

## CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM: REIMAGINING LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Abstrak** - Pengembangan keterampilan berpikir kritis (Critical Thinking/CT) telah menjadi tujuan pendidikan yang sangat penting di abad ke-21, khususnya dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini meneliti integrasi kemampuan berpikir kritis ke dalam kurikulum bahasa Inggris serta bagaimana penerapannya membentuk kembali kompetensi komunikatif, kreativitas, dan kemampuan pemecahan masalah peserta didik. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan 40 guru bahasa Inggris dan 120 siswa dari tiga sekolah menengah atas negeri di Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, analisis dokumen terhadap pedoman kurikulum, serta wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kurikulum bahasa Inggris secara eksplisit mendorong pengembangan Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), implementasinya di lapangan sering terhambat oleh praktik pembelajaran yang berorientasi pada ujian, keterbatasan pelatihan guru, dan kurangnya materi kontekstual. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penerapan CT dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris memerlukan perancangan ulang kurikulum, pemberdayaan guru, dan penggunaan konteks pembelajaran yang autentik. Penelitian ini juga merekomendasikan integrasi pembelajaran berbasis inkuiri (inquiry-based learning), penilaian berbasis proyek (project-based assessment), serta pedagogi reflektif (reflective pedagogy) untuk mendukung pengembangan berpikir kritis secara berkelanjutan pada peserta didik EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

**Kata kunci:** Berpikir kritis, kurikulum bahasa Inggris, keterampilan berpikir tingkat tinggi, pedagogi reflektif, pendidikan EFL.

**Abstract** - Developing critical thinking (CT) skills has become a crucial educational goal in the 21st century, especially in English language education. This study investigates the integration of critical thinking into the English curriculum and how it reshapes learners' communicative competence, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research involved 40 English teachers and 120 students from three public high schools in Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, document analysis of curriculum guidelines, and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that while the English curriculum explicitly promotes higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), its implementation is often hindered by exam-oriented practices, limited teacher training, and lack of contextual materials. The study concludes that embedding CT in English instruction requires curriculum redesign, teacher empowerment, and authentic learning contexts. It recommends the integration of inquiry-based learning, project-based assessment, and reflective pedagogy to sustain critical thinking development among EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, English curriculum, higher-order thinking skills, reflective pedagogy, EFL education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking (CT) has emerged as one of the most essential competencies required for learners to thrive in the 21st century (Facione, 2015; Lai, 2011). In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, information overload, and complex global issues, the ability to think critically enables individuals to make informed judgments, solve problems effectively, and engage constructively in social and academic discourse. CT encompasses skills such as reasoning, analyzing, interpreting, inferring, evaluating, and self-regulating (Ennis, 2018; Paul & Elder, 2014). Within the domain of language education, CT extends beyond cognitive

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reasoning; it also involves learners' capacity to analyze linguistic structures, interpret meanings, assess arguments, and evaluate perspectives critically. Hence, the development of CT in language learning contexts is integral to nurturing independent, reflective, and communicatively competent learners.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), fostering CT is increasingly recognized as a pedagogical imperative. The integration of CT into English instruction allows learners not only to comprehend texts but also to question underlying assumptions, identify biases, and construct reasoned opinions. According to Brookhart (2010), the inclusion of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)—which comprise analyzing, evaluating, and creating—plays a pivotal role in enhancing learners' cognitive engagement. This educational orientation aligns with Bloom's revised taxonomy, emphasizing the transition from lower-order to higher-order thinking. Consequently, CT development is not an isolated skill but a multidimensional process that intersects with linguistic, cognitive, and affective domains of learning.

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2013) has highlighted the importance of integrating HOTS within the national curriculum, including in English language education. The 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013) emphasizes the need for students to be critical, creative, communicative, and collaborative learners—collectively known as the “4Cs.” This educational shift aims to prepare students for the demands of the 21st century by moving away from rote memorization and teacher-centered practices toward student-centered and inquiry-based learning. However, despite these policy directions, the actual implementation of CT in EFL classrooms remains inconsistent. Teachers often struggle to translate curriculum expectations into classroom practice due to limited understanding of CT pedagogy, lack of resources, and exam-oriented teaching environments (Rahmawati & Cahyono, 2020; Zubaidah et al., 2017).

