

日本とラトビアの外国語としての英語教室における 批判的思考スキルの開発の比較

Comparison of Critical Thinking Skills Development in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms in Latvia and Japan

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Abstract

English is the most widely used language in the world. Latvia and Japan are updating their curriculums to improve the study practices. This article explores what English as a Foreign Language is and how to incorporate critical thinking skills in English as a foreign language classroom. It analyses the current situation of English proficiency and curriculum in Latvia and Japan. It also highlights what English teachers in Japan and Latvia think about critical thinking skills. This study shows how critical thinking is incorporated in everyday classrooms in both countries and addresses the immediate action that is needed to improve the lack of English proficiency.

Keywords: EFL, CEFR, Critical thinking skills, Latvia, Japan.

1. Introduction

Everyone whose native language is not English chooses to study the language for different reasons. The article “8 Benefits of Learning English in 2021” (Kings Education, 2020) mentions that currently, there are around 1.5 billion English speakers around the world, which represents one fifth of the world’s total population. English is spoken in some of the most economically and culturally influential countries globally, and over the centuries has become the main language not only of international communication, but of international business, academia, medicine, science, technology and law.

The curriculum is regularly reviewed in most countries around the world. It has been recently done in Finland, Estonia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Singapore (Skola 2030, 2021). It should come as no surprise that these countries rank amongst the best

in different studies about education quality. Latvia has followed suit and has implemented a brand-new curriculum from September 2020. The curriculum has been completely revised to keep it up to date with educational tendencies around the world. Japan also revises its curriculum, called the course of study, every ten years. After coming to Japan, the author of the article was surprised by the lack of English-speaking skills amongst Japanese people but in particular, the students who are studying at the Naruto University of Education, in the Global Education course, as upon graduation these students are meant to be on the frontlines representing Japan in different roles around the world. After conversations with some of the students, it was made clear that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in Japan are conducted differently to those in other countries the author had visited previously. It is clear that in the 21st century it is not enough to just learn

vocabulary and grammar during EFL classes. Pally (1997) explains that critical thinking skills should be developed in English classes because they allow students to acquire information, without which they are less able to question, synthesize, and evaluate what they read; they allow students to become familiar with the rhetorical conventions of a discipline; and, as these are the skills needed for university study, today's workplace and to understand the socio-political factors that affect students' lives, they allow students to practice the skills they will need outside the classroom.

In July 2021 a survey was carried out to get a deeper understanding of how critical thinking skills are developed during EFL classes in Japan and Latvia. This article explores what EFL is, what the current situation of EFL classes in Japan and Latvia is, what critical thinking skills are, if EFL teachers from Japan and Latvia implement critical thinking skills in their EFL classes and what their opinion about critical thinking skills is.

2. English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Different types of acronyms for teaching and learning English can be confusing. Hyte (2015) addressed the issue by saying that even those within the teaching profession may not be clear on the difference between the acronyms (e.g., ESL, EFL, ESP, ESOL, and ELL): they are used with the intention of providing more distinction between the different learning environments. The two acronyms most often mixed up are ESL and EFL, so Hyte continues by explaining that ESL means English as a Second Language - learning English in a country where English is dominantly spoken or where English is the official language, while EFL means English as a Foreign Language so is used when learning English in a non-English-speaking country. For example, students in Japan who are learning English are considered EFL students because English is not the official language of the country. At the same time, if those same students were to travel to the United States (U.S.) and would learn English there, they would be considered ESL students.

When looking for a clear definition of EFL, the author chose two definitions which explain the abbreviation. Collins Dictionary (n.d.) describes the

term as the teaching of English to people whose first language is not English. Christiansen (2020) describes EFL as the learning and use of the English language as an additional language by users with different native languages in a non-English speaking country.

Classification of languages can be confusing at times in Japan. The country has no law, constitution, etc. explicitly stating that the official language of Japan is Japanese. As explained by Shimizu (2020) the reason for this is that the population of Japan has been mostly Japanese people and the Japanese language has been the only language spoken in the country; therefore, there has been no particular need to define the official language. While Japanese is the de facto official language of Japan, there could be problems if Japanese society attempted to designate an official language because there are so many dialects in the country and they are so different that could be considered totally different languages if they were spoken elsewhere in the world. At the same time, after living in Japan for a year and asking Japanese friends what the official language of Japan is, it is clear that Japanese is the only official and spoken language in the country.

