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DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING COMPETENCE IN PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS THROUGH DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract

The development of critical thinking competence has become an essential priority in contemporary English language teacher education. Prospective English language teachers are expected not only to possess linguistic and methodological knowledge but also to evaluate information critically, formulate evidence-based arguments, question assumptions, and make pedagogically justified decisions. This article examines the potential of dialogic pedagogy, problem-posing education, and reflective practice for developing critical thinking competence in prospective English language teachers. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Stephen Brookfield, and Peter Facione, the study explores the relationship between critical thinking, communicative competence, learner autonomy, and professional reflection. Particular attention is paid to the adaptation of international pedagogical approaches to the context of higher education in Uzbekistan. A methodological framework is proposed that integrates problem-based tasks, evidence-oriented discussions, critical reading, microteaching, and reflective portfolios. The article argues that critical thinking should be developed as an integral component of professional teacher preparation rather than as an isolated cognitive skill. The proposed framework may support the preparation of reflective, analytically competent, and pedagogically responsible English language teachers.

Keywords: critical thinking competence, prospective English language teachers, dialogic pedagogy, problem-posing education, reflective practice, English

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language teaching, learner autonomy, pedagogical decision-making, teacher education, Uzbekistan.

1. Introduction

Contemporary teacher education requires a transition from knowledge transmission towards the development of independent, analytical, and reflective professionals. In the field of English language teaching, this transition is particularly significant because teachers operate in a dynamic educational environment characterized by linguistic diversity, digital communication, changing learner needs, and increasingly complex pedagogical challenges.

Prospective English language teachers must be able to interpret educational information, evaluate the reliability of teaching resources, identify the strengths and limitations of instructional methods, and make decisions based on evidence. They also need to create classroom environments in which learners can ask questions, express different opinions, justify their arguments, and reconsider their assumptions. These professional responsibilities demonstrate that critical thinking is both a personal cognitive competence and a pedagogical capacity.

Critical thinking is commonly associated with interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Facione (1990) emphasizes these interconnected skills in his influential framework of critical thinking. In teacher education, however, these skills should be considered alongside professional judgment, ethical responsibility, communication, and reflection.

Dialogic pedagogy offers an important pathway for integrating critical thinking into English language instruction. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of information, dialogic teaching encourages them to construct meaning through questions, discussion, argumentation, and the examination of alternative perspectives. Paulo Freire's educational philosophy is particularly relevant because it challenges the assumption that teaching should consist primarily of transferring predetermined knowledge from teacher to learner.

The relevance of this approach is also reflected in recent research by Alaudinova and Aripova (2026), who examine the development of communicative and critical-thinking-oriented tasks through P. Freire's problem-posing education and dialogic education technologies. Their work provides a relevant methodological

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reference for connecting critical pedagogy with English language classroom practice.

The purpose of this article is to examine how dialogic pedagogy and reflective practice can be integrated into the professional preparation of prospective English language teachers and to propose a methodological framework for developing their critical thinking competence within the context of higher education in Uzbekistan.

Critical thinking is not simply the ability to criticize information or disagree with another person. It involves the careful examination of claims, the evaluation of evidence, the identification of assumptions, and the formulation of justified conclusions. A critically thinking individual remains open to alternative explanations and is prepared to revise an initial position when stronger evidence becomes available.

Dewey (1933) associates reflective thinking with the active, persistent, and careful consideration of beliefs and knowledge in relation to their supporting grounds and possible consequences. This perspective is relevant to teacher education because professional decisions should be based on systematic observation and thoughtful interpretation rather than habit alone.

For prospective English language teachers, critical thinking competence can be understood as an integrated capacity comprising several dimensions.

First, the analytical dimension involves identifying central ideas, distinguishing facts from opinions, examining relationships between arguments, and recognizing unsupported assumptions.

Second, the evaluative dimension concerns the assessment of source credibility, the relevance of evidence, the logical consistency of claims, and the appropriateness of teaching materials.

Third, the argumentative dimension enables prospective teachers to formulate clear positions, support their ideas with evidence, respond to counterarguments, and participate constructively in academic discussions.

Fourth, the reflective dimension involves examining personal assumptions, evaluating teaching decisions, recognizing limitations, and planning improvements.

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Finally, the pedagogical dimension concerns the ability to design learning activities that encourage critical thinking among future pupils. It requires teachers to formulate open-ended questions, select meaningful problems, organize productive discussions, and assess the quality of learners' reasoning.

These dimensions are interdependent. For example, a prospective teacher may identify the main argument in an English-language article but may still need to develop the ability to assess the reliability of its evidence. Similarly, a student may demonstrate strong analytical skills but find it difficult to design classroom tasks that encourage pupils to reason independently. Teacher education should therefore connect individual cognitive skills with their practical pedagogical application.

