'Narratives' for Critical Thinking among Undergraduate Students in an ELT Classroom

Dr. M. Nivedita
Assistant Professor, Department of English, and Head, Department of Languages
University College of Science
Saifabad, Hyderabad
Telangana, India

DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v15i02.016

[1] *Received: 15/05/2025; Accepted: 20/06/2025; Published: 25/06/2025*

ABSTRACT

This is especially true for undergraduate students in the realm of ELT where learners need to involve in analytical, evaluative and synthesizing processes. Narratives in the classroom is a basis for knowledge construction This study focuses on 'narratives' which play a vital role in this purpose within an undergraduate English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. Written narratives, as well as oral history narratives, are a material that can help involve students in identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reflecting on and about different perspectives. Through the lens of narrative structures, themes, and language choices, students can be encouraged to involve with texts in a more meaningful way and even forge connections to the rest of the world.

The paper examines several distinct forms, such as personal narratives, fictitious stories, and case studies, and their influence on the cognition of students. By engaging with these narratives, students can develop multiple perspectives and broaden their understanding of the issue. In addition to this, using narratives encourages a personal forum for students to share opinions and discussion, leading to new approaches in critical thinking. Moreover, the research presents specific strategies which EFL teachers employ when applying narratives in their instructions. Structured storytelling, guided discussions, and critical reflection exercises are among those strategies that require students to consider the content from various perspectives. Narrativity helps the learners to have better language skills and helps in stimulating your creativity, interest and independent thinking, according to this research. These narratives provide an effective tool for encouraging critical discussion within the ELT classroom. Through varied applications of narrative as a mechanism for deeper cognitive involvement, teachers help students develop the critical thinking skills they will need, both now and for a lifetime, to succeed academically. This article argues for a deliberate and thoughtful choice of narratives used in ELT classrooms to develop an analytical and reflective skill set in the students learning.

Key words: *storytelling; confidence skills; language skills; vocabulary; imagination; soft skills*

Introduction

Like the unconscious mind, the term, the "Neural Story Net" emphasizes both the brain's basic wiring and its innate efficiency, forming narratives from received data. The brain responds to the unknown, by accessing past knowledge

[1] How to cite the article: Nivedita M.; (June, 2025); 'Narratives' for Critical Thinking among Undergraduate Students in an ELT Classroom; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities;* Vol 15, Issue 2; 171-176; DOI: http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v15i02.016

in order to make sense of things. This process is why you can get two people who were at the same event interpreting it differently, because both people are filtering through their own previous memory and experience. The brain builds meaning by processing new information through the lens of previous experiences and this is why storytelling and the cognition levels of an individual are so fundamentally connected.

The brain fills in gaps even if we are driving a completely factual narrative just to make sure that we make sense. These are the latest in a long lineage of "mini-brain stories," the product of a habit we have that reverts to narrative: our brains naturally arrange and package data in ways that make them easier to analyze for the reality we perceive. Authors often develop a distinct voice for the narrator of a story, and employ analogies to illuminate complex ideas. For instance, a marathon runner could be compared to someone filing papers, or even Marines coming on to a beach to be ready to fight. Often these metaphors are used to distill and define complex ideas into more easily understood concepts for audiences.

Thinking enables synthetic questions, borrowing from conceptualizations that have arisen from our experience, and employing fiction as a literary device. But it is involving so it is still important that science communicators be honest in their narratives. One source further emphasizes that pie charts will never cause dramatic reactions, but adding a narrative dimension to data can generate emotional involvement, which is a must for drawing attention. Using elements of storytelling, scientists can invoke an emotional reaction with their audience, making them active participants of the process and allowing use of selective mental attention on the topic.

On it, psychologists have backed this with scientific evidence. For example, in their book *Unintended Thought*, the authors James Uleman and John Bargh (1989) summarize some psychological research and point out that although the studies are valid, their findings appear contradictory. They argue that phenomenological studies have shown conflicting intuitions with regards to the control of automatic processing. Instinctive responses happen regardless of our wishes, and they often seem to happen beyond our control. These reactions often offer a prescription for action, and we come to trust them as if they were well-regulated (69).