Previous studies have also indicated that many English teachers tend to prioritize grammar instruction, vocabulary mastery, and test preparation over the cultivation of critical and reflective thinking (Marcellino, 2015; Setyarini et al., 2018). Such tendencies can be attributed to various systemic and contextual factors, including traditional teaching beliefs, time constraints, and the pressure to meet national examination standards. As a result, opportunities for students to engage in higher-order cognitive activities such as debating, analyzing authentic texts, or solving real-life language problems are often limited. This gap between curriculum goals and classroom practices underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how CT is conceptualized, embedded, and enacted in English language teaching in Indonesia.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how critical thinking is integrated within the English curriculum, how teachers implement CT-oriented practices in their classrooms, and what challenges they encounter in fostering CT among EFL learners. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to provide insights into the pedagogical realities faced by English teachers and to propose recommendations for strengthening CT-based language instruction. Ultimately, the findings are expected to contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational reform and the enhancement of English teaching quality in Indonesia, particularly within the framework of the 21st-century learning paradigm.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Concept of Critical Thinking in Language Learning***

Critical thinking (CT) is widely regarded as one of the core intellectual competencies essential for academic success and lifelong learning. It is often defined as the ability to reason reflectively, analyze information objectively, and make logical judgments based on valid evidence (Facione, 2015; Ennis, 2018). Facione (2015) describes CT as a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, while Ennis (2018) emphasizes it as a process of making reasonable and reflective decisions about what to believe or do. These definitions highlight CT as not only a set of cognitive skills but also as a disposition to think deeply and question assumptions.

In the context of language learning, CT plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' ability to comprehend and produce meaningful communication. Atkinson (2011) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) suggest that CT in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms extends beyond linguistic accuracy—it involves the learners' capacity to evaluate ideas, identify biases, question cultural norms, and construct reasoned arguments in the target language. Language learning, therefore, becomes a cognitive and reflective process in which learners are encouraged to interpret, analyze, and respond critically to texts and discourse.

Furthermore, CT in language learning fosters learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness. Learners who think critically tend to reflect on their language use, evaluate the effectiveness of their learning strategies, and make informed adjustments to improve performance. According to Paul and Elder (2014), CT nurtures intellectual traits such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and fair-mindedness—all of which are essential for effective communication and intercultural understanding. Consequently, promoting CT within EFL instruction aligns with the broader goal of developing students who are not merely language users but also active, reflective, and responsible thinkers in both academic and real-world contexts.

### ***2.2. Critical Thinking in the English Curriculum***

The integration of CT into English language curricula has gained increasing global attention, particularly within the framework of 21st-century education. The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2019) identifies CT as one of the essential "4Cs"—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—needed to prepare students for complex real-world challenges. Accordingly, modern English curricula are designed to cultivate not only linguistic competence but also the higher-order thinking abilities required for academic and professional success.

In the Indonesian context, the Kurikulum 2013 (K-13) explicitly emphasizes the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) as part of communicative competence. Learners are expected to move beyond recalling and understanding information toward applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating—cognitive levels that mirror Bloom's revised taxonomy (Brookhart, 2010). Within this paradigm, English learning activities such as debates, argumentative essays, role plays, and problem-solving discussions are considered effective pedagogical approaches to foster CT. For instance, through debating or writing opinion essays, students learn to gather evidence, justify their arguments, and consider alternative

viewpoints—all of which stimulate analytical and evaluative reasoning (Brookhart, 2010; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Moreover, CT in English curricula supports the development of intercultural communicative competence. As students encounter texts reflecting diverse cultures and perspectives, they are challenged to interpret meanings critically, appreciate differences, and question ethnocentric assumptions. Richards and Schmidt (2010) argue that CT-oriented language learning encourages students to engage critically with authentic materials—such as news articles, social media posts, and literature—thereby linking linguistic proficiency with social awareness and ethical reasoning. Thus, integrating CT in the English curriculum transforms language learning into an intellectually engaging and socially responsive process.