In 2012, a referendum was held in Latvia to consider changes to the constitution (Likumi, 1922) and introduce Russian as the second official language in the country. The 4th article in the constitution stipulates that in Latvia the only official language is Latvian. The referendum failed, as almost seventy five percent of people voted against the changes, so Latvian is still the only official language of the country as explained by LSM (2012) in "*Referenduma rezultāts: Latvijā vienīgā valsts valoda paliks latviešu valoda*" [Referendum results: Latvian will remain the only state language in Latvia]. Concluding the above mentioned, it can be agreed that English classes in Japan and Latvia qualify as EFL classes. The following section discusses the importance, curriculum and situation of EFL in Japan and Latvia.

2.1. EFL in Japan

In 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) carried out a nationwide survey to examine the level of English proficiency amongst English language teachers and students. To make it easier to compare the results The Common European Framework of Reference for

Table 1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Source: Made by author and based on *Global scale - Common Reference levels* (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Languages (CEFR) - an international standard for describing language ability was used. CEFR describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. Description of each level can be seen in Table 1 below.

Usage of CEFR levels makes it easy for anyone involved in language teaching and testing, such as teachers or learners, to see the level of different qualifications. It also means that employers and educational institutions can easily compare the qualifications to other exams in their country (Cambridge Assessment English, n.d.). The results of the survey have been visualized in Figure 1 and 2. To make the analysis of data easier to follow, the lowest scoring, the highest scoring prefecture and nationwide average scores were chosen. Tokushima Prefecture was added to the results because the author studies in the Naruto University of Education which is located in Tokushima Prefecture so the data is relevant for further study.

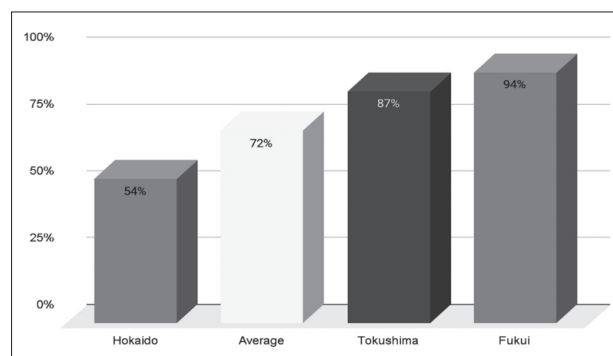


Figure 1. Percentage of teachers with English proficiency level of B2 or higher.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of high school English language teachers whose proficiency level is B2 or higher. Nationwide, 22,173 teachers took part in the survey and out of those, just 72% or 15,956 have B2 level of English proficiency or higher. The lowest scoring prefecture was Hokkaido where almost half of 839 English language teachers scored below the level of B2. Tokushima Prefecture ranks quite high on the list with close to 90% of 174 high school English language teachers being able to demonstrate B2 level

of English language proficiency. The best result amongst teachers was achieved in Fukui Prefecture where 93.9% of 161 teachers have a B2 level of English language proficiency.

The survey was also carried out amongst 689,614 high school students (Figure 2). Only 43% of them are expected to acquire or have English proficiency equivalent to CEFR A2 or higher by the end of high school. The highest results were achieved by Fukui Prefecture where almost 60% of 5101 students were expected to reach the level. In Tokushima Prefecture, out of 5774 students less than half were expected to be able to reach the level. At the same time, the lowest scoring prefecture was Kochi, where only every third student will reach level A2 proficiency in English by the end of high school. A correlation can be seen, as Fukui Prefecture showed the highest results both in student and teacher surveys, while Kochi ranked the lowest amongst students and second lowest amongst teachers.

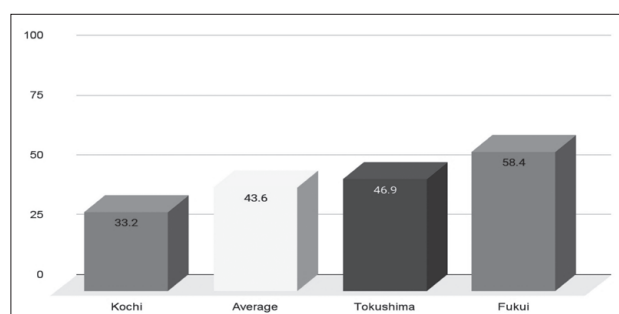


Figure 2. Percentage of high school students expected to reach at least A2 level of English Proficiency.