Dialogic pedagogy regards dialogue as a fundamental mechanism of learning. In a dialogic classroom, students are encouraged to articulate their ideas, ask questions, compare interpretations, and respond to the reasoning of others. The teacher does not abandon professional guidance; rather, the teacher facilitates a structured learning environment in which knowledge is examined and developed through interaction.

Freire (1970) criticizes the banking model of education, in which learners are treated as passive recipients of information. In contrast, problem-posing education begins with questions, contradictions, and situations that invite learners to investigate the world around them. This approach can be adapted to English language teacher education by presenting prospective teachers with authentic educational problems instead of providing them with ready-made methodological solutions.

For instance, students may be asked to consider the following question:

Should English language teachers correct every grammatical mistake during speaking activities?

Rather than memorizing a single answer, students investigate the pedagogical implications of different approaches. They consider learners' proficiency levels, communicative goals, confidence, fluency, accuracy, and the nature of the activity. They then formulate a position and support it with methodological reasoning.

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Another problem may concern the use of artificial intelligence in English language learning:

How can teachers use AI-generated materials without compromising students' critical thinking and academic integrity?

Students examine the potential benefits and limitations of AI-generated content, identify possible inaccuracies, and develop classroom guidelines for responsible use. This activity combines language practice, information evaluation, ethical reasoning, and professional decision-making.

Alaudinova and Aripova (2026) discuss the methodological potential of Freire's problem-posing education and dialogic technologies for designing tasks that support communicative competence and critical thinking in English language teaching. Their research provides a relevant basis for incorporating dialogue, problem analysis, and learner autonomy into teacher preparation.

Dialogic pedagogy is most productive when classroom interaction is purposeful and intellectually challenging. Simply organizing group discussions does not automatically develop critical thinking. Students need clear questions, access to relevant evidence, opportunities to challenge ideas respectfully, and criteria for evaluating the quality of their arguments.

4. International Approaches to Developing Critical Thinking in Teacher Education

International research offers several complementary approaches to the development of critical thinking in prospective teachers.

4.1. Reflective practice

Reflective practice enables prospective teachers to examine their own teaching decisions and learn from professional experience. Brookfield (2012) emphasizes the importance of questioning assumptions and examining teaching through different perspectives.

In English language teacher education, reflective practice may include the analysis of lesson plans, classroom observations, microteaching recordings, and feedback from peers or mentors. After delivering a short lesson, a prospective

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teacher can examine whether the chosen activity achieved its objectives, whether all learners participated, and whether the questions encouraged deeper thinking.
Reflective questions may include:
What was the main learning objective of my lesson?
Which teaching decisions were supported by evidence?
What difficulties did learners experience?
Did my questions encourage independent reasoning?
What would I change in a future lesson, and why?
These questions transform teaching practice into an opportunity for systematic professional learning.

4.2. Evidence-based argumentation

Evidence-based argumentation requires learners to support claims with relevant information and explain the relationship between evidence and conclusions. This approach can be implemented through academic writing, structured debates, research-based presentations, and the comparison of educational sources.
For example, prospective English language teachers may compare two articles discussing grammar instruction. They identify each author's main claim, examine the evidence presented, assess the limitations of the arguments, and prepare a balanced conclusion.
This process develops both academic language skills and critical evaluation. It also helps future teachers distinguish personal preference from methodologically justified decisions.

4.3. Collaborative problem-solving

Collaborative problem-solving requires students to investigate a shared problem, consider different perspectives, and agree on a reasoned solution. In teacher education, the problems can be drawn from classroom management, lesson planning, assessment, learner motivation, and the selection of instructional materials.
A group might receive the following task: a secondary school class contains learners with different levels of English proficiency, but the teacher has only one lesson plan and limited classroom resources. Students must propose an inclusive

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lesson structure, justify their choice of activities, and explain how learning outcomes will be assessed.

The task encourages participants to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical judgment. It also requires them to listen to alternative viewpoints and revise their initial proposals when necessary.

4.4. Critical digital literacy

Digital learning environments provide access to extensive information but also expose students to inaccurate, biased, or misleading content. Prospective English language teachers therefore need the ability to evaluate online resources critically. Critical digital literacy includes checking the author and publication date, identifying the original source, comparing claims across independent sources, distinguishing evidence from opinion, and recognizing the limitations of AI-generated information.

These skills are particularly important when prospective teachers select authentic materials for classroom use. An online article may be linguistically suitable but contain unsupported claims or cultural stereotypes. Teachers should therefore evaluate both its linguistic value and its reliability, relevance, and educational appropriateness.

