



Teaching critical thinking through English literature: a task-based approach for ESL learners

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how English literature can be used as a tool for developing critical thinking skills in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms through a task-based approach. In contemporary language education, the importance of fostering higher-order thinking skills has become increasingly recognized (Facione, 2015; Brookfield, 2012). However, many ESL contexts still focus primarily on grammar, vocabulary, and test preparation, often neglecting the cognitive benefits of literary engagement. Literature – especially short stories, plays, and poetry – naturally provokes interpretation, analysis, and discussion, making it an ideal resource for critical thinking development (Lazar, 2008; Maley, 2010). Task-based learning (TBL) provides a flexible and student-centered framework to design activities around literary texts, encouraging learners to infer meaning, justify opinions, and evaluate characters or themes (Ellis, 2003). Drawing on current pedagogical theory and published research, this article argues for a more integrated use of literature in ESL to cultivate not only language competence but also intellectual autonomy and reflective thinking.

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Ingliz adabiyoti orqali tanqidiy fikrlashni o'rgatish: ESL o'quvchilari uchun topshiriqqa asoslangan yondashuv

ANNOTATSIYA

Kalit so'zlar:

Tanqidiy fikrlash,
topshiriqqa asoslangan
ta'lim,
ingliz adabiyoti,

Ushbu maqola ingliz tilini ikkinchi til sifatida o'rganayotgan (ESL) talabalarda tanqidiy fikrlash ko'nikmalarini rivojlantirishda ingliz adabiyotining topshiriqqa asoslangan yondashuv orqali qanday foydali bo'lishi mumkinligini o'rganadi. Hozirgi zamonaviy

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ESL darslari,
til o'qitish,
o'quvchi mustaqilligi,
kognitiv ko'nikmalar.

til o'qitishda yuqori darajadagi fikrlashni rivojlantirish muhimligi tobora ortib bormoqda (Facione, 2015; Brookfield, 2012). Biroq ko'plab ESL darslari hanuzgacha grammatikani, lug'at boyligini va test tayyorgarligini asosiy yo'nalish sifatida tanlaydi va adabiy matnlarning aqliy rivojga qo'shadigan hissasini e'tibordan chetda qoldiradi. Ayniqsa, hikoya, drama va poeziya kabi matnlar talabalarda tahlil qilish, talqin etish va bahslashish ehtiyojini yuzaga keltiradi (Lazar, 2008; Maley, 2010). Topshiriqqa asoslangan ta'lim (TBL) bu kabi matnlar atrofida faoliyatlarni o'quvchiga yo'naltirilgan tarzda tashkil etish imkonini beradi va talabalarda fikr yuritish, o'z fikrini asoslash va mavzularni baholash kabi ko'nikmalarni rivojlantiradi (Ellis, 2003). Ushbu maqola mavjud ilmiy manbalar asosida ESL darslarida adabiyotdan foydalanishni nafaqat til o'rganish, balki intellektual mustaqillik va reflektiv fikrlashni rivojlantirish vositasi sifatida asoslab beradi.

Обучение критическому мышлению через английскую литературу: подход, основанный на задачах, для изучающих английский язык как иностранный (ESL)

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ключевые слова:

Критическое мышление,
обучение на основе
заданий,
английская литература,
преподавание ESL,
обучение языку,
автономия учащихся,
когнитивные навыки.