It is likely that our brain processes developed according to principles of storytelling because of how long humans have been telling stories. Cave walls were also painted by early hominids because early human brain functions. This either/or conundrum does not have a resolution, and yet the best scientists of the brain continue to search for one. These research findings can guide storytellers in writing the best scripts whether dealing with a fictional story about a sea captain moving about with a dead bird in his bag or a documentary about an Alaskan fisherman filling a box with king crab. The psychologists who carried out this research had been remarkably cautious when forming a hypothesis, using human subjects, and reporting the effects. Legitimate science is a difficult enterprise. The goal of the scientific method is to verify or falsify a particular hypothesis. After going through it, a new hypothesis comes out, and then the process continues.

Storytelling, a practice that dates back to ancient times, is one of the oldest art forms. It relies on two crucial elements: choice and conveyance. Many educators, especially English teachers, embrace storytelling as an effective tool in teaching. While it can be a medium to describe a wide array of subjects, it is also a method for gathering and sharing stories. To be a skilled storyteller, one must connect with the audience, as the delivery is just as important as the content. Moreover, practice is essential in mastering this art. Storytelling is not only an essential teaching method but also an avenue for instilling a deep, empathetic connection with others and guiding children in understanding human behavior.

'Narratives' for Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking is a fundamental cognitive skill essential for academic success and lifelong learning. It involves the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a logical and reasoned manner. In an increasingly complex world, the ability to think critically is vital for students, particularly in higher education, where they are often required to involve with diverse perspectives and solve complex problems. The role of storytelling in education has gained attention as an effective method for enhancing critical thinking skills. Stories are not only a form of entertainment but also serve as powerful tools for communication and learning. By involving oneself with narratives, students can explore multiple perspectives, analyze character decisions, and reflect on the implications of those decisions. The emotional and cognitive involvement that storytelling evokes allows for deeper reflection and more meaningful

connections with the subject matter.

This experiment seeks to investigate the impact of storytelling on critical thinking skills among undergraduate students. Specifically, it explores whether storytelling exercises, where students involve with a narrative and critically reflect on it, can improve their abilities to analyze, evaluate, and justify their reasoning in comparison to traditional lecture-based methods. By incorporating storytelling into the learning process, this study aims to assess whether it can foster more active participation, enhance cognitive involvement, and ultimately improve students' critical thinking abilities. Through this experiment, the researcher (the author) seeks to provide evidence that storytelling, as an educational tool, can contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, offering a more engaging and effective alternative to traditional teaching methods. The findings may have implications for the integration of narrative-based techniques into educational curricula, promoting deeper cognitive involvement and improving students' ability to approach complex ideas and problems from multiple perspectives.

Hypothesis 1:

Storytelling activities will significantly improve critical thinking skills among students. Students exposed to storytelling exercises will show a higher improvement in their critical thinking abilities compared to students who are not exposed to these activities.

Hypothesis 2:

Students who involve in storytelling will demonstrate a higher ability to evaluate multiple perspectives in a scenario. The storytelling group will outperform the control group in evaluating different perspectives in complex scenarios.

Hypothesis 3:

Students who participate in storytelling will develop more advanced reasoning and justification skills when analyzing complex situations. Storytelling will lead students to justify their reasoning more effectively compared to the control group, with a higher level of depth and coherence in their responses.

Participants:

20 undergraduate students (10 in the experimental group and 10 in the control group).

Materials:

Short stories or case studies for storytelling.

Rubric for evaluating critical thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating, justifying).

Digital tools (optional for virtual learning).

Data collection forms and statistical tools for analysis.

Data Analysis:

The data analysis focused on comparing the pre- and post-assessment scores for both the experimental and control groups, using statistical methods to determine the significance of any differences observed.

Experimental Group Results: In the experimental group, where students participated in the storytelling exercise, the pre-assessment scores for critical thinking skills showed an average score of 55%. Post-assessment results, after actively involving themselves with the story, show an average increase of 20%, bringing the average post-assessment score to 75%. Students demonstrated improved abilities to analyze the key elements of the story, evaluate multiple perspectives, and justify their reasoning during group discussions. The storytelling approach facilitated deeper

involvement and encouraged more sophisticated critical thinking as students were required to reflect on the story and actively discuss it with peers.

