

# Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching in China: Definition, Dimensions, and Pedagogical Implications

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## Abstract

Critical thinking, recognized as one of the essential 21st-century skills, has gained significant attention in global education, especially within the context of English language teaching. It not only enhances students' language proficiency but also cultivates their ability to analyze, reason, and solve problems, thereby preparing them to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. This review aims to explore the definition, dimensions, and pedagogical strategies of critical thinking in English language teaching in China. The study identified three core dimensions of critical thinking in English language teaching: cognitive skills, affective dispositions, and cultural factors. Furthermore, effective course design, teaching methods, and assessment approaches are pivotal in fostering these critical thinking skills. Despite challenges including the overwhelming emphasis on exams, cultural attitudes toward authority, insufficient teacher training, large class sizes, and varying levels of language proficiency, there are four directions for future research and practice. These include fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between language departments and other academic fields, reforming the curriculum to prioritize higher-order cognitive skills, enhancing teacher training programs, and leveraging technology to support the development of critical thinking in English language teaching. Thus, this study offers valuable theoretical insights for English teachers, school administrators, and policymakers, guiding them in advancing critical thinking in English language education in China.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, English Language Teaching, Pedagogical Strategies

## Introduction

Critical thinking, widely regarded as a key competency for the 21st century, has gained considerable emphasis in educational discourse worldwide, especially within the realm of English language teaching (Esen, 2021). Critical thinking plays a crucial role in enhancing students' language skills while simultaneously fostering their capacity for analysis, reasoning, and problem-solving. It prepares students to effectively navigate the complexities of an

increasingly interconnected and dynamic world (Yuan, Liao, Wang, Kong, & Zhang, 2022). In the context of English language teaching (ELT), critical thinking not only strengthens linguistic competence but also encourages students to engage more thoughtfully with the content, develop independent perspectives, and apply their learning to real-world situations. Despite its importance, the integration of critical thinking into English language teaching in China faces significant obstacles. These include a longstanding focus on rote memorization, exam-driven educational practices, and cultural influences that may limit the development of open-mindedness and critical reflection (Yuan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the traditional teacher-centered approach to learning often leaves little room for student autonomy and critical engagement. This review seeks to examine the concept of critical thinking, explore its various dimensions, and assess the pedagogical strategies for effectively incorporating it into English language teaching in China, with an emphasis on overcoming the existing barriers. Through addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide theoretical insights and practical implications for fostering critical thinking in English education in China.

Specifically, this review addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the localized definition of critical thinking in the context of English language teaching in China?

RQ2: What are the dimensions of critical thinking?

RQ3: What is the current status of critical thinking in English language teaching in China?

RQ4: What are pedagogical strategies and implications of in English language teaching in China?

RQ5: What are challenges and future directions of critical thinking in English language teaching in China?

### **Definition of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking has been extensively defined and analyzed by scholars across various disciplines, each contributing unique perspectives to its conceptualization. Paul and Elder (2006) prominent figured in the field, define critical thinking as “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it”. They emphasized the importance of intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, relevance, and logic in the critical thinking process (Paul & Elder, 2006). Similarly, Ennis (2011) described critical thinking as “reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Ennis (2011) highlighted skills such as analyzing arguments, evaluating evidence, and making informed judgments as core components of critical thinking.

In addition, Dewey (2022) viewed critical thinking as an active and persistent effort to examine beliefs or knowledge in light of the evidence that supported them. Dewey’s pragmatic approach underscored the importance of curiosity and open-mindedness in fostering critical thinking. Additionally, Facione (2011) defined critical thinking as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which resulted in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment was based.” Overall, this comprehensive definition highlights both cognitive skills and affective dispositions as integral to critical thinking.

