

РАЗВИТИЕ НАВЫКОВ КРИТИЧЕСКОГО МЫШЛЕНИЯ НА ЗАНЯТИЯХ ПО АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

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Аннотация. В статье описывается важность навыков критического мышления при изучении языка и даются некоторые практические рекомендации по развитию этих навыков на занятиях по иностранному языку. Отмечается, что критическое мышление представляет собой неотъемлемый компонент языкового образования благодаря его потенциалу повышать уровень владения языком у студентов, повышать их мотивацию и готовить их к общению в реальной жизни. В статье также подчеркивается роль преподавателей в развитии критического мышления и предлагаются различные виды заданий и приемы, которые могут быть использованы для развития этого навыка у обучающихся.

Ключевые слова: критическое мышление, изучение языка, студенты, преподаватель, навыки, задания

DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract. This article discusses the importance of critical thinking skills in language learning and provides some practical suggestions for developing these skills in the foreign language classroom. It argues that critical thinking is an essential component of language education due to its potential to enhance students' language proficiency, increase their motivation, and prepare them for real-life communication. The article also highlights the role of teachers in promoting critical thinking and suggests various activities and techniques that can be used to foster this skill in language learners.

Keywords: critical thinking, language learning, students, teacher, skills, activities

Introduction

Critical thinking has become a buzzword in education, and there is a growing recognition of its significance in language learning. However, it is not always clear what critical thinking entails and how it can be effectively developed in the foreign language classroom. This article aims to shed light on these questions by providing an overview of the key features of critical thinking and suggesting some practical strategies for integrating it into language instruction.

Critical thinking is a vital skill for the 21st century. It involves evaluating information, making reasoned judgements and solving problems based on evidence [1]. In the field of English language teaching (ELT), critical thinking skills are often overlooked or not given sufficient attention. This action research project aimed to explore the impact of explicitly teaching critical thinking skills on students' language learning and their ability to think critically.

Critical thinking in language learning

Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information in order to make reasoned judgments and decisions. In the context of language learning, it involves going beyond the surface meaning of words and sentences and engaging with the content in a deeper and more meaningful way. Critical thinkers are able to identify biases, assumptions, and fallacies in arguments, as well as to recognise different perspectives and viewpoints [2].

There are several reasons why critical thinking is considered an important skill in language education [3]. First, it helps students to develop a better understanding of the target language by encouraging them to think about the underlying meanings and implications of what they read or hear. Second, it enhances their language production skills by enabling them to express their thoughts and opinions more clearly and coherently. Third, it promotes learner autonomy and self-directedness by equipping students with the tools to monitor their own learning and make informed choices. Finally, it prepares them for real-life communication outside the classroom, where they will often need to evaluate information, solve problems, and engage in critical discussions.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering students' critical thinking skills [4]. They need to create a supportive classroom environment that encourages learners to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and express their opinions freely. They also need to provide clear guidelines and feedback on how to think critically and offer opportunities for practice and reflection.

Context and participants

The study was conducted at Saint-Petersburg State Chemical and Pharmaceutical University over a period of four months (September – December 2023). The participants were 30 second year pharmacy students who studied English at intermediate level. They were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups received regular lessons in general English, but the experimental group also received additional instruction in critical thinking skills.

Procedure

The action research project consisted of three main stages: pre-test, intervention and post-test. At the beginning of the study, all participants took a pre-test to assess their language proficiency and their ability to think critically. The test included a range of tasks such as multiple-choice questions, gap-filling exercises and short-answer questions. Following the pre-test, the experimental group received a series of lessons in critical thinking skills. These lessons were integrated into the regular English classes and covered a variety of topics including logical reasoning, problem-solving techniques and evaluating arguments. The control group did not receive any specific instruction in critical thinking skills. After the intervention, both groups took a post-test which was similar in format and content to the pre-test.

The activities used to develop critical thinking among students of experimental groups included:

1. Questioning techniques: Students were encouraged to ask and answer open-ended questions that require higher-order thinking. For example, instead of simply asking 'What happened next in the story?', you could ask 'Why do you think the character made that decision?' or 'What other choices could they

have made?' Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills to generate more challenging questions at different levels of complexity was also used.

2. Debate and discussion: Class debates or group discussions on controversial topics, such as animal testing, social media, or climate change were organised. Students were provided with a range of viewpoints and arguments, and encouraged to critically evaluate the evidence and present their own position. The teacher assigned roles to different students (e.g. moderator, timekeeper, devil's advocate) to ensure active participation and balanced interaction.

3. Problem-solving tasks: Students were given real-life scenarios or case studies that required them to analyse a problem, identify possible solutions, and evaluate the pros and cons of each option. For instance, students were asked to imagine they were planning a holiday and had a limited budget. They needed to decide where to go, what to do, and how to make the most of their money. This activity not only developed their critical thinking skills but also enhanced their creativity and decision-making abilities.

4. Authentic materials: Authentic texts, such as news articles, opinion pieces, or advertisements, that contain arguments, counter-arguments, and persuasive language were used. Students were asked to critically examine the author's claims, evidence, and reasoning, and discuss whether they agree or disagree with the main points. The teacher also provided them with different versions of the same text and asked them to compare and contrast the arguments presented.