The combination of reflective practice, evidence-based argumentation, collaborative problem-solving, and critical digital literacy provides a comprehensive foundation for developing professional critical thinking.

5. The National Context: Opportunities for Higher Education in Uzbekistan

The development of critical thinking competence among prospective English language teachers in Uzbekistan should be connected with the broader objectives of improving foreign language education, strengthening professional preparation, and expanding the use of learner-centered teaching methods.

The national educational context requires an approach that combines international pedagogical ideas with local educational priorities, cultural values, curricular requirements, and the linguistic needs of students. Consequently, international methods should not simply be transferred into the classroom without adaptation.

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They should be selected and modified according to the aims of particular courses and the professional responsibilities of future teachers.

Alaudinova's research on oral communication competencies provides a relevant methodological connection between communicative language development and teacher preparation. Her publications include work on classroom activities for oral communication, the pedagogical modelling of oral speech competencies, and competency-based approaches to developing oral skills in future English teachers (Alaudinova, 2021, 2022). Although these publications primarily address oral communication, they offer useful methodological perspectives for integrating communicative activities with analytical discussion, argumentation, and reflective learning.

Within Uzbek higher education, critical thinking can be integrated into practical English, English language teaching methodology, academic writing, linguistics, and teaching practicum courses. This integration would help students understand that critical thinking is not restricted to a single subject but is a professional competence that supports multiple dimensions of teaching.

Local cultural and educational contexts can also provide meaningful material for critical inquiry. Students may compare representations of education in Uzbek and English-language sources, examine how cultural assumptions influence classroom interaction, or discuss the advantages and limitations of different approaches to learner assessment.

Such activities enable prospective teachers to develop intercultural awareness without treating any cultural perspective as beyond analysis. They also encourage students to connect professional reasoning with the realities of the schools in which they may eventually work.

6. A Methodological Framework for Developing Critical Thinking Competence

Based on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, this article proposes a five-stage methodological framework for developing critical thinking competence in prospective English language teachers.

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Stage 1: Problem identification and activation of prior knowledge.
The teacher introduces a relevant pedagogical problem, short text, classroom scenario, or controversial statement. Students identify the central issue and express their initial assumptions. The purpose is to activate prior knowledge and create a reason for inquiry.

Stage 2: Information analysis and evidence evaluation.
Students examine relevant texts, teaching materials, research summaries, or classroom observations. They distinguish claims from evidence, compare sources, and identify missing information. The teacher guides the process without supplying all the conclusions in advance.

Stage 3: Dialogic discussion and argumentation.
Students work individually, in pairs, or in groups to develop positions and examine alternative interpretations. They are expected to provide reasons, ask clarifying questions, and respond respectfully to counterarguments.

Stage 4: Pedagogical application.
Students translate their conclusions into practical teaching decisions. They may design a lesson activity, prepare a microteaching session, adapt a reading task, or develop assessment criteria. This stage connects critical thinking with professional performance.

Stage 5: Reflection and evaluation.
Students evaluate the reasoning process, review feedback, identify weaknesses, and formulate specific improvement goals. Evidence of progress may be collected through reflective journals, portfolios, written assignments, and observations of teaching practice.
The framework follows a progression from identifying a problem to evaluating information, constructing an argument, applying conclusions, and reflecting on the outcome. The stages are interconnected rather than strictly linear: new evidence or feedback may require students to revisit an earlier decision.

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Table 1. Proposed framework for developing critical thinking competence

Stage	Main activity	Critical thinking focus	Expected learning evidence
Problem identification	Analysing a pedagogical scenario	Questioning assumptions	Clear identification of the problem
Evidence evaluation	Comparing texts and sources	Analysis and evaluation	Evidence-based interpretation
Dialogic discussion	Debating alternative solutions	Argumentation and perspective-taking	Justified oral contributions
Pedagogical application	Designing and delivering a lesson activity		
Professional decision-making	A reasoned teaching plan or microteaching task		
Reflection	Reviewing feedback and outcomes	Self-regulation and reflection	A specific professional improvement plan

The proposed framework is intended as a methodological model for instructional design. Its effectiveness should be examined through empirical research involving prospective English language teachers in different higher education settings.

7. Assessment Criteria and Practical Recommendations

The assessment of critical thinking should focus on the quality of reasoning rather than on agreement with the teacher's preferred opinion. Students may reach different conclusions while demonstrating equally strong critical thinking, provided that their arguments are logical, evidence-based, and responsive to alternative viewpoints.

Five assessment criteria are proposed.