**Definition of Critical Thinking in the Chinese Context**

In the context of Chinese culture and education, the definition of critical thinking takes on unique dimensions influenced by historical, cultural, and educational factors. Traditional Chinese education has long emphasized rote memorization, respect for authority, and adherence to established knowledge, which can sometimes conflict with the Western emphasis on questioning and independent reasoning (Tan, 2018). However, as China increasingly integrates into the globalized world, the need for critical thinking skills has become more pronounced, particularly in English language teaching, where communication and intercultural understanding are increasingly paramount.

In the Chinese context, critical thinking can be understood as a balanced approach that integrates analytical reasoning with cultural values such as harmony and collective well-being. It involves the ability to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives while respecting cultural norms and social relationships (Tan, 2018). In English language classrooms, critical thinking might manifest as the ability to analyze English texts, engage in cross-cultural discussions, and reflect on one's own learning processes. At the same time, students are encouraged to maintain a respectful and collaborative attitude, aligning with Confucian values of humility and social responsibility (Brooks & Brooks, 1998).

Moreover, the Chinese educational system's focus on high-stakes examinations has often prioritized test performance over the development of higher-order thinking skills (Zhang, 2023). However, recent reforms have begun to emphasize the importance of fostering creativity, problem-solving, and independent thinking (Luo, 2023; Wang, 2021). In this evolving landscape, critical thinking in China is increasingly seen as a skill that complements traditional learning methods, enabling students to apply their knowledge in innovative and practical ways.

Overall, while the core principles of critical thinking, including analysis, evaluation, and reasoning, remain consistent across cultures, its application in the Chinese context is shaped by cultural values and educational traditions. Thus, by integrating these elements, critical thinking in China can be defined as a culturally adaptive skill that empowers students to navigate both local and global challenges effectively.

**Dimensions of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is a multifaceted construct that includes cognitive skills, affective dispositions, and cultural influences. These three dimensions are essential for effectively fostering critical thinking, particularly in the context of English language teaching and learning in China.

At the core of critical thinking is cognitive skills that enable individuals to process information systematically and logically. These skills include analysis, reasoning, evaluation and explanation. Analysis means breaking down complex information into smaller components to understand their structure and meaning (Cottrell, 2023). Based on Moge (2022), Analyzing the arguments in an English essay is to identify underlying assumptions. Paulsen and Kolstø (2022) state that reasoning refers to using logic to draw conclusions from evidence. This involves deductive and inductive reasoning, such as inferring the main idea of a text based on supporting details (Varsat, 2023). Evaluation is a way to assessing the

credibility, relevance, and strength of arguments, evidence, and sources (Paul & Elder, 2006). In English language learning, this involves evaluating the reliability of online resources for research (Alhabdan, 2021). Explanation means clearly articulating one's reasoning and conclusions (Paul & Elder, 2019). This skill is crucial for effective communication in English, as it allows learners to present their ideas coherently and persuasively. Overall, these cognitive skills form the foundation of critical thinking, enabling learners to engage deeply with content and develop well-reasoned perspectives.

In addition to cognitive abilities, critical thinking involves affective dispositions that shape how learners approach problems and information. Key dispositions include: curiosity, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and persistence. Curiosity is a desire to explore new ideas, ask questions, and seek deeper understanding (Tan, 2018). In English language learning, curiosity drives students to engage with diverse texts and cultures (Hong, Hwang, Liu, & Tai, 2022). Open-mindedness is a willingness to consider alternative viewpoints and revise one's own beliefs in light of new evidence (Paul & Elder, 2019). This is particularly important in cross-cultural communication, where differing perspectives are common. Fair-mindedness means that striving to be impartial and objective, even when personal biases and emotions are involved (Paul & Elder, 2019). This disposition encourages students to evaluate arguments based on merit rather than preconceived notions. Persistence is the determination to tackle complex problems and overcome challenges (Elder & Paul, 2020). In English language learning, persistence helps students navigate difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Nosirova, 2023). Overall, these affective dispositions complement cognitive skills by fostering an attitude of intellectual engagement and adaptability.

