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CRITICAL THINKING AND ITS ROLE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES STUDY

Summary. In the contemporary dynamic educational landscape, the development of critical thinking skills has become extremely important and is now widely recognized as a foundational objective across virtually all academic disciplines. It extends significantly to foreign language study, which was traditionally focused on linguistic accuracy and communicative competence. The article provides a research of the relationship between critical thinking and foreign language acquisition, stating that these two cognitive and educational domains are not merely complementary but are, in fact, profoundly reinforcing.

The research examines the cognitive processes that engage with a foreign language and demonstrates how they foster analytical, problem-solving, and evaluative competences within the learner. It also illustrates how applying of a critical mindset enhances both the depth and effectiveness of language learning, examining pedagogical approaches and methodologies that can be integrated into foreign language curricula. These approaches are designed to actively stimulate and develop critical thinking skills through targeted activities and strategic instructional design, moving beyond rote memorization to genuine intellectual engagement.

The methodology employed for the article is based on a literature review and a conceptual analysis that involves a clear conceptual delineation of critical thinking and foreign language study, as well as an exploration of theoretical frameworks that link cognitive development with linguistic acquisition.

Furthermore, the methodology focuses on identifying instances of mutual reinforcement, investigating how learning a foreign language stimulates critical thinking and, conversely, how critical thinking can be strategically applied by learners to optimize their language acquisition strategies. The article also highlights the substantial academic and practical benefits of fostering critical thinking in foreign language learners that are far beyond primary linguistic competence and encompass broader cognitive, metacognitive, and intercultural capabilities.

The main research findings reveal a relationship where critical thinking is both an outcome of and an enhancer for foreign language learning, which naturally fosters metacognitive awareness, problem-solving and inference skills, cross-cultural comparison and perspective-taking, and critical evaluation of information and sources. At the same time, a critical mindset significantly improves language acquisition through strategic learning, deeper linguistic processing, effective error analysis and self-correction, enhanced reading and listening comprehension, and improved productive skills. Pedagogically, integrating critical thinking requires a shift to tasks demanding analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, such as problem-based learning, debates, authentic material analysis, and comparative tasks.

The conclusions emphasize that cultivating critical thinking in foreign language learners transcends the traditional objective of achieving linguistic proficiency, instead equipping learners with essential cognitive tools that empower them to make more informed and reasoned decisions, engage in more profound and empathetic intercultural communication, and critically understand diverse perspectives.

Keywords: critical thinking, foreign language study, language acquisition, pedagogy, cognitive skills, intercultural communication, problem-solving.

1. INTRODUCTION

Problem statement. We are living now in an era of rapid globalization of all spheres of our lives: banking, business, information technologies, medicine, culture, entertainment, education, etc. This era is characterized also by rapid information flow, complex global challenges, and diverse cultural interactions that emerge the capacity for critical thinking as an indispensable competence. To implement cutting-edge technologies in our lives, we have to collaborate with our partners from different parts of our planet to work out appropriate solutions to all the challenges that we face nowadays. Thus, to meet all the requirements of our fast-changing world, a new generation of young specialists must have sufficient knowledge of foreign languages, as well as be able to solve different tasks and problems quickly and effectively. To meet all these needs and be able to respond to numerous challenges nowadays, universities provide future specialists not only with a certain amount of knowledge and professional skills and abilities but also develop their aptitude to judge current events and the surrounding environment in general. This aptitude, the ability to think critically, can also improve their cognitive strategies and become very important for their further working career.

The development of critical thinking is often associated with disciplines like philosophy, science, or social studies, in contrast, the role of critical thinking in foreign language study is profound but frequently underestimated. Traditional foreign language education has historically focused on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative fluency; however, a growing body of modern research and pedagogical shifts highlight an approach that integrates the development of thinking skills.

Thus, our research is devoted to the exploration of the relationship between critical thinking and foreign language study. It posits that learning a foreign language provides unique opportunities for cultivating critical thinking and, at the same time, that critical thinking significantly enhances the foreign language learning process.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The concept of critical thinking has been explored across various academic disciplines, and its importance in education is emphasized in several research works. Thus, Ennis [1] defined critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do”, outlining key dispositions and abilities. Similarly, Paul and Elder [2] presented a comprehensive framework in which they emphasized universal intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness. These definitions laid the groundwork for integrating critical thinking into diverse curricula.

