

# Developing Critical Thinking Skills of Efl/EsL Learners through Authentic Readings at Primary School

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**Abstract:** *Fostering sophisticated thinking contributes to the language skills of young language learners and is a fundamental objective in educating school children in general and in teaching English to young learners in particular. Developing thinking skills enhances the cognitive abilities of school children and leads to positive outcomes in the learning process. However, in spite of the role of thinking skills in second language learning and teachers' interest in thinking skills at the level of primary school, the practice of teaching thinking skills at primary school is still lacking. There is only modest contribution of the teachers' practices to teaching thinking skills and there is a dire need for further work on primary students' synthesis, analysis, and interpretation skills. In addition, teachers of English language require practical ideas to improve students' thinking skills especially in the ESL/EFL contexts. Through a rigorous review of previous research on fostering thinking skills and provides a series of strategies or techniques, namely Content-Based Instruction, Task-Based Language Teaching Approach and English Literature, the authors argue that these strategies or techniques can be used for teaching or embedding thinking skills in the context of English as a Second/Foreign Language for young learners at primary school.*

**Keywords:** communicative skills, linguistic ability, language structure, analysis, synthesis, comparison, evaluation.

## Introduction

The application of thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation and interpretation results in clear and coherent communication (Kennedy, Fisher, & Ennis, 1991). Thinking skills development is reported as an essential need for ESL and EFL settings and conducive to language learning and should be visible in language curriculum objectives. Developing thinking skills significantly develops language learners' speaking and listening exams scores, writing and speaking skills, vocabulary learning, and reading comprehension performance.

However, in order to develop learners' thinking skills one cannot neglect the important element of age. According to Phillips (1993) exposing a young learner to a task beyond their cognitive level is as unreasonable as exposing a comparatively more developed learner to less challenging tasks. While the first scenario leads to learners' anxiety, distraction and low-motivation, the second one causes boredom and distraction. Cameron (2001) states that young language learners compared with adult learners are more enthusiastic, lively, and willing to please the teacher. In contrast, short-lived interest and motivation is more vivid in younger learners than what is seen in adult learners. Therefore, the awareness of teaching methods and techniques that positively contribute to learning in younger language learners is very important and necessary for English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers.

However, there is little review on strategies, techniques and methods suggested in the literature that can help ESL/EFL teachers at primary school to implement thinking skills in ESL/EFL classrooms. This paper intends to provide a brief review of previous research on techniques, approaches and methods proposed in the literature for developing thinking skills for young ESL/EFL language learners. Also, because the concept "young" might not introduce the exact age of learners, the authors chose studies addressing primary school children to introduce a referable age range for the readers. For the purpose of this article, the authors choose to focus on several strategies or techniques that have been studied by other researchers and used by primary school ESL/EFL teachers and their importance in promoting thinking skills in ESL/EFL learning, such as Content-Based Instruction, Task-Based Teaching Approach, English Literature and Mental Modelling in Reading Comprehension.]

## Content-Based Instruction (CBI) to Foster ESL Thinking Skills

CBI is a concept of education that has strong connections to project work, task-based learning and a holistic approach to language instruction. The focus of a CBI lesson is on the topic or subject matter, in which during the lesson students are focused on learning about this particular subject matter. They learn about this subject using the language they are trying to learn, rather than their native language, as a tool for developing knowledge and so they develop their linguistic ability in the target language. This is thought to

be a more natural way of developing language ability and one that corresponds more to the way we originally learn our first language (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003).

In the context of teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) content-based instruction can be employed using the English language as the medium of communication in class for the purpose of teaching school subjects across all educational levels including primary school level. According to previous research, this approach contributes to communicative skills (Wesche & Skehan, 2002), increased productivity along with improved listening skills (Chou & Chou, 2015), and effective content learning (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008). CBI approach, when effectively put into practice, is highly likely to engage learners in constant cognitive processes in an EFL/ESL environment, where the educational goal is not limited to learning the linguistic content. With the CBI approach, language learners are exposed to authentic reading texts. Authentic content, highly beneficial for developing thinking skill, calls for language functions such as, “comparing, describing, classifying, proving, debating, persuading, and evaluating” (A. U. Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 41) which develop thinking skills. In addition, due to the main purpose of reading or listening to an authentic input in classroom, which is understanding the content rather than developing language proficiency, thinking skills such as, interpretation, evaluation and synthesis are stimulated to enable the learner to interpret the unfamiliar content words. Therefore, the integration of language learning as a tool and learning a subject as a goal inherently develops thinking skills.

According to the concept of similarity-based induction, there is a tendency to project an attribute that is true for one entity to a very similar category (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Therefore, any similarity that is spotted by the learner between novel linguistic input and their prior linguistic knowledge enables the learner to create a mental description and explanation of the unfamiliar second language (L2) input through reasoning (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Drawing upon similarity-based induction, therefore, one can argue the novel input should be comprehensible enough to allow for drawing similarities between the novel input and learners’ schema. This in turn will allow for the application of reasoning as a thinking skill.