Cultural context plays a significant role in shaping how critical thinking is understood and practiced. In China, several cultural factors influence the development of critical thinking: collectivism vs. individualism, respect for authority, high-stakes examinations, and Chinese language and thought. As for collectivism and Individualism, Chinese culture traditionally emphasizes collective harmony and social responsibility, which can sometimes conflict with the individualistic nature of critical thinking, including questioning authority and expressing dissenting opinions (Ho & Barton, 2022). Balancing these values is crucial for fostering critical thinking in a culturally sensitive manner. Secondly, the Confucian tradition of respecting teachers and elders may discourage students from challenging established knowledge and engaging in open debate (Tan, 2018). Encouraging a respectful yet questioning attitude is key to overcoming this barrier. In terms of high-stakes examinations, the emphasis on standardized testing in China often prioritizes memorization and rote learning over higher-order thinking skills (Xu & Lu, 2022). Integrating critical thinking into English language teaching requires rethinking assessment methods to value creativity and problem-solving. Ultimately, Chinese Language and thought are also important cultural factors. The structure of the Chinese language and its cultural nuances may influence how students approach critical thinking in English (Liyange, Walker, & Shokouhi, 2021). According to Ge, Park and Pietromonaco (2022), indirect communication styles in Chinese culture may affect how students express arguments or critique ideas in English. By addressing these cultural factors, educators can create a learning environment that supports the development of critical thinking while respecting cultural values.

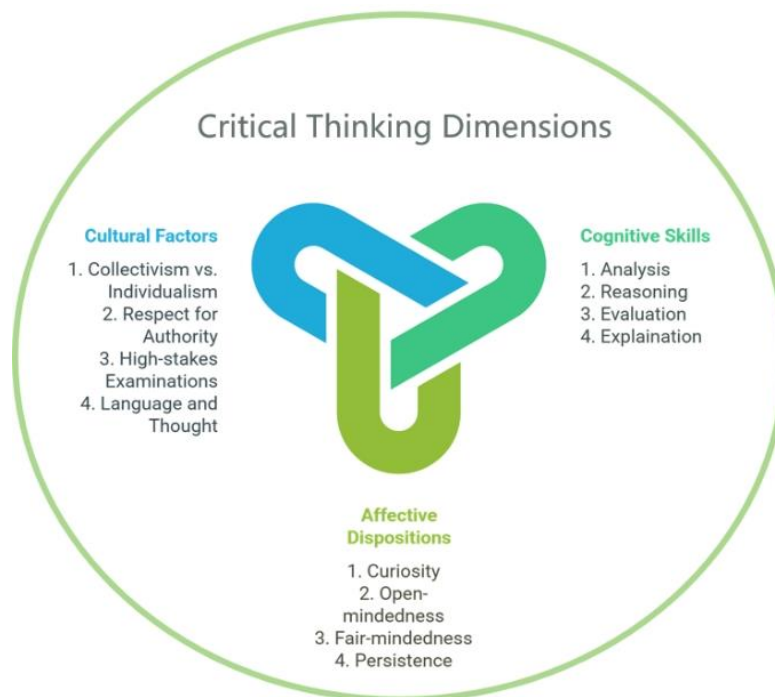


Figure 1.1 Three Dimensions of Critical Thinking

As shown in Figure 1.1, the three dimensions between cognitive skills, affective dispositions, and cultural factors highlights the complexity of critical thinking. In the Chinese context, fostering critical thinking in English language teaching requires a holistic approach that integrates these three dimensions. Teachers can design activities that encourage analysis and reasoning while promoting curiosity and open-mindedness. At the same time, they must be mindful of cultural influences and adapt their methods to align with students' backgrounds and values. In conclusion, the dimensions of critical thinking, including cognitive skills, affective dispositions, and cultural factors, provides a comprehensive framework for its development.