В статье рассматривается возможность использования английской литературы как средства развития критического мышления у учащихся, изучающих английский язык как второй (ESL), с помощью метода обучения, основанного на выполнении заданий. В современном языковом образовании всё большее значение придаётся развитию навыков критического мышления (Facione, 2015; Brookfield, 2012). Однако во многих ESL-классах по-прежнему преобладает акцент на грамматике, лексике и подготовке к тестам, в то время как когнитивные возможности литературных текстов остаются недооценёнными. Литературные произведения – особенно рассказы, пьесы и поэзия – естественным образом стимулируют анализ, интерпретацию и дискуссию, что делает их идеальными для формирования критического мышления (Lazar, 2008; Maley, 2010). Обучение на основе заданий (TBL) предоставляет гибкую, ориентированную на учащихся методику, способствующую формированию умений интерпретировать текст, аргументировать мнение и оценивать персонажей и темы (Ellis, 2003). Основанная на теоретических источниках и педагогических исследованиях, статья призывает к более активному использованию литературы на занятиях ESL с целью развития не только языковых, но и интеллектуальных способностей учащихся.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century classroom demands more than linguistic proficiency – it requires learners to engage critically, solve problems independently, and communicate ideas effectively. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, these cognitive demands often intersect with the need to master a new linguistic system, posing unique challenges and opportunities for educators. One increasingly recognized strategy for cultivating these competencies is the integration of **critical thinking** instruction through **English literature**, particularly via **task-based learning (TBL)** methodologies. This pedagogical synergy aligns with global educational reforms emphasizing student agency, higher-order thinking, and intercultural competence (Facione, 2015; OECD, 2018). Critical thinking, defined as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information for purposeful decision-making, is essential for academic success, civic participation, and lifelong learning (Paul & Elder, 2006). Despite its recognized value, many ESL classrooms, especially in post-Soviet and developing contexts, remain rooted in teacher-centered grammar instruction, prioritizing memorization over independent reasoning (Taglieber et al., 2017). This instructional paradigm neglects the development of essential 21st-century skills and limits learners' engagement with language as a tool for meaning-making, self-expression, and argumentation. As research has shown, ESL learners who receive explicit instruction in critical thinking tend to outperform their peers in writing, reading comprehension, and oral discourse (Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010). English literature provides a rich, authentic medium through which critical thinking can be cultivated. Through engagement with diverse texts – ranging from classical poetry to contemporary short stories – students are invited to explore multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and analyze characters' motivations and thematic undercurrents. Literary texts not only introduce cultural and linguistic complexity but also stimulate emotional and intellectual engagement, making them ideal platforms for deeper reflection and analysis (Lazar, 2009). Furthermore, when literature is coupled with **task-based learning** – an instructional model that emphasizes real-world, meaning-focused activities – students are encouraged to engage actively with content, collaborate with peers, and apply critical thinking in communicative settings (Willis & Willis, 2007). Tasks such as role-plays, debates, creative rewrites, and thematic projects transform literature lessons into dynamic environments that foster linguistic, cognitive, and interpersonal growth.

In the context of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Preschool and School Education has increasingly promoted communicative competence and modern teaching methods in foreign language instruction (MoPSE, 2022). National curricular reforms have highlighted the importance of integrating 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, into English language teaching at the secondary and tertiary levels. However, implementation remains uneven. Many teachers lack the methodological training to incorporate literature-based tasks or to assess critical thinking skills systematically. Textbook content often lacks cultural diversity and higher-order questioning prompts, limiting its potential to foster reflective discourse. Moreover, high-stakes exams continue to prioritize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary recall, inadvertently discouraging experimental, task-based learning approaches. Nevertheless, numerous grassroots efforts – often supported by NGOs, teacher communities, and university-led training programs – have begun to introduce literature-driven, task-oriented teaching strategies

into Uzbek ESL classrooms. These initiatives often reveal that even with limited resources, educators can successfully cultivate critical thinking by integrating short literary texts, guided discussions, and scaffolded writing assignments. Moreover, students frequently respond with increased motivation, improved language retention, and more nuanced thinking when exposed to literature-infused tasks. This article explores the theoretical foundations and practical applications of teaching critical thinking through English literature in ESL contexts, with a specific focus on Uzbekistan. Drawing on recent research in applied linguistics, educational psychology, and second language pedagogy, it examines how literature-based tasks promote critical thinking and what challenges educators face in implementing these approaches. By analyzing classroom practices, reviewing national policies, and presenting evidence-based recommendations, this study aims to offer actionable insights for English teachers, curriculum designers, and policy-makers seeking to foster deeper learning in their ESL programs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a **qualitative content analysis** method to explore how English literature can be effectively used to foster **critical thinking** in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, specifically through **task-based language teaching (TBLT)** strategies. The research was based on **secondary data analysis** from a range of peer-reviewed academic articles, curriculum reports, teacher training manuals, and international educational policy documents published between **2015 and 2025**. No original fieldwork was conducted, and all findings were synthesized from authentic, scholarly sources to ensure academic accuracy. The methodological framework was guided by the **constructivist learning theory** (Vygotsky, 1978) and the **cognitive academic language learning approach** (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), both of which align with the principles of critical thinking development through literature-based instruction. Additionally, **Ellis's (2003)** model of task-based language teaching provided the pedagogical lens for analyzing classroom implementation strategies.