With such results, MEXT is looking to revive the curriculum. Even though critical thinking has been an essential part of the Japanese Act of Law since 1947. Article 30 section 2 states that the goal is to develop a foundation for lifelong learning, particular care and attention must be given to enable students to acquire basic knowledge and skills while developing the ability to think, judge (reason) and express ideas that are required to utilize such knowledge and skills. To solve problems and foster an attitude of engaging proactively in the study/learning process (MEXT, 2018, p.7). The new course of study will be implemented in 2022. Officials are hopeful that it will help to pave the way for students to acquire knowledge and skills, to be equipped with critical thinking and decision making amongst other essential skills. Kodama and Kametani

(2021) mention that research shows that schools that have followed the MEXT guidelines since 2014 and introduced critical thinking in their classrooms have shown significant improvement in their EFL results.

2.2. EFL in Latvia

The curriculum in Latvia has been changed completely starting from the previous school year. The official position of the Ministry of Education was stated in Skola 2030 (n.d.a) “*Kāpēc Skolās Latvijā Nepieciešams Pilnīgi Jauns Mācību Saturs?*” [Why Latvian Schools Need a Whole New Curriculum] and indicated that the curriculum and approach that was introduced in schools in Latvia in the 2020/2021 school year was not entirely new. Teachers and students were not starting from scratch. The officials had revised and improved the curriculum that had been in place and that was developed about 10 years ago. The aim was to make learning relevant, to avoid duplication and to build content continuously from pre-school (called kindergarten in Japan) to secondary school (known as high school in Japan), the changes highlighted by the officials included:

1. a shift from passive learning and memorization of factual material by the pupil to an active cognitive process guided by the teacher;
2. linking the knowledge and skills acquired at school to real life, for example through field trips and nature studies;
3. learning values, attitudes and general skills so that the pupil knows how to deal with unexpected situations.

According to the article in Skola 2030 (n.d.b) “*Kā mainīsies skolēna ikdienas klasē?*” [How will a pupil’s daily life in the classroom change?] the most important change is in the way learning takes place - not by giving students ready-made answers, but more by letting them arrive at the answers themselves. The teacher will offer tasks that encourage explanation, contrast, generalization and conversation. In other words, learning by using their knowledge and critically analyzing the offered or gathered information - learning by doing. The teacher will guide and support the students, helping them to distinguish which information is more important and teaching them a variety of problem-solving techniques. In this way, with the teacher’s help, students will gradually build the foundations of their knowledge - just like a car or a

house is built from a game building blocks. Knowledge acquired this way is more valuable, more effective, more motivating and more lasting than rote knowledge.

When analyzing the curriculum of EFL it states that the main goal is that by the end of Year 9 (called primary education in Latvia; junior high school in Japan) students should be able to use English as a medium of cognition, perception and intercultural communication, enabling the pupil at the end of primary education to be at the level of independent language user - B1 of CEFR. Students should be able to perceive, understand, analyze and interpret information, concepts, facts and ideas in different formats and genres of texts in English (Skola 2030, 2021). Building on that knowledge during high school, students can choose to study English at different levels, all of which require students to demonstrate the command of the English language in different situations while analyzing a wide range of information. Taking into account the EFL situation in Japan and Latvia and the curriculum, the next part of the article concentrates on what critical thinking skills are and how to develop them in an EFL classroom.

3. Critical Thinking Skills

According to Tomaszewski (2021) critical thinking is the ability to think in an organized and rational manner in order to understand connections between ideas and/or facts. Tomaszewski points out 8 main characteristics of critical thinking skills displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Critical Thinking Skills Based on Tomaszewski (2021).

<i>Analysis</i>	the ability to collect and process information and knowledge
<i>Interpretation</i>	concluding what the meaning of processed information is
<i>Inference</i>	assessing whether the knowledge you have is sufficient and reliable
<i>Evaluation</i>	the ability to make decisions based on the available information
<i>Explanation</i>	communicating your findings and reasoning clearly
<i>Self-Regulation</i>	the drive to constantly monitor and correct your ways of thinking
<i>Open-Mindedness</i>	taking into account other possibilities and points of view
<i>Problem-Solving</i>	the ability to tackle unexpected problems and resolve conflicts

Chesla (2005) agrees that essentially, critical thinking is a decision-making process. Specifically, critical thinking means carefully considering a problem, claim, question, or situation in order to determine the best solution. That is, when one thinks critically, he or she takes the time to consider all sides of an issue, evaluate evidence, and imagine different scenarios and possible outcomes.

Dummett (2019) points out that it would be fair to say that most of the calls in recent years for greater inclusion of critical thinking activities in the language classroom stem from two prevalent notions. One is the idea that education needs to get its priorities right: to spend less time training students for tests of knowledge and start stimulating them to think for themselves. The other notion is that we live in an age of misinformation in which only the critically minded can avoid manipulation or slavish conformity. These are both valid points and should be used as a basis to why critical thinking is an essential tool in any classroom.