#### *The Current Status of Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching in China*

In China, English language teaching (ELT) has traditionally been focused on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and speaking skills (Çiftci & Özcan, 2021; Jian, 2022; Xinbei, Din, & Swanto, 2024; Xiong & Nasri, 2024). However, in recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of fostering critical thinking (CT) skills within the English classroom (Fan, 2024; Fan & See, 2022; Yuan et al., 2022). Despite this shift, the integration of critical thinking into ELT practices remains inconsistent and often superficial.

One major obstacle to embedding critical thinking into English teaching is the exam-oriented education system in China. The Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) and other standardized tests place a heavy emphasis on rote memorization and factual recall, leaving little space and limited time for critical inquiry and reflective thinking (Cui, 2022). As a result, teachers prioritize test preparation over promoting higher-order thinking skills. In response to this challenge, some educators have begun to experiment with approaches that encourage critical thinking (Cui, 2022). These include task-based learning (TBL), debates, problem-solving activities, and discussions that prompt students to analyze and evaluate

different viewpoints (Cui, 2022). However, these practices are not yet widespread, as many teachers still adhere to traditional methods that do not explicitly nurture critical thinking. Additionally, large class sizes and limited resources further hinder the effectiveness of such strategies.

Moreover, students' performance in critical thinking is an area of considerable concern. Research studies and classroom observations have shown that while some students demonstrate a capacity for critical thinking, many others struggle to engage with tasks that require independent analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas (Cui, 2022; Xiao, 2024). A study conducted by Fan and See (2022) found that, although Chinese students in urban areas generally perform well in English language tests, they tend to display weak critical thinking skills when faced with open-ended questions and tasks requiring subjective reasoning. This trend was observed particularly in reading comprehension and essay-writing exercises, where students often regurgitate information without critically analyzing and evaluating it (Bi, 2022). What's more, students' ability to express their opinions in English and support their views with logical reasoning was often underdeveloped (Wang, 2022). According to Bi (2022), in group discussions and debates, many students found it challenging to construct well-reasoned arguments, and their contributions tend to be limited to simple assertions and personal opinions rather than evidence-based analysis. The lack of exposure to critical thinking opportunities in the classroom may be one of the primary reasons behind this performance gap (Liu & Li, 2023). Additionally, Lun, Yeung and Ku (2023) illustrated that the pressure to perform well in exams can discourage students from engaging in deeper intellectual exploration, reinforcing surface-level learning rather than encouraging reflective and critical engagement with content.

Finally, teachers play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking in students. However, the implementation of critical thinking in ELT faces several challenges that teachers must navigate. These challenges stem from both the educational environment and the individual capabilities of the teachers themselves. Firstly, many English teachers in China lack sufficient training in critical thinking pedagogy. While they may be experts in language teaching, they may not be well-versed in teaching methods that encourage independent thinking, inquiry, and reflection (Agustin, Suherdi, & Purnawarman, 2024). This is particularly true in rural and less-developed regions, where professional development opportunities for teachers are often limited. Teachers may also feel unprepared to facilitate discussions and activities that require students to critically engage with material, especially when they themselves are more accustomed to a teacher-centered, knowledge-transmission approach (Bui, 2022). Additionally, the pressure to prepare students for exams can leave little time for teachers to explore critical thinking exercises that go beyond the curriculum (Wen, 2024). Teachers may also face resistance from students who are more comfortable with traditional methods of learning, where the focus is on memorization and repetition rather than on questioning, evaluating, and synthesizing information (Wen, 2024). Despite these challenges, some teachers are making strides in incorporating critical thinking into their lessons. They adopt interactive teaching strategies, encouraging students to compare and contrast different perspectives, evaluate the credibility of sources, and engage in reflective writing (Liang & Fung, 2020). However, the lack of institutional support, including curriculum reforms and teaching resources that promote critical thinking, means that these efforts are often not systematically integrated into the broader educational framework.