5. Reflective journals: The teacher assigned regular writing tasks in which students reflected on their learning experiences, expressed their thoughts and feelings, and made connections between new information and existing knowledge. The teacher encouraged students to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses as language learners, set goals for improvement, and suggest strategies for achieving these goals. It was important to provide constructive feedback on students' entries and offer guidance on how to think more critically and metacognitively.

Results and discussion

The data from the pre-test and post-test were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of both language proficiency and critical thinking skills. On average, the experimental group scored 15% higher than the control group in the post-test. Furthermore, the experimental group demonstrated a significant improvement in their ability to think critically. For example, students were better able to identify assumptions, draw logical conclusions and evaluate the credibility of sources.

The findings of this action research project suggest that explicitly teaching critical thinking skills can have a positive impact on students' language learning and their ability to think critically. The results are consistent with previous studies which have shown a strong correlation between critical thinking skills and academic achievement [2]. There are several possible explanations for these findings. One explanation is that critical thinking skills help students to become more independent learners. By developing their ability to analyse information and solve problems, students are better equipped to learn new concepts and apply them to different contexts. Another explanation is that critical thinking skills enhance students' metacognitive awareness. When students are taught to think critically, they become more aware of their own thinking processes and are better able to monitor their learning. This, in turn, leads to greater self-regulation and improved academic performance.

Challenges of teaching critical thinking skills

One of the main challenges of teaching critical thinking skills in ELT is the fact that critical thinking is a complex process that involves different cognitive skills [5]. These skills include analysing information, evaluating arguments, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and solving problems. Teaching all of these skills at once can be overwhelming for both the teacher and the students. A possible solution to this problem is to break down the process of critical thinking into smaller, more manageable steps. For example, instead of asking students to evaluate an argument, the teacher can start by asking them to identify the main claim and supporting evidence. Once they have mastered this step, they can move on to the next one.

Another challenge of teaching critical thinking skills in ELT is the fact that critical thinking is culturally specific [5]. Different cultures have different ways of reasoning and arguing. For example, in Western cultures, people often use deductive reasoning, where they start with a general principle and then apply it to a specific case. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, people often use inductive reasoning, where they start with specific examples and then draw a general conclusion. When teaching critical thinking skills in ELT, it is important for teachers to be aware of these cultural differences and to take them into account. For example, when asking students to evaluate an argument, the teacher can encourage them to consider alternative viewpoints and to think about how the argument might be interpreted differently in different cultures.

A third challenge of teaching critical thinking skills in ELT is the fact that critical thinking is often seen as a threat to authority [5]. In some educational systems, students are expected to memorise facts and accept what they are told without questioning it. When asked to think critically, some students may feel uncomfortable or even resistant. To overcome this challenge, it is important for teachers to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment where students feel safe to express their opinions and ask questions. For example, instead of telling students what to think, the teacher can encourage them to think for themselves by asking open-ended questions and by providing opportunities for group discussion and debate.

A fourth challenge of teaching critical thinking skills in ELT is the fact that critical thinking is often seen as an individual skill [5]. In many educational systems, students are expected to work independently and to come up with their own answers. However, in the real world, critical thinking is often a collaborative process that involves working with others and building on their ideas. When teaching critical thinking skills in ELT, it is important for teachers to provide opportunities for students to work together and to learn from each other. For example, instead of asking students to solve a problem on their own, the teacher can ask them to solve it in pairs or small groups. This not only helps to develop their critical thinking skills but also their communication and teamwork skills.

Implications for ELT

The implications of this study for ELT are far-reaching. Firstly, it highlights the need for critical thinking skills to be integrated into the English language curriculum. Traditionally, the focus of ELT has been on teaching grammar and vocabulary, but this study suggests that there is also a need to develop students' higher-order thinking skills. Secondly, the study suggests that critical thinking skills can be taught explicitly. In the past, it was assumed that critical thinking skills were innate and could not be taught. However, recent research has shown that critical thinking skills can be developed through instruction and practice [4]. Finally, the study suggests that critical thinking skills are transferable. The participants in this study were university students, but the findings are likely to apply to other age groups

and languages. This has important implications for language teachers and curriculum designers, as it suggests that critical thinking skills can be taught not only in the English language classroom but also in other subject areas.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is an essential skill for language learners as it enables them to engage more deeply with the content, enhance their language proficiency, and prepare for real-life communication. Teachers can promote critical thinking by creating a supportive classroom environment, using questioning techniques, organising debates and discussions, assigning problem-solving tasks, selecting authentic materials, and encouraging reflective journals. By integrating these activities into their lessons, teachers can help students become more independent, analytical, and confident users of the target language.

Teaching critical thinking skills in ELT can be a challenge, but it is also a rewarding and worthwhile endeavour. By breaking down the process of critical thinking into smaller steps, by taking into account cultural differences, by creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and by providing opportunities for collaboration, teachers can help their students develop their creative and critical thinking skills in the second or foreign language classroom.

This action research project has shown that explicitly teaching critical thinking skills can have a positive impact on students' language learning and their ability to think critically. The findings of this study have important implications for ELT, suggesting that critical thinking skills should be integrated into the English language curriculum and that they can be taught explicitly. Further research is needed to explore the most effective ways of teaching critical thinking skills and to investigate their transferability to other contexts. However, this study provides a strong argument for the inclusion of critical thinking skills in ELT and suggests that they are a key component of 21st-century education.

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