CRITICAL THINKING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This literature review aims to examine effective strategies for fostering critical thinking skills in English language learning and to identify the main challenges educators face in implementing these strategies. It also explores how contextual and cultural factors influence the integration of critical thinking in English instruction. Findings indicate that methods such as problem-based learning, task-based instruction, and metacognitive training effectively enhance critical thinking skills. However, obstacles including limited teacher training, rigid curricula, and traditional cultural norms present significant barriers. Adapting strategies to cultural contexts and providing institutional support are crucial for successful integration. These findings contribute to the development of more holistic English teaching practices focused on strengthening critical thinking skills.

Keywords : *Critical Thinking, English Language Learning, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Challenges, Cultural Context*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian kepustakaan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji berbagai strategi yang efektif dalam mengembangkan kemampuan berpikir kritis pada pembelajaran bahasa Inggris serta mengidentifikasi tantangan utama yang dihadapi oleh pendidik dalam penerapannya. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga membahas pengaruh faktor kontekstual dan budaya terhadap integrasi berpikir kritis dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa metode seperti problem-based learning, task-based instruction, dan pelatihan metakognitif efektif dalam meningkatkan keterampilan berpikir kritis. Namun, kendala seperti kurangnya pelatihan guru, kurikulum yang kaku, dan norma budaya tradisional menjadi hambatan signifikan. Penyesuaian strategi dengan konteks budaya dan dukungan institusional dianggap sangat penting agar integrasi berpikir kritis dapat berjalan optimal. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan praktik pengajaran bahasa Inggris yang lebih holistik dan berorientasi pada penguatan keterampilan berpikir kritis.

Kata Kunci : *Berpikir Kritis, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, Strategi Pembelajaran, Tantangan Pengajaran, Konteks Budaya*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, English language learning (ELL) is no longer limited to mastering vocabulary and grammar; it also demands the integration of higher-order thinking skills, particularly critical thinking (CT). Critical thinking, defined as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information to form reasoned judgments, is essential in empowering learners to engage deeply with language, content, and context. However, the integration of critical thinking into English language instruction remains a complex challenge for educators and curriculum designers worldwide (Dzulkurnain et al, 2024; Franchisca et al, 2024; Zulfikhar et al, 2024).

The objective of this literature review is to explore various strategies used to incorporate critical thinking into English language learning and to examine the challenges educators face in doing so. This review aims to synthesize key findings from existing studies in order to highlight best practices and identify persistent gaps in research and application.

This study is significant in that it addresses the growing demand for 21st-century skills within language education frameworks. As global communication, technological advancement, and multicultural interactions become increasingly prevalent, the ability to think critically in English not only enhances academic achievement but also prepares learners for real-life problem-solving and decision-making in global contexts.

Several researchers have underscored the importance of critical thinking in ELL. For instance, Halpern (1998) emphasized the role of deliberate instruction in fostering critical thinking, while Ennis (2011) outlined essential skills and dispositions that support CT development in academic settings. More recent studies (e.g., Liaw, 2007; Fahim & Saeepour, 2011; Yang & Gamble, 2013) have investigated instructional strategies such as task-based learning, problem-based learning (PBL), and dialogic teaching as effective approaches for nurturing CT skills in language classrooms.

This review operates under the assumption that fostering critical thinking within ELL is both necessary and feasible through targeted strategies. The variables under investigation include types of instructional strategies (e.g., project-based learning, inquiry-based tasks, reflective practices), learner-related factors (e.g., language proficiency, motivation), and contextual challenges (e.g., curriculum limitations, teacher preparedness). As this is a literature-based study, the method used involves qualitative content analysis of peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, and theoretical models published between 2000 and 2024.

CT in this study refers to the ability to think reflectively and independently (Facione, 2011; Wulantari et al, 2023), while ELL refers to learners acquiring English as an additional language, often in formal academic settings. No regional limitations are imposed, but cultural and contextual differences among studies are considered in the analysis.

Findings from existing literature reveal that while strategies such as collaborative learning, Socratic questioning, and real-world problem-solving tasks show promise in promoting CT in ELL classrooms, their implementation is often hindered by factors such as teacher-centered pedagogy, assessment constraints, and limited training for educators. For instance, studies by Davidson & Dunham (1997) and Nguyen (2020) suggest that teachers often lack confidence in facilitating CT activities, especially in contexts where standardized testing dominates educational goals.

