

FOSTERING NON-LINGUISTIC LANGUAGE LEARNERS`
CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS VIA NATIONAL UZBEK FAIRY TALES IN
READING CLASSES

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Abstract : This research aimed to assess the effectiveness of reading short narratives in enhancing the Critical Thinking (CT) skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This focus stems from the widespread presence of narratives in various aspects of human life and the essential role that CT plays in guiding students toward success in both academic and non-academic settings. To achieve this, the study involved 59 undergraduate EFL students majoring in English translation. Ultimately, 54 participants were selected, with 27 individuals assigned to each of the two groups: the narrative group (which engaged with the national fairy tale “Zumrad and Kimmatt”) and the control group that did not use narratives. This selection considered the participants' language proficiency and CT skills to ensure group homogeneity.

Keywords: Critical thinking skills, Narrative texts (national fairy tales), non-linguistic language learners, Learner-oriented approach, reading class

As part of the elicitation tasks, participants in the narrative and non-narrative groups were provided with short texts tailored to their respective categories. Both groups incorporated communicative reading methods into their course design, emphasizing a learner-centered approach. Results from the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) indicated that the narrative group achieved better scores than the non-narrative group in both pretest and posttest analyses, following 12 treatment sessions. Discussions have addressed the possible educational implications of these findings for language learning and teaching, along with explanations for the differences in critical thinking skills among the participants.

Critical Thinking

Scholars from various national and cultural backgrounds have long explored the significant role of critical thinking (CT) in both social and personal realms throughout human history, from ancient societies to contemporary times (Paul, Elder, & Bartell 1997; Descartes, 2006). It seems that CT has always been a crucial element of human existence. However, in our fast-paced world, characterized by rapid scientific and technological advances, the importance of CT has become even more vital for the younger generation, who need to attain a higher level of education to effectively tackle complex issues.

This necessity arises from the increasingly complex and refined nature of both educational and non-educational facets of modern life.

Accessing a vast amount of information online is possible for everyone in just a few minutes, which can result in a "Analysis paralysis" refers to the difficulty encountered when trying to choose the best materials from the vast and continuously expanding databases available

(Davidson, 1996, cited in Halpern, 2003). Multiple studies have highlighted and demonstrated the value of critical thinking (CT) and critical thinkers (Brookfield, 1987; Facione, 2013; Ferrett, 1997; Halpern, 2003; Kurfiss, 1988; Smith, 2002, among others). Wade (2008) asserts that the main goal of education is to empower students to think critically when faced with problems, challenges and misunderstandings.

Facione and Facione (1994) contend that in the contemporary world, it is crucial to master thinking and study skills. They compellingly note that "students who simply memorize facts without the ability to analyze information, evaluate implications, assess the validity of arguments, and explain how they reached their conclusions will find it difficult to succeed in the competitive economic and political environments of this century and beyond" (1994, p. 3). This underscores a growing area of research dedicated to the effective integration of critical thinking (CT) objectives in educational environments, particularly regarding the instruction and learning of foreign or second languages.

Critical Thinking in English as a Foreign Language/English as a Second Language (EFL/ESL) Environments

The abundance of resources and interactive teaching methods makes educational environments, particularly second and foreign language programs, highly conducive to teaching critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills can foster self-awareness in EFL learners, helping them recognize the existing connections between their emotions and thoughts. While thought and emotion may initially seem distinct, a deeper exploration reveals various forms of interdependence between the two. The emotional component of language learning is vital to the overall process; as noted by Paul & Elder (2002), cited in Jose (2013), "learners may bring learned indifference, irrational fears, acquired hostility, and rigid ideas into the classroom, which can restrict their learning to superficial levels."

Teachers of second or foreign languages can help students improve their self-understanding and awareness of their environment by fostering self-awareness. Üstünlüoğlu (2004, p. 3) notes that "Teachers can help students identify their perceptions, assumptions, biases, and values, and guide them in overcoming old habits to embrace a new viewpoint." By nurturing this self-awareness, L2 learners may more readily cultivate a positive attitude towards people from their own culture, develop an interest in the cultural elements of the L2 community, and enhance their empathy for native speakers of the language.

