

DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS DURING ENGLISH LESSONS: CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING

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Abstract

Soft skills are no longer considered secondary to professional skills. They are essential for personal and professional success in a rapidly changing, interconnected world. Developing these skills can lead to better career prospects, improved relationships, and a more enriching life overall. In this article the author is going to consider the ways to develop such soft skills as creative and critical thinking during English lessons.

Creative and critical thinking are valuable soft skills that play a crucial role in problem-solving, decision-making, and innovation. Both creative and critical thinking can complement each other in various scenarios. Creative thinking can generate a wide range of potential solutions, while critical thinking helps select the most viable and effective ones. They also enhance an individual's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and excel in various professional roles.

Developing creative and critical thinking skills during English lessons can be both fun and beneficial. The author suggests using creative writing prompts, role play, storytelling, creative projects and collaborative brainstorming for improving creative thinking skills. The ways to develop critical thinking lies in using Socratic seminars, text analysis, debates, media literacy, logical puzzles, comparative literature studies as well as feedback and revision. Incorporating a mix of these activities into English lessons can help students develop both creative and critical thinking skills. It's also essential to create a supportive and open environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and engaging in discussions.

Key words: critical thinking, creative thinking, soft skills, teaching English, methodology, didactics.

Soft skills are essential in today's world because they enable individuals to excel in diverse professional and personal settings. They facilitate effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, which are critical for career success and personal growth. In an increasingly interconnected and rapidly evolving global landscape, these skills are prized by employers, enhance employability, and foster positive relationships. Soft skills are not only crucial for navigating the complexities of the modern workplace but also for building strong connections, resolving conflicts, and leading a fulfilling life beyond one's career, making them indispensable in the 21st century.

Developing such soft skills as creative and critical thinking during the learning process is of paramount importance. Creative thinking fosters innovation, enabling individuals to approach problems and tasks with fresh perspectives, leading to novel solutions and breakthroughs. It encourages students to think beyond usual memorization and apply their knowledge in inventive ways, preparing them for real-world challenges where creativity is highly valued. On the other hand, critical thinking empowers individuals to evaluate information, make informed decisions, and discern fact from fiction. It equips students with the skills needed to analyze complex issues, consider multiple viewpoints, and solve problems logically, ensuring they are well-informed citizens and capable problem-solvers. Together, creative and critical thinking form a powerful cognitive toolkit that not only enhances academic performance but also equips learners to thrive in a dynamic, information-driven society where adaptability and the ability to think both creatively and critically are essential for success.

After conducting research, the author found out that the issue of the individual's critical and creative thinking development has been of the interest to the scientists for a long time starting from the earlier period [1; 2; 5] and continuing nowadays [3; 4]. In spite of this, the problem of future English teachers' critical thinking formation is not developed enough, that is why this paper is of immediate interest.

Developing creative and critical thinking skills during English lessons can be both fun and beneficial. Here are some strategies to encourage these skills:

For Creative Thinking:

1) Creative Writing Prompts:

Provide students with open-ended writing prompts that encourage them to think creatively. For example, ask them to write a story based on a peculiar image or start a sentence and have them complete it. You can offer a range of prompts that cover different genres, themes, and styles, such as fantasy, mystery, or personal narrative. This diversity allows students to explore various creative avenues. It is important to incorporate visual stimuli like images, paintings, or videos as prompts. Visual cues can spark creative thinking and inspire students to build stories or descriptions around what they see. Encourage students to connect the prompts to their own experiences or interests. This personalization can lead to more authentic and imaginative responses. Give students time to think and brainstorm before they start writing. This contemplative stage can help them generate more creative ideas. Encourage students to revise and refine their work. Revision is an opportunity to refine their creative ideas and enhance the quality of their writing.

2) Role Play:

Engage students in role-playing exercises or drama activities where they have to think creatively to embody characters or situations. Choose scenarios that are relevant to the lesson's theme or the students' interests. These could be real-life situations, fictional scenarios, or historical events that tie into the curriculum. Introduce challenges or dilemmas within the role-play scenario that require creative problem-solving. This can include conflict resolution, decision-making, or adapting to unexpected twists in the story. Connect role-plays to real-world situations or potential careers that require creative problem-solving, such as customer service, negotiation, or public speaking. Assess students not only on their ability to perform in character but also on their creative contributions to the role-play. Consider their ideas, responses, and adaptations.