Therefore, CBI approach provides a beneficial path for language teachers to develop thinking skills in EFL/ESL as a teaching context whose pedagogies have not provided an explicit pedagogy to integrate thinking skills and teaching English as a second/foreign language. Moreover, in CBI approach, the learner’s main goal is to focus on the lesson content through the medium of the second language. To that end, learners rely on thinking skills to resolve linguistic obstacles that hinder understanding the content as this approach “requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources” (Stoller, 1997). For example, the exposure to a novel and unfamiliar language structure or lexis leads the learner to compare their lexical or structural schema with the novel language input. This in turn will induce the need for confirmation of their speculated meaning. To confirm the accuracy of their speculation, the learner analyzes the linguistic context, interact with other peers and make further comparisons, or evaluate the outcome of their deduced meaning by analyzing further details.

According to Gunning and Oxford (2014); CBI approach to teaching L2 provides ample room for developing the habit of thinking due to the constant learners’ challenge to decipher the content through using the target language. This involves learners in spontaneous creation of meaning of the unfamiliar content rather than the prompted attention to linguistic forms established by the teacher. The struggle to understand meaning is an optimal shift from focus on structure and lexis to focus on the content, which entails students’ cognitive engagement. In addition, learners’ efforts to make sense of the input, promotes language learning strategies that

positively contribute to all thinking skills. Previous studies maintain that despite no defined goal to develop thinking skills, CBI significantly develop thinking skill. For instance, Huang (2011) explored the motivated behavior of young learners of English including attention and cognitive engagement in a content-based instruction course, by which various decisions and steps are adopted and practiced by teachers that contribute to thinking skills. Huang reported that the most highlighted teaching behaviors were providing room for students’ interest to complete a task in limited time, providing the chance to express their views without being concerned about giving the right answer, arising their curiosity through postponing the teachers’ comments on learners’ answers, asking open-ended questions. The findings of the study imply that teachers need to adopt a meaning-focused approach to teaching so that the young language learners find the chance to negotiate meaning and enter a dialogical verbal communication. There are four prototypes of CBI, namely immersion education, sheltered courses, adjust courses and theme-based models (Duenas, 2004).

However, the authors believe that the theme-based model the most appropriate model to contribute to thinking skills development at primary school second language classes. Theme-based teaching emphasizes the exposure of language learners to contextualized learning situations where different subjects are used as the content of language learning (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). In this model, pre-selected themes are used to inform and direct a whole course of language learning where the integration of learning and teaching activities is determined by their content (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). In addition, as topics or themes are the “connecting thread” of language content (Cameron, 2001, p. 180) the “fragmentation and unconnected skill exercises” (Berry & Mindes, 1993, p. 6) does not occur which contributes to meaningful content. In order to teach English as a second or

foreign language along with developing thinking skills, teachers need to create an anxiety-free learning experience for learners. This is because learning English is likely to cause anxiety among students (Yim, 2014), which can hinder the application of cognitive procedures in learning such as language learning strategies used in reading and listening tasks. This is because little or no anxiety in learning, consequently opens the door for thinking skills in EFL/ESL context. The theme-based model of teaching English views learning experience consonant with children's natural learning style (Cameron, 2001), hence, it is a suitable model to contribute to an anxiety-free learning experience. A theme-based model thus should entail the development of thinking skills as Freeman and Freeman (Freeman & Freeman, 2006, p. 64) maintain that when a lesson content "is relevant and interesting, students are more likely to try harder to understand and to stay focused." The link between thinking skills and the theme-based approach to teaching a second language can also be explained due to problem solving tasks inherent in theme-based approach. Stimulating the cognitive processes, problem solving is introduced as the main pillar of thinking skills in the literature of thinking skills in EFL/ESL contexts (Sokol, Oget, Sonntag, & Khomenko, 2008; Waters, 2006). EFL/ESL students have to build a grammar model (Sokol et al., 2008), discover the implicit message in texts (Thakur & Al-mahrooqi, 2015), evaluate different sources of information (Holliday & Fagerheim, 2006), and compare and evaluate different viewpoints in listening practice (Ya Ting C Yang & Gamble, 2013). In this regard, the theoretical foundations of theme-based model implicitly refer to the necessity of problem solving in achieving long lasting learning results in primary school language learners, through providing cognitively demanding task (Met, 1991), problem solving and synthesizing information (Grabe & Stoller, 1997).

### **Task-Based Language Teaching Approach**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), also known as task-based instruction (TBI), focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language (Ellis, 2003). Defined by Ellis (2003), a task is a plan of work whose primary focus is meaning. Task fulfillment entails learner's cognitive engagement that hinges upon thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, comparison and evaluation. Ellis (2005) refers to thinking skills in task based teaching in highlighting the cognitive processes required for task fulfillment. Ellis (2005, p. 3) mentions that doing a task engages learners "in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication" and in creating "pragmatic meaning", both of which depend upon memory, analysis, and synthesis in order to create meaning.

