

Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Differentiated English Instruction in Philology Faculties

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Abstract. *Critical thinking is essential for academic success and professional development in philology, where analytical skills underpin language study and interpretation. This study examines the implementation of differentiated English instruction to foster critical thinking among students in philology faculties in Uzbekistan. Classroom observations, surveys, and interviews were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of tailored activities. Findings indicate significant improvements in analytical abilities, with differentiated strategies addressing diverse learner needs. Challenges include cultural norms favoring rote learning, but incremental integration proved beneficial. Results underscore the potential of differentiated approaches to enhance critical thinking in EFL contexts within Uzbekistan's higher education system.*

Key words: *Critical thinking, differentiated instruction, English as a foreign language, philology faculties, Uzbekistan.*

Introduction. Critical thinking, encompassing skills such as analysis, evaluation, inference, and problem-solving, is pivotal in higher education, particularly in philology faculties where students engage with linguistic structures, literature, and cultural texts (Facione, 1990). In Uzbekistan, where English is increasingly emphasized as a key foreign language for academic and global communication, integrating critical thinking into English instruction can empower philology students to navigate complex texts and discourses. Differentiated instruction, which adapts teaching to individual learner differences in readiness, interests, and profiles, offers a promising framework for this integration (Tomlinson, 2014). However, in post-Soviet educational contexts like Uzbekistan, traditional teacher-centered methods often prevail, limiting opportunities for student autonomy and deeper cognitive engagement.

Prior research has linked differentiated English teaching to improved language proficiency and cognitive skills, yet applications in philology-specific settings remain underexplored (Subban, 2006). In Uzbekistan, reforms since 2012, including presidential decrees to enhance foreign language education, have promoted innovative pedagogies, but implementation in philology faculties faces barriers like large class sizes, limited resources, and cultural preferences for memorization (Hasanova, 2007). These reforms aim to align education with international standards, emphasizing communicative competence and analytical skills in languages like English, which is crucial for philology students pursuing careers in translation, linguistics, and cultural studies.

This study addresses this by investigating how differentiated English instruction develops critical thinking in Uzbekistan's philology faculties, focusing on strategies, outcomes, and contextual adaptations. By drawing on empirical data from key institutions, it provides insights into overcoming systemic challenges and leveraging local cultural elements for effective teaching.

Critical Thinking in English Language Instruction

Critical thinking in EFL involves questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence, and synthesizing ideas within language tasks, fostering not only linguistic but also intellectual growth (Paul & Elder, 2006). Studies show that activities like debates, problem-solving tasks, and reflective writing enhance these skills, leading to better comprehension and expression in English (Atkinson, 1997). In Uzbekistan, where English is compulsory in higher education, integrating critical thinking aligns with national goals for producing independent thinkers capable of global engagement. For instance, in philology faculties, students analyze English literary works alongside Uzbek texts, requiring skills to compare cultural nuances and linguistic patterns.

Recent research in Uzbekistan highlights the role of English lessons in developing critical thinking through interactive methods, such as discussions and analyses, which encourage logical reasoning and creative responses (Kuchkarova, 2020). However, traditional approaches often limit this to rote learning of grammar and vocabulary, underscoring the need for innovative strategies.

Differentiated Instruction in Philology Contexts

Differentiated instruction tailors content, processes, and products to student diversity, using flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and varied assessments (Tomlinson, 2017). In philology faculties, this approach can address varying proficiency levels in English, allowing advanced students to analyze literary critiques while beginners focus on basic interpretation. Research in non-language universities highlights its efficacy in boosting motivation and skills, though adaptations for cultural contexts are needed (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). In Uzbekistan, philology programs emphasize Uzbek and foreign languages, with English serving as a tool for literary and linguistic analysis, making differentiated methods ideal for bridging gaps in critical engagement.

To expand, differentiated strategies in EFL include metacognitive training, blended learning, and technology integration, which promote autonomy and link to critical thinking through reflection and problem-solving. In Uzbekistan's philology faculties, such as those at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, these can incorporate local texts to make tasks culturally relevant. For example, differentiating reading activities on Uzbek folklore translated into English allows students to critically evaluate cultural representations at their own pace.

Furthermore, literature reviews from Uzbekistan indicate that differentiated instruction enhances student achievement by adapting to individual needs, with positive effects on motivation and learning outcomes (Rakhmonova, 2024). This is particularly relevant in philology, where diverse student backgrounds—from urban Tashkent to rural areas—require tailored approaches to foster analytical skills in English.

Gap in Research

While global studies affirm the benefits of differentiated instruction for critical thinking in EFL, limited research focuses on Uzbekistan's philology faculties, where cultural and systemic factors influence adoption (Kuchkarova, 2020). Existing work often overlooks higher education specifics, emphasizing secondary levels instead. This study fills this gap by providing empirical insights from Uzbekistan, informing policy and practice in philological education.

