

**DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH GAMIFIED
LITERARY ACTIVITIES IN MIDDLE SCHOOL EFL EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of gamified literary activities as a means of developing critical thinking skills in middle school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The research focuses on the implementation of the authorial method “FableBunker,” which integrates role-based interaction, literary interpretation, and game mechanics. The experimental study was conducted with 7th-grade students in Chirchik, Uzbekistan. The findings indicate that the use of gamified literary tasks not only increases students’ motivation and engagement but also significantly enhances their ability to analyse, evaluate, and interpret literary content. The results suggest that gamification can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for fostering higher-order thinking skills in language learning. However, the study also identifies certain limitations, including the need for structured guidance and differentiated instruction.

Keywords: critical thinking, gamification, EFL education, literary analysis, student engagement, role-based learning, experiment.

INTRODUCTION

The novelty of the study lies in the integration of gamified literary activities with a structured focus on critical thinking development, as well as in the design and experimental validation of the authorial method “FableBunker” within real classroom conditions.





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In contemporary foreign language education, the development of higher-order thinking skills, particularly critical thinking, has become one of the key priorities¹. Modern learners are expected not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but also to analyse, interpret, and evaluate information in a meaningful and reflective way.

Within this framework, critical thinking is increasingly viewed as an essential component of communicative competence, as it enables students to engage with language not merely as a system of rules, but as a tool for reasoning and expression². However, in practice, teaching English through literary texts in middle school often remains focused on reproduction of content rather than its interpretation. As a consequence, students show a restricted ability to critically engage with textual material, construct independent judgments, and present their perspectives in a coherent and substantively reasoned form. This problem is further complicated by the nature of literary texts themselves. While literature provides rich opportunities for interpretation, cultural exploration, and emotional engagement, it can also appear linguistically complex and cognitively demanding for middle school learners. Without appropriate methodological support, students tend to approach texts superficially, focusing on basic comprehension rather than deeper analysis. Consequently, the potential of literature as a tool for developing critical thinking often remains underutilized in classroom practice. At the same time, the integration of gamification into education is increasingly viewed as a promising strategy for enhancing student engagement and cognitive involvement. Gamification introduces elements such as roles, challenges, interaction, and feedback, which transform the learning process into a more dynamic and participatory experience. According to D. Sharofova and M. Tursunova³, the use of gamified approaches in

¹ Singh C. K. S., Marappan P. A review of research on the importance of higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in teaching english language //Journal of Critical Reviews. – 2020. – T. 7. – №. 8. – C. 740-747.

² Fahim M., Eslamdoost S. Critical thinking: Frameworks and models for teaching //English language teaching. – 2014. – T. 7. – №. 7. – C. 141-151.

³ Sharofova D., Tursunova M.I. Gamification as an Innovative Strategy to Increase Motivation in Teaching English to Young Learners in Uzbekistan // Science and Education. — 2026. — Vol. 7, No. 3. — P. 268–272.





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language learning contributes to increased motivation, active participation, and reduced anxiety among learners, thereby creating a more favourable and supportive educational environment. Similarly, research by S. Berdiev highlights motivation as a key factor influencing successful language acquisition in the context of Uzbekistan, emphasizing the need for innovative and student-centred teaching strategies. From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of gamification can also be explained through its alignment with constructivist and socio-cultural approaches to learning. These frameworks emphasize that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, collaboration, and meaningful activity⁴. Gamified tasks, particularly those based on role-play and discussion, create conditions in which learners are required to interpret information, evaluate different perspectives, and justify their own opinions — all of which are core components of critical thinking.

Despite these advantages, the potential of gamification for developing critical thinking through literary analysis remains insufficiently explored, especially in the context of middle school EFL education. Most existing studies focus primarily on motivation and engagement, while the cognitive dimension of gamification — its impact on analytical and interpretative skills — receives less attention. In addition, there is a lack of methodologically grounded approaches that integrate literary content with gamified interaction in a systematic and pedagogically justified way.

This gap determines the relevance of the present study, which aims to investigate how gamified literary activities can contribute to the development of students' analytical, evaluative, and interpretative skills. In particular, the study focuses on the implementation of the authorial method “FableBunker,” designed to transform literary reading into an interactive, discussion-based process that promotes both linguistic development and higher-order thinking.

METHODS

⁴ Warikoo R. Enhancing student motivation, engagement, and achievement through gamification techniques //Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal. – 2025. – T. 7. – №. 2. – C. 41-65.



The present study employed a quasi-experimental research design aimed at examining the impact of gamified literary activities on the development of critical thinking in middle school EFL learners. The research was conducted during a two-month pedagogical practice (March–April) at Secondary School No. 9 in Chirchik. The sample consisted of 40 students of the 7th grade (aged 14), an age group characterized by the emergence of abstract reasoning, increased cognitive flexibility, and a growing capacity for evaluative judgement. These characteristics make this stage particularly suitable for the development of higher-order thinking skills through language learning.

The participants were divided into two groups — control and experimental — following the principle of comparable academic performance. This grouping enabled a controlled comparison between traditional and gamified instructional approaches. To establish baseline equivalence, a diagnostic pre-test was administered prior to the intervention. The test was specifically designed to measure not only linguistic competence (reading comprehension and vocabulary), but also indicators of critical thinking, including the ability to interpret textual information, formulate arguments, justify opinions, and express evaluative judgments. The results confirmed that both groups demonstrated similar levels of proficiency and limited capacity for analytical and interpretative engagement with literary texts.