Alongside the ability to draw conclusions, which is essential for reading comprehension and critical thinking, the skill of evaluating information is also vital in both domains. The act of developing hypotheses and analyzing the data within a text fosters a productive cognitive process that improves understanding and knowledge acquisition (Baretta, Tomitch, MacNair, Lim, & Waldie, 2009). Grab (2009) states that reading comprehension encompasses a reader's capability to integrate new information with prior knowledge, comprehend and assess written texts according to their intended purposes, interpret the author's perspectives, and synthesize information from different sources.

Inductive and deductive reasoning are essential elements of critical thinking that serve as foundational frameworks for generalization, playing a significant role in the learning of both first

and second languages. Deductive reasoning helps individuals derive specific instances from a general principle, while inductive reasoning formulates broad laws, rules, or conclusions based on particular examples. In the context of first language acquisition (FLA) or second language acquisition (SLA) in natural and informal settings, the inductive approach aids learners in discovering specific rules and meanings from the information available. This process allows them to acquire linguistic rules implicitly, without needing explicit instruction.

On the other hand, deductive reasoning offers students clear access to norms and meanings during language acquisition in a classroom environment, though it necessitates careful attention to the examples provided (Brown, 2014). This leads to an interesting question: Is a skilled second language (L2) learner inherently a critical thinker, or is a critical thinker inherently a skilled L2 learner?

This question invites exploration into the relationship between language proficiency and critical thinking skills. On one hand, a competent L2 learner might possess strong critical thinking abilities, which allow them to analyze linguistic structures and contexts effectively. Conversely, critical thinkers might excel as L2 learners due to their ability to evaluate, synthesize, and apply knowledge actively. Ultimately, the interplay between these two skill sets can significantly enhance both language acquisition and critical thinking development, suggesting that fostering one may benefit the other in educational environments.

Narratives (in the form of fairy tales), non-narratives and Critical Thinking Skills

Iakovos (2011) contends that the ability to think critically does not appear to be naturally structured or developed, despite Bean's (1996) recognition of it as a skill that can be taught. Lazere (1987, p. 3) argues that literature, when "properly integrated with rhetoric and composition," is the only academic field that can comprehensively cover the full spectrum of cognitive skills now deemed essential for critical thinking. He claims that literature can engage students in advanced moral reasoning through the use of both literal and figurative language, as well as intricate syntax and structure. This engagement can enhance their awareness of possible ambiguities in the world and promote an understanding of the connections between different perspectives and various elements of form and meaning basically.

The Current Study

The objective

As mentioned, even though there is a wealth of literature discussing the advantages of utilizing narratives in EFL/ESL contexts, the effects of this method on enhancing L2 learners' critical thinking (CT) skills have not been sufficiently examined. It is crucial to select familiar texts for non-linguistic language learners to aid in their comprehension and engagement. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the impact of short narratives used as elicitation tasks on the CT skills of EFL learners. In this context, the research aimed to address the following questions:

1. How does the use of short narratives in EFL contexts influence the critical thinking skills of learners?
2. Do EFL learners demonstrate a measurable improvement in their critical thinking abilities when engaging with narrative-based tasks compared to traditional language instruction methods?

3. What specific aspects of critical thinking (e.g., analysis, evaluation, synthesis) are most affected by the use of narratives in language learning?
4. How do learners' backgrounds and familiarity with the narratives impact their critical thinking development during the tasks?
5. What are the learners' perceptions of using narratives as a method to enhance their critical thinking skills within the EFL classroom?

By exploring these questions, the study seeks to illuminate the importance of incorporating narratives in language education and its potential to improve critical thinking among EFL learners. To provide an objective response to the research questions, the following null hypotheses were established for testing:

- The implementation of short narratives as elicitation tasks has no significant impact on the critical thinking skills of EFL learners.
- The implementation of short non-narrative texts as elicitation tasks has no significant impact on the critical thinking skills of EFL learners.

5. Method

For this study, 59 undergraduate Uzbek-speaking EFL learners (both male and female), aged 19 to 23, who are majoring in English translation at UzSWLU, were invited to participate. Their language proficiency and critical thinking (CT) skills were assessed using the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), respectively. The results of the OPT indicated no extreme scores or outliers. Regarding the CCTST, 54 participants with scores ranging from 8 to 15, which was approximately one standard deviation (2.88) on either side of the mean score (11.67), were selected. These participants were then divided into two intact groups: an experimental group (referred to as the Narrative group) and a control group (referred to as the Non-narrative group), with 27 participants in each group.

