



University-Level English Major Students' Strategies to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

Critical thinking follows cognitive procedures such as analysing, evaluating, synthesising, and interpreting. University-level English major students need to develop critical thinking skills to thrive intellectually in this competitive world. Students at such a level adopt different strategies to develop their criticality. This study analysed the basics of critical thinking skills, such as questioning, appraising, synthesising, and interpreting, and explored the strategies that master's-level English major students adopted to foster their critical thinking skills. For this, the study employed a qualitative approach and interviews as tools to collect data. The data were collected from five master's-level English major students of Tribhuvan University using qualitative interviews. The data were categorised, codified, and analysed under qualitative themes. The discussion showed that critical thinking is a cognitive process and has sub-skills that build the core of higher-order thinking skills. Likewise, the study found that university-level English major students employed strategies to promote their critical thinking skills such as critical reading, questioning, metacognitive activities, comparison and contrast, collaboration and cooperative learning, concept mapping, and self-reflection.

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is a process of thinking outside the box, and it involves procedures such as establishing premises to analyse information and issues from multiple perspectives, identifying underlying assumptions, presenting tools of evaluation, and developing a logical conclusion. It is an essential skill that students need to perform different pedagogical activities in the classroom, sharpen their criticality and inference for academic purposes, and beyond the classroom. Yazidi (2023) views critical thinking as a crucial skill that enables students to communicate effectively, link supporting details to strengthen reasoning, solve problems, and infer their own meaningful conclusions. In addition, critical thinking as a cognitive process engages students in analysing information, evaluating arguments, and synthesising information to reach a logical conclusion. Students learning English at the university level are expected to have achieved the required proficiency in basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Likewise, the curriculum of English at this level has provision to promote students' cognitive ability and critical thinking skills. Supporting this view, the Faculty of Education, English major course — Interdisciplinary Readings in English (2021) — has clearly mentioned developing students' criticality, inference, and creativity through wider reading of diverse texts on recent global themes in English. Moreover, criticality and creativity are relative and reciprocal intellectual phenomena. Critical thinking promotes students' creativity and innovative ability so that they come up with new ideas and solutions to problems. Stedman and

Adam (2012) believe that one of the primary goals of university-level language education is to sharpen students' critical thinking, creative thinking, social, and metacognitive skills. In line with these views, Saeger (2014) puts forward the argument that critical thinking, an intellectual exercise, is a part of 21st-century skills and is an imperative phenomenon that higher education acknowledges as a dire need of students in the form of a skill that enables them to compete in this competitive world.

University-level English learners need to be acquainted with the use of information and communication technology. They need to develop their critical thinking skills to acquire new knowledge and practices, and to create new discourse in the relevant discipline using ICT as a resource. In the words of Zhong and Song (2024), higher-level students should develop cognitive skills to analyse the pressing issues of this world from multiple perspectives and lead towards logical conclusions. Students using criticality can transfer their theoretical knowledge to social practice, cope with surrounding challenges, and compete in this competitive world. The times require that university-level English language learners be familiar with twentieth-century soft skills — such as communication, criticality, collaboration, creativity, and the use of ICT — and be proficient practitioners of these skills. Enhancing critical thinking among English language learners at a higher level is pertinent to empowering them to effectively adapt to a rapidly changing world, to develop their problem-solving efficiency and skills, and to clearly articulate their ideas with proper synthesis and meaningful interpretation (Ordem, 2017). Likewise, recent classroom pedagogy of language also focuses on interaction either in pairs or in groups, and attempts to position language learners not as passive listeners but as critical and constructive participants. Such a mode of classroom interaction, its successful application, constructive vision, and reflection are not possible without critical thinking. Moreover, language learners nowadays need to expose themselves to people in society, learn to be part of their respective society, and this requires higher-order thinking skills for meaningful social interaction. Despite its value, cultivating critical thinking can be challenging for students since they are often involved only in deciphering factual information through memorisation and have faced formal standardised testing. Here, our context seems similar to that described by Facione (2020), who concludes that students' lack of required metacognitive skills, the traditional classroom setting, and the adoption of traditional pedagogy are challenges to enhancing students' critical thinking skills.