In the field of second language acquisition and foreign language education, the discourse around critical thinking has been significant, and it moved beyond a sole focus on linguistic competence. Researchers like Atkinson [3] started the debate by questioning the universal applicability of Western notions of critical thinking in non-Western contexts, still, many researchers have largely affirmed its value in language learning globally. Several scientific studies [4; 5; 6] have increasingly shown that integrating critical thinking promotes deeper processing of linguistic input and more effective output.

Specifically, the scientific sources highlight several key areas where critical thinking intersects with foreign language study. Among them it is worth mentioning:

- metacognition in language learning. Research by Flavell [7] on metacognition, which is the awareness and understanding of one's thought processes, is devoted to this topic. He states that in foreign language study, metacognitive awareness allows learners to monitor their comprehension, identify learning gaps, and adjust strategies, which are all critical thinking skills;
- problem-solving in language use. Language learning inherently involves problem-solving different types of problems, from deciphering unfamiliar vocabulary in context to navigating complex grammatical structures and rhetorical strategies [8; 9];
- intercultural competence. Here, the idea is that deepening into new languages and cultures makes learners analyze and compare different worldviews, challenging their preconceived notions and fostering a more nuanced understanding of global diversity. This aspect directly contributes to critical thinking by promoting perspective-taking and reducing ethnocentric biases [10];
- authentic material analysis. The use of authentic materials like news articles, literary texts, documentaries, etc., in foreign language study necessitates a critical evaluation of source credibility, underlying messages, and cultural implications [11]. This moves from the main concentration on comprehension to analytical and evaluative reading/listening;
- pedagogical integration. Various pedagogical approaches have been proposed to foster critical thinking in language classrooms, including problem-based learning, debates, discussions, and task-based learning. These methodologies encourage active engagement, argumentation, and collaborative problem-solving in the target language [12].

The benefits of integrating critical thinking into the educational process are undoubted, but there are still challenges in this process that include teachers' understanding of critical thinking concepts, curriculum design, and appropriate assessment methods. In our article, we base on existing scientific sources to further elucidate the intertwined nature of critical thinking and foreign language study and to advocate for its deliberate integration.

The purpose of the article is to examine the theoretical background of this relationship, discuss the methodologies that facilitate the integration of critical thinking into foreign language classes, and highlight the benefits for learners beyond main linguistic proficiency.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a literature review and conceptual analysis approach to investigate the role of critical thinking in foreign language study. To study the problem of developing critical thinking skills we have used comparative analyses and surveys. The used methodology also involves a review of pedagogical practices to examine existing and proposed pedagogical approaches that aim to integrate critical thinking skills into foreign language teaching, which includes analyzing the design of learning activities, materials, and assessment methods that encourage analytical and evaluative thought; identification of mutual reinforcement while investigating how learning a foreign language naturally stimulates critical thinking processes, and conversely, how critical thinking can be applied by learners to optimize their language acquisition strategies by evaluating learning resources and analyzing language patterns; and discussion of benefits, synthesizing the academic and practical benefits of fostering critical thinking in foreign language learners, extending beyond linguistic competence to broader cognitive and intercultural capabilities. In our analysis, we have overviewed the established theories in cognitive psychology, second language acquisition, and educational philosophy to study the role of critical thinking in modern foreign language education.

3. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the last few decades, many teachers, researchers, and applied linguists have concentrated their attention on the positive impact that studying foreign languages can have on the development of students' cognitive abilities and critical thinking in particular. According to Paul: "Critical thinking is an intellectually controlled process of active communication, application of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information, collected through observation, experience, consideration, and communication" [13, p. 1]. At the same time, Limpan [14] offers to define the following main aspects of critical thinking:

- active communication. Communication itself can be regarded as the most efficient method of student motivation for developing their critical thinking. Effective communication is based on precisely formulated concepts and opinions, and obvious cause-and-effect relationships. In foreign language lessons, students are taught to recognize the most effective ways of communication used in printed texts or video presentations; students learn communicative strategies used in written texts. Eventually, they can sort out logically wrong reasonings that can impede the quality of communication. A teacher can successfully use students' interests and aspirations by offering them different materials, such as texts, videos, or podcasts. Students may work them through, understand their main ideas and concepts, and comment on them. Another example of an active communication approach can be a pre-prepared lesson, i.e., when students themselves study and research a particular topic before a lesson and demonstrate their results at the lesson, discussing them actively within a group;

- development of information evaluation skills. Nowadays, the flow of information that we obtain from numerous different sources is really extensive. However, not all information is of great importance to students. That is why a teacher in the lesson must teach students how to properly assess textual and visual information. Students must also be taught how to identify the target audience and how to choose particular information materials;

- asking questions. While conducting a lesson, a teacher has to ask students different questions. The questions may concern the homework check, the teacher may see if students understand the explained material, etc. To develop students' critical thinking, a teacher is advised to ask students not only the general questions that require short answers, "Yes" or "No", but they should ask the special questions that need students' detailed and thoughtful reactions and answers. The teacher's questions must be of such a kind that they would motivate learners to exchange their opinions actively and take an active part in the discussion. The teacher's questions should stimulate students to answer willingly, using as many new words and phrases as possible or to make up sentences using the studied grammatical structures.