In addition, a task should involve the learner in the cognitive process to reach the communicative goal. Communicative tasks usually involve two learners distinctly different from teacher-student interactions in terms of time pressure. The immediate need for responding to the interlocutor's questions results in an eagerness to find a way to construct meaning and verbalize it, for which the learner has to engage in thinking skills. In addition, constructing a solution in interactive tasks is cooperative where learners "satisfy their interlocutors' needs in addition to monitoring their own performance" (Pinter, 2007, p. 190). Previous research illustrates how adopting tasks in teaching English to young learners leads to developed thinking skills. In one study, Pinter (2007) explored the effect of a common task called "spot the difference" on primary school students' thinking skills. The two participating primary school students were exposed to two pictures of the same house with three floors and were required to spot their differences through interacting with each other. The participants used analysis and interpretation throughout the task in order to resolve ambiguities about the pictures. For example, one of the participants' lack of knowledge of "kitchen" in English led to his peer's analysis and interpretation of his peer's need for knowing the equivalent term for "kitchen." The results revealed that despite participants' low English competence, the rate of oral interaction developed through stimulating thinking skills. This is where the thinking skills are stimulated in spot-the-difference tasks as learners constantly need to listen to their interlocutors while observing the picture, evaluate the peers' description and the available image, and consciously find the differences through on-the-spot interpretation.

Another method to use task-based teaching with an eye on thinking skills development is to merge extensive reading and task-based teaching (Green, 2005). The teacher first needs to know the most appealing book genres or titles by surveying students' interest. It should be noted that letting learners select their own preferred reading topics contributes to motivation and self-confidence (Arnold, 2009). Then through a cycle of tasks students are exposed to task-based activities based on the topics of their interest, which is highly likely to contribute to critical thinking skills, and synthesis of information. Developing thinking skills is also viable by providing planning time for children prior to task completion. In one study, Philp, Oliver, and Mackey, (2006) examined relationship between 21 children's planning and production. The participants were allowed time to get engaged in strategic pre-planning prior to carrying out the tasks while the researcher was monitoring the time. Pogrow (1990) states that information processing theory is linked between problem-solving efforts and the corresponding cognitive processes. The time spent on planning a task leads to cognitive processes that contribute to problem-solving activities. If the oral task is a problem for a student, then providing time results in learners' engagement in the completion of the task.

Therefore, the high rate of structural complexity found in participating learners (Philp et al., 2006) is the evidence for successful engagement in thinking skills as a result of providing sufficient time for a task. In addition, the teacher can apply task-

repetition. Repeating a task allows the learner to understand the conveyed implicit and explicit meaning finding more time to look into the structure of the input (Bygate, 2001). Guirao, de Larios and Coyle (2015), realized that children focus on language form after resolving the meaning issues in their first writing attempt. This finding is resonant with earlier findings that state meaning has a higher priority over the form (Van Patten, 1990). Once the meaning is resolved for the learners in the initial task fulfilment, the attention is freed to observe and screen new or challenging forms, for which the thinking skills such as monitoring, evaluation, selection and interpretation are used.

### English Literature

Literature stimulates learners' thinking skills such as interpretation of the context and inferring meaning through contextual clues (Bland & Lütge, 2013; Peham, 2009). The human's inherent need for narratives (Hardy, 1978) highlights the application of literature in first and second language learning especially at a younger age (Ghosn, 2002). Contrary to bottom-up approaches to language learning in which "pre-Chomskyan structuralists" (Hulstijn et al., 2014, p. 376) prioritized text decoding and linear understanding, literature provides an active role for children in the learning process. Ghosn (2002) suggests that the authentic content in English literature for EFL learners at primary school not only promotes their thinking skills but also positively contributes to young learners' interest in learning English. The development of thinking skills is adversely affected by schooling (Greenfield, 2005), teacher beliefs' (A. Zohar, Degani, & Vaaknin, 2001), and dearth of adequate pedagogies (Zohar, 2004). This inadequacy is also evident in EFL/ESL contexts, where English is entirely viewed as an academic discipline (Kang, 2000).

However, literature serves to fill the gap in today's educational system regarding developing thinking skills due to motivational benefits for learners (Arnold, 2009), further exposure to language in a social setting (Green, 2005), and development of thinking skills through developed academic literacy (Ghosn, 2002). The literature provides manifold suggestions to use literature that engage learners in thinking skills.

### Conclusion

The fostering of thinking skills to teaching English as a Second language is important in second language research. Developing thinking skills at primary school may be considered a challenging goal for three reasons: young language learners' age, abstract nature of thinking skills, the novelty of research discussion in this realm.

However, there are various techniques, strategies and approaches that the literature suggests to improve teaching English young language. These strategies and techniques happen to stimulate thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, interpretation and evaluation. The integration of thinking skills and teaching English to young learners is an important effort in English as a second language education. Further research is essentially needed to explore the techniques and strategies regarding thinking skills in teaching and learning of English as a second language. In addition, further research is needed to investigate second language teachers' and students' outlooks, beliefs and thinking skills techniques and strategies in teaching and learning of English as a second language.

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