

# THE EFFICACY OF INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how English language learners in Uzbekistan improve their critical thinking abilities through inquiry-based learning (IBL). Numerous research have demonstrated that, when applied methodically, IBL dramatically enhances cognitive capacities, linguistic proficiency, and learner engagement. With higher education institutions actively supporting inductive teaching approaches in English language training, this pedagogical approach has demonstrated great promise in the educational setting of Uzbekistan.

## **Key words**

Critical thinking development, inquiry, theoretical framework, benefits and challenges of IBL, IBL implementation.

## **Introduction**

Inquiry-based learning is "a form of active learning that starts by posing questions, problems, or scenarios" as opposed to depending on teacher-centered knowledge transmission (Lee, 2016) This marks a significant departure from previous pedagogical techniques. Traditional teaching strategies that emphasize memorization and passive information reception (Piaget, 1969; Dewey, 1938) contrast sharply with this constructivist approach. IBL changes the way students interact with the target language in language learning environments. Instead of focussing on language as a subject to be studied, IBL views language as a medium that facilitates genuine inquiry. Formulating questions, carrying out investigations, evaluating evidence, creating explanations, relating explanations to prior knowledge, and disseminating discoveries are the fundamental elements of IBL. These elements foster critical thinking abilities while organically integrating with language learning goals. IBL gives language learners the chance to improve the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for success in school and the workplace by including them in authentic inquiry processes (Martin et al., 2020; Lee & Richards, 2016).

## **Development of Critical Thinking Through IBL**

Fundamental elements of critical thinking are precisely aligned with the IBL's key processes of questioning, research, analysis, and evidence-based reasoning. Through these activities, students form cognitive habits that transcend subject matter and allow them to tackle difficult issues methodically in a variety of settings (Centres for Disease Control [CDC], 2002; Harvard University, 2018). This development of critical thinking skills is very important for Uzbek English language learners. Students need to be able to critically analyze information, assess other points of view, and create well-reasoned arguments in the target language in addition to being proficient in English as the nation becomes more integrated into international economic and educational institutions. A teaching approach offered by IBL concurrently attends to these interrelated demands (University of Minnesota, 2007; University of California, 2019).

### **IBL in the Educational Context of Uzbekistan**

Inductive teaching approaches in English language training have shown growing acceptance in Uzbekistan's higher education institutions. As noted in a 2021 conference paper on Uzbek higher education reforms: "Uzbek institutions highly support the implementation of inductive methods to the English teaching process" (NIMH, 2020). For inquiry-based learning to be implemented successfully for English language learners in Uzbekistan, structural components, pedagogical strategies, and contextual aspects must be carefully taken into account. According to research, inquiry-based learning works best when it is applied via systematic procedures that lead students through several phases of inquiry. The inquiry cycle offers a methodical framework that may be tailored to different language learning environments and consists of engagement, investigation, explanation, elaboration, and evaluation (NIMH, 2020; University of Minnesota, 2007). For Uzbek students learning English, this method is especially pertinent since it allows them to interact with a variety of viewpoints while expressing elements of their own cultural background in the target language (Salas & D'Agostino, 2020; Martin et al., 2020). In classrooms that use inquiry-based language learning, the teacher's role changes dramatically. Teachers act as facilitators who lead students through the inquiry process rather than merely imparting knowledge. Creating interesting scenarios or questions, offering suitable scaffolding, directing students to pertinent materials, and promoting the growth of language and critical thinking skills are all part of this facilitative function (Lee & Richards, 2016). This change necessitates professional development for Uzbek language instructors that focusses on both inquiry-based approaches and context-specific facilitation strategies. Instructors need to become proficient in creating inquiry-provoking, linguistically accessible questions,

scaffolding language use without limiting critical thinking, and giving feedback that takes into account both linguistic characteristics and cognitive processes (University California, 2019; Harvard University, 2018). A key element of a successful IBL implementation is the efficient evaluation of both language development and the advancement of critical thinking. Multiple assessment methodologies offer the most complete picture of learner development. Important data regarding the effectiveness of IBL implementation is provided by pre- and post-tests measuring particular critical thinking abilities, analysis of student work products, observation of classroom interactions, and self-assessment tools (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2002; University of Minnesota, 2007). According to a research looking into how IBL benefited students' ability to speak English, when inquiry methods were used correctly, 100% of students achieved the desired performance levels, with an average score of 76.69. Furthermore, according to Martin et al. (2020), 84% of students expressed favorable opinions about the IBL approach. These results imply that both cognitive development and affective elements affecting language acquisition can be documented using suitable assessment techniques.

