



FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING BY THE APPLICATION OF ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROCESS

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Abstract. *This study investigates students' evaluation of a collaborative, problem-based task Team Research Project that is a part of the course English for Academic Purposes and Research course delivered to students of Childhood Pedagogy at Vilnius University. Grounded in the Action-oriented Approach (AoA) and aligned with the updated CEFR Companion Volume (2018, 2020), the course aimed to foster not only linguistic communicative but also critical thinking (CT) and general academic competencies. The research methodology was qualitative and via structured written interviews the feedback from 32 first-year students was gathered. Content analysis revealed four major themes: perceived benefits, task shortcomings, knowledge gained, and suggested improvements. Students evaluated the task Team Research Project positively, highlighting development in teamwork, communication, research, and CT skills. Many reported improved motivation, personal growth, and a better understanding of CT's role in education. However, challenges included unclear task instructions, time management issues, and uneven team participation. Suggestions included clearer guidelines and more time for preparation. Overall, the findings affirm the effectiveness of the AoA-based, collaborative tasks in enhancing both language and critical thinking competencies. The study supports broader implementation of such methodologies in tertiary-level foreign language education to meet 21st-century educational goals and the necessity to nurture students CT skills.*

Key words: *Action-oriented approach, critical thinking, foreign language teaching, team research project*

1. INTRODUCTION

The new updated version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020) with the Action-oriented Approach (AoA) (North, Piccardo, 2019) behind it inspired many changes in foreign language teaching and learning at universities. The AoA has also been applied in the English for specific purposes (ESP) courses at Vilnius University at the institutional level. Since the academic year of 2019/2020 all the ESP courses modified according to the

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AoA and task-based methodologies. The research into students' evaluation of the updated courses was carried out immediately in 2020 to measure students' perceptions of the courses (Kriauciūnienė, Targamadžė, Arcimavičienė, 2020). The research findings revealed a positive evaluation. Moreover, students of three Vilnius University study programmes who participated in the research (Childhood Pedagogy, Genetics, International relations and Political Sciences) expressed the view that the AoA tasks provided them with an opportunity to develop their critical thinking (CT) skills. That fact was very important to find out as CT skills are among the general competencies that all university subjects should develop.

Many researchers have shown that we have to foster students' CT skills during all the subjects at universities, foreign language courses as well (Grosser, Lombard 2008; Thomas 2011; Wilson, 2016; Živkovič, 2016; Nappi, 2017; El Soufia and See; 2019; Bezanilla, Galindo-Domínguez, Poblete 2021). As Jasim, Yahya (2023) claim, CT skills of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and solving problems are among the skills that can be developed in EFL classes and that it is necessary to educate learners from critical perspective. The authors argue that CT skills play a positive role in developing language receptive skills i. e. listening and reading as well as developing cognitive awareness that can be targeted in EFL classes. Research findings of Cosgun, Atay (2021) reveal a positive effect of problem-based learning on the development of CT skills of students, however, they acknowledge that its role in EFL classrooms has not been fully explored. A more recent research carried out by Aldaz Izquierdo et al. (2024) proved the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in the teaching of language and literature. PBL, despite its challenges, is a valuable tool for transforming language and literature teaching, promoting essential skills for solving complex real-life problems. Similar ideas are expressed in Jaleniauskienė, Venckienė's (2025) review paper where the fact that project-based language learning (PBL) aligns well with the action-oriented approach is identified. Their research shows how PBL is beneficial for the overall learning outcomes of students, their CT development including as well.

Thus, the AoA seems to be a very favourable language teaching methodology for the development of students' CT skills. The AoA focuses on the learner as a social agent and the performance of real-life tasks (North, Piccardo, 2019; Council of Europe, 2020). Realistic tasks empower the students to use not only the students' linguistic-communicative competence but general competences as well, the CT being one of them.