- authentic materials. Using authentic materials in foreign language lessons is the best way to activate students' critical thinking. Authentic materials motivate students to study a foreign language, which can be a kind of challenge or a type of trial. Authentic materials can be presented in different ways, such as articles, podcasts, advertisements, and video and audio files. Work with listed sources can be used by students of any level;

- work assessment. In this regard, the student's work must be assessed constantly, at every lesson, not at the end of a term, like a single test or a credit. A credit or a test can show only a certain amount of knowledge, mainly of a linguistic nature, but an uninterrupted assessment during the whole semester allows a teacher to test a greater range of skills and abilities, including the ability to think critically. It is also possible to assert that even while doing tasks aimed at developing linguistic skills, a teacher can also develop students' critical thinking. For instance, while doing the task of filling the gaps with the correct verb forms, students may work with given vocabulary, performing different tasks, such as analyzing the words, dividing them into categories, comparing their usage in various styles, and defining the sequence of events and their cause-and-effect relationships in the given text. Such activity as project work is also called upon to develop creativity and collaboration most effectively because students must prepare the project together, carry out preparatory work, discuss the context, solve emerging problems, and create the project's final product [14, p. 218].

It is impossible to measure critical thinking, and it is also impossible to determine certain limits to which it can be developed in a single individual. Regardless of our expectation that critical thinking must be present to a certain degree in all spheres of our lives, we are often influenced by irrational thoughts and behaviour. Scriven and Paul consider that it is not correct to claim that people have already completed the task of mastering the skills of critical thinking. Instead, it is only possible to discuss varying degrees of critical thinking skills [15, p.2]. Suppose a foreign language teacher can teach their students how to think, to consider, how to be creative in solving problems, and how to apply the acquired knowledge in the future job. In that case, we will get effective specialists, no matter what sphere they will work in. Those specialists will identify what is essential and what is not. They will have a high degree of intellectual confidence; and be aware of the ambiguity of different resources. They will be able to control their thinking and think beyond the obvious.

Thus, the ability to think critically, assess, and reconsider the previous opinion is an extremely important skill that needs to be developed and supported in those who learn a foreign language. Moreover, as Pineda-Baez mentioned: “The nature of a foreign language, as a subject, makes it an ideal environment for developing critical thinking skills” [16, p. 3].

Learning a foreign language is a complex cognitive process that naturally engages various critical thinking skills. The main of them we have depicted in Figure 1.

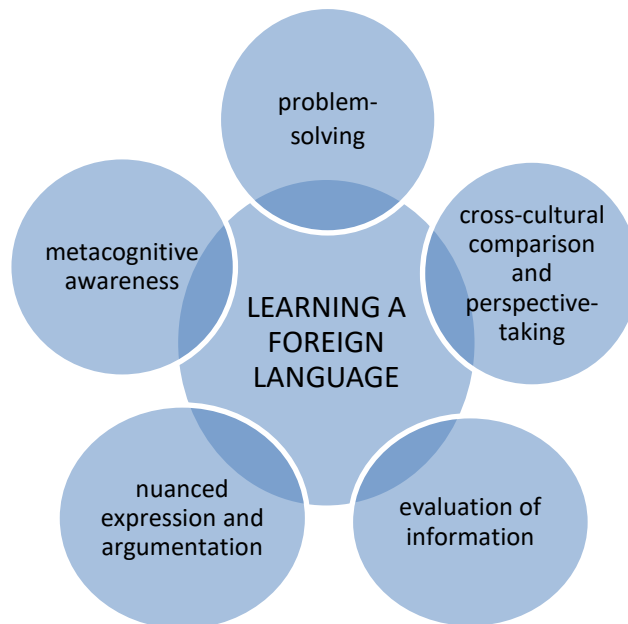


Figure 1. Critical thinking skills in foreign language learning

Let's analyse them more precisely:

- metacognitive awareness. Learners constantly monitor their understanding and production, identify gaps in their knowledge, and adjust their strategies, and this self-reflection is a core component of critical thinking. For instance, when encountering a complex sentence structure, a critical language learner has not just to memorize it, but to analyze its components, compare it to their native language, and infer its rules.
- problem-solving and inference. Language is full of ambiguity and context-dependent meanings, which is why learners must constantly solve linguistic problems, infer meanings from context, and navigate cultural nuances, and these require analytical reasoning and strategic thinking.
- cross-cultural comparison and perspective-taking. To study a new language inherently means exposure to a new culture and worldview, thus, learners are prompted to compare and contrast linguistic structures, social norms, and conceptual frameworks, that are leading to a deeper understanding of their own culture and foster empathy and intellectual flexibility. This process challenges ethnocentric biases and promotes a more critical understanding of global issues.

