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THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT Critical thinking is an important outcome of contemporary education because learners need to interpret information, evaluate evidence and make reasoned decisions. Collaborative learning can create opportunities for these processes by bringing students into purposeful interaction. This thesis examines the pedagogical role of collaborative learning in developing critical thinking, with particular attention to structured discussion, collaborative problem-solving, peer feedback and reflection. The literature indicates that collaborative problem-solving can support critical thinking, but its effectiveness is influenced by task design, group size, duration and scaffolding. The thesis argues that group work becomes cognitively valuable when students must explain ideas, compare alternatives and justify shared decisions. Practical implications are proposed for teachers and for future empirical research in EFL and general education contexts.

Keywords: Critical thinking; collaborative learning; group discussion; peer feedback; higher-order thinking; pedagogy

The ability to think critically has become an important educational priority. Learners are expected to evaluate information, solve problems and communicate decisions rather than only reproduce facts. This expectation affects both general education and language education, where students need to use language for meaningful academic and social purposes. Collaborative learning provides one possible context for this development. When students work together, they can encounter different opinions and approaches. They may need to explain why they believe an answer is appropriate, listen to another perspective and reach a shared decision. These processes have a close relationship with critical thinking. The purpose of this thesis is to discuss how collaborative learning can contribute to students' critical thinking and what conditions are necessary for effective implementation.

Critical Thinking as an Educational Outcome Critical thinking includes cognitive and reflective processes. Facione (1990) identifies interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation. In classroom practice, these processes can be developed through tasks that require students to use evidence and provide reasons. Critical thinking should not be treated as an isolated skill that appears only in special lessons. It can be integrated into ordinary subject teaching. A teacher can ask students to compare two explanations, identify evidence, question an assumption or propose an alternative solution.

The revised Bloom taxonomy also supports this approach. Analysing, evaluating and creating require students to use knowledge actively. Collaborative tasks can provide opportunities for these processes if the task requires meaningful discussion rather than simple division of labour.

Collaborative Learning Collaborative learning involves learners working together toward a shared learning goal. Johnson et al. (2014) emphasise positive interdependence and individual accountability. These principles are important because effective collaboration requires both a shared outcome and meaningful contribution from each learner. A group task becomes more productive when students need to exchange information or reasoning. For example, if each learner receives different information about a problem, the group must communicate to construct a complete understanding. This structure creates a genuine reason to interact. Collaboration can also provide social support. Learners can ask peers for clarification, observe different strategies and receive immediate responses. In language classrooms, this interaction can provide additional opportunities to use the target language.

Collaboration and Critical Thinking The relationship between collaboration and critical thinking can be explained through explanation, comparison, evaluation and reflection. Students often need to explain their thinking to peers. They then compare their ideas with alternative suggestions and evaluate possible solutions. Evidence from research supports this relationship. Xu et al. (2023) synthesised 36 empirical studies and reported a significant positive overall effect of collaborative problem-solving on critical thinking. The authors also found that instructional conditions can moderate results. This means that the effectiveness of collaboration is not independent of pedagogy. The implication is that teachers should design collaboration around cognitive goals. A task should require learners to make decisions, solve a problem or evaluate information rather than simply complete a worksheet together.

Strategies for Classroom Practice Structured group discussion can be organised around specific questions. Students can be asked to provide one claim, one reason and one response to a peer. Rotating roles can ensure that students practise different forms of interaction. Collaborative problem-solving is another effective structure. Students identify the problem, generate solutions, compare alternatives and justify a final decision. The teacher can use a simple rubric to assess reasoning and participation.

Peer feedback can encourage evaluation. Students can use criteria such as clarity, relevance, evidence and organisation. After giving feedback, learners can write a short reflection explaining which feedback they found useful. Think–Pair–Share is useful when the teacher wants to combine individual thinking with collaboration. Students first formulate a response, then discuss it with a partner and finally share with the class.

Scaffolding and Teacher Support Students may need support to participate in critical discussion. Sentence starters, guiding questions, visual organisers and examples can make thinking processes more accessible. Teacher scaffolding is especially important in EFL contexts. Learners may have a strong idea but limited language for expressing it. Providing functional language can reduce linguistic barriers while preserving the cognitive challenge. The teacher should also monitor group interaction. If one student consistently answers all questions, the teacher can introduce turn-taking or role structures. If students are unsure how to justify an answer, the teacher can ask for evidence rather than supplying the answer immediately.

Challenges Collaborative learning can involve unequal participation, disagreement, time-management problems and dependence on stronger students. These challenges can reduce the cognitive value of group work. Clear roles, individual accountability and manageable tasks can reduce these problems. It is also useful to include individual reflection so that each learner demonstrates personal engagement with the task. Another challenge is assessment. Teachers should decide whether they are assessing the group product, individual reasoning, collaboration skills or all three. Transparent criteria can make expectations clearer.

Implications for EFL and Teacher Education Collaborative learning is particularly relevant to EFL because communication itself is part of learning. Students can use English to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, solve problems and present decisions. Teacher education programmes can also benefit from this approach. Future teachers need practical experience in designing tasks that develop both subject knowledge and thinking skills. They should learn to distinguish between simple group work and structured collaborative learning. For Uzbek educational settings, future studies could investigate collaborative learning with defined age groups and measurable outcomes. Such studies could use pre- and post-intervention, measures, classroom observation and student reflections rather than relying only on general impressions.

Collaborative learning can support critical thinking when interaction is purposeful. Students need opportunities to explain ideas, question assumptions, compare alternatives and justify decisions. The literature indicates a positive relationship between collaborative problem-solving and critical thinking, but implementation conditions matter. The main pedagogical implication is that teachers should design group tasks around meaningful cognitive goals. Collaboration should be structured through clear roles,

appropriate scaffolding and reflection. Future empirical research can examine how these strategies work in specific EFL and general education contexts in Uzbekistan.

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