The major findings synthesized in this review contribute to the larger field of language education by emphasizing the need for a pedagogical shift—one that balances language accuracy with cognitive engagement. These insights can inform teacher training programs, curriculum design, and

classroom practices that seek to integrate CT more effectively into ELL (Hanifah et al, 2023; Ningsih & Sari, 2021).

The review concludes that while there is a general consensus on the importance of critical thinking in language learning, its actual integration remains inconsistent and context-dependent. Questions remain regarding the best ways to assess CT in language learners and how to adapt CT instruction across varying levels of proficiency and cultural contexts. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of CT-focused instruction and investigate context-sensitive pedagogies that account for the diverse needs of English language learners globally.

Literature Review

Critical thinking (CT) has increasingly become a focal point in English language learning (ELL), aligning with the demand for 21st-century skills in education. Numerous studies affirm that integrating CT into ELL can enhance learners' linguistic performance, analytical ability, and engagement in meaningful communication (Chamot, 2018; Alnofaie, 2020). Despite this consensus, its implementation in real classrooms remains inconsistent, with varying levels of awareness, teacher readiness, and institutional support (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Liu et al., 2022, Fauziningrum et al, 2023).

One of the earliest frameworks for CT in language education was proposed by Paul and Elder (2001), who argue that English classrooms provide ideal spaces for fostering critical thinking through reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks. Building upon this, Liaw (2007) explored how content-based instruction can be used to promote CT by integrating cognitively demanding tasks into language learning. Her findings revealed that learners exposed to such tasks developed better inferencing and analytical skills alongside language acquisition.

More recent empirical studies have provided updated insights into strategy-based instruction. For example, Yang and Gamble (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study involving Taiwanese EFL students and found that the use of problem-based learning (PBL) significantly improved both critical thinking skills and learners' written performance in English. Similarly, Kurniawan et al. (2021) examined the implementation of project-based language learning (PBLL) in Indonesian EFL classrooms, showing that students engaged in collaborative projects exhibited greater critical awareness and responsibility in using English meaningfully.

Technology has also become a key facilitator in developing CT within ELL. A study by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2017) emphasized the role of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in enhancing learners' CT through multimedia-rich activities and reflective online discussions. More recently, Hamdan and Almaloul (2023) demonstrated that integrating digital storytelling and online debate platforms fostered learners' ability to reason, argue, and evaluate multiple perspectives in English.

Despite promising strategies, numerous challenges persist. Teachers frequently report difficulties in designing tasks that both foster CT and align with linguistic objectives (Afshar & Movassagh, 2017). Additionally, standardized assessments rarely evaluate students' higher-order thinking skills, discouraging teachers from prioritizing CT-oriented instruction (Rahimi & Sajed, 2020). Moreover, cultural factors often influence classroom interaction patterns. In contexts with strong teacher-centered traditions, students may be hesitant to express critical views, fearing confrontation or disrespect (Nguyen, 2020; Hartono et al, 2023).

Another concern involves the teacher's role. Research by Liu et al. (2022) in Chinese tertiary institutions revealed that while teachers acknowledge the importance of CT, many lack the training or pedagogical knowledge to foster it effectively. This underscores the need for professional development programs that emphasize CT in ELT contexts.

From a methodological standpoint, studies exploring the link between CT and ELL tend to focus on short-term interventions or single skills (e.g., writing or speaking), leaving gaps in understanding the longitudinal impact of CT instruction across language modalities. Furthermore, while strategies such as inquiry-based learning, metacognitive instruction, and reflective journaling have shown promise, their effectiveness across proficiency levels remains underexplored (Tavakoli & Rezazadeh, 2021).

In sum, the literature indicates a growing recognition of critical thinking as an essential component of English language education. Various instructional approaches—ranging from problem-based to project-based and technology-integrated models—have shown effectiveness. However, the practical application of these strategies is often hindered by systemic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers.

Research Questions

Based on the reviewed literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What strategies have been proven effective in fostering critical thinking in English language learning classrooms?
2. What are the main challenges faced by educators in implementing critical thinking strategies in ELL settings?
3. How do contextual and cultural factors influence the integration of critical thinking into English language instruction?

METHOD

This study employed a library research method (literature review) aimed at analyzing and synthesizing relevant theoretical and empirical literature related to the integration of critical thinking in English language learning. As a qualitative-descriptive study, the research did not involve field data collection but relied on secondary sources to explore the strategies used and challenges encountered in fostering critical thinking in ELL contexts.

