

## **DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN EFL CLASSES**

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**Annotation.** The development of critical thinking skills has become a central objective of modern foreign language education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language contexts. Traditional teaching methods often emphasize memorization and mechanical practice, which may limit learners' ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply knowledge independently. This study examines the role of project-based learning as an instructional approach for fostering critical thinking skills among EFL learners. By engaging students in meaningful tasks that require problem solving, collaboration, and reflection, project-based learning creates an environment where language use and higher-order thinking develop simultaneously. The study argues that project-based learning enhances learner autonomy, cognitive engagement, and communicative competence in EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, project-based learning, EFL instruction, learner autonomy, higher-order thinking

### **Introduction.**

In the modern educational landscape, the development of critical thinking skills has become one of the most important objectives of higher education institutions worldwide. Rapid globalization, the expansion of information technologies, and the growing complexity of social and professional environments require learners not only to acquire knowledge but also to analyze information critically, evaluate multiple perspectives, and make reasoned decisions. In this context, foreign language education, particularly English as a Foreign Language instruction, plays a significant role in preparing learners for academic, professional, and intercultural communication. English is no longer viewed merely as a subject of study, but rather as a cognitive and communicative tool that supports intellectual development.

Within EFL classrooms, critical thinking is closely linked to meaningful language use. Learners who are able to question ideas, interpret texts, and express personal viewpoints demonstrate higher levels of language proficiency and communicative competence. However, despite the acknowledged importance of critical thinking, many EFL programs continue to

emphasize traditional teaching approaches that focus primarily on grammar accuracy, vocabulary memorization, and examination performance. Such approaches often limit learners' opportunities to engage in reflective thinking and authentic language use, resulting in passive learning habits and surface-level understanding.

University-level EFL learners face particularly high demands in terms of critical thinking. They are expected to read academic texts, participate in discussions, conduct research, and present arguments in English. These tasks require not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to synthesize information, evaluate evidence, and construct coherent arguments. When instruction does not actively promote these skills, learners may struggle to transfer their language knowledge to real academic and professional contexts. Therefore, the integration of instructional approaches that simultaneously develop language proficiency and higher-order thinking is essential.

Project-based learning has gained recognition as an effective pedagogical approach that addresses these challenges. Rooted in constructivist learning theory, project-based learning emphasizes active engagement, inquiry, collaboration, and problem solving. In this approach, learners are involved in extended tasks that require them to explore real-world issues, gather and analyze information, and produce meaningful outcomes. Language learning occurs naturally through the process of completing projects, as learners use English to communicate ideas, negotiate meaning, and reflect on their learning experiences.

In EFL classrooms, project-based learning provides a meaningful context for developing critical thinking skills. Rather than receiving information passively, learners are encouraged to ask questions, examine different viewpoints, and make informed judgments. This shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered engagement transforms the role of both teachers and students. Teachers become facilitators who guide learning processes, while students take responsibility for their own learning and actively construct knowledge through interaction and reflection.

Another important aspect of project-based learning is its relevance to learners' real-life experiences and future professional goals. Projects often involve topics that connect academic content with social, cultural, or professional issues, making learning more meaningful and motivating. This relevance increases learners' cognitive engagement and encourages deeper thinking. When learners perceive language learning as purposeful and applicable, they are more likely to invest effort and develop a positive attitude toward learning English.

Despite the potential benefits of project-based learning, its implementation in EFL contexts is not without challenges. Teachers may face constraints related to time, curriculum requirements,

assessment practices, and classroom management. Additionally, learners who are accustomed to traditional instructional methods may initially struggle with the autonomy and responsibility required in project-based environments. These challenges highlight the need for careful planning, pedagogical support, and ongoing reflection when integrating project-based learning into EFL instruction.

This study aims to explore the role of project-based learning in developing critical thinking skills among EFL learners at the university level. By examining how project-based activities influence learners' cognitive engagement, language use, and reflective thinking, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of effective instructional practices in EFL education. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators seeking to create learning environments that support both language development and critical thinking skills.

**Main Part.** Critical thinking in EFL education involves the ability to interpret information, evaluate arguments, and express reasoned opinions using the target language. These skills develop most effectively when learners are actively engaged in tasks that require inquiry and reflection. Project-based learning provides such engagement by placing learners in situations where they must identify problems, gather information, and propose solutions. Language learning becomes a purposeful activity rather than an isolated academic exercise.