3) Storytelling:

Start by telling a well-crafted story to the class. This serves as a model and inspires students with a high-quality example of storytelling. Encourage students to create and share their own stories or narratives. This can involve both written and oral storytelling, allowing for imagination to flourish. Provide story starters or prompts that kickstart the storytelling process. These can be a few words, a sentence, an image, or an object to spark creative thinking. Encourage students to ask open-ended questions about the story, its characters, or its plot. This promotes deeper thinking and creative exploration. Emphasize the use of descriptive language and vivid imagery to engage the reader's senses and create a more immersive experience. Encourage students to paint a mental picture with words. Try collaborative storytelling, where students take turns contributing to a single story. This cooperative approach can lead to

unexpected and imaginative plot developments. Incorporate storytelling games or activities, such as “storytelling circles” where each student adds a sentence to create a collective story.

4) Creative Projects:

Assign projects that involve creating something, such as poems, short stories, artwork, or multimedia presentations. Encourage students to think innovatively while working on these projects. Offer students a choice of creative projects, allowing them to select topics or formats that genuinely interest them. Autonomy motivates creativity. Assign group projects where students must work together to develop a creative solution or product. Collaboration can spark new ideas and creative thinking. Organize opportunities for peer feedback and critique during the project's development. This helps students refine their ideas and fosters creative thinking through discussion and reflection. Ask students to reflect on their creative process, identifying what worked well and what could be improved. Self-evaluation fosters creative growth and self-awareness.

5) Collaborative Brainstorming:

Foster creativity through group brainstorming sessions. Establish a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable sharing their ideas without fear of judgment. Encourage open and respectful communication. Choose thought-provoking and engaging topics or questions to spark creative thinking. These should be open-ended and encourage multiple perspectives. Organize students into small groups. A diverse mix of personalities and backgrounds can lead to richer and more creative discussions. Explain the brainstorming rules to the students. Emphasize that there are no “bad” ideas during this phase, and the goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. Set a specific time limit for the brainstorming session. Time constraints can push students to think more creatively and prevent overthinking. While students brainstorm in their groups, circulate among them to listen to their ideas, offer guidance, and keep the discussion on track. Encourage students to combine or build on each other's ideas. This collaborative approach can lead to innovative solutions and creative breakthroughs.

For Critical Thinking:

1) Socratic Seminars:

Conduct discussions in a Socratic style, where students are encouraged to ask and answer open-ended questions. This promotes critical thinking and active dialogue. Choose texts that are rich in complexity, ambiguity, or themes open to interpretation. Texts that present ethical dilemmas, conflicting viewpoints, or nuanced characters are particularly suitable. Assign the reading and require students to read the text critically, making annotations and noting questions or areas of confusion. This process prepares them to engage deeply in the seminar. Provide a set of open-ended, thought-provoking questions related to the text. These questions should encourage critical analysis, evaluation of evidence, and the development of reasoned arguments. Encourage students to lead the discussion by posing their own questions, responding to their peers, and providing well-reasoned arguments. The teacher's role is to facilitate, guiding the conversation when necessary. Encourage students to make connections between the text and other texts, historical events, or contemporary issues. This helps them apply critical thinking skills in a broader context.

2) Text Analysis:

Have students analyze and discuss literary texts, articles, or speeches. Teach students to read actively. Encourage them to annotate the text, highlighting key passages, questions,

unfamiliar words, and notable literary devices or persuasive techniques. Teach students to recognize and analyze literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, irony, and foreshadowing. Discuss how these devices contribute to the text's meaning. Analyze the characters in literature. Encourage students to delve into characters' motivations, development, and their roles in conveying the text's themes. For non-fiction texts, have students evaluate the author's argument. Discuss the use of evidence, logical reasoning, and rhetorical strategies to persuade the reader. Organize class discussions where students can express their analyses, interpretations, and critiques of the text. Encourage debate and the respectful exchange of ideas. Assign critical essays or responses that require students to articulate their analyses and arguments based on evidence from the text. These written assignments help them consolidate their critical thinking skills.