In summary, while there is a growing awareness of the importance of critical thinking in English language teaching in China, its integration into teaching practices remains a work in progress. Students' performance in critical thinking tasks reveals significant gaps, largely due to traditional teaching methods and the exam-focused education system. Teachers face challenges in both the lack of professional development in critical thinking pedagogy and the pressure to focus on exam preparation. For critical thinking to be more effectively integrated into ELT, a more holistic approach is needed, including curriculum reforms, teacher training, and a shift in assessment practices that allow for the development of higher-order thinking skills.

### *Pedagogical Strategies and Implications of Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching in China*

Integrating critical thinking into the English language curriculum requires intentional design that goes beyond traditional language skills to foster inquiry, reflection, and analytical thinking. Effective course design, teaching methods, and assessment approaches play a pivotal role in fostering these skills (Chen, 2023; Liang & Fung, 2020; Ma & Luo, 2021).

There are four key strategies for embedding critical thinking into course design: curriculum focus on higher-order thinking, task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, interdisciplinary connections, and diverse learning materials.

Firstly, curriculum focus on higher-order thinking (Chen, 2023; Liang & Fung, 2020; Lu, 2024; Ma & Luo, 2021). According to Liang and Fung (2020), the curriculum should emphasize not only language proficiency but also the development of analytical skills. Instead of focusing solely on memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, teachers can introduce tasks that require students to evaluate, critique, and synthesize information. It shows that readings can be selected not just for language learning but for their potential to provoke thought, challenge assumptions, and present controversial topics for discussion (Ma & Luo, 2021). Secondly, incorporating a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach allows students to engage in real-world tasks where they need to use critical thinking (Chen, 2023). Tasks including analyzing an issue, proposing solutions, and presenting arguments based on evidence can help students think critically in both their language production and comprehension (Lu, 2024). Additionally, it is important to enhance interdisciplinary connections. English courses can also draw connections to other disciplines, such as history, politics, and science, encouraging students to apply critical thinking across contexts (Liang & Fung, 2020). And examining global issues, students can learn to see English as a tool not just for communication but for inquiry and exploration of complex ideas. Finally, teachers need to use diverse learning materials. A rich variety of texts (news articles, documentaries, literature, debates, and academic papers) can provide students with opportunities to critically assess different perspectives, compare viewpoints, and develop their own informed positions (Liang & Fung, 2020). Teachers can choose materials that challenge students' views and encourage them to form their own opinions.

There are five teaching methods can be employed to foster critical thinking in English language classrooms. These include problem-based learning (PBL), debate, case study analysis, Socratic seminars and flipped classroom.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) involves presenting students with a real-world problem and asking them to work together to solve it (Karan & Brown, 2022). In the context of English language teaching, this could involve analyzing a social issue, debating a controversial topic, and investigating a current event. Through collaboration, research, and discussion, students develop critical thinking skills as they question assumptions, evaluate sources, and consider multiple perspectives (Suwastini, Puspawati, Adnyani, Dantes, & Rusnalasari, 2021). PBL encourages autonomy, inquiry, and deeper engagement with the content. Debates are an excellent way to develop critical thinking, as they require students to formulate logical arguments, back them up with evidence, and anticipate counterarguments (Chatfield, 2022). In English classrooms, students can debate issues relevant to their studies and topics related to global affairs, fostering both language skills and critical thoughts (Mitra, 2024). Teachers can assign roles, including pro- and con- positions, and ask students to consider the topic from different viewpoints. Next, in case study analysis, students examine real-life scenarios and historical events and analyze them from different angles (Seshan, Matua, Raghavan, Arulappan, Al Hashmi, Roach, Sunderraj, & Prince, 2021). This method encourages deep investigation and the application of critical thinking in problem-solving contexts. A case study of a global conflict could prompt students to analyze the causes, perspectives, and consequences, asking them to evaluate the decisions made and propose alternative solutions (Nguyen Thi Thu, 2023). And, Socratic Seminars uses open-ended questions to promote dialogue among students. In Socratic seminars, students are encouraged to question each other's ideas and challenge their assumptions (Ibarra & Cárdenas, 2022). This fosters a deeper understanding of the material and sharpens critical thinking skills. The teacher's role is to guide the discussion by posing thought-provoking questions and ensuring that all voices are heard (Dalim, Ishak, & Hamzah, 2022). Next, flipped Classroom is also a good method. In a flipped classroom model, students engage with content outside of class (e.g., through videos, readings, and online discussions) and then use class time to analyze and discuss the material (Anjomshoaa, Ghazizadeh Hashemi, Jasim Alsadaji, Jasim Mohammed, & Masoudi, 2022). This model encourages active learning, where students are required to reflect on and critique the content before engaging in collaborative discussions and activities in class.