Control Group Results: In the control group, the pre-assessment scores were similar to those of the experimental group, with an average score of 54%. After the traditional lecture-based teaching, the post-assessment score rose slightly to an average of 60%. While there was some improvement, it was less pronounced compared to the experimental group. The students in this group did not involve in interactive or reflective activities, and their focus remained on factual understanding rather than critical evaluation. This smaller increase suggests that traditional teaching methods may not be as effective in fostering critical thinking compared to the storytelling intervention.

Comparative Analysis: The difference between the pre- and post-assessment results for the experimental group (an increase of 20%) is significantly larger than the increase in the control group (an increase of 6%). This difference suggests that the storytelling intervention had a positive impact on the development of critical thinking skills. The experimental group's ability to analyze, evaluate, and justify their reasoning improved more substantially, supporting the hypothesis that storytelling enhances critical thinking abilities. Based on the data analysis, the experiment supports the hypothesis that storytelling significantly enhances critical thinking skills. The students exposed to storytelling were able to analyze complex scenarios, evaluate different perspectives, and justify their reasoning more effectively than those in the control group. The findings suggest that storytelling can be an effective tool for fostering critical thinking in educational settings, providing valuable insight into how narrative-based methods can be integrated into teaching practices to improve cognitive skills.

This experiment demonstrates the effectiveness of storytelling in promoting critical thinking among undergraduate students and offers valuable evidence for incorporating storytelling into educational curricula to enhance cognitive involvement.

Theories of Vygotsky and Piaget

Vygotsky's ZPD theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolding, which refers to the support provided by teachers or more capable peers to help learners accomplish tasks they cannot yet complete independently. According to Vygotsky, learners are capable of achieving more with guidance than they can on their own, which fosters the development of cognitive and critical thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with assistance. This concept can be directly applied in the classroom to improve critical thinking by encouraging activities that challenge students but remain within their ZPD, enabling them to think critically and independently.

To improve critical thinking, teachers can present problems or scenarios that students cannot fully solve on their own but can involve with when provided with appropriate support. The role of the teacher is to carefully gauge students' current capabilities and offer just enough guidance to push their thinking to a higher level. This process helps students internalize new cognitive strategies, gradually reducing the need for support as they gain independence.

For instance, when students involve in complex problem-solving tasks or analyze case studies, a teacher can initially offer structured guidance by asking probing questions or providing hints. As students' confidence and ability grow, the teacher reduces their assistance, allowing students to develop their critical thinking skills through independent analysis and reflection. In this manner, ZPD can foster the gradual development of higher-order thinking.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development, on the other hand, provides a framework for understanding how children and adolescents develop their ability to think critically over time. Piaget proposed that cognitive development occurs through four stages: the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage (Piaget, 1952). According to Piaget, children actively construct knowledge by interacting with their environment, and critical thinking abilities emerge as they progress through these stages.

Critical thinking is particularly fostered during the formal operational stage (around age 12 and beyond), where individuals begin to think logically about abstract concepts and involve in hypothetical-deductive reasoning. In this stage, students develop the ability to systematically consider different possibilities and solutions to problems, which

is at the core of critical thinking. Piaget's theory stresses the importance of providing students with tasks that encourage the development of logical reasoning, as it is through solving problems and reflecting on different perspectives that students' critical thinking abilities are nurtured. To apply Piaget's ideas in the classroom, educators can design activities that require students to move beyond concrete experiences and involve with abstract reasoning. For example, using debates, hypothetical situations, or open-ended questions encourages students to use abstract thinking to evaluate different outcomes. Furthermore, Piaget emphasizes the role of assimilation (integrating new information into existing schemas) and accommodation (adjusting schemas to incorporate new experiences) in cognitive development. In the context of teaching critical thinking, this can be translated into students' ability to integrate new information and adapt their thinking when confronted with new and challenging problems.

By presenting students with increasingly complex tasks, educators help them advance through the stages of cognitive development, allowing them to refine their critical thinking skills.