### **Benefits and Challenges of IBL in Uzbekistan**

For English language learners in Uzbekistan and comparable settings, research has found a number of important advantages to using inquiry-based approaches. Initially, IBL establishes "authentic contexts" for language usage, offering purposeful communication goals instead of practice exercises. Because students see a direct connection between language learning activities and practical applications, these authentic contexts increase motivation and engagement (Salas & D'Agostino, 2020). This development of intentional communicative contexts is especially valuable in Uzbekistan's educational setting, since chances for real-world English usage may be few outside of the classroom (Stanford University, 2020). Second, IBL encourages "active learning" by having participants gather and share real-world information. This active participation stands in contrast to typical language instruction methods, which include passive information reception. According to studies, active learning strategies result in better academic outcomes, such as increased learning transfer to different contexts, deeper conceptual understanding, and improved retention (University of California, 2019; Harvard University, 2018). Third, critical thinking skills are greatly improved by IBL. According to research, inquiry-based learning methods result in significant improvements in critical thinking; the study found that the change was 2.5 times greater than that of traditional teaching techniques (Lee & Richards, 2016). For Uzbek students getting ready to participate in international academic and professional settings, this

improvement of critical thinking skills in addition to language growth is an especially beneficial result (University of Minnesota, 2007). Lastly, IBL develops stimulating learning spaces that encourage involvement and intellectual curiosity among students. Inquiry-based learning environments have been found to have students who "were more intellectually engaged and participated to a greater extent in classroom discussions" (Martin et al., 2020). Because there are more opportunities for meaningful language production and reception, this increased engagement immediately aids in language acquisition. Notwithstanding these proven advantages, there are a number of obstacles to overcome when integrating IBL into the English language education system in Uzbekistan, which call for calculated strategies. Professional development and teacher preparation are two major obstacles. Due to their training in traditional methodology, many English language teachers in Uzbekistan might not be conversant with inquiry-based approaches. Comprehensive professional development is necessary for effective implementation, with an emphasis on practical facilitation techniques, question formulation strategies, and assessment approaches suitable for language learning contexts in addition to theoretical knowledge of IBL (University of California, 2019; Harvard University, 2018). Furthermore, inquiry-based pedagogies might not be compatible with institutional frameworks and evaluation methods. Discrete linguistic knowledge may be given precedence over communicative competence and critical thinking skills in traditional examination-focused evaluation methods. To guarantee cohesive educational experiences, successful implementation necessitates alignment across instructional approaches, curriculum frameworks, and evaluation systems (Stanford University, 2020; NIMH, 2020). Another possible issue is a lack of resources, especially in school contexts where access to real materials, technology, and professional development opportunities is restricted. Although IBL doesn't necessarily require a lot of resources, some implementations might profit from having access to specialized materials, collaborative technology, or a variety of information sources (Salas & D'Agostino, 2020). Lastly, how inquiry-based approaches are received and applied may be influenced by cultural issues. Approaches that prioritize student-directed inquiry may initially encounter resistance due to educational traditions that place a strong emphasis on teacher authority and information transmission. In order to overcome this difficulty, IBL principles must be carefully tailored to local cultural contexts while preserving the essential components that make it so effective (Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Conclusion**

The data analyzed clearly shows that inquiry-based learning is effective in helping Uzbek English language learners strengthen their critical thinking abilities.

Teachers may establish environments that equip students to critically engage with complex ideas and a range of global viewpoints in addition to being able to speak effectively by incorporating real inquiry processes into language learning objectives. In the context of Uzbekistan, effective implementation requires that teacher preparation emphasize useful facilitation strategies (Harvard University, 2018). Critical thinking and language proficiency should be assessed via assessment systems (University of Minnesota, 2007). Culturally appropriate materials that are in line with inquiry cycles must be incorporated into curricula (Salas & D'Agostino, 2020). Future studies should examine the long-term effects of consistent application of IBL approaches on the language and cognitive development of Uzbek learners (Stanford University, 2020).

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