Strategies refer to the pre-planned techniques and activities that teachers or students adopt in teaching and learning. Effective language learning strategies emphasise students' communicative competence, active engagement, and cognitive processing rather than learning English through structured patterns and rote memorisation. Language learning strategies refer to the specific set of activities, steps, and plans that learners consciously select and employ to facilitate the acquisition of information. They are action-driven, more self-directed, and are adopted to improve learning (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Peter & Hashim, 2023). As critical thinking is a cognitive process and represents students' higher-order thinking skills, students find it challenging to develop. The broader steps of critical thinking — such as analysing, evaluating, synthesising, and interpreting — are conscious procedures that require students' smooth planning in advance, a set of activities prepared beforehand, and self-direction. University-level English language learners therefore need to adopt strategies to foster their critical thinking ability. In the absence of learning strategies, the enhancement of criticality in English language learners is not possible. At this juncture, this study aims to analyse university-level English major students' understanding of critical thinking and to explore the strategies adopted by them to promote their critical thinking skills.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Critical Thinking in Education: Historical Development and Present Status

Critical thinking came into existence in education with the employment of Socratic questions in discourse. Socrates introduced the process of critical thinking by raising spot questions, particularly to analyse universal themes. Plato used critical thinking as a process to link knowledge with students. It was Aristotle who developed the framework of logic to promote critical thinking (Daniel & Auriac, 2011). Consequently, the spot questions developed during the Greek period found a place in education in the Renaissance, the fertile era in history. The study of Saeger (2014) shows that the developed concept of critical thinking as a part of cognitive psychology in education is rooted in the works of Dewey (1916), Piaget (1964), and Vygotsky (1978), along with other contributors. The study further claims that critical thinking after the late 1980s occupied an important space in education, and cognitive psychology recognised it as a fertile area for research. Since then, critical thinking has received further identity as the mental process that students use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts. In education, critical thinking plays a crucial role among teachers and students so that they can analyse information from different perspectives, evaluate the reliability of sources, examine assessment tools, and draw meaningful conclusions. Moreover, criticality as a cognitive process leads students to the search for creative solutions to problems (Orhan, 2022). In recent years, critical thinking in education has been established as a distinctive cognitive process that makes us think, raise questions, find pertinent information, and leads us to reasonable conclusions rather than positioning us as passive recipients (Fisher, 2001). Today, critical thinking is valued as an indispensable component of 21st-century soft skills in education, occupying an important space both inside and beyond the classroom.

2.2 Critical Thinking as a Skill

Skill is the ability to do something expertly and well. It includes basic language skills and higher-order thinking skills. Critical thinking, as a higher-order thinking skill, equips students with the ability to analyse, evaluate, synthesise, and interpret independently. Critical thinking is an ability that enables students to think and analyse with the quality of reasoning and argument. It leads students to the state of questioning beliefs, claims, and actions, and exploring solutions (Thunnithet, 2011).

The study of Pretorius (2000) asserts that critical thinking as a cognitive skill and extensive reading are useful and supportive in developing students' criticality and inference. Critical thinking follows procedures such as reading and analysing a text, evaluating the arguments and premises used to support a statement, and finally leading to the stage of interpretation. Critical thinking, as a part of cognitive psychology, plays an important role in constructing meaning by linking incoming information with prior knowledge, keeping supporting details at the centre.