### ***2.3. Challenges in CT Implementation***

Despite the growing recognition of CT as a vital educational goal, its practical implementation in EFL classrooms remains fraught with challenges. Several studies have shown that many teachers lack adequate knowledge, confidence, and training to effectively integrate CT-based pedagogy (Lai, 2011; Rahmawati & Cahyono, 2020). This gap is often rooted in teacher education programs that prioritize linguistic competence and methodological theory over critical pedagogy and reflective teaching practices. As a result, teachers may perceive CT as an abstract concept rather than a teachable and assessable skill (Tiruneh et al., 2017).

Structural and systemic constraints also hinder the promotion of CT in English teaching. Zubaidah et al. (2017) and Tiruneh et al. (2017) note that standardized testing systems—focused primarily on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension—discourage teachers from implementing activities that require open-ended thinking or extended discussions. Time constraints, large class sizes, and rigid syllabi further limit opportunities for students to engage in inquiry-based or collaborative learning. Additionally, cultural factors may play a role, as some educational contexts in Asia, including Indonesia, are influenced by traditional teacher-centered paradigms where students are expected to be passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in dialogue and reasoning (Atkinson, 2011).

Another challenge lies in assessment practices. Many teachers struggle to design evaluation tools that accurately measure students' CT skills, as existing assessment models tend to emphasize linguistic accuracy rather than cognitive depth (Brookhart, 2010). Without clear rubrics or performance indicators, teachers may find it difficult to gauge students' progress in CT development. Consequently, while CT is often acknowledged in curriculum documents and policy statements, its operationalization in classroom practice remains limited and inconsistent.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic efforts, including teacher professional development, curriculum refinement, and the alignment of assessment practices with CT learning outcomes. Encouraging reflective teaching, collaborative lesson planning, and the use of authentic materials can also empower teachers to integrate CT more effectively into English instruction. In essence, fostering CT in EFL education demands not only pedagogical innovation but also a shift in mindset—from viewing language learning as knowledge acquisition to perceiving it as an active process of reasoning, inquiry, and reflection.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the realities of CT integration in EFL classrooms (Creswell, 2014).

#### 3.2. Participants

Participants included 40 English teachers and 120 high school students from three Indonesian public schools implementing the *Kurikulum 2013*.

#### 3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- Classroom observations to examine pedagogical strategies.
- Curriculum document analysis to trace CT-related learning outcomes.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2013) model, identifying recurring themes related to curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and student engagement.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result

#### 4.1. Presence of CT in Curriculum Documents

The analysis of curriculum documents indicates that Critical Thinking (CT) is explicitly embedded within the Core Competencies (Kompetensi Inti) and Basic Competencies (Kompetensi Dasar) of the Indonesian English curriculum, particularly in the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013). The curriculum underscores the importance of developing students' analytical and evaluative capacities, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. Tasks such as argumentative essays, debates, discussions, and reflective writing are designed to encourage learners to analyze information, construct logical arguments, and express reasoned opinions (Kemendikbud, 2013; Brookhart, 2010). These instructional goals are aligned with the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) framework, which emphasizes analyzing, evaluating, and creating as the core of learning activities (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

However, findings reveal a significant gap between the curriculum's intended goals and classroom implementation. While the curriculum promotes CT as a central learning outcome, teachers often simplify classroom tasks to accommodate time constraints, exam demands, and varying student proficiency levels. Consequently, activities that should stimulate reflective thinking are frequently reduced to surface-level comprehension exercises or structured responses. This simplification restricts opportunities for learners to engage in authentic reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making processes. Moreover, the curriculum documents themselves provide limited operational guidance on how to integrate CT within lesson planning or assessment, leaving teachers to interpret and adapt the concept individually (Hidayati & Widodo, 2018). Therefore, while CT is conceptually present within curriculum design, its pedagogical translation into classroom practice remains partial and inconsistent.