Finally, evaluating students' critical thinking skills presents a unique challenge since these skills are often not easily quantifiable through traditional exams (Thornhill-Miller, Camarda, Mercier, Burkhardt, Morisseau, Bourgeois-Bougrine, Vinchon, El Hayek, Augereau-Landais, & Mourey, 2023). However, eight formative and summative assessment methods can effectively evaluate students' development in critical thinking (Ismail, Rahul, Patra, & Rezvani, 2022). Formative assessments are ongoing evaluations that provide feedback to students during the learning process (Irons & Elkington, 2021). These assessments can include: reflection journals, peer reviews, discussion and debates. Based on the reflection journals, students can write journals that reflect on what they have learned, their evolving viewpoints, and their analysis of class discussions and readings (Stevens & Cooper, 2023). These journals give teachers insight into students' critical thinking processes and help guide future instruction. Peer Reviews is also a good assessment way, encouraging students to review each other's work and promotes not only critical evaluation skills but also self-reflection (Liu, Liu, Hwang, Tu, Wang, & Wang, 2023). Through critiquing peers' arguments, students gain practice in assessing reasoning and evidence, essential components of critical thinking. Discussions and Debates are also important. Teachers can assess students' participation in



discussions and debates, focusing on their ability to present logical arguments, evaluate counterarguments, and support their opinions with evidence (Aarar, 2024).

Summative assessments evaluate the overall development of students' critical thinking skills at the end of a lesson and unit (Zhang, Wu, Zhu, & Zhou, 2023). These can include: essays and research papers, case study reports, final presentations, and rubrics for critical thinking. Essays and research papers can assess students well. Assignments that require students to research a topic, analyze different viewpoints, and present well-structured, evidence-based arguments are an effective way to assess critical thinking (Haines, 2021). These assessments test not only language proficiency but also the students' ability to synthesize information and present their own well-supported conclusions. Case Study Reports can be well utilized. As mentioned earlier, case studies are an excellent way to assess critical thinking. Students' reports can be evaluated based on how well they analyze the case, propose solutions, and justify their decisions with clear reasoning and evidence (Tight, 2022). Final Presentations is also a good summative assessment way. Presenting a well-reasoned argument and analysis of a topic in front of the class can be a strong summative assessment. It allows teachers to evaluate both the critical thinking process and the ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively in English (Liang & Fung, 2021). Finally, using rubrics that specifically assess critical thinking elements, including argumentation, evidence evaluation, and clarity of reasoning, can help ensure that assessments are aligned with critical thinking objectives (English, Robertson, Gillis, & Graham, 2022). These rubrics can provide transparency in evaluation and allow students to understand the key areas they need to improve.

In summary, incorporating critical thinking into English language teaching requires thoughtful course design, effective teaching methods, and robust assessment practices. Utilizing strategies including problem-based learning, debates, and case studies, teachers can provide students with opportunities to engage critically with content and develop their analytical skills. Furthermore, the use of both formative and summative assessments ensures that students' critical thinking abilities are consistently nurtured and evaluated. Through these pedagogical strategies, students can develop the essential skills needed to think critically, not only in English but in their broader academic and professional lives.

