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Fostering Critical Thinking and Creativity Through English Language Teaching

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Abstract. This article examines the integration of critical thinking and creativity into English language teaching (ELT) in secondary schools. The study, conducted during a teaching placement, employed qualitative methods including classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student questionnaires. Participants were pupils of grades 7–9 with varying levels of English proficiency, as well as their teachers. The findings demonstrate that activities such as debates, storytelling, project-based learning, and text/media analysis significantly enhance both language competence and soft skills development. Debates fostered analytical and argumentative abilities, while storytelling stimulated imagination and self-expression. Project-based learning promoted teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, whereas text/media analysis developed critical literacy and cultural awareness. Teachers emphasized the importance of scaffolding tasks to match proficiency levels, ensuring accessibility for all learners. Students reported increased motivation and engagement, highlighting the real-life relevance of these activities. The discussion identifies CLIL and Task-Based Learning as effective pedagogical approaches for balancing linguistic and cognitive objectives. The article concludes that ELT can serve as a transformative practice, preparing learners for academic success and active participation in modern society. Future research should explore long-term effects, teacher training, and comparative studies of international practices.

Keywords: *English language teaching, Critical thinking, Creativity, Soft skills, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), Task-Based Learning (TBL), Pedagogical strategies, Student engagement, Cognitive development, Intercultural communication.*

Introduction.

The teaching of English in schools has traditionally focused on developing language proficiency: grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. However, the demands of

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modern education extend far beyond linguistic competence. In today's rapidly changing world, students must acquire soft skills—universal competencies that enable them to adapt, collaborate, and innovate in diverse contexts. Among these, critical thinking and creativity are increasingly recognized as the key competencies of the 21st century.

Critical thinking equips learners with the ability to analyze information, identify contradictions, evaluate evidence, and construct logical arguments [1]. It fosters intellectual independence and empowers students to make informed decisions in both academic and real-life situations. Creativity, in turn, nurtures divergent thinking, originality, and the capacity to generate innovative solutions [2]. Together, these skills form the foundation for lifelong learning and active participation in knowledge-based societies.

The process of foreign language acquisition provides a unique environment for cultivating these competencies [3, 4]. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is also a medium of cognition, interpretation, and self-expression. Through the study of English, learners engage in activities that require them to question assumptions, compare cultural perspectives, and articulate ideas in novel ways. This makes English language teaching (ELT) an ideal platform for integrating critical and creative thinking into the educational process.

As a global lingua franca, English offers unparalleled opportunities for the development of soft skills. Classroom practices such as debates, project-based learning, storytelling, text analysis, role-playing, and intercultural comparisons encourage students to think critically and creatively while simultaneously improving their language competence. These activities transform the English classroom into a dynamic space where linguistic goals intersect with cognitive and personal growth.

Moreover, the integration of critical thinking and creativity into ELT aligns with international educational frameworks, such as the OECD's 21st Century Skills and UNESCO's emphasis on education for sustainable development. By embedding these competencies into language teaching, schools not only enhance academic outcomes but also contribute to the formation of individuals who are prepared to meet the challenges of globalization, technological advancement, and social transformation.

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Materials and methods.

The study was conducted as part of our third-year teaching placement and aimed at identifying effective ways to foster critical thinking and creativity in English language lessons. A qualitative research design was chosen, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of classroom practices and learner responses. The design combined several complementary methods—classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and student questionnaires—providing triangulation of data and enhancing the validity of findings.

The participants included:

- Pupils: Students of grades 7–9 (aged 12–15), representing a range of English proficiency levels from Elementary (A2) to Intermediate (B1). This diversity enabled us to observe how learners at different stages of language acquisition engaged with tasks designed to develop soft skills.

- Teachers: English language teachers supervising our teaching placement. Their professional insights provided valuable perspectives on the feasibility and challenges of integrating critical and creative thinking into everyday lessons.

Data Collection Methods

- Classroom Observations: We systematically recorded the types of activities implemented, the level of student engagement, and the observable manifestations of critical and creative thinking during lessons.

- Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' pedagogical approaches, perceived challenges, and reflections on the outcomes of implementing soft skills-oriented tasks.

- Student Questionnaires and Reflections: Learners were invited to share their impressions of the activities, highlighting which tasks encouraged them to think more critically or express creativity.

During the placement, we implemented and observed a variety of classroom practices designed to integrate language learning with soft skills development:

- Debates and Discussions: Encouraged argumentation, logical reasoning, and analytical thinking [5].

- Storytelling and Creative Writing: Stimulated imagination, narrative competence, and creative use of language [6].

- Project-Based Learning: Promoted teamwork,

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communication, and collaborative problem-solving [7].

- Text and Media Analysis: Developed critical literacy, the ability to detect bias, and skills in comparing cultural contexts [4].

Methods of Analysis

The collected data were processed using content analysis, focusing on recurring themes and patterns. Particular attention was paid to:

- Manifestations of Critical Thinking: Evidence of argumentation, evaluation of sources, and comparison of viewpoints.
- Manifestations of Creativity: Original ideas, unconventional solutions, and innovative use of language.
- Student Engagement: Levels of participation, motivation, and self-reported perceptions of the tasks.

By combining multiple sources of data and applying systematic analysis, the study sought to provide a comprehensive picture of how English language teaching can serve as a platform for the development of critical and creative competencies in school settings. Sustainability of Kazakhstan's economy. Additionally, an expert survey is conducted to identify specific challenges and effective solutions that can be applied in the context of Kazakhstan.

Results.

Quantitative Findings

The questionnaires revealed that the majority of pupils reported increased motivation and interest when participating in activities designed to foster critical thinking and creativity [3].