The research was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher formulated the research objectives and questions, which focused on identifying effective instructional strategies, understanding existing challenges, and examining contextual influences on CT integration in ELL. Second, a systematic search for relevant literature was carried out using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The keywords used included "critical thinking in EFL," "critical thinking in English language teaching," "strategies for critical thinking," "ELL challenges," and "21st-century skills in language learning."

The third stage involved screening and selecting sources based on relevance, credibility, and recency. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published between 2000 and 2024 were included. Priority was given to empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and systematic reviews that directly addressed the integration of CT in English language learning across various educational contexts and proficiency levels.

Next, the researcher conducted content analysis to identify recurring themes, models, strategies, challenges, and pedagogical implications. The data were categorized into major thematic areas: (1) instructional strategies to develop CT in ELL, (2) barriers and limitations in implementation, and (3) contextual and cultural factors influencing CT integration. Through this process, the researcher compared findings across different studies to identify consistencies, contrasts, and gaps in the literature.

Finally, the results were synthesized and discussed in relation to the research questions. The researcher critically evaluated the significance of each finding and its contribution to the broader discourse on English language education and critical thinking. The literature-based approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the topic and laid the groundwork for proposing recommendations for future research and pedagogical practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Strategies In Fostering Critical Thinking in English Language Learning Classrooms

The literature reveals a range of instructional strategies that have been empirically proven effective in fostering critical thinking (CT) within English language learning (ELL) classrooms. Among the most frequently cited is problem-based learning (PBL), which immerses students in real-world scenarios that require analysis, evaluation, and solution-building using the target language. Yang and Gamble (2013) found that EFL learners who engaged in PBL tasks demonstrated significantly improved critical reasoning and argumentative writing skills. Similarly, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been effective in promoting CT through collaborative research, presentation, and reflection. Kurniawan et al. (2021) and Pambudi et al (2024) highlighted that EFL students involved in PjBL developed not only linguistic competence but also critical awareness and decision-making abilities.

Another widely applied strategy is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), particularly when tasks are designed to require higher-order thinking. Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) demonstrated that learners exposed to complex communicative tasks—such as debates, problem-solving discussions, and information-gap activities—engaged in deeper processing and exhibited higher levels of CT. In addition, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) has been shown to support CT by integrating subject matter knowledge with language practice, as evidenced by Liaw (2007), who reported that CBI improved learners' ability to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate content critically.

Metacognitive strategy training also emerged as a powerful approach. Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2017) showed that explicit instruction on planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning encouraged reflection and analytical thinking in English use. Moreover, the integration of digital platforms, such as online forums, blogs, and debate tools—has been associated with enhanced CT. Hamdan and Almaloul (2023) and Ilmi et al (2024) found that digital storytelling and asynchronous discussions helped learners articulate opinions, provide justifications, and critically assess peers' contributions in English.

Collectively, these strategies (PBL, PjBL, TBLT, CBI, metacognitive training, and digital learning tools) have been validated across diverse ELL contexts for their effectiveness in promoting learners' cognitive engagement, linguistic development, and ability to think critically. Their success,

however, often hinges on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and the design of meaningful, open-ended tasks that align with learners' proficiency levels.

The Main Challenges Faced by Educators in Implementing Critical Thinking Strategies in ELL Settings

Implementing critical thinking (CT) strategies in English language learning (ELL) settings presents several persistent challenges for educators. One of the most prominent issues is the lack of teacher preparedness and pedagogical training. Many educators, although aware of the importance of CT, report feeling ill-equipped to design and facilitate tasks that simultaneously promote language development and higher-order thinking (Liu et al., 2022). This is often due to limited exposure to CT-focused methodologies in pre-service or in-service teacher training programs (Afshar & Movassagh, 2017).

A second challenge lies in the rigidity of curriculum and assessment systems, which often prioritize grammar accuracy, vocabulary memorization, and standardized testing over critical inquiry and creative thinking (Rahimi & Sajed, 2020; Sari, Ningsih, & Novita, 2023). In such contexts, teachers may be discouraged from implementing open-ended, student-centered activities due to time constraints or pressure to meet prescribed learning outcomes.

