

Improving Critical Thinking In English Language Classrooms Through Engaging Activities

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Abstract: This article discusses the importance of promoting critical thinking skills in English language classrooms. It explains how language learning naturally supports deeper thinking, and offers a variety of interactive activities—such as debates, role-plays, story completion, and problem-solving tasks—that help students become thoughtful, independent learners. The article also highlights the teacher’s key role in guiding this process through questions, feedback, and age-appropriate tasks. Practical examples from both primary and secondary levels are included. The conclusion emphasizes that critical thinking not only improves English proficiency but also prepares students for real-life decision-making and problem-solving.

Keywords: Critical thinking, exploration, types of games, debate, method, types of questions, classroom, short stories, age, logic.

Introduction: In modern education, critical thinking is one of the most important skills that students need to develop. It helps them not just to remember facts, but to think deeply, solve problems, and make smart decisions. Schools today are not only places to learn information, but also spaces to grow as thinkers. Language learning, especially English, plays a big role in this process. When students learn a language, they also improve their memory, attention, and ability to understand different ideas. For example, when students read a story in English and talk about the characters’ actions, they learn to analyze situations and give their own opinions. This is where English activities become very powerful. Fun tasks like debates, storytelling, or solving problems in English help students use the language actively while thinking critically. The goal of this article is to show how such English lessons can help students become better thinkers and more confident learners.

Critical thinking means thinking clearly and carefully. It is the ability to ask good questions, find good answers, and understand why something is true or not. When students think critically, they do not just accept information—they try to understand it, check it, and connect it with what they already know. This skill is very important because it leads to deeper learning. For example, instead of just memorizing a grammar rule, a

student with critical thinking will ask, “Why do we use this rule here?” or “How is this different from my language?” Critical thinking also helps with problem-solving. If students face a challenge in reading or writing, they can use logic and creative ideas to find a solution. More importantly, critical thinking makes students more independent. They become confident to make decisions, explain their opinions, and learn by themselves—not just copy what the teacher says. In short, critical thinking builds smart, active, and responsible learners.

Discussion

There are many English language activities that can help students build strong critical thinking skills. One of the most effective is debate. In a debate, students must choose a side on a topic and support their ideas with reasons and examples. This teaches them to think logically, use evidence, and speak clearly. For example, students might discuss “Should students wear school uniforms?” and give arguments for or against the idea. Another helpful activity is role-play and simulation. These allow students to act out real-life situations, like being a doctor and patient or a shopkeeper and customer. This helps them see different points of view and develop empathy while practicing useful English.

Story completion and creative writing also support critical thinking. When students are asked to finish a

story or write their own ending, they use imagination and learn how to make decisions in storytelling. For example, after reading a short story about a lost dog, students could write what they think happened next. Problem-solving tasks, such as classroom escape rooms or English riddles, require teamwork and logical thinking. In these tasks, students must follow clues, make connections, and communicate in English to find a solution. Another rich activity is analyzing songs, poems, or short stories. This teaches students to think about hidden meanings, emotions, and messages in language. For instance, after listening to a song, they can talk about what the lyrics really mean or how the singer feels. Lastly, using open-ended questions during reading or listening helps students go beyond simple answers. Instead of asking, “What is the main idea?”, teachers can ask, “Why do you think the character made that choice?” or “What would you do differently?” These types of questions encourage deeper thinking, reasoning, and personal expression.

To successfully develop critical thinking through English lessons, teachers can apply age-appropriate activities that match the students’ level and interests. For example, in a primary classroom (grades 3–5), a teacher might use a story-based role-play. After reading a story about a character who finds a strange object, students are asked to act out what the character should do next. One group may say, “Take it to the police,” while another suggests, “Keep it and investigate.” This activity helps young learners express ideas, make decisions, and listen to different opinions—all while using simple English. In another primary-level task, a teacher gives students four items (e.g., a pencil, a phone, a book, a cup) and asks: “Which one is most useful and why?” Students must compare and give reasons, encouraging early logical thinking.

In a secondary classroom (grades 6–9), the tasks can be more complex. For instance, students might do a debate on technology, discussing the topic: “Is social media good or bad for teenagers?” They research points, write arguments, and present ideas to the class. Another example is creative writing—the teacher provides a headline like “The Day the School Disappeared” and students write a story with a beginning, middle, and end. After sharing stories, the class discusses which story had the most logical explanation or best solution. In both levels, using open-ended questions during reading, like “What would you do in this situation?” or “What lesson did the character learn?”, helps students think more deeply. These real-life lesson ideas show how teachers can turn any simple language activity into an opportunity to grow students’ critical thinking skills.

