

METHODS OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: This article explores methods for developing critical thinking skills in primary school students, specifically within the context of 3rd and 4th grade reading literacy lessons. The author presents various strategies such as analytical questioning, problem-based tasks, and interactive reading activities aimed at enhancing learners' cognitive engagement and reasoning. The role of teacher facilitation and the integration of reflective tasks in fostering independent and critical thought is also emphasized.

Keywords: critical thinking, primary education, reading literacy, methodology, problem-based learning, analytical skills, interactive learning.

In the modern educational landscape, the development of students' critical thinking skills is considered a core objective of general education, particularly in the context of 21st-century learning. As information becomes increasingly accessible and the world more interconnected, the ability to think critically- analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information- has gained greater importance than the mere accumulation of facts. In response, educational systems around the world are shifting focus from traditional rote learning to student-centered and inquiry-based learning models.

At the primary level, especially in grades 3–4, children are at a cognitive stage where they begin to develop foundational analytical skills. These include comparing and contrasting ideas, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, making reasoned predictions, and justifying opinions with evidence. Developing these skills early supports not only academic success across subjects but also fosters independent thinking and lifelong learning.

Reading literacy lessons, as a core component of the primary curriculum, provide a particularly rich environment for cultivating critical thinking. Texts used in reading classes often present diverse themes, characters, problems, and moral dilemmas, which can serve as a foundation for discussion, analysis, and problem-solving. When guided by purposeful questioning and reflective exercises, these texts become powerful tools for training young minds to engage with content more deeply and thoughtfully.

This study explores how critical thinking skills can be developed through reading literacy instruction in the 3rd and 4th grades, identifies effective pedagogical strategies, and offers practical recommendations for teachers.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative

techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of how critical thinking skills can be fostered among primary school students through reading activities. The methodological framework included the following components:

- **Classroom Observation and Lesson Analysis:** Structured and unstructured observations were conducted during reading literacy lessons in several primary school classrooms. These observations focused on teacher–student interactions, the types of questions posed by teachers, student responses, and the presence (or absence) of critical thinking strategies. Lesson plans and teaching materials were also analyzed to assess alignment with higher-order thinking objectives.
- **Pedagogical Experiments:** A series of experimental lessons were designed and implemented across multiple public schools in the Surkhandarya region. These lessons incorporated specific critical thinking tasks, such as open-ended questions, group discussions, reflective journaling, and problem-solving activities. Pre- and post-assessment tools were used to measure students' progress in critical thinking based on Bloom's taxonomy indicators.
- **Interviews and Surveys with Primary School Teachers:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced primary school teachers to explore their perceptions of critical thinking, challenges they face in fostering it, and strategies they currently use. Additionally, a questionnaire was administered to a broader group of teachers to collect data on teaching practices, training needs, and classroom conditions related to critical thinking instruction.
- **Content Analysis of Textbooks and Teaching Materials:** The official 3rd and 4th-grade reading textbooks approved by the Ministry of Preschool and School Education were examined. Tasks, exercises, and reading passages were analyzed to determine the degree to which they supported the development of critical thinking. This involved identifying whether activities encouraged analysis, evaluation, inference, comparison, and creative thinking.
- **Data from Experimental Schools:** Experimental implementation was carried out in selected public schools in urban and rural areas of the Surkhandarya region. These schools were chosen to ensure diversity in student demographics and educational contexts. The outcomes of the experimental lessons were documented using video recordings, student reflections, and teacher feedback.

The combination of these research methods provided a rich and multidimensional dataset, allowing the study to make grounded recommendations on enhancing critical thinking instruction in early grades through reading literacy lessons.

The research findings clearly demonstrate that the integration of critical thinking strategies into reading literacy lessons significantly enhances cognitive engagement and intellectual development in primary school students. One of the most impactful techniques observed was the systematic use of **higher-order questioning strategies**, such as open-ended "Why?", "How do you know?", and "What if?" questions. These types of inquiries pushed students beyond surface-level comprehension and encouraged them to analyze motives, predict outcomes, and consider alternative viewpoints.

Another effective strategy involved the use of **comparison tasks**, often implemented through Venn diagrams or T-charts. These tasks required students to compare characters, themes, or events across different stories or within a single text. This visual and conceptual comparison helped students recognize similarities and differences, reinforcing classification and evaluation skills fundamental to critical thinking.

Problem-solving activities rooted in narrative content also played a key role. For example, when students were asked to propose solutions to dilemmas faced by story characters or resolve a conflict within a text, they were required to apply logic, empathy, and creativity—key components of higher-order thinking.

Additional methods that proved highly effective included:

- **Justifying opinions:** Tasks such as "Do you agree with the character's decision? Why or why not?" required students to support their viewpoints with textual evidence. This developed their ability to construct arguments and engage in reflective judgment.
- **Creating alternative endings:** This activity fostered creative thinking while requiring students to adhere to narrative logic and coherence, thus blending imagination with structured reasoning.
- **Role-playing:** By assuming the roles of characters and acting out scenes, students deepened their understanding of motivations and consequences, enhancing both critical thinking and empathy.
- **Discussion-based analysis:** Moral and logical dilemmas presented in texts served as a foundation for classroom discussions, enabling students to explore complex issues, articulate diverse perspectives, and consider ethical implications.

The combined use of these approaches resulted in measurable improvements in students' ability to:

- Think independently and question assumptions
- Express thoughts clearly and coherently
- Identify key ideas and draw conclusions
- Respect differing viewpoints and build on others' ideas

Teachers involved in the experimental lessons also reported increased student engagement, deeper comprehension, and improved classroom dynamics.

Conclusion. The development of critical thinking skills in primary school students, especially within the context of reading literacy, is both a practical necessity and a pedagogical opportunity. The findings of this study suggest that well-designed, student-centered instruction can significantly enhance learners' analytical capabilities from an early age. Integrating questioning techniques, comparison tasks, problem-solving exercises, and collaborative discussions into

reading lessons transforms passive reading into an active, reflective, and intellectually enriching process.

For this transformation to occur, teachers must act not only as knowledge providers but also as facilitators of thought. Their **creativity, flexibility, and sensitivity to student responses** are essential in crafting lessons that challenge students to go beyond basic recall and toward higher levels of cognitive engagement.

To support widespread adoption of these methodologies, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Ongoing teacher training** on critical thinking strategies and classroom implementation
- **Curriculum redesign** to include critical thinking objectives within reading standards
- **Development of supplementary teaching materials** that encourage reflection and analysis
- **Encouragement of classroom discourse** that respects diverse opinions and nurtures inquiry

Further research should explore long-term outcomes of early critical thinking development, such as its influence on academic achievement, communication skills, and lifelong learning habits. As education systems prepare students for complex, information-rich societies, the importance of critical thinking in the primary classroom can no longer be overlooked.

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