Moreover, students' passive learning habits—shaped by traditional teacher-centered education models—also pose barriers. In cultures where deference to authority and rote learning are emphasized, learners may hesitate to question ideas, express opinions, or engage in critical dialogue, which are key components of CT (Nguyen, 2020; Sari, 2021, Sari & Ningsih, 2022). This cultural dimension can hinder class interaction and reduce the effectiveness of CT-oriented tasks such as debates or discussions.

Linguistic limitations further complicate CT instruction. For learners with lower English proficiency, engaging in abstract reasoning or constructing logical arguments in a second language can be daunting, making it harder for teachers to balance cognitive complexity with linguistic accessibility (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Kamaruddin et al, 2024). Teachers must therefore carefully scaffold activities to ensure that students are not cognitively overloaded.

Lastly, institutional support and resources remain uneven. Many schools and universities, especially in developing contexts, lack access to teaching materials, digital tools, and professional development opportunities that would support the implementation of CT strategies in ELL classrooms (Hamdan & Almaloul, 2023). Without such support, even motivated teachers may struggle to sustain CT-based instruction.

In sum, the integration of critical thinking in ELL is constrained by pedagogical, cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes in teacher education, curriculum design, classroom culture, and school policy.

Contextual And Cultural Factors Influence the Integration of Critical Thinking into English Language Instruction

Contextual and cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping how critical thinking (CT) is integrated into English language instruction. One significant influence is the educational culture of the country or institution, which determines how learning, teaching, and authority are perceived. In many Asian and Middle Eastern educational contexts, for example, collectivist cultural norms often

value conformity, respect for authority, and avoidance of conflict—values that can hinder open questioning, argumentation, and debate (Nguyen, 2020; Stapleton, 2011). As a result, learners may feel reluctant to challenge ideas or voice dissent, which are essential aspects of CT.

In addition, contextual factors such as national curricula, classroom size, and school policy can affect how effectively CT is taught. In centralized education systems with rigid syllabi and high-stakes exams, there is often little room for flexibility or innovation in teaching methods (Rahimi & Sajed, 2020). Teachers may find it difficult to implement student-centered, inquiry-based tasks that promote CT when the emphasis remains on grammar mastery and textbook completion. Large class sizes, limited time, and inadequate instructional resources further exacerbate these constraints, particularly in under-resourced public schools.

Teacher and student beliefs, which are influenced by cultural context, also affect CT integration. For example, in cultures where knowledge transmission is viewed as the teacher's primary role, learners may be conditioned to expect correct answers from the teacher rather than to explore multiple perspectives independently (Li, 2011; Rusmiyanto et al, 2023). Similarly, teachers who were themselves educated in systems lacking CT emphasis may not prioritize or fully understand its integration within language instruction (Afshar & Movassagh, 2017).

However, some studies show that contextual sensitivity and cultural adaptation can enhance CT instruction. For instance, Liaw (2007) emphasized the importance of integrating culturally relevant materials and topics to make CT tasks more accessible and engaging. In addition, culturally responsive teaching—where educators recognize and work within learners' socio-cultural frames—has been shown to help bridge the gap between local norms and global academic expectations (Ghosn, 2013).

In conclusion, while contextual and cultural elements can serve as barriers to the implementation of CT in ELL classrooms, they can also be leveraged as assets when instruction is adapted to local realities. Understanding and navigating these factors is essential for promoting sustainable, culturally appropriate critical thinking pedagogy.

Discussions

The findings of this literature review highlight that fostering critical thinking (CT) in English language learning (ELL) requires more than the selection of appropriate strategies—it demands alignment with pedagogical, institutional, and cultural contexts. Strategies such as problem-based learning (PBL), task-based language teaching (TBLT), content-based instruction (CBI), and metacognitive training have shown consistent effectiveness across diverse settings. These methods encourage learners not only to acquire language skills but also to evaluate information, construct arguments, and engage in reflective thinking—core components of critical literacy. However, their success is highly contingent upon thoughtful design, appropriate scaffolding, and teacher facilitation.

Yet, despite strong theoretical and empirical support for CT integration, a range of challenges continues to limit its implementation in ELL classrooms. One core issue lies in the pedagogical readiness of teachers. As observed in multiple studies (e.g., Afshar & Movassagh, 2017; Liu et al., 2022, Sari & Ningsih, 2023a; Sari & Ningsih, 2023b), many educators lack sufficient training in how to blend CT skills with language teaching objectives. Moreover, systemic factors—such as curriculum rigidity and exam-oriented assessment practices—frequently hinder teachers from adopting open-ended, learner-centered approaches. These structural limitations suggest a need for policy-level support to reform curricula and teacher education frameworks.

