

## **TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN EFL SETTINGS**

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As a result of today's globalization and rapid development of information technologies, the language learning process has become more complicated, and it is not enough to teach only grammatical rules or increase vocabulary. The formation of the ability to use the language effectively and purposefully in learners of English as a Second Language (EFL) is considered an important task. At the same time, critical thinking is one of the main skills that serve to develop students' ability to analyze, evaluate information, solve problems and find creative solutions (Paul & Elder, 2014).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is recognized as one of the effective tools for developing not only language skills, but also critical thinking in students in the EFL environment. PBL provides students with opportunities to complete tasks, work in groups, identify problems, and find solutions based on real-life situations. In this context, teacher strategies play a central role in supporting and shaping critical thinking.

This thesis analyzes, illustrates with practical examples, and develops recommendations for effective strategies that teachers can use to develop critical thinking through project-based learning in an EFL setting.

The concept of critical thinking first began to be widely used in pedagogical and psychological literature in the mid-20th century. Critical thinking is the process of analyzing problematic situations, making informed decisions, verifying facts, and arriving at logical conclusions (Ennis, 2011). For learners of English as a second language, critical thinking is not simply about knowing grammatical or lexical rules, but also about being able to express one's thoughts coherently and well-foundedly through language.

The main elements of critical thinking are:

Analysis – breaking down information into segments, identifying main and supporting ideas.

Evaluation – checking the reliability of sources and facts, making decisions.

Creative problem-solving – developing new ways to solve a problem.

Reflection – critically evaluating one's own ideas and respectfully accepting the ideas of others (Facione, 2015).[1]

Project-based learning is an active learning process that focuses on solving real-life problems that are relevant to the interests and needs of students. PBL has the following characteristics:

Focus or problem – students are given an interesting and relevant task.

Independent and group work – students work collaboratively on a project.

Outcome or product – a specific result or creative product is produced at the end of the project.

Reflection – students evaluate their work and analyze their experiences.

In an EFL setting, PBL provides students with the following opportunities:

Use language in a practical context.

Develop critical thinking through problem-solving.

Improve communication skills through group work and discussion.

Developing independent learning through creativity and innovation (Thomas, 2000).[2]

The teacher's strategies for developing critical thinking directly determine the effectiveness of the learning process. The following are the main strategies used in PBL in EFL.

The teacher should ask open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking. For example: "Why did this happen?" or "What alternative solution do you suggest?" In the process of asking questions, students analyze facts, form well-founded opinions, and learn to give logical explanations.

Group discussions and debates are effective tools for developing critical thinking. The teacher encourages students to listen respectfully to different opinions and defend their decisions based on evidence. The discussion process also serves to strengthen language skills.

If the project tasks assigned to students are related to real-life problems, they will use critical thinking more actively in the process of analyzing and finding solutions. For example, the task of creating an environmental project or a social media campaign encourages students to think creatively and critically.

After students complete the project, the teacher encourages them to reflect: what worked, what didn't work, which decisions were effective, and which processes need to be improved. Reflection serves to strengthen critical thinking.

During the more complex stages of the project, the teacher provides guidance but does not provide complete solutions. This strategy encourages students to think independently and teaches them to make responsible decisions.

Studies conducted in various EFL settings confirm the effectiveness of PBL in developing critical thinking. For example, Li (2019) found that in an experiment

conducted in Chinese schools, groups that used PBL showed significant differences in critical thinking skills compared to groups that received traditional lessons.[3]

Also, a study by Johnson and Johnson (2020) found that students in groups working through PBL improved their ability to analyze problems, make decisions, and develop creative solutions. These observations indicate that PBL is an effective tool for developing not only language skills but also critical thinking in EFL settings.[4]

In conclusion, developing critical thinking through project-based learning in EFL not only enriches the language learning process, but also develops students' ability to solve problems, analyze and develop creative solutions. The teacher can effectively implement this process by using the following strategies:

Ask open-ended questions and define problems.

Organize dialogue and discussions.

Adapt project tasks to real-life contexts.

Encourage reflection and self-assessment.

Use a variety of resources and sources.

Provide guidance (scaffolding).

The correct application of these strategies in the EFL environment significantly increases students' critical thinking skills and shapes them as independent, creative and thinking individuals.

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