The data corpus for this study included over **30 scholarly sources**, retrieved from databases such as **ERIC, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online**. The selection criteria for these documents were:

1. Publications between 2015–2025 that focus on ESL teaching, literature instruction, critical thinking, or TBLT.
2. Empirical studies conducted in non-native English contexts, especially in **Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe**.
3. Government policy papers, such as Uzbekistan's **National Curriculum for Foreign Languages** (MoPE, 2021), that prioritize critical thinking and communicative competence in language learning.

The analysis process followed a **thematic coding strategy**. After a comprehensive literature review, the materials were manually coded based on recurring themes such as:

1. **Pedagogical Integration** – how literature is used to trigger higher-order thinking.
2. **Task Design** – how task-based lessons stimulate analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.
3. **Learner Outcomes** – measurable effects on students' critical thinking skills.
4. **Teacher Preparedness** – professional development and instructional competence.

All sources were examined using a **triangulation approach** to ensure consistency and validity of the themes (Creswell, 2013). A matrix was created to compare findings across geographic regions and institutional settings, helping to establish both context-specific and generalizable patterns.

RESULTS

Findings across multiple studies confirm that literature-based tasks foster student engagement, learner autonomy, and higher-order thinking in ESL environments. When literary texts are used as prompts for inquiry-based tasks – such as debates, thematic essays, and creative rewriting – students demonstrate increased motivation and deeper language interaction (Chou, 2016; Aliyeva, 2022). For example, in the British Council’s “Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom” initiative (2019), Uzbek secondary learners involved in project-based literary activities (e.g., interpreting metaphor in poetry or role-playing scenes from drama) outperformed control groups in both language fluency and inferential comprehension. In particular, the integration of short stories with open-ended questions was shown to promote critical reflection and scaffolded dialogue.

1. Cognitive and Linguistic Development through Critical Reading

Critical thinking tasks based on literary analysis were strongly associated with improvements in both cognitive flexibility and linguistic competence. ESL learners exposed to explicit instruction in argumentative reasoning, point-of-view recognition, and evidence-based discussion developed stronger analytical skills and vocabulary acquisition (Khatib et al., 2011). In Uzbekistan, a 2021 pilot program in Fergana region, led by local teacher trainers in partnership with the Ministry of Public Education, involved 150 high school students in literature circles based on adapted English novels. Post-intervention assessments showed a 27% improvement in critical reading scores and a 19% increase in academic vocabulary usage, as measured by a locally developed rubric (MoPE, 2022).

2. Teacher Preparedness and Resource Availability

Despite the pedagogical value of critical thinking tasks, implementation remains uneven due to gaps in teacher training and material accessibility. According to a 2023 needs assessment by the Republican Education Development Center, only 32% of surveyed English teachers in Uzbekistan reported confidence in designing and assessing critical thinking tasks. Many cited challenges such as unfamiliarity with literature-based pedagogy, lack of authentic ESL texts, and insufficient training in higher-order questioning. The British Council’s 2020 teacher workshops in Tashkent and Samarkand attempted to address this gap by providing professional development in scaffolding critical tasks using Bloom’s Taxonomy. Evaluation of the program revealed that 74% of participating teachers felt more capable of integrating analysis, evaluation, and synthesis activities into their language lessons.

3. Cultural Contextualization of Critical Thinking

The successful implementation of critical thinking instruction is closely linked to cultural perceptions of authority, discussion norms, and learner autonomy. In many Uzbek classrooms, traditional teacher-centered instruction prevails, which may limit open dialogue or questioning (Saidova, 2020). However, when task-based literature instruction was introduced through culturally relevant texts – such as folktales, allegories, or bilingual poetry – learners demonstrated greater willingness to express opinions, challenge interpretations, and engage in peer collaboration. In a classroom-

based study conducted in Namangan in 2020, students responded positively to tasks based on simplified English translations of Uzbek authors (e.g., Abdulla Qodiriy), suggesting that culturally adapted literature can act as a bridge between critical thinking and local learning values.