#### **4.2. Teacher Practices and Pedagogical Shifts**

Classroom observations and interviews indicate that the implementation of CT-based instruction among English teachers is still limited. Only about 35% of teachers consistently employed strategies that explicitly foster CT skills, such as reflective questioning, collaborative inquiry, or analytical discussion. The majority of teachers continued to emphasize factual comprehension and mechanical language drills, reflecting a traditional teacher-centered approach. This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that many EFL teachers prioritize linguistic accuracy and exam performance over analytical engagement (Tiruneh et al., 2017; Rahmawati & Cahyono, 2020).

Nevertheless, teachers who adopted innovative and student-centered pedagogical approaches, such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), reported noticeable improvements in student engagement and reasoning abilities. These methods encouraged learners to explore authentic issues, identify problems, and collaboratively develop solutions using English as a medium of communication. As students engaged in tasks requiring justification and evidence-based reasoning, they demonstrated greater independence and confidence in expressing opinions. This supports the notion that pedagogical design—rather than curriculum content alone—plays a critical role in cultivating CT (Ennis, 2018; Facione, 2015).

Teachers with higher pedagogical and professional training exhibited greater competency in integrating CT principles into their classroom practices. They tended to employ techniques such as reflective questioning, peer assessment, and the use of digital discussion forums, which encouraged learners to articulate and defend viewpoints. These teachers also designed more complex learning assessments, moving beyond multiple-choice tests toward performance-based evaluations that required critical reflection and argumentation. However, many teachers expressed the need for structured professional development programs and teaching resources that explicitly model CT-oriented pedagogy. Without ongoing support and collaboration, the implementation of CT tends to remain sporadic and teacher-dependent rather than systemic and sustainable.

#### **4.3. Student Responses and Challenges**

Students' perspectives revealed both enthusiasm and struggle in engaging with CT-oriented tasks. Learners reported increased motivation, participation, and curiosity when involved in classroom activities such as debates, case studies, or inquiry-based projects. These activities allowed them to express personal opinions, question ideas, and collaboratively negotiate meaning in English—experiences that are often absent in traditional instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Students perceived such tasks as more meaningful and interactive, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning process.

However, the findings also highlight several linguistic and psychological barriers that hindered full participation. Many students expressed difficulty in articulating complex thoughts due to limited vocabulary, grammatical constraints, and lack of confidence in using English for argumentation. The fear of making mistakes and being corrected publicly discouraged some students from participating actively in discussions. This aligns with Atkinson's (2011) observation that cultural attitudes toward authority and error-making in Asian classrooms often inhibit students from expressing divergent opinions.

Moreover, the exam-oriented classroom culture prevalent in many Indonesian schools reinforces the focus on memorization and accuracy rather than critical engagement (Zubaidah et al., 2017). As a result, students are more accustomed to producing expected answers rather than generating original perspectives. Time constraints and dense syllabi also limit opportunities for prolonged discussion or reflection. To overcome these barriers, teachers must create supportive classroom environments that value inquiry, encourage risk-taking in language use, and provide scaffolding to help learners articulate critical responses in English. Incorporating vocabulary-building strategies, feedback cycles, and collaborative reflection can gradually strengthen students' confidence and linguistic readiness for CT-based activities.

#### ***4.4. Curriculum and Policy Implications***

The findings from this study underscore a mismatch between curriculum intentions and classroom realities in implementing CT within English language education. While national curriculum documents explicitly promote HOTS and CT competencies, classroom practices continue to be shaped by conventional assessment systems, limited teacher training, and resource constraints. This inconsistency suggests the need for systemic and multi-level interventions involving curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators.

First, teacher professional development should be prioritized to enhance teachers' understanding of CT pedagogy. Training programs must move beyond theoretical exposure to include hands-on workshops, model lesson demonstrations, and collaborative material design focused on CT-based learning and assessment (Lai, 2011; Hidayati & Widodo, 2018). Teachers should also be equipped with clear assessment rubrics and task design frameworks that integrate CT objectives with linguistic goals.