Application of ZPD and Piaget's Theory in Critical Thinking Education

In a classroom setting, both ZPD and Piaget's theory can work synergistically to enhance students' critical thinking abilities. Educators can design learning experiences that fall within students' ZPD, gradually increasing the complexity of tasks to challenge students' critical thinking. For example, during a discussion-based activity, students might initially be prompted with guided questions that encourage them to analyze different perspectives. As students demonstrate competence, the teacher can reduce their support, encouraging students to involve in deeper reflection and independent critical analysis.

In Piaget's terms, the teacher's role is to present opportunities for students to involve in tasks that push them to move beyond their current cognitive stage, thereby developing the abstract thinking required for critical analysis. For instance, when teaching critical thinking through case studies, students may initially analyze simple, real-life examples (concrete operational level), but with increasing support, they may be encouraged to consider more abstract, hypothetical scenarios (formal operational level), which requires higher-order thinking. The synergy between ZPD and Piaget's stages creates an environment where critical thinking is not only encouraged but is also scaffolded in a way that aligns with students' developmental stages. Teachers can use ZPD to identify appropriate levels of support and apply Piaget's theory to ensure that tasks are developmentally appropriate, thus ensuring that students involve with complex ideas at the right level for their cognitive stage.

Both Vygotsky's ZPD and Piaget's theory of cognitive development provide important frameworks for enhancing critical thinking skills in students. By understanding students' cognitive abilities and providing appropriate challenges and support, teachers can create an environment that fosters the development of critical thinking. The careful application of these theories allows educators to guide students through progressively complex tasks, encouraging them to analyze, evaluate, and justify their reasoning. As such, integrating these theoretical insights into teaching practice can have a profound impact on students' intellectual growth and their ability to think critically.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is a vital skill that is necessary for successfully overcoming life challenges, making sound decisions, and determining solutions. This enables individuals to be able to evaluate situations, assess varying viewpoints, and arrive at logical conclusions based on the facts instead of mere feelings or assumptions. Critical thinking helps people evaluate information in daily life, separating fact from opinion and uncovering bias or fallacies. Being able to do this is vital in decision-making, be it deciding between financial plans, career paths or addressing personal disputes.

It includes sub-abilities like logic, which is a fundamental aspect of critical reasoning, allowing a person to scrutinize a complex problem and decompose it into manageable sections for which one can provide solutions on the basis of logic. For instance, in making hard decisions, logical reasoning allows people to weigh the pros and cons, think about the long-term consequences, and determine the best possible course of action. It also helps a person to solve problems as logical thinking enables a person to tackle challenges systematically and not be carried away by emotions or impulsive reactions.

In addition to decision making, critical thinking is a fundamental principle that helps in improving the other life skills such as communication, adaptability, and collaboration. For example, critical thinking helps people in the workplace improve communication skills, as a person can learn to order their thoughts and to present an argument logically, prepare for role-playing games, etc. Critical thinking practices also help foster empathy and understanding, because it encourages us to see a situation from somebody else's perspective and respond with thoughtfulness rather than directly. Furthermore, it aids in adapting to the unknown; being able to critically analyze incoming information, use experiences to learn, and apply that learning to new scenarios are all highly sought after skills.

Thus, critical thinking further aids in life-long learning, as it fosters a spirit of curiosity and willingness to question what we already know and believe. The body of science of the scientific method gets feedback into it and it produces a better process with a more accurate model of the world around us Broadening ones horizon with this mindset helps not only in individual development but also in empowering a person to take control of his life, take good decisions and serve in a better manner to the society. With that in mind, evaluative reasoning is an important academic skill to develop, but most importantly, it's a necessary skill to solve problems in everyday life and make sense of an increasingly complicated society.

References

Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. International Universities Press.

Uleman, J. S., & Bargh, J. A. (Eds.). (1989). *Unintended thought*. Guilford Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4

Suggested Readings

Chaffee, J. (2018). *Thinking critically* (12th ed.). Cengage Learning.

De Bono, E. (2010). *Lateral thinking: A textbook of creativity*. Harper Perennial.

Dobelli, R. (2013). *The art of thinking clearly*. HarperCollins.

Weston, A. (2009). *A rulebook for arguments* (4th ed.). Hackett Publishing Company.