2.3 Conceptualising Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies deal with the attempt to develop students' overall competence — such as linguistic, communicative, cultural, and strategic — by adopting sets of plans, schemes, and activities thought through beforehand. Oxford (2001) states that language learning strategies are goal-oriented, based on the intention and selection of the students, and help them become more autonomous and lead them to the completion of tasks. Such strategies can be categorised as cognitive, metacognitive, mnemonic, affective, and social. Cognitive strategies include more intellectually demanding activities such as analysing, reasoning, transforming, note-taking, and summarising. Metacognitive strategies refer to the arrangement of procedures in general and appear in series, such as arranging, evaluating, and planning; they help students identify potential resources of reasoning. Mnemonic strategies help learners develop a connection between new concepts and already known ideas; they do not typically foster deep association but are useful in memorising information in an orderly sequence. Affective strategies concern becoming acquainted with one's feelings, developing awareness, preparing emotional checklists, and cultivating culturally sensitive awareness. Social strategies

are supportive of understanding and cultivating students' culture and the values of the language they are learning, and studying together outside of class. While discussing the basics of language learning strategies, Oxford (2002) further mentions factors influencing learners' selection of strategies, such as motivation, academic/educational career orientation, gender, cultural background, age, and the nature of tasks. The basic concept of language learning strategies has been discussed here on the assumption that developing critical thinking among students is also a part of language learning, and they are related phenomena.

2.4 Strategies for Promoting Students' Critical Thinking

Developing critical thinking skills is a practice of activating the cognitive process through analysing information from multiple perspectives and evaluating the pertinence of the tools employed. It is based on intellectual values such as clarity, facts, and reliability. It is the ability to think of solutions and weigh them by rational criteria using premises of induction and deduction. Such critical thinking skills among students can be enhanced by adopting strategies that differ from the use of a general approach. These strategies can include discussion, Socratic questioning, collaborative and cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, visual mapping, making connections, rote memorisation, using premises, contrastive analysis, guessing and predicting, scanning, and assimilation.

3. Review of Empirical Literature

The study of Cesarandari (2019) examined the application of critical thinking skills in students' oral presentation assessments. The study employed a qualitative research design and used observation sheets and field notes as research tools. The findings showed that the questions adopted by the examiners demanded students' responses of analysing, evaluating, and creating, and that the majority of responses covered students' knowledge of the cognitive realm. It further proved that there had been adequate use of Bloom's taxonomy, and the spirit of the oral test to examine students' criticality was also fulfilled. The study carried out by Aizawa (2023) reported that the selection of language learning strategies is a matter of the learner's individual interest and need. The language learners recognised the pertinence of strategies to all language skills and realised that such strategies were to promote motivation and to improve their proficiency. Moreover, the adoption of strategies can lead them to more efficient and effective language acquisition. The study further found that students' use of strategies to learn language was equally beneficial for teachers, helping them employ integrated strategies in the classroom and design further curriculum and training.

The study of Muslem et al. (2017) explored the frequency of using critical thinking skills in reading comprehension among university students. The processes of critical thinking, such as analysing, evaluating, interpreting, inference, and self-regulation, were used as variables to examine frequency. It was a quantitative study, and data were collected using a set of questionnaires among one hundred students learning English. The findings revealed that inference was the most frequently used higher-order thinking skill by university students. Analysis, explanation, evaluation, interpretation, and self-regulation occupied subsequent positions among the critical thinking skills used. However, the study of Huyen and Ngoc (2024) reported that self-regulation of critical thinking ability in reading comprehension was the most frequently used cognitive process. Besides self-regulation, junior English majors frequently adopted explanation skills in reading comprehension.

Annunziata et al. (2023) examined selected systematic reviews related to cognitive skills and procedures and asserted a theoretical understanding of critical thinking. Their study reported that critical thinking is related to both disposition and skills from a conceptual point of view. Critical thinking is a higher-order thinking and cognitive process considered a skill; however, there is no unanimous view to confirm whether it is a skill, a disposition, or both. In line with this finding, the study of Brown (2015) asserted that critical thinking skills can be

enhanced while analysing information using binary opposed concepts and looking for what statements do not address. Likewise, the study of Nold (2017) aimed to improve university graduates' critical thinking skills using action research. The study conducted a test to examine improvement among university graduates and observed how students constructed self-evaluation as part of critical thinking for success. The result indicated statistically significant improvement in students' intrinsic development of critical thinking and self-assessment.