3) Debates:

Organize debates on relevant topics to encourage students to critically assess and defend their positions using evidence and reasoning. Choose topics that are relevant, engaging, and open to debate. Controversial issues encourage critical analysis and the exploration of multiple perspectives. Require students to research their assigned topics thoroughly. This includes gathering evidence, statistics, examples, and credible sources to support their arguments. Assign students to different roles, such as affirmative and negative teams, or as individual debaters. Each role has specific responsibilities, including constructing arguments. Explain the rules and format of the debate, including time limits for speeches, the order of speaking, and expectations for respectful conduct. This sets a structured framework for the activity. Encourage the audience to participate by asking questions, evaluating the arguments, and voting for the winning side. This engagement promotes critical thinking in the observers as well. After the debate, engage students in a reflective discussion. Encourage them to think critically about their performance, what they learned, and how their views might have evolved.

4) Logical Puzzles and Riddles:

Incorporate puzzles, riddles, or logic games into lessons. These can challenge students to think critically and solve problems. Choose logical puzzles and riddles that are age-appropriate and match the language proficiency level of your students. Start with simpler puzzles and gradually increase the complexity as students become more skilled. Present the puzzle within a relevant context. For example, use a riddle related to a story you're reading or a real-life problem that requires critical thinking to solve. Depending on the size of your class and the objectives, you can use puzzles as individual challenges or group activities. Group puzzles encourage collaboration and the exchange of ideas. If students are struggling with a puzzle, offer hints or guidance to help them move in the right direction. This helps them learn problem-solving strategies. Provide constructive feedback on students' solutions and correct any misconceptions or errors in their thinking. This helps them refine their critical thinking skills. Integrate puzzles into the themes of your English lessons, whether related to literature, vocabulary, or grammar. This reinforces the relevance of critical thinking skills.

5) Comparative Literature Studies:

Have students compare different works of literature or literary characters to encourage them to think critically about themes, characters, and storytelling techniques. Choose a set of diverse literary texts that can be compared. These texts can be from different cultural backgrounds, historical periods, or genres, highlighting distinct themes, styles, or narratives.

Encourage students to conduct research to support their analyses. This can involve exploring historical documents, literary criticism, and scholarly articles related to the texts. Incorporate visual aids such as maps, images, or multimedia presentations to help students visualize the settings, characters, or cultural elements in the texts. Relate the themes and issues in the literature to contemporary events or societal problems, encouraging students to draw connections between past and present.

6) Media Literacy:

Teach students to critically evaluate media sources, including news articles and advertisements, to identify bias and misinformation. Choose a variety of media sources and formats, including newspapers, online articles, videos, advertisements, social media posts, and podcasts. Make sure the content is age-appropriate and relevant to the curriculum. Begin by teaching students how to critically analyze media content. Discuss the elements of media, such as the message, target audience, purpose, tone, and credibility of the source. Emphasize the importance of fact-checking and verifying information. Teach students how to identify reliable sources and cross-reference information. Discuss the concept of bias in media and how it can influence the way information is presented. Explore different types of bias, such as political, cultural, or commercial bias. Analyze advertisements to uncover the persuasive techniques used, such as emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements, and visual elements. Discuss how these techniques impact the viewer.

7) Feedback and Revision:

Encourage students to revise their writing and incorporate feedback, fostering a critical eye for their work. Provide detailed and constructive feedback on students' written assignments. Focus on aspects related to critical thinking, including the depth of analysis, the strength of arguments, and the effectiveness of evidence. After receiving feedback, ask students to reflect on the feedback and identify areas where their critical thinking can be improved. What did they learn from the feedback, and how can they apply it to their future work? Encourage students to revise their assignments based on the feedback received. Stress that revision is an integral part of the learning process and that it allows them to refine their critical thinking and writing skills.

Conclusion. Creative thinking and critical thinking are distinct but complementary soft skills. Creative thinking involves generating new and innovative ideas, solutions, or approaches. Critical thinking, on the other hand, involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information and ideas. By combining creative and critical thinking in English lessons, teachers can help students become well-rounded, versatile thinkers who can both analyze and generate ideas effectively. These skills not only enhance language proficiency but also equip students with valuable tools for problem-solving, communication, and creativity in various aspects of life.

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