The content of the English language course for the students of Childhood Pedagogy was also prepared following the AoA with a special focus given to the development of CT skills. This was due to the participation in the Erasmus + Think4Jobs project that looked into the development of CT skills in different study programmes at university level. Following students' positive evaluation of the updated courses according to the AoA at Vilnius university in 2020 (Kriauciūnienė, Targamadžė, Arcimavičienė, 2020), the research question of the current paper is to find out if the positive evaluation of the course of *English of Academic Purposes and Research* remains with the new cohort of students of the study programme of Childhood Pedagogy. The research into the application of the AoA in language teaching, learning and assessment has been increasing recently (Aydınbeğ, Aydınalp, 2021; Fischer, 2021; Yamamoto, & Nitta, 2021; Fischer, Wolder, 2022: 187-201). Significant attention to the practical implementation of the updated version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) is reflected in the Council of Europe's publication: *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR Companion Volume in practice* (North, Piccardo, Goodier, Fasoglio, Margonis-Pasinetti, Rüschof (Eds.), 2022). The current paper aims to contribute to

the ongoing research on the application of the AoA at the university level, specifically by exploring its role in fostering students' critical thinking skills.

Thus, the aim of the paper is to reveal students' evaluation of the collaborative task *Team Research Project* that the students of Childhood Pedagogy study programme had to prepare during the course of *English for Academic Purposes and Research*. The purpose of this task was to develop students' collaborative, mediation, problem-solving and CT skills via the use of the English language to acquire the study content of the course. The study content of the course was focused on different aspects of CT, mainly its concept, definition, importance of its development in educational institutions, and the methods how to foster CT at the primary level of education.

2. METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

The participants of the research were the 1st year students of the study programme Childhood Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy of Vilnius University. The course of English for Academic Purposes and Research was delivered to students in the Autumn semester in 2024. There were 32 students who participated in the research on the voluntary basis.

The research method was qualitative, the method of data collection was structured written interviews, which were conducted at the end of the course. The methodological approach to both the formulation of the questions and the analysis of the research results is social constructivism, the underlying idea of which is that people construct their knowledge through collaboration and dialogue. As Y.E. Rachmad (2025: 58) claims, „knowledge is not an isolated entity but a shared and dynamic process, co-created through social interactions, culture, and experiences“.

The questions specifically targeted the students' evaluation of the problem-based, collaborative task, i.e. Team Research Project, drawing their attention to the following questions:

Q 1: What were the positive sides of the collaborative task Team research project?

Q 2: What were the shortcomings of this task?

Q 3: What did they learn during the preparation of the task?

Q 4: What could be improved/ done differently in the task performance?

As it has been mentioned above, the Team Research Projects focused on the analysis of CT and the possibilities of its development in primary education during different classes: Lithuanian, foreign language, mathematics, natural science arts, ethics. The students worked in groups of four or five and during the semester they had to work on the task autonomously having regular scheduled consultations during their lectures of the course English for the Academic Purposes and Research. The Team research project consisted of several parts: the students had to read the documents of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Science, to analyse the scientific literature on the topic, and based on that, propose their own possible research methodology and offer recommendations for the further research.

Following Leavy (2017: 146-147) a qualitative content analysis of the empirical research results was carried out: “Content analysis generally involves initial immersion into the content to get a sense of the “big picture,” determining the units of analysis, coding, analysis, and interpretation“. A content analysis of the research participants' responses has been conducted. The researchers coded the qualitative data and identified categories and sub-categories. The

researchers carried out the first two phases of data analysis independently following the recommendation made by O'Connor and Joffe (2020). Their suggestion emphasized the importance of having a minimum of two coders to enhance the intercoder-reliability of the generated code. In the following section, the research findings will be discussed.

3. RESULTS

Based on the analysis of empirical research data, four key categories emerged from the interview responses. These categories included: *the positive aspects of the collaborative Team Research Project; the shortcomings of the task; insights/knowledge gained by students during the activity; and suggested improvements for the course.*

In the first category - positive aspects of the collaborative task Team Research Project, six sub-categories were identified.