– evaluation of information and sources. In the modern, increasingly digital world, language learners access vast amounts of information in the target language, which is why critical thinking becomes essential for evaluating the credibility, bias, and relevance of the sources, whether they are news articles, social media posts, or academic texts.

– nuanced expression and argumentation. Moving beyond basic communication, expressing complex ideas, constructing arguments, and participating in debates in a foreign language demands sophisticated critical thinking, so learners must select precise vocabulary, appropriate grammatical structures, and culturally sensitive discourse strategies to convey their message effectively and persuasively.

At the same time, critical mindset actively improves the effectiveness and depth of foreign language learning (Figure 2).

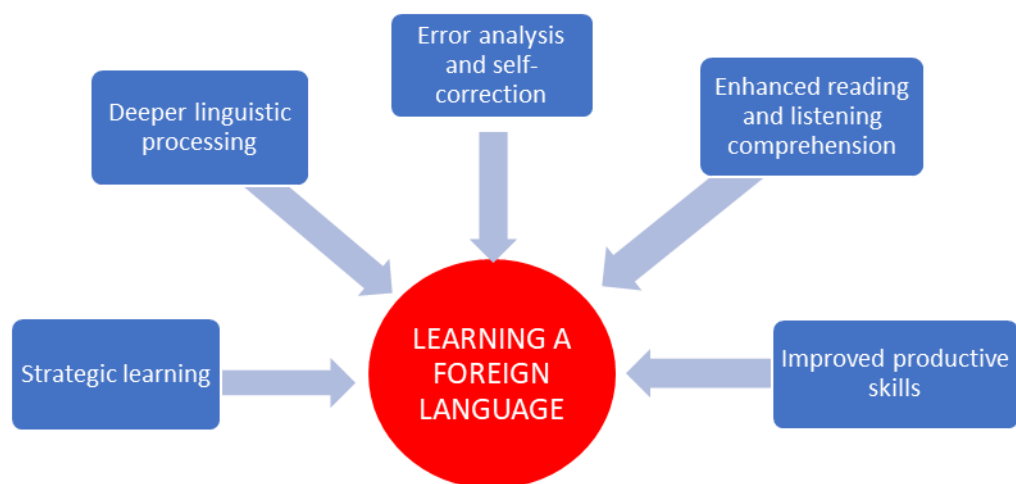


Figure 2. Critical mindset that improves the effectiveness of foreign language learning

Thus, let us describe them:

– strategic learning. Critical learners are not passive recipients of information, they question, analyze, and strategically choose learning methods that suit them best; they also evaluate the efficacy of different vocabulary acquisition techniques, grammar explanations, or practice exercises.

– deeper linguistic processing. Instead of rote memorization, critical thinkers engage with language at a deeper level, they look for patterns, identify exceptions, and understand the underlying logic of grammatical rules and lexical collocations. This leads to more robust retention and better application.

– effective error analysis and self-correction. Critical thinking allows learners to analyze their own errors systematically, understand why they made a mistake, and devise strategies to avoid it in the future, fostering self-correction and continuous improvement.

– enhanced reading and listening comprehension. Critical readers and listeners actively engage with texts and audio, questioning the author's intent, identifying implicit meanings, and recognizing persuasive techniques. This active engagement leads to a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the target language material.

– improved productive skills. When producing speaking or writing language, critical thinkers organize their thoughts logically, structure arguments coherently, and anticipate potential misinterpretations, resulting in clearer, more effective, and persuasive communication.

Thus, it becomes clear that integrating critical thinking into foreign language study requires a shift from purely reproductive tasks to those that demand analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. To have a success in it, it is necessary to use appropriate pedagogical strategies in teaching process. Among such strategies, we can name problem-based learning, which presents real-world problems

that require students to research, discuss, and propose solutions in the target language, thus encouraging analytical thinking and practical application of language skills. Another helpful strategy can be using debates and discussions on the lessons, as structuring classroom debates on controversial or complex topics allows students to formulate arguments, present evidence, respond to counter-arguments, and use persuasive language. One more strategy that can be used is authentic materials analysis, which is based on using such authentic texts like news articles, scientific papers, advertisements, and films from the target culture and guiding students to analyze their purpose, audience, underlying messages, and potential biases. Role-playing and simulations are another helpful strategy that engages students in scenarios that require negotiation, conflict resolution, or complex decision-making in the target language, fostering both linguistic and critical communication skills.

4. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

So, we come to the conclusion that the study of foreign languages offers a good ground for forming and empowering critical thinking skills and, conversely, a critical mindset, thus significantly enriching the language learning experience. Integrating critical thinking into foreign language study also empowers learners with valuable cognitive tools that they can apply across all aspects of their lives. These competences, including analytical reasoning, problem-solving, information evaluation, and nuanced communication, are essential for navigating modern life complexities and improving intercultural understanding.

Thus, we may also conclude that the future of foreign language education lies in recognizing and actively leveraging this relationship. Further research could explore the long-term impact of explicit critical thinking instruction on language proficiency, investigate the most effective artificial intelligence tools for fostering critical thinking in foreign language study, and develop standardized assessment tools for measuring critical thinking development within diverse foreign language contexts.

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КРИТИЧНЕ МИСЛЕННЯ ТА ЙОГО РОЛЬ У ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

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Анотація. У сучасному динамічному освітньому середовищі розвиток навичок критичного мислення став надзвичайно важливим і широко визнається основоположною метою практично усіх академічних дисциплін. Це значною мірою стосується і вивчення іноземних мов, яке традиційно було зосереджене на лінгвістичній точності та комунікативній компетентності. У статті представлено дослідження взаємозв'язку між критичним мисленням та вивченням іноземної мови, стверджуючи, що ці дві когнітивні та освітні сфери не просто доповнюють одна одну, а насправді глибоко підсилюють.

У статті досліджуються когнітивні процеси, пов'язані з вивченням іноземної мови, та демонструється, як вони сприяють розвитку аналітичних, проблемних та оціночних компетенцій у учнів. Також проілюстровано, як застосування критичного мислення підвищує як глибину, так і ефективність вивчення мови на основі педагогічних підходів та методології, які можна інтегрувати в навчальні програми з іноземних мов. Ці підходи розроблені для активного стимулювання та розвитку навичок критичного мислення за допомогою цілеспрямованих заходів та стратегічного планування навчання, виходячи за рамки механічного запам'ятовування.

Методологія статті базується на огляді літератури та концептуальному аналізі, що включає чітке концептуальне розмежування критичного мислення та вивчення іноземної мови, а також дослідження теоретичних рамок, які пов'язують когнітивний розвиток з лінгвістичним засвоєнням. Крім того, у статті досліджено, як вивчення іноземної мови стимулює критичне мислення, і, навпаки, як критичне мислення може бути стратегічно застосоване студентами для оптимізації їхніх стратегій засвоєння мови. У статті також висвітлюються суттєві академічні та практичні переваги розвитку критичного мислення у тих, хто вивчає іноземні мови, які виходять далеко за межі основної лінгвістичної компетенції та охоплюють ширші когнітивні, метакогнітивні та міжкультурні можливості.

Основні результати дослідження показують взаємозв'язок, де критичне мислення є одночасно результатом і підсилювачем вивчення іноземної мови, що природним чином сприяє розвитку

метакогнітивної усвідомленості, навичок вирішення проблем і формулювання висновків, міжкультурного порівняння та сприйняття різних точок зору, а також критичної оцінки інформації та джерел. Водночас критичне мислення значно покращує засвоєння мови завдяки стратегічному навчанню, глибшій лінгвістичній обробці, ефективному аналізу помилок та самокорекції, покращенню розуміння прочитаного та почутого. З педагогічної точки зору, інтеграція критичного мислення вимагає переходу до завдань, що потребують аналізу, синтезу та оцінки, таких як проблемне навчання, дебати, аналіз автентичних матеріалів та порівняльні завдання.

У висновках наголошується, що розвиток критичного мислення у тих, хто вивчає іноземні мови, виходить за рамки традиційної мети досягнення лінгвістичної грамотності, натомість оснащуючи учнів необхідними когнітивними інструментами, які дозволяють їм приймати більш обґрунтовані та аргументовані рішення, брати участь у глибшому та емпатичному міжкультурному спілкуванні та критично розуміти різні точки зору.

Ключові слова: критичне мислення, вивчення іноземних мов, оволодіння мовою, педагогіка, когнітивні навички, міжкультурна комунікація, вирішення проблем.

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