One of the defining features of project-based learning is its emphasis on learner collaboration. Through group work, learners are exposed to diverse perspectives and are required to negotiate meaning in English. This interaction promotes critical reflection as learners compare ideas, justify opinions, and respond to feedback. The social dimension of project-based learning thus supports both linguistic development and cognitive growth.

Project-based learning also fosters autonomy by encouraging learners to make decisions about content, resources, and presentation formats. This autonomy requires learners to think critically about their choices and to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies. In EFL classrooms, such independence strengthens learners' confidence and motivates them to use English more creatively and accurately. Over time, learners develop a sense of ownership over their learning process, which enhances long-term engagement.

Another important aspect of project-based learning is its integration of authentic tasks. Projects often involve real-world issues that are relevant to learners' academic or professional interests. Engaging with authentic content encourages learners to analyze complex information and to apply language skills in meaningful contexts. This relevance increases cognitive investment and helps learners perceive English as a practical tool for problem solving and communication.

Assessment in project-based learning environments also supports critical thinking development. Instead of focusing solely on final outcomes, assessment often includes reflection, peer evaluation, and self-assessment. These practices encourage learners to examine their learning processes, identify strengths and weaknesses, and plan improvements. Such reflective activities are essential components of critical thinking and contribute to continuous learning.

**Conclusion.** This study has examined the role of project-based learning in fostering critical thinking skills within EFL classrooms, with particular attention to university-level learners. The analysis demonstrates that project-based learning offers a meaningful and effective pedagogical framework for integrating language development with higher-order cognitive skills. Unlike traditional instructional approaches that often prioritize memorization and accuracy, project-based learning encourages learners to actively engage with content, question assumptions, and apply language as a tool for analysis and communication. As a result, critical thinking becomes an integral part of the language learning process rather than a separate instructional goal.

One of the most significant conclusions of this study is that project-based learning creates authentic conditions for cognitive engagement. Through sustained inquiry and collaborative problem solving, learners are required to interpret information, evaluate sources, and synthesize ideas in English. These processes naturally stimulate critical thinking while simultaneously enhancing linguistic competence. Learners move beyond passive reception of knowledge and become active participants in constructing meaning, which leads to deeper understanding and more durable learning outcomes.

The findings also suggest that project-based learning contributes positively to learner autonomy and responsibility. By allowing learners to make decisions regarding project topics, research methods, and presentation formats, this approach empowers students to take ownership of their learning. Such autonomy requires learners to reflect on their choices, assess their progress, and adjust their strategies accordingly. This reflective dimension is central to critical thinking development and supports learners in becoming more independent and self-regulated language users.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of project-based learning plays an important role in shaping learners' critical thinking abilities. Interaction with peers exposes learners to diverse perspectives and encourages dialogue, negotiation, and justification of ideas. These social interactions promote analytical reasoning and deepen learners' understanding of complex issues. In EFL classrooms, collaboration also provides rich opportunities for meaningful language use, allowing learners to practice communicative skills in realistic and purposeful contexts.

Another important conclusion is that project-based learning enhances learner motivation and engagement. When learners work on projects that are relevant to real-world issues or their future professional goals, they are more likely to invest cognitive and emotional effort in the learning process. This relevance transforms language learning from an abstract academic requirement into a meaningful activity with practical value. Increased motivation, in turn, supports sustained engagement and contributes to long-term language development.

The role of the teacher is also redefined within project-based learning environments. Rather than serving solely as a source of knowledge, the teacher acts as a facilitator who guides inquiry, supports reflection, and provides constructive feedback. This shift in pedagogical roles creates a more balanced and interactive learning environment where learners are encouraged to think critically and express ideas confidently. Effective teacher guidance remains essential for ensuring that projects align with learning objectives and that critical thinking skills are developed systematically.

In conclusion, project-based learning represents a powerful instructional approach for developing critical thinking skills in EFL university classrooms. When implemented thoughtfully, it supports the integration of language learning with cognitive development, fosters learner autonomy, and enhances motivation and engagement. While challenges related to time management, assessment, and learner readiness may arise, these can be addressed through careful planning and pedagogical support. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that project-based learning has significant potential to contribute to the development of reflective, analytical, and competent EFL learners who are well prepared for academic and professional communication in a globalized world.

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