5.2 Instrumentation

The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), Form B, was utilized as both the pretest and post-test. This assessment consists of 34 multiple-choice questions, each followed by four or five options, enabling test takers to evaluate the fundamental critical thinking skills deemed essential for baccalaureate general education. These skills include Evaluation, Analysis, Inference, Deductive Reasoning, and Inductive Reasoning. No specific disciplinary knowledge is necessary to take the test.

6. Data Analysis and Results

A paired-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the potential changes in the learners' Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) scores, including the scores for its subscales (Evaluation, Analysis, Inference, Deductive, and Inductive Reasoning), from the pretest to the post-test within the Narrative group. The results, shown in Tables 2 and 3, reveal a statistically significant difference in the mean CCTST scores, with an increase noted from the pretest ($M=11.37$, $SD=2.16$) to the post-test ($M=13.48$, $SD=2.91$). The t-test results showed that this difference is significant, with $t(26) = -4.25$ and $p = .00$.

This finding suggests that the use of short narratives as elicitation tasks has a positive effect on the development of critical thinking skills among EFL learners, as evidenced by their improved scores on the CCTST after engaging in narrative-based activities. The results underline the

importance of incorporating narrative methods into language learning to enhance learners' critical thinking abilities.

7. Conclusions and Implications

This study targeted to examine the potential impact of using short narratives as elicitation tasks on the critical thinking (CT) skills of EFL learners. The statistical findings underscore that narrative texts significantly outperform non-narrative texts in facilitating the development of EFL learners' CT skills. The results show that, with the use of narratives, critical thinking sub-skills—such as Inductive Reasoning, Deductive Reasoning, Analysis, and Evaluation—exhibited statistically significant improvements.

The primary objective of the study was to link the research findings to practical applications in real EFL educational settings. By doing so, the study intends to inform and enhance L2 learning and teaching conditions, illustrating the effectiveness of narrative-based methods in fostering critical thinking among language learners. These insights enable educators to better incorporate narratives into their curricula, thereby improving both language acquisition and critical thinking skills in their students.

The current EFL educational system in Iran largely relies on conventional, teacher-centered methods that emphasize didactic teaching. These approaches can hinder students' learning by reducing their critical thinking skills and active participation in class. In this setting, students generally take on a passive role, simply receiving the information given by the teacher without questioning or analyzing it.

Moreover, the traditional educational model tends to enforce a specific set of values, pushing students to seek correct answers and follow established interpretations. This adherence to particular ideologies limits their ability to grow as critical and reflective thinkers, as noted by Scheffler (1973) and Malone (2008). Consequently, the learning environment restricts intellectual exploration and discourages questioning of established assumptions. To create a more effective and enriching EFL educational experience, it is crucial to move beyond these traditional methods and adopt approaches that encourage critical engagement, such as narrative-based learning, which can enable students to think independently and creatively.

Considering the advantages of critical thinking skills in second language (L2) learning environments, the findings of this study could inspire Iranian educational policymakers, especially those involved in foreign language education. Syllabus designers and EFL educators can leverage these insights by tackling the issue from both a narrative-focused angle—providing suitable narrative texts as relevant content—and a learner-centered approach that prioritizes the enhancement of critical thinking skills within the realm of second/foreign language acquisition and beyond.

Additionally, the results may raise awareness among EFL teachers about the importance of critical thinking in language classrooms. As language educators, recognizing the elements of critical thinking skills can foster a deeper understanding of the diverse nature of language

teaching. This understanding highlights that there is no one-size-fits-all theory or method that provides a "magic" solution to cater to the needs of all learners in every situation.

By fostering a deeper comprehension of critical thinking skills, EFL teachers may improve their teaching methodologies, allowing them to be more receptive to the value of diverse models, theories, and research findings. This holistic approach may ultimately enrich the educational experience for L2 learners, equipping them with essential skills for effective communication and thoughtful engagement in an increasingly complex world.

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