#### *Challenges and Future Directions of Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching in China*

While there is increasing awareness of the importance of critical thinking (CT) in English language teaching (ELT) in China, several challenges persist in effectively incorporating critical thinking (CT) into the classroom. These challenges stem from cultural, structural, and pedagogical factors that hinder the development of students' critical thinking abilities.

One of the most significant barriers to fostering critical thinking in China is the overwhelming emphasis on exams. The Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) and other standardized tests often prioritize rote memorization and factual recall over the development of analytical and evaluative skills (Liu & Helwig, 2022). As a result, both teachers and students tend to prioritize test preparation, leaving little opportunity for open-ended tasks, debates, and reflective discussions that foster critical thinking (Bean & Melzer, 2021). This exam-centric system limits the space for creativity, independent thought, and critical inquiry in the classroom.

The second is about cultural attitudes toward authority. In traditional Chinese educational culture, there is a strong emphasis on respect for authority and the teacher's role as the primary source of knowledge (Liu & Ren, 2024). This hierarchical relationship may hinder students from questioning the material and the teacher, a key component of critical thinking. In many cases, students may hesitate to express differing opinions and challenge the information presented in class. In addition, some students may struggle with the idea of "thinking for oneself" because they have been conditioned to believe that the teacher is always right (Tomas, Nera, & Schöpfer, 2022).

The third is lack of teachers' training. Many English teachers in China are not adequately trained to foster critical thinking skills in their students. While teachers may be well-versed in language instruction, they may lack the pedagogical skills and strategies needed to encourage inquiry-based learning and critical reflection (Shivolo & Mokiwa, 2024). Furthermore, critical thinking is not always an explicit part of teacher education curricula, meaning that even teachers who wish to integrate critical thinking (CT) into their classrooms may struggle to do so effectively (Jamil, Hafeez, & Muhammad, 2024).

The fourth is the large class size. In many Chinese schools, particularly in rural and underfunded areas, class sizes can be quite large (J. Zhou, 2023). This creates challenges for engaging students in interactive discussions, debates, and other activities that promote critical thinking (J. Zhou, 2023). In such settings, teachers often rely on lectures and rote learning to manage classroom dynamics, which leaves little time for the active engagement needed for critical thinking development (Vaghela & Parsana, 2024).

Finally, language proficiency is also an obstacle. Students in China may also face difficulties in expressing their critical thoughts in English, especially in the early stages of language acquisition (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Critical thinking involves articulating complex ideas and engaging in high-level analysis, which can be challenging when students are still developing their language proficiency. This gap can deter students from fully engaging in critical thinking tasks, as they may fear making mistakes and not being able to express their ideas clearly.

While the challenges are significant, there are also promising directions for future research and practice that could help integrate critical thinking more effectively into English language teaching in China. These directions involve changes in curriculum design, teacher professional development, and classroom practices.

One direction is fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between language departments and other academic fields. English teachers could work with teachers from subjects including history, social studies, and science to create interdisciplinary projects that require students to apply critical thinking across subjects (Lu, 2022). Students could read English texts related to a global issue, analyze multiple viewpoints, and propose solutions. This approach would not only enhance students' language skills but also help them develop the ability to think critically about complex topics in various fields (Hurajová, 2021).

Secondly, to create an environment where critical thinking can thrive, there needs to be a reform in the curriculum to place greater emphasis on higher-order cognitive skills.

English language curricula should incorporate more activities that foster analysis, evaluation, and creation, rather than focusing solely on language mechanics (X. Zhou, 2023). English textbooks can be redesigned to include more controversial issues, case studies, and thought-provoking materials that encourage students to engage critically with the content (Montenegro Gómez, 2021).