- Subcategory one - *enjoyment of working in a team*: [enjoyed working with my colleagues (4); it was good to meet in our free time at a café or somewhere else and communicate; working with colleagues is fun (2), it was really a very nice time; it was good experience, because you can meet, make new friends; became more close, had fun while preparing; friendly people in a group; getting to know my groupmates better is the ultimate pro of the task; made great connections between group teammates; teamworking; our group built a strong connection; new interactions with colleagues; I liked the group I worked with, we communicated and made a great presentation; we got to know each other better (2)].
- Subcategory two - *acquiring the skill of working in a team*: [such opportunities come very rarely and I'm glad there was a chance to form a connection; it was not only a project but I got to know my team members better, bonding with classmates (3); improves your teamworking skills as you need to communicate with your teammates; a lot more easier to do in a group than to work alone; friendly team, division of labor; friendship between the team members improved; we had a plan and knew what each of us were doing; it helped to develop our communicative skills; I learnt how to communicate with my peers; it is effective to collab with others].
- Subcategory three - *learning from others and exchanging ideas*: [I learnt a lot of new ideas from my colleagues (2), learning a lot of things together; learnt new things; it is great to talk to new people and see their different viewpoints; expanding our outlook; I got better at listening to other people's ideas and using them].
- Subcategory four - *learning about what CT is and gaining CT skill*: [understanding CT better (2); how to teach CT (2), why it is important, what it means to think critically and the advantages of such thinking; the knowledge will be definitely useful in the future; I learn how to use CT in my classes; got great ideas for my future work, learnt new things that are beneficial for my future career; I realized that it is necessary to encourage the students to analyse think critically, and not be afraid to make mistakes, as it is through mistakes and reasoning we learn a lot; we learnt a lot of new things about the topic; had a chance to see other colleagues' presentation and evaluate their thinking process; it was challenging and encouraged me to think critically; this task helps improve CT skills when you need to choose which information is going to be good; it was also a good opportunity to solve the same problems that were coming from the same task].

- Subcategory five - *developing research skills*: [I learnt about the data analysis, how to read a research article and remember most important things; you have an opportunity to analyse research and say your opinion about it; the task helps in the long run, because knowing how to do research is important and how to choose the most important information; I learnt how to prepare a research proposal; the task itself is perfectly designed to fit our study programme and naturally, the subject of English].
- Subcategory six - *benefit for personality development*: [the project was intriguing and that motivated me a lot; I improved my leadership skills: enjoyed preparing the slides (2); good preparation for an exam; good to go out of the comfort zone; learnt to manage time a little better; the group work developed my sense of responsibility (as I am a procrastinator) and that was a very strong motivating factor; talking to audience; not being afraid to ask questions; good feeling to be able to report back on long-prepared project work; we motivated and supported each other; support from the group, everyone helped; helping each other].

The analysis of empirical research findings related to the first category—the positive aspects of the collaborative Team Research Project—indicates that the task was highly beneficial for students. They learned how to work effectively in teams, communicate with one another, and share responsibilities. In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of the course content and the content of the task, i. e. critical thinking and its development in primary education, students reported significant improvement in their critical thinking skills, which aligns well with one of the course’s primary objectives. Moreover, the collaborative nature of the task contributed to their personal development. Students noted that, beyond acquiring technical skills such as creating more visually appealing slides, they became more motivated to learn, more willing to share responsibilities, and more supportive of their peers. This, in turn, helped them grow into more responsible and autonomous learners.

In the second category – *the shortcomings of the task* – 3 subcategories were identified.

- Subcategory one - *lack of clarity*: [lack of clarity of how to perform the task (12), not enough time to digest and practice each segment of the task; we did not understand some of the parts of the task; lack of examples of the task (2); lack of guidelines; hard to understand at the very beginning, but later on it became clear; we had many questions about the project but we did it; we did not fully understand the task].
- Subcategory two - *poor time management and stress*: [not enough skills for planning time, lack of time management skills (4); lack of motivation to start the work, lack of encouragement; a lot of stress, wanted to give up (2), but I really appreciate this experience; stress how to present it; it is difficult to find the right articles on specific topics and it causes stress (2)].
- Subcategory three - *lack of teamworking skills*: [to be honest my group did not contribute enough to the presentation, I had to carry the weight of analysing the articles, perhaps this was my part as a leader; sometimes it was hard to find the compromises as we all had different ideas (3); we split the task in parts, I only knew my part and less about the other parts, and that was bad for the examination; difficult to make everyone have their work done; one missing colleague who did not contribute; it caused stress when we had to cover for a colleague who did not attend; there should be more meetings with the group].

