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Critical Thinking Tasks in ESP Speaking Classes: A Qualitative Exploration of 21st Century Skills Development

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Abstract

Humans expect English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes in the 21st century to not only help students get better at speaking and writing English, but also to help them think critically and communicate professionally. This study aims to find out how critical thinking tasks are used in an ESP speaking class and how they help second-semester students in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) study program at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar build the abilities they would need in the 21st century. A qualitative descriptive design was used to collect data from nine students using semi-structured interviews and observations of the classroom. Thematic analysis showed that critical thinking exercises helped students solve problems in the real world, explain and defend their ideas, and work well with others in group conversations. Even though participants had trouble with terminology and expression, they said they felt more confident, more conscious of their thinking, and more ready for work. The study concludes that critical thinking exercises in ESP speaking classes help students learn the language and develop skills that are important in the 21st century. It also suggests that authentic assignments with enough assistance should be used to help students succeed.

Keywords: *ESP Speaking Class; Critical Thinking Tasks; 21st-Century Skills; PGSD Students*

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INTRODUCTION

The needs of the 21st century have changed the way we teach, making it important for students to learn not only the facts about a subject but also a set of abilities that can be used in many different situations (Sujarwo et al., 2023; Pardede, 2020). Critical thinking is one of these skills that many people think is very important. It is typically listed along with problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, and communication as one of the most important "21st-century skills." (Bahri & Florentinus, 2020) As part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education, which is meant to get students ready for specialized academic or professional communication, developing critical thinking abilities has become a main goal of teaching (Jubhari et al., 2024; Muliani & Sumarsono, 2019).

Traditionally, ESP speaking lessons have concentrated on helping students learn how to conduct communicative activities that are important in certain professional fields, such as commercial negotiations, medical consultations, technical presentations, or customer service interactions (Zarrinabadi, 2014). To be able to execute these jobs well, you need to be able to speak and write correctly and fluently, but you also need to be able to think critically, weigh your options, explain your choices, and engage in reflective reasoning (Sujarwo et al., 2019). As businesses around the world become more bilingual and multicultural, workers are expected to communicate clearly and convincingly while also showing strong analytical skills and good judgment (Baskal et al., 2024). Because of this, both teachers and scholars have called for a move away from language-only training towards a more integrated approach that actively promotes critical thinking (Sumarni & Salsabila, 2023).

Even though more and more people agree on this, adding critical thinking exercises to ESP speaking lessons is very hard to teach. Teachers need to come up with exercises that strike a balance between language development and cognitive complexity (Syafii et al., 2021). This will help students articulate complicated thoughts in a second language. Moreover, the highly contextualized nature of ESP requires instructors to tailor tasks to specific professional scenarios, which may involve sector-specific knowledge, discourse conventions, and communicative norms. Many ESP teachers also say they have problems, including not having enough time to teach, not having enough training in how to teach critical thinking, and having students with different levels of language skills and motivation (Rojabi et al., 2022). These variables show how important it is to do real-world research that looks at both the theoretical reasons for using critical thinking in ESP and the practical problems that come up when doing these kinds of tasks in the classroom.

There have been a number of potential tactics found in studies on critical thinking in English language education (ELT) in general. These include problem-based learning, project-based learning, case studies, debates, role-plays, and activities that involve working together to solve problems (Sukmawati et al., 2025). These methods help students learn how to negotiate meaning, back up their beliefs, think about different points of view, and think about how they came to their conclusions, all of which are important critical thinking abilities. Most of this study

has been done in general EFL or ESL settings, while there haven't been as many studies that look at ESP speaking classes explicitly. Given the specialized nature of ESP, it remains crucial to investigate how critical thinking tasks can be effectively adapted to meet learners' professional communication needs.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of how critical thinking tasks are implemented in ESP speaking classes and how they contribute to the development of 21st-century skills (Muliani & Sumarsono, 2019). By examining the experiences and perspectives of teachers and learners, as well as observing classroom practices, the research aims to uncover the pedagogical strategies used, the challenges encountered, and the perceived impact on learners' communicative and cognitive development. In doing so, the study hopes to offer practical insights for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and classroom practitioners seeking to integrate critical thinking meaningfully into ESP speaking instruction.

Ultimately, equipping ESP learners with critical thinking skills is not merely an academic exercise but a response to the evolving demands of professional life (Sasabone et al., 2021). Professionals must make informed decisions, solve complex problems, and communicate their reasoning effectively in diverse, often high-stakes contexts. By fostering these capacities within ESP speaking classes, educators can better prepare learners to thrive in their chosen fields and to contribute thoughtfully and responsibly to an increasingly interconnected world.

Research Question: *How are critical thinking tasks implemented in ESP speaking classes to support the development of learners' 21st-century skills?*

This study aims to explore how critical thinking tasks are used in ESP speaking classes and their role in developing 21st-century skills.