4. Discussion of Results

To gather the data of the actual situation and teachers' convictions about implementation of critical thinking skills into EFL classes, a questionnaire was sent out to English teachers in Japan and Latvia. In total sixty teachers (thirty from each country) completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions and included a branching option after question number 3, if the teacher would answer that the curriculum does not include any reference to critical thinking, they would not have to answer the question which asked them to name the critical thinking skills which are mentioned in the curriculum.

When asked if teachers feel critical thinking should be developed during English classes (Figure 3), almost all teachers from Latvia stated it should, while opinions of Japanese teachers were equally split between agreeing that critical thinking skills should be developed during English classes and those that were not sure about the issue raised.

When asked to explain why, the majority of teachers from Latvia mentioned that in their opinion critical thinking skills are one of the most important 21st century life skills and they are essential for any

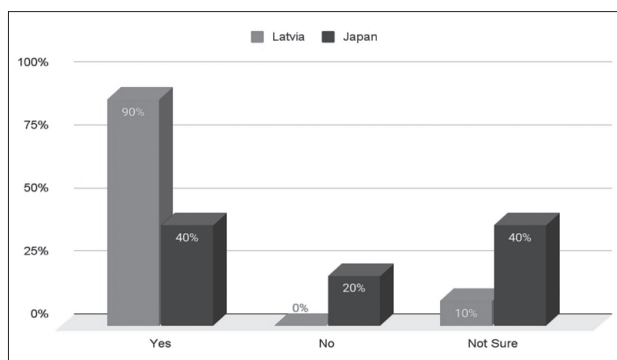


Figure 3. A bar chart to illustrate teachers' opinions about the necessity of implementing critical thinking skills into the EFL classroom.

human being. Other popular answers included that critical thinking skills are the most meaningful part of the language class; there are many communicative tasks (oral and written) in the course books that require students to apply their critical thinking skills; critical thinking skills are necessary in contemporary society - for example analyzing information on the internet, to make decisions at work etc.; critical thinking skills in English classes are essential since it is a life skill rather than just language acquisition. Many teachers also mentioned that critical thinking is an opportunity to create interesting and modern tasks for students and help them with everyday problems they could have in the real world and critical thinking is the thing that sets us apart from other species. Even more - in real life, students will never encounter a situation in which somebody will give them sentences and ask to fill in the gaps or recite a grammar rule. Teachers from Japan that were in favor of including critical thinking skills in English classes mentioned that it is one of the 4 C's of the 21st century; critical thinking is important in real life; these skills should be developed through English classes at school, because language learning should enhance everyone's critical thinking, so even without the mother tongue, that should be the aim; critical thinking is essential for children to be able to live in modern society so all teachers should develop children's critical thinking; Those who were not sure mentioned it is necessary to develop critical thinking, but it is not the main priority in English classes or in life; it is important to understand the diversity in the world through English lessons and improve communication abilities in English, not learn about critical thinking. Those teachers that thought critical thinking should

not be included either did not state their reasons or explained that teachers have to teach students grammar and vocabulary not some other skills.

There are multiple parts in each of the EFL classes - listed in Figure 4. Teachers were asked to explain which part of the lesson would make use of and develop students' critical thinking skills. The majority of teachers expect students to make use of and develop their critical thinking skills during speaking, writing and reading. Three teachers from Japan answered that critical thinking would not be evident in any of the lesson parts.

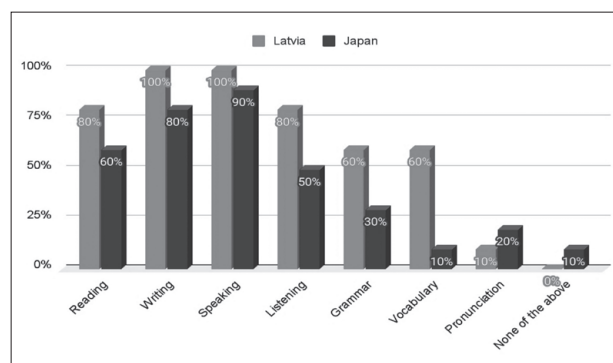


Figure 4. A bar chart displaying parts of the English lesson in which teachers would normally expect students to make use of and develop their critical thinking skills. Teachers could mark all the options that were applicable.

All 30 surveyed English teachers from Latvia agreed that they would expect students to make use of and develop their critical thinking skills during writing and speaking activities, both of these were also the most popular choices amongst the teachers from Japan. Only three of the teachers from Latvia mentioned that they would expect students to do so during pronunciation activities. Surprisingly, only 10% of Japanese teachers expect their students to develop critical thinking skills during the process of studying vocabulary, while more than half of Latvian teachers expect their students to do so.