The analysis of empirical research findings under the second category—shortcomings of the task—revealed fewer subcategories compared to the positive aspects, which can be viewed as a favorable outcome. Among the main challenges identified by students was a lack of clarity regarding the task instructions. This is likely due to the novelty of the assignment, particularly for first-year students with no prior experience in similar collaborative projects. The findings suggest that more detailed guidance and clearer expectations should be provided during the preparation phase. Another recurring issue was time management, as students were expected to plan and execute the project independently. This highlights the importance of fostering student responsibility and autonomy. Additionally, some students reported stress associated with the collaborative process, which can be attributed to their limited experience with group work. While teamwork was generally seen in a positive light, certain difficulties arose, especially in teams where leadership and coordination were lacking. Students who assumed leadership roles faced challenges such as teammates failing to meet deadlines or neglecting their responsibilities—issues that, while problematic, also present opportunities for the development of leadership and conflict-resolution skills. Overall, students responded positively to the task, as illustrated by comments such as, “There was nothing bad about this project,” and “None of us had any problems.”

In the third category – *insights/knowledge gained by students during the task* – 5 subcategories were identified.

- Subcategory one - *gaining the understanding of the concept of CT*: [I understood the meaning of CT and that it is important nowadays (3); I learnt how to use CT in the classroom (4) in primary school, I learnt that CT is crucial and that there is a lack of it in our school curricular; got a lot of ideas for my future classes (2) how to teach CT in my classes; a lot about CT, its importance (5) and that there is a lack of information about it in Lithuania(4); problem-solving – it was hard at first to understand the concept of a research proposal, but with discussion we found the solution; developed my CT skills as well; the task itself made us think critically and on our own, you need to understand yourself what is important what could be left out; I learned a lot from the project].
- Subcategory two: *improvement of communicative skills in English*: [I learnt how to communicate better with my peers; I think I got better at listening to other ideas and using them; I improved my speaking and communication skills (3) and some English words (3) and had to overcome my fear of talking in front of the audience in English; I learnt to present information to peers feedback (not reading but saying out loud); I learnt how to talk in front of the class and how to listen to others].
- Subcategory three – *development of collaborative skills*: [I improved my working in group skills (7); I learnt team work (2) because I had to negotiate, plan and understand the task; I understood that I need to push my teammates more if I want them to do something (but only when I am a leader); I learnt how to collaborate].
- Subcategory four - *development of academic skills*: [I learnt how to write a research proposal, the structure of it (3), it will help in my further studies, when writing other assignments, academic papers;
I also learnt what is studying about, that it is not just doing the homework briefly, but also analysing the task and the information that we find; I have improved my academic style (2); I learnt about the data analysis, about how to read the article (4) and remember the most important facts; I learnt how to do good research and how to find

the most important data (2); how to select the most important information; I learnt how to analyse the given information; I learnt how to make beautiful slides and how to present them in front of the class].

- Subcategory five – *character development*: [I built my confidence; I learned that English is not as scary (talking about the texts we needed to read) I learnt to keep my hopes up; that no one else would take the responsibility (4) if I would not do it myself; I learnt how to manage my time (3) and also how to manage time for a bigger project and how to give everyone equal amount of work; I learnt patience].

The most significant finding within the third category—insights and knowledge gained by students during the task—is their acknowledgment of having developed a clear understanding of what critical thinking (CT) is and its importance in both education and today's world. Moreover, students not only acquired theoretical knowledge of CT but also demonstrated progress in applying CT skills, indicating that one of the main aims of the course was successfully achieved. In addition, students reported improvements in their communicative English language abilities and enhanced mastery of academic skills. Their responses also revealed growth in their "learning to learn" competence and personal development, as they became more self-aware and resilient learners. This is a particularly positive outcome, as fostering general competencies such as critical thinking, communication, and personal growth should be an integral part of all subjects. The Team Research Project, carried out as part of the English for Academic Purposes and Research course, clearly supported this holistic development.