METHOD

Research Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive methodology to look into how critical thinking tasks are used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) speaking classes and how they help students learn skills that will be useful in the 21st century. We chose the qualitative method so that we could have a better understanding of the participants' living experiences, perspectives, and interactions in the classroom in a naturalistic educational setting.

The setting and the participants who took part in the research

The study took place in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar. Nine students in their second semester were in an ESP speaking class. They were chosen on purpose because they were active participants in critical thinking exercises in class and were willing to give thorough thoughts. The goal of the selection was to get a wide range of interesting and unique experiences related to using critical thinking in language learning.

Techniques to Collect Data

We gathered data by doing semi-structured interviews and watching classes. We did semi-structured interviews with each of the nine students to find out how they felt about, experienced, and dealt with critical thinking tasks throughout ESP speaking activities. The interview guide had open-ended questions about the many sorts of speaking exercises, how engaged the students felt, how they thought their skills were improving, and how relevant the challenges were to real-world communication. We watched the class to see how the teacher employed critical thinking exercises, how students interacted with one another, and how they taught. Field notes were made to record both verbal and nonverbal interactions in the classroom.

Analysing the Data

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for theme analysis to look at the data. There were six steps to the analysis: getting to know the data, making initial codes, looking for themes, going over themes, defining and labelling themes, and writing the final report. We wrote down every word of the interviews and then looked at the observation notes along with the interview transcripts to make sure the results were accurate.

Reliability

The study used triangulation of data sources (interviews and observations), member checking (participants checked summaries of their responses for accuracy), and peer debriefing with another qualitative researcher to make sure the coding process and thematic structure were correct. The findings were more credible, transferable, reliable, and confirmable when processes were written out in detail.

Ethical Considerations

The right university authority gave its consent for the study. Before collecting data, all participants were told what the study was about and gave their informed consent. Participants were told that their names would be kept secret and that they could leave the study at any moment without any problems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This segment shows some of the answers from the nine participants about their experiences with critical thinking activities in the ESP speaking class. The researcher looked at the participants' stories and wrote about them in a way that brought out patterns, insights, and meaning.

Q1. How people see the difficulty of the task

Participant 1: "Some of the speaking assignments are hard. We need to think before we speak. "It's not just about grammar; it's also about how we explain things."

This shows how critical thinking skills require a lot of mental effort. The participant knows that producing language is related to reasoning, which backs up the study's claim that ESP tasks can go beyond language skills.

Q2. Relevance to Real Life
Participant 2: "I enjoyed the part where we prepared an English lesson plan. It made me feel like I was a teacher. I had to figure out how to communicate things to students in a way that was easy to understand.
This shows that the task is real. The activity not only improved the learners' ability to speak English, but it also helped them practice dealing with professional problems, which got them thinking about the future.

Q3. Speaking as a Reason
Participant 3: "The teacher always asks us, 'Why do you say that?'" I can't just say the answer; I have to give reasons. I don't always know how to say things in English, but I do my best.
The person taking part understands that they need to explain their reasoning. This is in line with the main goal of critical thinking, which is to learn how to explain and defend your choices, even when language skills are a problem.

Q4. More Self-Assurance "Before, I was scared to talk," said participant 4. But I feel surer of myself now that we work in groups and talk about our thoughts.
This implies that critical thinking exercises that are part of group work can help students feel less anxious and more confident. Psychological safety in peer discussions helps people do better.

Q5. Working together and seeing things from different angles
Participant 5: "My friend and I had different answers, but we talked about them and chose the best one." It helped me learn more.
This shows how useful dialogic learning is, according to the researcher. Being exposed to other points of view helps people think more flexibly and grasp things better, which are two important skills for developing critical thinking in the 21st century.

Q6. Problems with vocabulary and expression
Participant 6: "I know what I want to say sometimes, but I don't know how to say it in English." It's hard since I have to think and translate at the same time.
Language barriers are still a problem while doing jobs that require a lot of thinking. This makes it even clearer that ESP lessons that emphasize critical thinking need scaffolding and vocabulary support.

Q7. Thinking about how you think
Participant 7: "This class makes me think about how I think." I know when my answer is too simplistic, and I try to make it clearer.

A significant point is that the learner shows metacognitive awareness, which is a sign of sophisticated critical thinking. The class is helping students learn by making them think about what they are learning.

Q8. Motivation through activity Authenticity: "I get excited when the task is like something real," said Participant 8. It makes me want to do my best. "Like working on a real problem."
This comment backs up the idea that task-based learning can be motivating. Students are more likely to get involved both mentally and emotionally when they realise how it relates to real life.