In a similar area, Yoe et al. (2023) conducted quantitative research to explore the efficacy of an inquiry-based learning approach on students' critical thinking skills in an oral English class. The analysis showed that students' skill to analyse was significantly improved after receiving an inquiry-based learning approach. However, the study revealed that there was no significant change in students' inference and evaluation skills. The study of Shukri and Mukundan (2015) reported that literary texts are useful materials with ample potential to teach critical thinking skills in the English classroom. Wisely selected literary texts, if handled skilfully, have proven to be beneficial resources for developing critical thinking skills among ESL students. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2022) discussed the value of critical thinking skills among English language teachers and students in developing students' cognitive skills. The study focused on critical thinking skills that contribute to developing students' awareness and showed different processes of critical thinking skills such as analysing, evaluating, reasoning, inferring, and interpreting. The study of Shawkat (2025) explored how the integration of teaching strategies enhances students' critical thinking skills in the EFL context. Information was collected using interviews with English language teachers. The study found that the employment of instructional strategies, particularly innovative ones that engage students more, was pertinent to promoting students' criticality.

The above studies discussed the concept of critical thinking skills from diverse perspectives and prioritised conceptualising critical thinking. They showed how the notion of critical thinking is developed among English language learners and how students' cognitive skill development contributes to their better acquisition of language. Studies such as Nold (2017) and Yoe et al. (2023) focused on the efficacy of methodological approaches to develop critical thinking skills, in which the former emphasised critical thinking as pedagogy and the latter focused on an inquiry-based learning approach. These studies have given less attention to university-level English major students' use of strategies in developing their critical thinking skills. The present study aims to fill this gap.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach and interview guidelines as tools to collect data. Five master's-level English major students studying at Tribhuvan University were purposively selected as informants. The selected informants were interviewed in depth, and the researcher conducted two interviews with each informant to clarify the received information and to assure the informants that the data reflected their own version. The information gathered through interviews was in English. The collected information was categorised, codified, and discussed under qualitative themes. After the discussion of the results, the findings were derived, and the conclusion was drawn based on such findings.

5. Results and Discussion

University-level English major students' understanding of critical thinking, or conceptualising critical thinking as a skill, is a fundamental aspect of this study. After conceptualising the basics of critical thinking skills, students can adopt different strategies to foster such skills. This section discusses how English major students of university level — particularly those at master's level — perceive critical thinking and what different strategies,

plans, and techniques they use to develop their criticality. They have been discussed under the following themes.

5.1 Students' Understanding of Critical Thinking

Students are curious about their field of study. They learn basic language skills as well as higher-order thinking skills by listening to their peers and teachers in the classroom, and to their parents and family members beyond the classroom. University-level English major students need to have the required critical thinking skills. Such skills encourage them to think outside the box. Students not only collect information from texts and store it in their minds, but also think about what the text does not say. University-level students analyse information from diverse perspectives using different tools of evaluation and their skills to think critically. At this juncture, one of the informants shared: "Critical thinking is related to cognitive and metacognitive procedures to accomplish its own cycle. It supports students in developing awareness, thinking independently, building arguments, making sound judgements, and solving problems. It is a sum of total mental exercise that one can perceive through a critical mindset." Here, critical thinking follows cognitive processes such as analysing, synthesising, and interpreting, as well as metacognitive stages such as ordering, arranging, assessing, and appraising. It develops students' better awareness and encourages them to think critically and creatively. They develop the ability to think independently because of the presence of critical thinking in them. Critical thinking is a concept and a process that leads students to the stage of making the right decision and reaching a proper conclusion.

In addition to this, the next informant added: "Critical thinking fosters independent and reflective thinking, develops effective communication, facilitates deeper comprehension, provides ample opportunities to sharpen students' language proficiency, and elevates their academic performance." Critical thinking as a higher-order thinking skill is related to students' multiple cognitive developmental aspects and supports students to evaluate the use of their own arguments and premises, and to develop the practice of reflective thinking. The practice of critical thinking makes them effective communicators, promotes deeper and wider understanding of subject matter, and promotes their acquisition of language and academic writing skills. The discussion shows that critical thinking is a cognitive process that facilitates students in developing wider and deeper comprehension, promotes independent reflective thinking, and effective communication. This finding is in line with the conclusion of Astanakulov (2025), who concluded that critical thinking contributes to students' cognitive development — particularly in analysing information with deeper understanding, evaluating the use of arguments as claims, and synthesising information to lead to meaningful conclusions.

