# Critical Thinking in University through a Curriculum-wide Reading and Writing Project

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## Abstract

Critical thinking has gained popularity in the English as a foreign language (EFL) educational arena of late in Japan due to the Ministry of Education (MEXT) updating its requirements of English education to include logical thinking. This has caused the need for educators in Japan to quickly adapt to the inclusion of logical thinking, and by extension, critical thinking in their curriculum (MEXT, 2011) from 2013. Even though MEXT has required critical thinking to be included in the classroom, it seems very little has been done to include true critical thinking into textbooks and institutions' curriculum designs. One crucial component of the language teaching curriculum is the ability to think rationally, objectively, and deeply about a topic, or in other words, to think critically. Critical thinking has been shown to foster students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and judge the value of the information presented to them both inside, and outside, the classroom (Lund, 2016). Critical thinking also helps students to make their own decisions related to their academic, and future employment, success (Nold, 2017). In a university-level reading and writing course in Japan, for example, students must create manuscripts at beginner to advanced levels that somewhat adhere to the expectations of academic English communities (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010) when it comes to topic development and utilizing source information. In order to reflect on, and thereby judge the veracity of, the information presented to

them either by their textbook in the classroom or by external sources, critical thinking skills allow students to deconstruct, reflect upon, and assign value to information sources. This also allows them to construct their own content on two levels, one, projecting their creativity as independent thinkers, and two, linguistically as writers who can think about a topic more deeply.

The purpose of this paper is to share the planning, design, and implementation of a critical thinking reading and writing project which was introduced into the second-year EFL reading and writing focused courses at Tokai University from the spring and fall semesters of 2019. The reading and writing course, named Academic English (AE), was split into three levels depending upon the students' performance in their first-year English courses. Each level of the AE course had a project book that was individualized for their corresponding textbook and level. The project's focus, for all levels, was to develop critical thinking skills through the introduction of reflective thinking, logical fallacies, and research skills. At the end of the project, students were asked to apply their critical thinking skills to their textbook and research the veracity of the information presented to them in one of their required readings during the course. The overall reception of the project by the students was positive and results of a post-project questionnaire showed that students felt they had gained some mastery over critical thinking on subjects both in the classroom and in their lives. The project has seen success in allowing students to become learners who are more independent in their thinking, more critical in their reception to information provided to them, and better writers who are able to think on a topic more deeply and logically.

**Keywords**: English language learners, higher-order thinking skills, curriculum design, task-based project

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had more difficulty than the higher levels. While this was expected, the development of critical thinking should not be tied directly to students English ability. Dispositions and skills, if introduced and explained in level-appropriate language, should be as attainable for beginners as they are for advanced students. It is clear that many improvements will need to be made over the lifetime of the CTPB in order to ensure all students develop critical thinking skills and dispositions.

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**About the author**

James Dunn is an Associate Professor at Aichi University. His research interests are critical thinking skills and their impact on learning and strategies for the gamification of vocabulary learning through critical thinking. His goal: help students understand they are capable of more than they know through critical thinking skills training.