The teacher plays a very important role in helping

students develop critical thinking during English lessons. First, the teacher should create a safe and supportive classroom environment, where students feel free to share their ideas without fear of being wrong. This builds confidence and allows students to take risks in thinking and speaking. Teachers also need to use the right guiding questions and scaffolding techniques to help students think step by step. For example, when reading a story, instead of only asking “What happened?”, the teacher can ask, “Why did the character make that choice?” or “What would you do differently?” These kinds of questions help students go deeper in their thinking.

Another important role of the teacher is to choose suitable materials and activities. Tasks should match the age and level of the students but still challenge them to think. For example, for younger learners, picture-based problem-solving tasks can be used, while older students can handle discussions or writing argumentative essays. Teachers must also encourage reflection. After an activity, asking students to explain what they learned or how they solved a problem helps them become more aware of their thinking. In short, the teacher is not just someone who gives information, but a guide who helps students become independent, thoughtful, and active learners through language.

Assessment and feedback are also key parts of building critical thinking in English lessons. Instead of only using tests with right or wrong answers, teachers can use formative assessment—this means checking students’ thinking and understanding during activities, not just at the end. For example, while students are working on a group project or a debate, the teacher can walk around, listen, and ask questions like, “Why did you choose this idea?” or “Can you explain your point again?” This helps students reflect and improve their thinking in the moment. Peer assessment is also useful. Students can give each other feedback, such as “I liked your reason because it was clear” or “Maybe you can add more examples.” This teaches them to listen and think critically about each other’s work.

Self-assessment is another powerful tool. After finishing a task, students can answer questions like, “What did I learn?”, “What was difficult?”, and “How can I do better next time?” This builds metacognition—thinking about their own thinking. Teachers can also use rubrics or checklists that focus on both language and thinking skills. For instance, a checklist might include items like: “Did I give reasons for my opinion?”, “Did I listen to others?”, and “Did I ask good questions?” This helps students understand what good critical thinking looks like. By using thoughtful assessment and feedback, teachers can guide students not just to speak English—but to think better with it.

Case Study 1: Story Completion in a Primary Classroom (Grade 4)

Description

In a Grade 4 English class, the teacher began the lesson by reading a short story about a lost puppy named Max. The story ended with the sentence: "Max saw a light at the end of the alley." Students were asked to work in small groups and finish the story in their own words. They had to decide: Who lives near the light? Is it a friend or a danger? How does the story end?

Result:

Students developed multiple story endings. Some imagined a kind old woman helping the dog, while others created a mystery or adventure plot. After writing, groups shared their stories and explained their choices. The teacher guided the discussion with open-ended questions like: "Why did you choose this ending?" and "What could happen next?"

Case Study 2: Debate in a Secondary School (Grade 8)

Description:

In a Grade 8 English class, the teacher introduced the topic of social media and divided the class into two debate teams. One group supported the idea that social media is helpful for teens, while the other opposed it. Students were given time to research vocabulary, prepare points, and find examples from their own lives or the news.

Result:

During the debate, students gave clear arguments and responded to each other's ideas. They used English phrases like "I agree, but..." and "According to..." to structure their points. After the debate, the class reflected on which arguments were strongest and why.

Case Study 3: Problem-Solving Game in Mixed-Level Class (Grade 5–6)

Description:

The teacher designed a classroom "escape room" where students had to solve 5 English-language puzzles to find a hidden "key" and unlock a storybook. Puzzles included matching clues to pictures, decoding a riddle, finding verbs in a paragraph, and solving a classroom map mystery.

Result:

Students worked in groups, using English to ask questions, suggest solutions, and guide each other. The teacher observed and occasionally prompted deeper thinking with hints like "What do you already know?" or "Is there another way to look at this?"

Conclusion

In conclusion, critical thinking is not just an extra skill—

it is a necessary part of modern education. It helps students become more than just passive learners who repeat information. Instead, they learn to ask questions, make decisions, solve problems, and think for themselves. These are the skills they will need in real life, no matter what job they choose or where they live. English lessons are a perfect place to develop these skills because language and thinking are closely connected. When students speak, listen, read, or write in English, they are also thinking. Activities like debates teach them how to build strong arguments. Role-plays and simulations help them understand others and respond to new situations. Creative writing allows them to imagine different solutions. Even small tasks like answering open-ended questions or solving a mystery in English help them grow as thinkers.

Teachers are key to making this happen. A good teacher doesn't just give information—they guide, ask questions, listen, and encourage students to explain their ideas. Teachers can create a learning environment where students feel safe to speak, explore new ideas, and learn from mistakes. With the right strategies and support, even young learners can begin to think critically in English. Assessment should also support this growth by focusing not only on correct answers, but also on how students think, reason, and reflect on their learning.

By using English as a tool to build critical thinking, we help students in two ways: they become better at using the language, and they become smarter, more thoughtful people. This combination prepares them for school, work, and life. That is why promoting critical thinking through English activities should be a goal for every teacher and every classroom.

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