5.2 Strategies Employed to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Here, strategies are planned activities carried out in the classroom and beyond it. Master's-level English major students can plan, prepare, or design different activities, methods, and techniques in advance to foster their critical thinking abilities. These English major students have adopted different strategies to promote their higher-order thinking skills. Such strategies are discussed below.

Extensive Reading

Master's-level English major students can read texts of different themes for wider and deeper understanding so that they can develop their criticality and creativity. Such texts can be rich in content knowledge, issues, and information. Students can read them and analyse the information from diverse perspectives. In this context, one of the informants expressed: "I consult literary and non-literary texts in English for wider reading. These texts are of diverse themes like education, humanities, ecology and environment, population and sociology, postmodern concepts, etc. They have burning issues and contemporary themes which invite discussion from multiple and critical perspectives." Here, master's-level English major

students read interdisciplinary texts of diverse themes and contemporary issues. The students analyse the information using different lenses and develop premises of induction and deduction. They examine tools used for appraisal, synthesise main ideas, and prepare the substance to move to a logical conclusion. It develops critical thinking ability among students. This analysis leads to the finding that extensive reading of fiction and non-fiction is one of the strategies adopted by students to cultivate critical thinking skills.

Questioning

Students can use questions — either short, long, or critical — among themselves or ask such questions to their instructors. They can use a series of questions in general or for specific purposes, asking questions to examine their own thinking and to check the thinking of others. In this context, one of the informants stated: “When my teachers separate time for discussion like students’ talking time, I use questions, basically short and critical type. I listen to them carefully. If their answers do not satisfy my curiosity, I ponder other questions in series.” This information leads to the analysis that master’s-level English major students use Socratic questions, asking questions in series like a curious learner. They use long and critical questions related to the texts and beyond them. The Socratic questions clarify concepts, challenge existing norms and values, and look for evidence. Such questions develop students’ deeper understanding and insight. It shows that questioning, mainly Socratic questioning, is one of the strategies adopted to develop their criticality. This finding resonates with the conclusion of Selvia (2020), who affirmed that Socratic questioning and other questioning approaches promote students’ critical thinking abilities, allowing their active contribution to critical inquiry, reasoning, and the development of an investigating mindset. However, the next informant shared: “I do not use many questions; I just watch the questions my peers fire to our teachers and listen to their responses. I compare it to what I am thinking and reflect on self-assimilation.” In addition, master’s-level English major students learn critical thinking through self-reflection and assimilation.

Comparison and Contrast

University-level English major students can cultivate critical thinking skills by comparing what they have thought with what actually happens in the classroom and beyond it. They can compare their thinking with their social learning, with what they encounter in different books, and with what their instructors and peers share. In this regard, one of the informants expressed: “I listen attentively to what my peers say while expressing their views, observations, and experiences on a particular issue. Then I compare them with how I think, what is my stance on this issue, and what I would do if I were in their position.” Here, the students compare their own views with the arguments put forward by their peers. They analyse their own opinion, the use of their tools of evaluation, and compare them with their peers, contrasting their use of premises with others’, and arrive at their own position. Moreover, the students learn to think about thinking processes, enhancing their ability to arrange information and make logical, evidence-based conclusions. It proves that comparison and contrast, as metacognitive techniques, are among the strategies of university-level English major students to foster their criticality.