In the fourth category – *suggested improvements for the course* - two subcategories were identified.

- Subcategory one – *more clarity of the task*: [an example of the task (10) could be presented as we only understood the research proposal when we had to write it, then only all the parts were clear, we all understood it differently; the structure of the slides was not quite clear (2); clear instructions as it is the first such task].
- Subcategory two – miscellaneous – 1) *perfection of the task*: we could have double-checked the presentation (2) for mistakes before the presentation; design of the slides could have been better (2); more time was necessary to correct the mistakes on the slides; 2) *time management*: time planning has to be improved (4); we could have started earlier, then there would have been more time for improvement and less stress; 3) *autonomous learning*: I need to put more effort myself. 4) *collaboration*: meet more (2) and work in person; more cooperation, better preparation].

In the fourth category—*suggested improvements for the course*—only two subcategories were identified, which may be interpreted as a generally positive evaluation of the task. One recurring issue raised by students was the lack of clarity in task instructions, which they had also mentioned under the shortcomings category. Several other suggestions were too varied to be grouped into specific themes and were therefore categorized under a miscellaneous subcategory. These included improving the quality of student work and the need for better time management. A few students also suggested broadening the focus of the task beyond the Lithuanian context to include other European countries, noting the difficulty in finding research related to the development of critical thinking in primary education. This observation

presents a valuable direction for future research in the field. Overall, students received the task positively, as reflected in comments such as, “Everything was OK, I enjoyed the project,” and “Everything was fine; no improvement necessary—we did a very good project.”

Some students, however, expressed a desire for an extended course structure due to the cognitive demands of the project and the high level of English proficiency required. As one student remarked: “It could have been a two-semester course, not one,” while another noted, “It could have been moved to the second semester or even the second year—it is very hard to switch to C1 level or do the research results.”

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of empirical research data gathered through semi-structured student interviews yielded four principal thematic categories, each corresponding to one of the research questions. These categories reflect students’ perceptions of the *Team Research Project* implemented in the *English for Academic Purposes and Research* course.

Students identified a range of benefits resulting from participation in the collaborative *Team Research Project*. Notably, they reported the development of key soft skills, including teamwork, communication, and the ability to share responsibilities effectively. Besides the development of these interpersonal skills, students acknowledged an improvement in their understanding of critical thinking and its relevance in education. More importantly, they have also suggested that they became more proficient critical thinkers—demonstrating that one of the course’s primary objectives had been met. Moreover, students expressed their satisfaction with their personal development outcomes, as they mentioned increased motivation and greater responsibility. Students’ responses revealed the emergence of autonomous learning behaviours. Alongside that their technical skills were also enhanced, particularly in areas such as presentation design and digital literacy. These findings suggest that the collaborative task fostered both academic and personal growth in a meaningful and lasting way. These findings align with previous similar studies conducted by Barzdžiukienė, Urbonienė, Klimovienė (2006) who claimed that cooperative learning activities appeared to be effective techniques for developing students’ critical thinking.

Similar ideas were expressed by Bloemert, Paran, Jansen’s (2020) research who also identified the positive power of collaboration between the students and the research team. Although their research participants were secondary school students, their research outcome proved that collaborative tasks lead to a better understanding of the teaching learning process.

The research findings go in line with Fushino (2014) study who conducted a cooperative learning (CL) group survey project with freshmen students of English and revealed an increased cooperative behavior among students and their enhanced analytical skills. In this context the research conducted by Cosgun, Atay, (2021) should also be mentioned as they align with the current research findings. They acknowledge that problem-based learning (PBL) approach in foreign language classrooms might enhance students’ critical thinking and creativity while contributing to their language development. Apart from the development of their CT skills, the students in the current research also reported improvements in their English language proficiency, academic writing, and research skills. Furthermore, they developed broader competences such as the ability to learn independently, self-regulate their learning, and strengthen their personal character—an important outcome aligned with modern educational goals of holistic competence development. Thus, the research findings of the

current research as well as Cosgun, Atay's (2021) research results show the valuable impact of integration of collaborative, problem-based tasks in foreign language classrooms and that such tasks are necessary to promote not only students' foreign language skills but their critical thinking and creativity as well.