Methods. Participants included 180 philology students and 20 English instructors from three universities in Uzbekistan: Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, and Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. These institutions were selected for their prominence in philology and varying regional contexts, ensuring a representative sample. A mixed-methods design was employed: quantitative surveys assessed critical thinking levels using a validated scale (e.g., California Critical Thinking Skills Test adapted for EFL), administered pre- and post-intervention to measure changes in analysis, evaluation, and inference skills. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with instructors and students, exploring perceptions of differentiated strategies, and classroom observations of 30 lessons to document implementation.

Differentiated instruction involved tiered activities, such as group discussions on literary themes for varied proficiency groups, reflective journals on English texts with Uzbek parallels, and technology-enhanced tasks like online debates using platforms accessible in Uzbekistan. Implementation spanned one semester, with instructors trained via workshops on adaptation techniques. Data analysis used thematic coding for qualitative inputs via NVivo software and descriptive comparisons for quantitative measures, ensuring ethical considerations like informed consent and anonymity.

To enhance rigor, inter-rater reliability was checked for observations, and triangulation of data sources validated findings. The approach drew from Uzbekistan-specific studies on differentiated English teaching, incorporating flexible grouping and content variation (Rakhmonova, 2024).

Results. Summary assessments revealed moderate baseline critical thinking levels among students, with notable improvements post-intervention. Diversity in activities led to enhanced analytical skills, while tailored sophistication in tasks indicated better evaluation abilities, with meaningful content integration comprising a substantial portion of lessons. Clear distinctions emerged by proficiency: advanced students showed greater variety and depth in responses compared to beginners, particularly in literary analysis tasks.

Relationship evaluations demonstrated strong connections between differentiated strategies and critical thinking growth, followed by engagement and autonomy. The prediction model identified activity variety, task complexity, and content relevance as key indicators, collectively explaining 45 percent of the improvements in skills. Exposure to innovative methods positively influenced these connections, boosting overall performance in philology-specific English tasks. Qualitative insights from interviews highlighted that interactive segments, such as role-plays and debates on cultural texts, prompted richer analytical expressions, with students applying critical lenses to literary and linguistic content more effectively. For instance, students reported increased confidence in evaluating English sources against Uzbek perspectives, with instructors noting reduced reliance on memorization. Additionally, regional differences were observed: students from Samarkand, with more rural backgrounds, benefited from visual aids in differentiated tasks, leading to higher engagement in problem-solving activities.

Discussion. The outcomes demonstrate varied critical thinking development through differentiated English instruction in Uzbekistan's philology faculties, aligning with findings on individual adaptations in EFL settings. Elevated activity variety and task sophistication correspond to greater student involvement, suggesting that customized approaches encourage deeper cognitive engagement. Instructor facilitation, especially with flexible strategies like tiered assignments, fosters this by promoting elaborate analyses of philological texts (Tomlinson, 2017).

For Uzbekistan's higher education, this implies incorporating culturally responsive exercises, like discussions on local literature in English, to leverage diversity and overcome rote-learning traditions. Such strategies can address challenges in philology faculties, where multilingualism offers unique opportunities for critical comparisons but requires teacher support. Findings echo literature reviews showing differentiated instruction's positive impact on achievement and motivation in Uzbekistan's English classes (Rakhmonova, 2024).

Challenges include resistance to questioning authority, necessitating gradual implementation and teacher training, as seen in secondary school contexts adaptable to higher education. Future research could explore longitudinal effects, integration with other subjects like linguistics, and digital tools' role in resource-scarce areas. Overall, differentiated instruction via English enhances critical thinking, supporting Uzbekistan's educational reforms and preparing philology graduates for global linguistic challenges.

Conclusion. This study underscore the transformative potential of differentiated English instruction in cultivating critical thinking skills among philology students in Uzbekistan's higher education context. By tailoring learning experiences to individual readiness, interests, and linguistic proficiency, differentiated approaches foster deeper cognitive engagement, autonomy, and analytical reasoning—competencies vital for future linguists, translators, and educators. Evidence from the

intervention revealed that activity variety, task complexity, and cultural relevance significantly enhanced students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and infer within both linguistic and literary contexts.

These outcomes indicate that differentiated instruction not only bridges linguistic gaps but also reshapes traditional pedagogical mindsets that prioritize memorization over reflection. When students engage in tiered discussions, interpret literary parallels between Uzbek and English texts, and participate in open-ended analytical tasks, they develop higher-order thinking and intercultural awareness. Importantly, the integration of culturally responsive content—such as local folklore or Uzbek-English comparative readings—proved instrumental in maintaining motivation while strengthening analytical depth.

However, successful implementation requires systemic support: teacher training in differentiated pedagogy, institutional encouragement for flexible curricula, and the use of technology to personalize learning in resource-limited environments. Addressing resistance rooted in conventional teaching traditions calls for gradual adaptation, professional development, and reflective teaching practices.

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