Collaboration and Cooperative Learning

Collaboration refers to the process of two or more students working together to achieve common goals. Students can combine their diverse skills and knowledge to develop their critical thinking skills. Such collaborative and cooperative learning in the classroom can occur in pair work, group work, or other forms of interaction. At this juncture, one of the informants shared: “I always prefer sitting with my friends and holding discussions. I participate in group interaction when my teachers hold discussions and accomplish the target task. Likewise, my

friends also feel comfortable performing group work. I always complete the allocated tasks on time, discussing with my friends.” Collaborative and cooperative learning involves students working together in pairs or in groups to solve problems, complete tasks, or discuss concepts. Students of master’s level work together, hold discussions, and help other students in cooperative tasks to complete them. While holding discussions, they prefer analysing information, using multiple perspectives, assessing tools of evaluation, and reaching meaningful interpretations. It shows that collaboration and cooperative learning are among the strategies used to develop students’ critical thinking. Likewise, the next informant added: “I support my peers in learning, ask them about their diverse perspectives, and encourage them to look at a particular topic using their own lenses. First, I read, discuss, write the main ideas and points, and share them.” The students take part in activities that require criticality, for example, analysing cases and debates in which students share their ideas and arguments. This finding is in line with Warsah et al. (2021), who interpreted that collaborative and cooperative learning activities improved students’ critical thinking skills.

Problem-Based Learning

This approach of instruction involves students in different procedures for solving real problems in the classroom or beyond it. The instructor can sometimes provide students with authentic problems and ask them to work collaboratively. In this context, one of the informants shared: “We rarely work on problem solving; it happens in limited frequency when our instructors give us project work, particularly for examination purposes.” This result hints that problem-solving as a strategy to improve students’ criticality does not occur regularly; however, it is one of the available strategies. It shows that problem-solving is a less frequently adopted strategy to foster students’ criticality; however, it can be one of the most effective procedures.

Concept Mapping and Visual Mapping

This approach refers to the use of core critical thinking skills such as analysing, evaluating, and synthesising. Concept maps and visual maps provide students with visual pictures of knowledge and logical presentations of ideas in order or series, like a road map to solve problems. In this regard, one of the informants said: “I adopt this approach, which requires the presentation of ideas in logical sequence. I read the text, search for the main ideas, attempt to connect them with the title, and look for coherence at the micro and macro level.” This data leads to the explanation that students use visual mapping or concept mapping as a core aspect of critical thinking skills. This strategy enables them to build coherence at both micro and macro levels.

Project Work and Structured and Semi-Structured Academic Writing

Instructors provide university-level students of English major with project work on different topics of academic writing. They can be writing research proposals, preparing reports, and writing seminar papers — assignments that require students to justify their position and analyse information to promote further cognitive engagement. In this context, one of the informants stated: “We are asked to write a thesis proposal, and we prepare it as part of our course. We prepare seminar papers for academic purposes and the final report for examination purposes. We organise small-scale seminars, explore the issues, and present them among the students in the presence of our instructor/s. Moreover, we get feedback from our teachers and peers.” According to this information, master’s-level students undertake many English courses of academic writing and prepare proposals, reports, and seminar papers. These writings, while preparing literature reviews, writing backgrounds, and identifying the problem and research gap, require highly engaged intellectual exercises like the sub-skills of critical thinking and orderly presentation. The students are involved in activities such as analysing, appraising, synthesising, and interpreting. Such practices of academic writing enable them to argue, use

appropriate premises, and make claims with evidence. Likewise, the students receive feedback from their peers and instructors. Such feedback works as a critical input, giving students the opportunity to improve their criticality through comments received.

6. Conclusion

Critical thinking follows a cognitive process and contributes to a cognitive approach to the teaching of English. University-level English major students need to be acquainted with critical thinking and should use it constructively for creative purposes. They can use critical thinking skills to thrive intellectually in this rapidly changing and competitive world. Critical thinking, as a cognitive or higher-order thinking skill, follows sub-skills such as analysing, evaluating, synthesising, and interpreting, which are the core of critical thinking skills. University-level students majoring in English consciously follow strategies to foster their critical thinking skills. Such strategies are critical reading, inquiry-based questioning (Socratic questioning), comparison and contrast, metacognitive activities, collaborative and cooperative learning, concept mapping, and self-reflection. To promote master's-level English major students' criticality, strategies such as wider reading, problem solving, project work, and semi-structured academic writing have been recommended for pedagogical implications.

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