

**DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING SKILLS IN B2-LEVEL EAP
LEARNERS: A TASK-BASED APPROACH AT THE PRESIDENTIAL
SCHOOL IN NUKUS**

Nurimbetova Gulbakhar, Nurimbetova Aynura

In academic contexts, reading extends beyond comprehension; it involves the ability to evaluate information critically, identify bias, and synthesize perspectives. For B2-level learners in EAP programs, developing critical reading skills is essential for success in higher education, especially in English-medium instruction environments. In Uzbekistan, the rapid expansion of English-medium programs demands learners who can engage critically with academic texts. However, many students remain accustomed to surface-level reading, focusing on vocabulary and general meaning rather than deeper analysis.

This study is situated at the Presidential School in Nukus, an elite educational institution preparing students for global academic and professional opportunities. Despite their high general proficiency, learners often struggle with evaluating the credibility of sources, recognizing implicit arguments, and distinguishing between fact and opinion. Task-based learning (TBL) offers a promising approach, as it situates reading within meaningful, outcome-oriented activities that reflect real academic practices.

Materials included authentic articles from academic and semi-academic sources, such as The Conversation, BBC Future, and National Geographic. Texts were selected to contain identifiable bias, multiple perspectives, and complex argument structures.

The intervention lasted six weeks, with two 80-minute lessons per week. Each lesson followed a TBL cycle:

- Pre-task: Vocabulary pre-teaching, prediction activities, and discussion of prior knowledge.
- Task cycle: Pair/group tasks such as identifying author purpose, mapping argument structures, and ranking evidence strength.
- Language focus: Feedback on language used in discussions and written justifications.

Data were collected through pre- and post-tests assessing critical reading sub-skills, classroom observations, and student reflective journals.

Quantitative results from the critical reading test showed a 22% average improvement in the experimental group's scores compared to a 7% increase in the control group. Qualitative analysis of reflective journals revealed that students became more aware of author bias, fact/opinion distinction, and the need to cross-check sources.

Students particularly benefited from tasks requiring justification of their answers, as this encouraged deeper engagement with the text. The collaborative nature of TBL also allowed weaker readers to learn strategies from stronger peers. These findings align with Nunan's (2004) view that meaningful interaction facilitates both language development and cognitive growth.

This study demonstrates that integrating task-based learning into EAP reading instruction can significantly improve B2-level learners' critical reading skills. By engaging in authentic, purposeful tasks, students not only improved comprehension but also developed the ability to evaluate sources critically. The

approach is particularly relevant for the Uzbek context, where exam-oriented teaching often limits opportunities for higher-order thinking.

Recommendations include:

1. Embedding critical reading tasks across EAP curricula.
2. Providing professional development for teachers on TBL and critical literacy.
3. Using authentic, diverse reading materials to expose students to multiple perspectives.
4. Encouraging student reflection to promote metacognitive awareness.

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