This idea also aligns with Barzdžiukienė, Urbonienė, Klimovienė's (2006) opinion who claim that only conscious learning and reasonably active teaching with the focus on critical thinking skills might help a learner achieve positive results in any field, foreign languages included as well.

Additionally, to the students' acknowledgement of their better comprehension of CT, the findings suggest that the collaborative task fostered both academic and personal growth in a meaningful and lasting way. Similar ideas have been found in Puangpunsi's (2021) study who also proved the crucial role of PBL in the enhancement not only of English skills but the acquisition of CT skills. Similarly, to our research results the majority of Puangpunsi's (2021) research participants also mentioned that project-based activity engaged them to develop collaboration and teamwork skills, flexibility and adaptability skills and increased the better level of responsibility in learning.

Overall, the collaborative task *Team Research Project* of the AoA-based course of *English for Academic Purposes and Research* was well received by students. The performance of the task contributed significantly to the development of students' both academic and general competences. While minor adjustments may enhance future iterations—particularly in terms of clearer instructions and course timing—the task successfully met its intended objectives. Student feedback such as “*Everything was OK, I enjoyed the project,*” and “*We did a very good project,*” further confirms the positive reception of the task and its impact on student learning.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of empirical research data gathered through semi-structured student interviews yielded four principal thematic categories, each corresponding to one of the research questions raised in the introductory part of the paper. These categories reflect students' perceptions of the *Team Research Project* implemented in the AoA-based course of *English for Academic Purposes and Research* course.

In order to answer the first research question among the *positive aspects of the collaborative task* students overwhelmingly reported that the collaborative task was beneficial. They developed transferrable skills such as teamwork, communication, and the ability to share responsibilities effectively. Additionally, they gained deeper content knowledge and notably improved their critical thinking (CT) abilities—one of the primary objectives of the course. The task also supported personal growth, as students became more motivated, responsible, and autonomous learners. Many also highlighted improvements in technical skills, such as creating visually engaging presentations, which further contributed to their overall learning experience.

In order to answer the second research question among the *shortcomings of the task* the students most frequently mentioned the lack of clarity regarding the task instructions, likely due to the students' limited prior experience with similar AoA-based assignments in a foreign language classroom. Other issues included challenges with time management and occasional team dynamics, particularly for students who assumed leadership roles.

These difficulties, while present, also represent opportunities for further development of leadership and organizational skills.

In order to answer the third research question - *what did they learn during the preparation of the task*- a major finding was that students not only learned about critical thinking conceptually but also developed the practical skills to apply it. This indicates that a core aim of the course was achieved. Students also reported improvements in their English language proficiency, academic writing, and research skills. Furthermore, they developed broader competences such as the ability to learn independently, self-regulate their learning, and strengthen their personal character—an important outcome aligned with modern educational goals of holistic competence development.

In order to answer the third research question *among the suggestion how to improve the course* only two subcategories have been identified, again indicating overall student satisfaction. The repeated concern about unclear task instructions suggests a need for clearer guidelines and scaffolding in future iterations. Other suggestions, grouped under a miscellaneous subcategory, included better time management and expanding the research focus to include European rather than solely Lithuanian contexts, due to difficulties in accessing relevant data. Some students also recommended extending the course to two semesters or relocating it to a later stage in their study programme, citing the high cognitive load and the challenges of working at a C1 English level early in their studies.

Overall, the *Team Research Project* was positively received by students and effectively supported both academic and personal development. While minor improvements can be made - particularly regarding task clarity and course timing - the findings suggest that the collaborative task within the framework of the the AoA methodology successfully fostered critical thinking, academic skills, and learner autonomy. The positive feedback confirms the success and impact of the course design according to the AoA and collaborative, problem-based task could be recommended to foreign language teachers at tertiary level for the improvement of students not only the communicative foreign language skills but critical thinking skills as well that are of utmost importance in the 21st century.

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