Overall, the findings highlight that literature-based, task-driven approaches significantly enhance critical thinking and language development among ESL learners. However, the approach requires systematic support in teacher training, material development, and cultural sensitivity to realize its full potential in Uzbek educational contexts.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study underscore the significant potential of using English literature as a vehicle for developing critical thinking among ESL learners through task-based learning (TBL). Consistent with earlier findings in regional and international literature, the integration of literary texts into the ESL classroom appears to foster analytical skills, promote learner autonomy, and stimulate deeper engagement with language and meaning (Chou, 2016; Khatib et al., 2011). In particular, the use of **open-ended tasks** – such as character analysis, thematic exploration, and creative rewriting – enabled students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and engage with inferential reasoning. This aligns with constructivist theories of learning, which posit that meaning is best constructed through active, student-centered experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, the emphasis on **literary interpretation** offers a natural platform for developing higher-order thinking skills, as learners are required to evaluate multiple perspectives, justify interpretations, and articulate evidence-based opinions. At the same time, the findings also highlight **critical challenges** to the implementation of this approach in Uzbekistan and similar ESL contexts. Chief among these is the **insufficient training** of English teachers in designing and facilitating critical thinking tasks. As the data from the Republican Education Development Center (2023) suggests, only a minority of teachers report confidence in their ability to lead discussions or assess analytical thinking. Without adequate professional development and pedagogical support, even the most well-designed materials may fail to translate into meaningful classroom practice. Furthermore, cultural factors play a non-negligible role in shaping how critical thinking is taught and received. In Uzbekistan, as in many collectivist cultures, educational environments often favor **rote learning and teacher authority** over debate or individual critique (Saidova, 2020).

Thus, introducing critical tasks through **culturally familiar content**, such as adapted Uzbek folktales or bilingual poetry, may serve as a pragmatic bridge between traditional expectations and modern pedagogical goals. This suggests that **localization of materials** is not merely a linguistic task, but a cultural and cognitive necessity. Notably, the **positive learner outcomes** in regions where pilot programs were implemented – such as improved critical reading scores and increased academic vocabulary – support the claim that task-based literature instruction can be both linguistically enriching and cognitively stimulating. However, it is also clear that these gains are contingent upon **institutional commitment**, including curriculum reform, availability of resources, and integration of critical thinking benchmarks in national assessment frameworks. Finally, while this study is based on a synthesis of qualitative findings and policy reports, further empirical research is needed. **Classroom-based experimental studies**, longitudinal evaluations, and comparative assessments across regions would provide stronger evidence for the sustained impact of this method.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the integration of critical thinking instruction into English literature teaching for ESL learners, with a specific focus on task-based learning (TBL) methodologies. The findings from literature review and comparative analysis reveal that English literature, when paired with structured tasks and learner-centered strategies, offers a compelling avenue for developing higher-order thinking skills among second language learners. Through narrative interpretation, analytical discussion, and role-based inquiry, students engage in authentic cognitive processes that mirror real-life problem solving and argumentation.

At the same time, the implementation of critical thinking instruction in ESL classrooms – particularly in contexts such as Uzbekistan – faces substantial pedagogical and institutional challenges. Chief among these are traditional teacher-centered methodologies, limited teacher training in critical thinking pedagogy, exam-oriented curricula, and a general lack of contextualized resources that combine literary study with skills-based language learning. Without adequate support and professional development, ESL educators may find it difficult to shift from text comprehension to cognitive engagement through tasks. Nevertheless, the growing body of global and regional research points to the transformative potential of integrating TBL and literature-based instruction. Countries such as Malaysia, Turkey, and South Korea have reported measurable improvements in student reasoning, participation, and academic autonomy following the inclusion of critical thinking frameworks into English teaching practices (Chou, 2016; Zainuddin et al., 2019). These outcomes provide a valuable reference point for Uzbek educational reform efforts. For Uzbekistan to fully benefit from this pedagogical intersection, strategic changes are necessary at both the classroom and policy levels. These include embedding critical thinking competencies into national English language curricula, funding teacher training programs that include practical workshops on literature-based TBL, and encouraging schools to pilot literature circles, debate formats, and inquiry-based writing tasks as part of regular instruction. Ministries of Education and higher education institutions must also update language teacher education programs to reflect these evolving priorities.

In conclusion, teaching critical thinking through English literature in ESL contexts is not merely a trend but a vital educational goal aligned with 21st-century skills development. By combining culturally relevant texts, dialogic interaction, and task-based methods, educators can foster learners who are not only linguistically competent but also intellectually independent. In doing so, language classrooms can become sites of critical literacy, civic engagement, and cognitive growth – equipping students to think beyond the text and contribute meaningfully to an interconnected world.

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