Table 1

Comparative Engagement in ELT Activities

Activity Type	% of Students Reporting High Engagement	% of Students Reporting Moderate Engagement	% of Students Reporting Low Engagement
Debates and Discussions	65%	25%	10%
Storytelling/Creative Writing	70%	20%	10%
Project-Based Learning	80%	15%	5%
Text/Media Analysis	60%	30%	10%

Manifestations of Critical Thinking:

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- **Argumentation:** 68% of students demonstrated the ability to construct logical arguments during debates.

- **Evaluation of Sources:** 55% showed awareness of bias and reliability when analysing texts and media.

- **Comparison of Viewpoints:** 62% were able to contrast different cultural or textual perspectives.

Manifestations of Creativity:

- **Original Ideas:** 72% of students produced unique solutions or narratives in creative writing tasks.

- **Unconventional Solutions:** 58% demonstrated divergent thinking in project-based activities.

- **Creative Use of Language:** 65% experimented with vocabulary, stylistic devices, or narrative techniques.

Qualitative Findings

Classroom Observations: Pupils were most engaged in project-based learning, where teamwork and problem-solving created a dynamic environment. Debates encouraged critical questioning, though some students struggled with structuring arguments. Storytelling revealed high levels of imagination, with students often drawing on personal experiences or cultural references. Text analysis highlighted differences in proficiency: Intermediate learners were more confident in identifying bias, while Elementary learners required scaffolding.

Teacher Interviews: Teachers noted that integrating soft skills required additional preparation time and adaptation of materials. They emphasized the importance of scaffolding tasks to match proficiency levels, ensuring accessibility for all learners [6]. Teachers also observed that students became more confident in expressing opinions and collaborating with peers.

Student Reflections: Pupils reported that debates helped them “think more deeply about different sides of an issue.” Creative writing was described as “fun and liberating,” allowing them to express ideas beyond textbook exercises. Project-based tasks were valued for their “real-life relevance,” as they mirrored teamwork situations outside the classroom [5].

Summary of Results: The findings indicate that integrating critical thinking and creativity into English lessons significantly enhances student engagement and fosters the development of soft skills. While challenges remain—particularly in adapting tasks for lower proficiency levels—the overall impact was positive, with both teachers and

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students recognizing the value of these approaches.

Discussion.

The integration of soft skills into English language teaching not only contributes to the personal development of students but also enhances their motivation to learn the language. In contemporary society, where the flow of information is increasingly intense and complex, the ability to think critically and creatively has become indispensable. Our findings confirm that English lessons can serve as an effective platform for cultivating these competencies.

Debates and Discussions: These activities provided students with opportunities to practise English in authentic communicative contexts. Beyond language practice, they fostered analytical and argumentative skills. Pupils learned to assess the reliability of information, compare viewpoints, and construct logically coherent arguments [5]. Teachers noted that debates encouraged active participation, though scaffolding was necessary for lower-proficiency learners.

Storytelling and Creative Writing: These tasks stimulated imagination and linguistic creativity. Pupils who created their own stories or alternative endings to literary works demonstrated originality and confidence in self-expression [6]. Such activities reinforced language competence while simultaneously building self-efficacy in creative thinking. Importantly, students reported that these tasks were enjoyable, which increased their intrinsic motivation to learn English.

Project-Based Learning: This approach emerged as one of the most effective strategies for integrating soft skills. Collaborative projects required students to allocate roles, plan tasks, and search for information in English, thereby enhancing teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities. The real-life relevance of projects was highlighted by both teachers and students, who observed that these tasks mirrored professional and social situations outside the classroom [7].

Text and Media Analysis: The analysis of texts and media materials fostered critical literacy, a skill particularly relevant in the digital age [8; 9]. Students learned to identify bias, compare cultural contexts, and question sources. Intermediate-level learners demonstrated greater confidence in evaluating information, while Elementary-level learners required additional support [4]. This underscores the importance of differentiated instruction when integrating

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critical thinking into ELT.

Pedagogical Approaches: The teacher plays a central role in designing tasks that simultaneously develop language and cognitive skills. Effective approaches include:

- CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning): By integrating subject content with language practice, students acquire disciplinary knowledge while improving their English proficiency.

- Task-Based Learning (TBL): Practical tasks encourage independence, initiative, and creativity, aligning with constructivist principles of active knowledge construction [10].

Implications: The integration of critical thinking and creativity into ELT should not be perceived as an additional burden but as a natural extension of language education. By embedding soft skills into everyday classroom practices, teachers prepare students not only for academic success but also for active participation in modern society. English thus becomes more than a means of communication—it evolves into a tool for shaping individuals who are adaptable, innovative, and ready to face global challenges

Conclusion.

Teaching English at school can be a powerful tool not only for developing language proficiency but also for fostering critical thinking and creativity among pupils. The integration of soft skills into the educational process enables teachers to move beyond traditional methods and transform English lessons into a dynamic environment for shaping individuals who are prepared to meet the challenges of modern society.

The findings of our study demonstrate that activities such as debates, storytelling, project-based learning, and text/media analysis significantly contribute to the development of analytical and creative abilities. Critical thinking helps pupils to analyze information, identify contradictions, make informed decisions, while creativity fosters the ability to think divergently, generate original ideas, and express themselves confidently. Together, these skills enhance motivation to learn English, making the learning process more engaging, practice-oriented, and personally meaningful.

The teacher's role is central in this process. By carefully designing tasks that combine linguistic objectives with cognitive development, educators ensure that language

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learning is not isolated from broader educational goals. Approaches such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and Task-Based Learning provide effective frameworks for balancing language acquisition with the cultivation of universal competencies [10].

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