Q9. Transferability to Future Teaching Participant 9: "This isn't just for speaking class." When I teach students later, I think I'll use this style of thinking.
This answer shows that the learning will have an effect for a long time. Critical thinking exercises are helping to build a professional identity, not just for language use.
The interviews reveal that students understood how hard critical thinking activities were on their brains, saw how valuable they were for improving their communication and professional skills, and slowly changed the way they learnt to match those demands. Even while language barriers made things harder, the students showed strength, gained confidence, and became more conscious of how they thought. These results show how important it is to include critical thinking in ESP lessons. This will not only help students become better speakers, but it will also help teachers become more reflective and ready for the future.

This study aimed to find out how critical thinking tasks are used in ESP speaking sessions for second-semester PGSD students and how these challenges help students learn 21st-century abilities. The interview results show a group of similar experiences that show both the benefits and the difficulties of adding critical thinking to language learning.
First, everyone who took part said that the tasks were mentally demanding. They said that speaking exercises went beyond just grammar drills and needed systematic reasoning and good explanation. One participant, for instance, stressed the need to "think before we speak" because it took mental work to communicate an idea logically in English. This backs up the main point of the study, which is that ESP activities can be made to help students improve their language skills and their ability to think critically (Dildora, 2023). For example, students have to organize their thoughts, explain their choices, and articulate complicated ideas in another language.
Another evident theme is how the assignments relate to actual life. Participants liked doing things like making lesson plans in English because they thought they were similar to what they would do as teachers in the future. They said that doing these kinds of assignments helped them get better at making things easier to understand for elementary school students, which is a skill they anticipate using in their jobs. This study fits with task-based learning theories, which say that real, work-

related tasks make people more interested and help them learn in a meaningful way. Students seemed more likely to fully participate in the critical thinking exercises since they knew they would be useful in their future teaching jobs.

Third, the results show how important it is to give reasons in order to encourage critical thinking. Participants said that the teacher's frequent query, "Why do you say that?" made them go beyond brief replies and give reasons and arguments. Students said they tried to explain their reasons, even when language barriers made it hard. This means that well-structured critical thinking exercises can help students practice a vital part of professional communication: the ability to explain, justify, and persuade. The function of collaborative dialogue is another important issue. Group work turned out to be a great way for students to talk about and improve their ideas (Sasi et al., 2025).

Participants said they talked with their classmates about alternative options and then chose the best one. These kinds of encounters gave students a chance to see things from different points of view and helped them think more critically and flexibly. This backs up social-constructivist ideas about learning, which say that information is built through conversation. It also shows how working in groups can help people feel less anxious and more confident when they speak, which is especially essential for language learners (Kulamikhina et al., 2020).

There were also problems with language at the same period. Several others said they knew what they wanted to say but had trouble finding the right words in English. This shows that ESP classes that include critical thinking need to be carefully structured. Teachers might need to help students with vocabulary, show them how to use reasoning language, and provide them with tips on how to connect their thoughts with their ability to express them in English (Hasnani & Uleng, 2022). Some students, in particular, exhibited indicators of metacognitive growth. One participant said that they knew when their answer was too simplistic and tried to make it clearer. One important part of critical thinking is being aware of your thoughts. This means that the assignments not only helped students think logically, but also made them think about how they learn and talk to others (Ramezani et al., 2016).

The students' remarks regarding how these exercises could be used in other situations showed that they had a lasting effect. One person said that they would employ "this style of thinking" when they taught students in the future. This means that critical thinking assignments in ESP speaking programs do more than just get students ready to use the language right away. The results show that there was a strong link between encouraging critical thinking and improving EFL learners' speaking skills (Arfae, 2019). They also assist students in building habits of reasoning and reflection that will aid them in their professional lives.

In general, these results show that critical thinking assignments can turn ESP speaking classes into places where students can learn both language skills and abilities needed in the 21st century. There are still problems, including language difficulties, but the research shows that with the right help, students can really get into tasks that need them to think critically, justify their actions, work together, and reflect (Qizi, 2025). This shows how important it is for teacher education programs

to give future teachers not only good language skills but also the ability to think critically so they can help their students develop.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study indicated that adding critical thinking exercises to ESP speaking lessons for second-semester PGSD students helped them think more deeply, solve problems in the real world, and talk to one another in a group. Participants said that these exercises were hard but useful. They had to explain their responses, think about diverse points of view, and plan how to make their thoughts clear—skills that will be important for them as instructors in the future. Students liked that activities like lesson planning in English were real, but they also had trouble with vocabulary and articulating complicated ideas. This shows how important it is to provide thorough scaffolding and language support.

Based on these results, it is suggested that ESP teachers create real-world speaking assignments that are centered on the profession and encourage critical thinking while also giving students the right linguistic support, like vocabulary lists and sentence frames. Teachers should use focused questions and structured group discussions to help students explain and justify their choices. This will develop their confidence and lower their fear. Also, teachers should have professional development that teaches them how to properly include critical thinking into ESP curricula. This will help students not only improve their English abilities but also learn important 21st-century skills that they will need for their future employment.

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