Analytical accuracy refers to the student's ability to identify the central problem, distinguish claims from supporting evidence, and recognize relevant relationships.

Evidence evaluation concerns the ability to assess source credibility, identify unsupported generalizations, and explain the relevance of information to a particular claim.

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Argumentative quality measures the clarity of the student's position, the logical organization of arguments, the use of supporting examples, and the treatment of counterarguments.

Reflective capacity concerns the student's ability to recognize limitations in personal reasoning, respond constructively to feedback, and identify opportunities for improvement.

Pedagogical transfer refers to the ability to apply critical thinking to lesson planning, instructional decision-making, classroom problem-solving, and the design of activities for school learners.

These criteria can be assessed through analytic rubrics, written assignments, oral presentations, classroom observation, microteaching, and reflective portfolios. Assessment should be continuous and formative, enabling students to understand not only the quality of their performance but also the steps required to improve it.

To support the implementation of this approach in higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, the following recommendations are proposed:

Integrate problem-posing and dialogic tasks into practical English and English language teaching methodology courses.

Provide regular opportunities for students to evaluate authentic texts and compare competing explanations of educational issues.

Incorporate reflective analysis into teaching practicum and microteaching activities.

Develop assessment rubrics that distinguish linguistic accuracy from the quality of critical reasoning while recognizing the relationship between the two.

Include digital source evaluation and responsible use of artificial intelligence in teacher education.

Encourage collaboration between university lecturers, school mentors, and prospective teachers in the analysis of authentic classroom problems.

These recommendations require institutional support and consistent implementation. In particular, teachers should be prepared to facilitate open-ended discussions, evaluate reasoning fairly, and create an environment in which questioning established assumptions is viewed as a legitimate part of academic learning.

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8. Discussion

The analysis suggests that critical thinking competence should be developed through the integration of cognitive, communicative, reflective, and pedagogical activities. Teaching students to identify arguments is insufficient if they cannot evaluate evidence or apply their conclusions to professional situations. Similarly, organizing classroom debates may increase participation without necessarily improving the quality of reasoning unless students are expected to justify their positions.

Dialogic pedagogy provides opportunities for learners to examine assumptions and consider alternative perspectives. Reflective practice complements this process by enabling prospective teachers to examine their own decisions and recognize how their beliefs influence their professional behavior. Problem-based learning then connects analytical work with practical pedagogical action.

The proposed framework also highlights the importance of language development. Prospective English language teachers need the linguistic resources required to express uncertainty, qualify claims, disagree respectfully, provide evidence, and formulate conclusions. Expressions such as the evidence suggests that, an alternative explanation may be, this claim requires further support, and from a pedagogical perspective can support the communication of nuanced reasoning in English.

However, linguistic fluency should not be treated as a direct substitute for critical thinking. A student may communicate confidently while relying on weak evidence, whereas another student may reason carefully but need linguistic support to articulate a complex argument. Appropriate teaching and assessment should recognize these differences.

The framework presented in this article is a theoretically grounded proposal rather than a report of completed experimental research. Further investigation should examine how the proposed methods influence students' reasoning, reflective capacity, academic communication, and pedagogical decision-making over time. Such research could compare different instructional approaches and investigate how students' language proficiency, prior educational experience, and digital literacy affect outcomes.

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9. Conclusion

Developing critical thinking competence in prospective English language teachers is an essential aspect of preparing reflective, independent, and professionally responsible educators. This competence enables future teachers to evaluate information, formulate evidence-based arguments, question assumptions, make informed instructional decisions, and guide learners towards more independent thinking.

The analysis demonstrates that dialogic pedagogy, problem-posing education, reflective practice, evidence-based argumentation, and critical digital literacy can complement one another in teacher education. International theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for these approaches, while national research and educational priorities offer opportunities for adapting them to the context of Uzbekistan.

Alaudinova and Aripova's research on problem-posing and dialogic educational technologies provides a relevant reference for designing communicative tasks that incorporate critical thinking. Alaudinova's related publications on oral communication and competency-based language development further support the importance of connecting communicative practice with professional teacher preparation.

The five-stage methodological framework proposed in this article—problem identification, evidence evaluation, dialogic discussion, pedagogical application, and reflection—offers a structured basis for integrating critical thinking into English language teacher education. Its implementation should be accompanied by clear assessment criteria, appropriate linguistic support, authentic pedagogical tasks, and continuous feedback.

Future empirical studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of this framework across different higher education institutions and learning contexts. Nevertheless, integrating critical inquiry into everyday teaching and learning activities represents a promising direction for preparing English language teachers who can think independently, act responsibly, and foster critical thinking among their future pupils.

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