evidence of the effectiveness of critical thinking integration. Future research could also investigate the effectiveness of different critical thinking frameworks within this specific context, including culturally relevant adaptations of Western models. Additionally, exploring the role of technology in supporting the development of critical thinking skills in this context, particularly through online platforms and collaborative learning tools, could be a fruitful area of inquiry. Finally, comparative studies examining the integration of critical thinking in



other post-Soviet or Central Asian educational contexts could provide valuable insights and best practices. By addressing these areas of future research, we can continue to refine and improve strategies for cultivating critical thinking skills in EFL learners, empowering them to become active, engaged, and successful participants in the global community.

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