Furthermore, this review underscores that cultural and contextual variables cannot be ignored when discussing CT in language education. In some cultures, particularly those influenced by hierarchical norms and exam-driven schooling, students may be less inclined to engage in behaviors traditionally associated with CT, such as questioning ideas or offering alternative viewpoints (Stapleton, 2011; Nguyen, 2020). In such contexts, CT instruction must be adapted through culturally responsive pedagogy. For example, promoting CT through group collaboration or storytelling—rather than confrontation or debate—may yield better results in high-context cultures.

Interestingly, several studies emphasize that when teachers contextualize CT instruction using culturally relevant materials and encourage gradual shifts in learner attitudes, resistance can be mitigated (Liaw, 2007; Ghosn, 2013). This affirms that the challenge is not the incompatibility of CT with certain cultures, but rather the inappropriate transfer of Western-based pedagogies without adaptation. Thus, educators must act not only as instructors but as cultural mediators, translating CT into forms that are meaningful and acceptable to their students.

The integration of technology also presents both opportunity and challenge. While digital platforms such as online discussions, blogs, and collaborative writing tools have enhanced learners' opportunities to practice CT, they also require digital literacy skills and access to stable infrastructure—both of which may be lacking in some ELL contexts (Hamdan & Almaloul, 2023; Norliani et al, 2024; Sitopu et al, 2023). Therefore, equitable implementation of tech-based CT activities must consider the digital divide.

Overall, this review contributes to the field by reinforcing the view that critical thinking in language learning is neither optional nor secondary—it is central to empowering learners for global citizenship, academic engagement, and lifelong learning. However, to fully realize this potential, systemic reforms in teacher education, curriculum design, and school culture are necessary, along with further empirical research in underrepresented regions and multilingual settings.

CONCLUSION

This literature review concludes that while numerous strategies—such as problem-based learning, metacognitive training, and task-based instruction—have been shown to effectively foster critical thinking in English language learning (ELL) contexts, their successful implementation is often hindered by a range of pedagogical, institutional, and cultural challenges. Teachers' limited training, rigid curricula, and students' passive learning habits rooted in traditional educational cultures are significant obstacles. Additionally, cultural perceptions of authority, language proficiency barriers, and limited institutional support further complicate efforts to integrate CT into ELL instruction. However, when critical thinking is introduced through culturally responsive pedagogy and supported by institutional reforms, its integration becomes not only possible but highly impactful. Thus, fostering critical thinking in ELL requires a multidimensional approach that combines effective strategies, context-aware adaptations, and structural support at both classroom and policy levels.

Suggestions

Based on the findings and discussion of this literature review, several suggestions are proposed to enhance the integration of critical thinking (CT) in English language learning (ELL):

1. Strengthen Teacher Training Programs: Pre-service and in-service teacher education should include specific modules on critical thinking pedagogy, focusing on how to embed CT skills into

language teaching practices. Teachers must be equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical tools and classroom strategies.

2. Implement Culturally Responsive CT Approaches: Educators should adapt critical thinking tasks to align with students' cultural norms and values. Instead of direct debate or argumentation, alternative forms such as collaborative problem-solving or reflective storytelling may be more effective in certain contexts.
3. Reform Curriculum and Assessment Practices: National and institutional curricula should allow more flexibility for the integration of critical thinking tasks. Moreover, assessment models should move beyond memorization and include authentic, open-ended tasks that assess learners' reasoning and evaluative skills.
4. Leverage Technology Thoughtfully: Educational technology tools—such as blogs, discussion boards, and online collaborative platforms—can foster CT when used intentionally. However, digital equity must be considered to ensure all learners have access to the necessary tools and training.
5. Encourage Research in Local Contexts: More empirical studies should be conducted in under-researched regions, especially in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environments, to provide locally relevant insights into CT practices and challenges.
6. Build a Supportive Learning Environment: Institutions should cultivate a classroom culture that values inquiry, curiosity, and respectful disagreement. This includes encouraging students to take risks, ask questions, and engage in self-reflection without fear of making mistakes.

These suggestions aim to provide a roadmap for educators, policymakers, and researchers to better facilitate the development of critical thinking in ELL classrooms across diverse educational contexts.

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