The last question asked respondents to finish the sentence "Critical thinking is..." as can be expected no two answers were exactly the same. It was decided to try and group the answers according to the eight categories devised by Tomaszewski (2021).

Figure 5 displays the overall tendency of the answers. Answers here are not grouped according to the country. Out of sixty answers, thirteen responses did not fit into any of the categories. When looking at

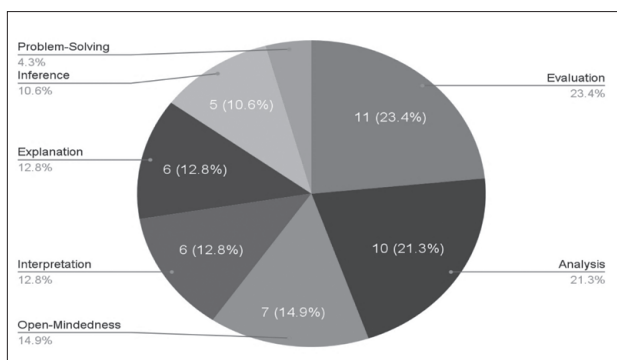


Figure 5. A pie chart to illustrate what teachers think critical thinking is. The results were grouped by the categories devised by Tomaszewski.

those 13 answers in correspondence to the country, it is interesting to note that only two of those were from Latvian teachers. They mentioned that critical thinking is a 21st century skill that is essential and should be fostered in each student. Out of thirty Japanese teachers as many as **eleven** of the responses did not fit any of the above-mentioned categories. One of the teachers did not provide an answer; seven teachers said that it is a complicated and useless skill that is not needed and in their opinion is a waste of time, one of those teachers explained that: “maybe this critical thinking is important for somebody, but it is not necessary for casual communication. I mean, the whole point of us talking in casual situations is to convey our emotions, feelings, and so on. So, I will not **waste time** teaching that to my students”. Another teacher mentioned that critical thinking is important but should not and cannot be considered the first priority; three of the teachers mentioned that it is an essential skill that should be developed and will help

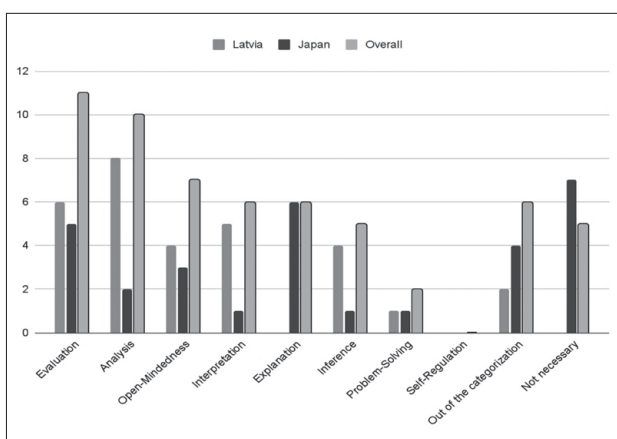


Figure 6. A bar chart to illustrate what teachers think critical thinking is, displaying the ideas grouped by countries and displaying the overall number of votes.

students to make better decisions in the future. This open-ended question provided a clear picture - Japanese English teachers are much more negative towards developing critical thinking skills during English language classes, which is visually reflected in Figure 6.

5. Conclusion

Latvian and Japanese history, culture and world views differ greatly so it is no surprise that so does the educational system, situation of EFL classes and teachers' attitude towards implementation of critical thinking skills into the curriculum and everyday classes. It is a worrying sign that the level of English knowledge expected from the graduates of primary school in Latvia (known as junior high school in Japan) exceeds that of high school students in Japan. Moreover, even some teachers of English in Japan cannot be considered independent users of the language.

It is evident that, by simply changing the curriculum, these problems cannot be addressed. The attitude towards the subject has to be changed. Long gone are the days when people believed that knowing a language means using high frequency vocabulary and knowing the difference between grammatical structures. Nowadays, critical thinking and the ability to communicate is essential; English is not just a subject to be learnt to pass the university entrance exam.

Latvia can learn a lot from Japan. First and foremost, how to treat people with respect or always do one's best. At the same time, if Japan wants to be seen as a truly developed country there is a long way to go. Japan needs to change and understand that a person's individuality and expression of personal opinion is not something to be scared of, it is what we expect from everyone in the 21st century. Revision of how EFL classes are conducted could be the first steppingstone into modernizing the whole education system.

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