During the instructional phase, the control group was taught using conventional methods, including reading aloud, translation, and answering comprehension questions. These activities were primarily focused on understanding the content of the text and reproducing information. In contrast, the experimental group was exposed to a gamified instructional model based on the authorial method “FableBunker,” developed to integrate literary analysis with interactive and communicative practices. The independent variable of the study was the use of gamified literary activities, while the dependent variables included students’ critical thinking skills, communicative performance, and level of engagement.





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The instructional materials consisted of adapted English fairy tales selected from the digital platform “FableCottage.” The selection criteria included linguistic accessibility, clear narrative structure, and the presence of conflict and moral dilemmas, which are essential for stimulating interpretation and discussion. The learning process in the experimental group was organized in a sequence of stages: (1) independent reading of the text, (2) guided analytical discussion, and (3) participation in the gamified activity.

The core component of the intervention was the “FableBunker” activity, designed as a role-based simulation. Students were assigned character roles through structured cards containing information about personality traits, motivations, and narrative context. Within a simulated decision-making scenario, learners were required to analyse their characters, evaluate their actions, compare alternative perspectives, and defend their positions using well-structured argumentation. The task design deliberately required students to engage in higher-order cognitive processes, including analysis, evaluation, and interpretation, rather than simple recall.

An important methodological feature of the intervention was the use of random role assignment, which ensured spontaneity of responses and prevented reliance on memorized language. This created conditions for authentic communication and real-time cognitive processing. The teacher’s role in this process was primarily facilitative: guiding interaction, providing scaffolding when necessary, and maintaining alignment between the game format and educational objectives.

To enhance internal validity, a crossover design was implemented. After two weeks of instruction, the groups were interchanged, allowing each group to experience both traditional and gamified approaches. This design minimized the influence of group-specific variables and increased the reliability of the findings.

Data collection was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data included indicators such as frequency of participation, length of responses, and use of



argumentation. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observation, discourse analysis of students' oral production, and questionnaire-based feedback focusing on motivation, engagement, and perceived difficulty of tasks. Special attention was given to markers of critical thinking, including the ability to justify opinions, evaluate characters' behaviour, and engage in dialogic interaction. To ensure the credibility of the results, triangulation of data sources was applied, combining observational, performance-based, and self-reported data. In addition, the study adhered to basic ethical principles: participation was voluntary, students were informed about the purpose of the activities, and all data were anonymized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study demonstrate that gamified literary activities have a significant positive impact on the development of critical thinking skills. Students in the experimental condition showed a noticeable improvement in their ability to analyse characters, interpret plot, and evaluate moral dilemmas. The proportion of actively participating students increased from approximately 40–45% to 49–55%. In addition, students' responses became more extended, logically structured, and argumentatively developed. They were more willing to express their opinions and support them with textual evidence.

Questionnaire data revealed that over 40% of students reported increased interest in the learning process, while more than 25% indicated improved confidence in speaking English. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted in Uzbekistan, which highlights the positive effect of gamification on student motivation and engagement. The findings of the study indicate that gamification should be considered not merely as a motivational strategy but as a cognitive mechanism that enables deeper processing of literary content. Its effectiveness can be interpreted through its alignment with socio-cultural and constructivist frameworks, according to which knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, collaboration, and meaningful engagement



with tasks. In this context, gamified activities transform the learning process into a space where language use becomes purposeful and cognitively demanding. Thus, gamification in this context functions not only as an engagement strategy but as a cognitive scaffold supporting higher-order thinking processes. More specifically, gamified literary tasks create conditions that require students to move beyond surface-level comprehension. Learners are engaged in interpreting textual information, comparing perspectives, and evaluating characters' actions, which directly contributes to the development of critical thinking skills. The role-based format further strengthens this effect by encouraging perspective-taking and interpretative reasoning, allowing students to approach literary texts from multiple viewpoints and engage in more nuanced analysis.

At the same time, the findings highlight that gamification is not intrinsically effective and should not be treated as a universally valid pedagogical framework. Its impact largely depends on the quality of instructional design and the extent to which game elements are meaningfully integrated into learning objectives. When applied superficially, gamification may result in increased behavioural activity without corresponding cognitive engagement, as learners tend to focus on game mechanics rather than on deeper understanding of the material. This aligns with recent research pointing to the risk of “gamification misuse,” where engagement remains at a surface level and does not lead to substantive learning outcomes.

An additional factor influencing the effectiveness of the method is the need for differentiation. Students with lower levels of language proficiency may encounter difficulties in participating in open-ended discussions and constructing arguments. Consequently, they require targeted scaffolding, including linguistic support and structured guidance. Therefore, the successful implementation of gamified literary instruction depends on the teacher's ability to maintain a balance between interaction, support, and clearly defined academic objectives, ensuring that engagement is accompanied by meaningful cognitive development. The study has certain limitations.



The duration of the experimental period was relatively short, which does not allow for evaluation of long-term effects. In addition, the sample size was limited to one school, which may affect the generalizability of the results.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study confirm that gamified literary activities offer a viable and effective framework for promoting critical thinking in middle school EFL education. The integration of the “FableBunker” method enhances students’ capacity for analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary texts, while also fostering greater motivation and communicative involvement. The practical significance of the study lies in the adaptability of the proposed model to real classroom conditions across varying levels of language proficiency. At the same time, the results emphasize that the success of gamification is contingent upon its methodological coherence and alignment with pedagogical objectives. The findings may be used by EFL teachers for designing interactive literature lessons and by curriculum developers for integrating gamified approaches into language education programs. Future research may focus on examining the sustainability of these effects over time and on exploring the potential of integrating gamified approaches with digital and hybrid learning environments.

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