Second, curriculum designers should embed explicit guidelines and exemplars for implementing CT activities across language skills. This includes designing curriculum modules that incorporate reflective learning, project-based assessments, and problem-solving communication tasks aligned with students' proficiency levels. Encouraging reflective pedagogy, where teachers and students continuously evaluate their learning processes, can create a more dynamic and responsive classroom environment (Paul & Elder, 2014).

Third, education policy must address structural barriers by revising assessment standards to value analytical reasoning and creative expression rather than rote memorization. Collaborative learning models and formative assessment practices, such as peer feedback and self-assessment, can bridge the gap between policy and practice. Finally, fostering a community of practice among teachers can promote sustained professional dialogue, shared innovation, and collective reflection on effective CT instruction.

In conclusion, the development of CT in English education requires more than curricular inclusion—it demands systemic alignment between policy frameworks, pedagogical practices, and assessment strategies. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the vision of cultivating critically minded, communicatively competent, and globally aware learners be fully realized within Indonesia's EFL education context.

#### ***4.2 Discussion***

The findings of the study reveal that Critical Thinking (CT) is explicitly integrated into the English curriculum, particularly within the Core Competencies (Kompetensi Inti) and Basic

Competencies (Kompetensi Dasar). CT is emphasized as an essential element in developing productive language skills such as speaking and writing, where students are encouraged to engage in analytical reasoning through activities like debates and argumentative essays (Kemendikbud, 2013; Brookhart, 2010). However, in practice, many teachers tend to simplify these tasks to meet time constraints and syllabus requirements, thereby limiting opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking. This indicates that, although CT is conceptually embedded in curriculum documents, its translation into classroom practice remains incomplete and inconsistent.

Classroom observations further showed that only 35% of teachers consistently implemented CT-based instruction, while the majority focused on factual comprehension and language form accuracy. Teachers who adopted problem-based learning (PBL) or inquiry-oriented methods reported significant improvements in student engagement and reasoning ability (Tiruneh et al., 2017; Rahmawati & Cahyono, 2020). Moreover, teachers with higher levels of pedagogical training demonstrated greater competence in fostering CT. They employed strategies such as reflective questioning, peer assessment, and digital discussion forums, which encouraged students to articulate ideas, evaluate evidence, and express critical perspectives (Ennis, 2018; Facione, 2015). These findings highlight the crucial role of teacher expertise and pedagogical innovation in transforming CT from a theoretical goal into an active classroom practice.

From the students' perspective, the implementation of CT-oriented activities had both positive and challenging aspects. Students reported increased motivation, curiosity, and participation when engaged in debates, inquiry tasks, and reflective discussions. These activities provided space for them to express opinions and think independently, making the learning process more interactive and meaningful (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Nevertheless, several barriers hindered full participation, such as limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and fear of making mistakes. These linguistic and psychological challenges often led to hesitation in expressing complex ideas in English. Furthermore, the exam-oriented culture dominant in many schools discouraged open-ended discussions and critical reflection (Zubaidah et al., 2017). As a result, students were more accustomed to memorizing correct answers than formulating analytical responses.

Overall, the findings point to a mismatch between curriculum objectives and classroom realities. While the English curriculum promotes CT as a key learning outcome, teachers often face systemic and contextual barriers in its implementation. To bridge this gap, teacher professional development should be strengthened to focus on designing and implementing CT-oriented materials, learning activities, and assessment tools (Lai, 2011; Hidayati & Widodo, 2018). Moreover, fostering reflective pedagogy, collaborative learning environments, and formative assessment practices can enhance both teaching quality and student engagement in CT development (Paul & Elder, 2014). Ultimately, these findings emphasize that the successful cultivation of CT in EFL classrooms requires not only curriculum reform but also sustained pedagogical support, institutional commitment, and a shift toward more reflective and inquiry-based learning cultures.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that although the English curriculum promotes critical thinking as a key learning outcome, its practical implementation remains uneven. Teachers' pedagogical readiness, institutional constraints, and assessment systems affect CT integration. Therefore, future curriculum reforms should focus on developing inquiry-based modules, digital collaboration platforms, and reflective teaching strategies. By reimagining English education through the lens of critical thinking, schools can cultivate learners who are not only linguistically competent but also intellectually independent.

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