Thirdly, a critical step in promoting critical thinking in ELT is to invest in comprehensive teacher training programs. These programs should focus on both language instruction and pedagogical strategies for fostering critical thinking (Liang & Fung, 2021). Teachers should be equipped with the skills to create a more interactive and student-centered classroom environment, where students feel encouraged to ask questions, share opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions (Yuan, Yang, & Lee, 2021). In-service teacher training, workshops, and seminars focused on critical thinking techniques could be integrated into existing teacher development programs (Ma & Luo, 2021).

Additionally, technology can also be a valuable tool in fostering critical thinking skills (Chen & Chuang, 2021; Cortázar, Nussbaum, Harcha, Alvares, López, Goñi, & Cabezas, 2021; Liang & Fung, 2020). Digital platforms, online discussion forums, and collaborative tools can allow students to engage with content in innovative ways (Chen & Chuang, 2021). Teachers can use online resources to host debates, group projects, and critical analysis tasks that students can work on collaboratively, even outside of class time (Liang & Fung, 2020). Additionally, educational technology can provide students with access to diverse perspectives and sources of information, further enhancing their ability to evaluate and critically engage with different viewpoints.

In summary, while promoting critical thinking in English language teaching in China faces numerous challenges, the potential benefits are immense. After addressing obstacles: exam pressure, cultural attitudes, and lack of teacher training, and by implementing forward-looking strategies like interdisciplinary collaboration, curriculum reform, enhanced teacher training, and integrating technology into teaching practice, critical thinking can be better integrated into ELT practices. The future of English education in China lies in creating an environment where students not only learn the language but also develop the critical thinking skills necessary for success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the localized definition and core dimensions of critical thinking in the context of English language teaching (ELT) in China. Critical thinking in English language teaching (ELT) refers to a reflective and analytical approach to English language learning that encourages students to engage deeply with content, challenge assumptions, assess evidence, and form reasoned conclusions. It goes beyond the mere acquisition of language skills, aiming to foster English students' ability to think critically, independently, and creatively. This approach integrates analytical reasoning with cultural values, including respect for social harmony and collective well-being, guiding students to navigate both the English language and the complexities of intercultural communication in China.

Furthermore, three core dimensions of critical thinking in English language education are identified. Cognitive skills involve the ability to analyze, reason, evaluate and explain

information. Affective dispositions include curiosity, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and persistence. At last, cultural factors encourage students to be conscious of their own thinking styles, including collectivism vs. individualism, respect for authority, high-stakes examinations, and language and thought.

Moreover, English teachers should adopt effective course design, teaching methods, and assessment approaches to implement effective teaching strategies that foster critical thinking in the classroom. Firstly, strategies for course design including curriculum focus on higher-order thinking, task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, interdisciplinary connections, and diverse learning materials, can help create an environment where students are encouraged to think critically. Additionally, teaching methods integrating reflective practices covers problem-based learning (PBL), debate, case study analysis, Socratic seminars and flipped classroom. Furthermore, assessments in English classrooms should focus not only on language proficiency but also on evaluating students' critical thinking abilities. This can be achieved through a combination of formative assessments like reflective journals and group discussions, reflection journals, peer reviews, and debates, essays and summative assessments like research papers, case study reports, final presentations, and rubrics for critical thinking.

Ultimately, the challenges in fostering critical thinking in English language teaching in China include the overwhelming emphasis on exams, cultural attitudes toward authority, lack of teachers' training, large class sizes, and varying levels of language proficiency. While the challenges are significant, promising directions for future research and practice include fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between language departments and other academic fields, reforming the curriculum to place greater emphasis on higher-order cognitive skills, enhancing teacher training programs, and leveraging technology to support the development of critical thinking in English language teaching in China. Overall, this study provides theoretical insights for English teachers, school administrators, and policy makers, aiming to cultivate critical thinking skills alongside English language teaching in China.

Although there are significant findings of critical thinking in the context of English language teaching (ELT) in China. This study is primarily based on a literature review and lacks support from field investigations and quantitative data. Future research could collect primary data through more field observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys to complement the existing theoretical framework and further validate the proposed teaching strategies and dimensions.

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