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Activating Primary School Students' Critical Thinking Through Games And Projects In Native Language And Reading Literacy Lessons

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Abstract. The article explores the methodological potential of didactic games and project-based learning for activating primary school students' critical thinking in native language and reading literacy lessons. Five didactic games are selected by grading questions and tasks according to the revised taxonomy of Anderson and Krathwohl, and four mini-projects are designed using Kilpatrick's four phases and the GRASPS structure. A four-week cycle in which a game serves as a practice task and a project as a transfer task is proposed, together with formative assessment tools. The effectiveness of the proposals is to be tested at the experimental stage.

Keywords: primary education, native language, reading literacy, critical thinking, didactic games, project-based learning, formative assessment.

INTRODUCTION

In today's information environment, one of the main tasks of the education system is not merely to deliver ready-made knowledge to the learner, but to teach them to select and analyze information, assess the reliability of sources and draw well-founded conclusions. Primary education is of decisive importance in this respect: it is at this age that a child's culture of working with texts and habits of thinking are formed.

This direction is also consistent with the state's education policy. Article 9 of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" (No. ZRU-637, 23 September 2020) [1] defines primary education as covering grades I–IV, while for the general secondary level it sets the task of developing learners' ability to think independently and analyze. The Concept for the Development of the Public Education System of Uzbekistan until 2030, approved by Presidential Decree No. PF-5712 of 29 April 2019 [2], aims at qualitative renewal of the content of education and at placing Uzbekistan among the world's 30 best countries in the international PISA ranking by 2030. Achieving these goals requires learners to be able to analyze information and justify their opinions, and the foundation of this ability is laid precisely in primary school.

Because the subject "Native Language and Reading Literacy" is built on working with texts, it is a convenient didactic field for developing critical thinking: the learner evaluates a character's actions, identifies the causes of events and finds the author's idea. In practice, however, work with texts often remains at the reproductive level – retelling the content and giving short answers to ready-made questions – and the opportunities for independent analysis and reasoned conclusions are not fully used.

For a primary school pupil, play and practical activity remain a natural form of learning. Presenting critical thinking tasks in the form of didactic games and mini-projects is therefore an important opportunity. **The aim of the study** is to substantiate a methodological system that links didactic games and the project method in native language and reading literacy lessons through the logic of practice and transfer, and to propose formative assessment tools for it.

Literature Review

R. Ennis defined critical thinking as reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do [3]; in this definition, justifying one's opinion and acting on the outcome play a central role.

Among Uzbek researchers, J. Ro'ziyeva has examined the role of didactic games in developing primary school pupils' creative thinking skills [4]. Sh. Rahmonov and X. Tojiyeva describe ways of carrying out project work in native language lessons and present it as a means of developing pupils' activity,

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creativity and communication culture; the authors stress the need to take into account the imagery-based thinking of 8–9-year-old children and their inclination to learn through play [5]. The main emphasis in these works is on creative thinking and learner activity.

The revised taxonomy of L. Anderson and D. Krathwohl is convenient for determining task complexity: it divides cognitive processes into remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating, with analyzing, evaluating and creating regarded as the closest to critical thinking [6]. The historical foundation of the project method was laid by W. Kilpatrick, who interpreted a project as a purposeful activity carried out wholeheartedly by the child and divided it into the stages of purposing, planning, executing and judging [7]. The backward design approach of G. Wiggins and J. McTighe recommends building a practical task from the intended learning outcome, according to goal, role, audience, situation, product and standards (GRASPS) [8]. P. Black and D. Wiliam showed that formative assessment, i.e. consistent feedback given during teaching, improves learning outcomes [9]. The possibilities and methods of developing critical thinking ability specifically in native language and reading literacy lessons have been considered by X. Haydarova [10].

The analysis shows that games, projects and assessment are usually studied separately; linking them into a single system through question level, the logic of practice and transfer, and formative assessment has not been sufficiently explored in the case of native language and reading literacy lessons. This article aims to fill that gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis of the study consists of learner-centered, activity-based and competency-based approaches and the principles of problem-based teaching. The methods used were analysis of scientific and pedagogical literature, comparative analysis, methodological modeling and design of didactic tasks. The effectiveness of the proposed system is planned to be tested separately in a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups; therefore, no conclusions about effectiveness are presented in this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Question levels and the choice of games

Analyzing textbook questions according to the Anderson–Krathwohl taxonomy [6] shows the teacher something important: questions such as “Who was the character?” and “What did he do?” remain at the level of remembering and understanding. Critical thinking, by contrast, requires working at the levels of analyzing, evaluating and creating. Therefore, when games are selected, each game is tied to one specific higher level (Table 1).

Table 1. Didactic games and their taxonomic level

Game	Content	Level [6]
“Text Detective”	A cause or logical gap left hidden in the text is found from evidence in the text (e.g., why the character was late).	Analyzing
“If I Were the Character...”	A decision is made in a problem situation and the decisions of groups are compared.	Evaluating
“True or False?”	Claims about the text are checked; the answer must be justified with “because the text says...”.	Evaluating
“Fact or Opinion?”	Statements from a text and from real-life situations are sorted into “can be proven” and “expresses an opinion”.	Analyzing
“Question Maker”	Roles are reversed: pupils compose questions about the text; the best question is one whose answer is not stated openly in the text.	Creating

2. Game rules and the question-asking community

Three conditions must be met for a game to activate critical thinking. First, the rule of the game must directly require a thinking operation: for example, in the game “True or false?” an answer is accepted only with “because”. Second, what is assessed is not the answer itself but its basis. Third, if the reasoning is sound, a wrong guess is not counted as a fault; this preserves a safe environment in which the learner can act

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at the limit of their own abilities. In the game "Question Maker", the class chooses by vote the most interesting question from among those composed and a discussion is built around it. Here the teacher observes not the "correct answer" to the question but the coherence of the children's arguments.

Critical thinking does not form as soon as a game has been played once in class; therefore, games are repeated as short 10–12-minute practice sessions, and their questions are renewed with a new text each time.

3. Mini-projects: Kilpatrick's stages and GRASPS

In primary school, projects should be short-term (one week) and simple in content, and should suit the child's imagery-based thinking and inclination to play [5]. Each project is carried out through Kilpatrick's four stages [7]: purposing ("Why and for whom are we doing this?"), planning, executing and judging. The task itself is presented using the GRASPS structure [8], which gives the learner a real situation and a clear audience (Table 2).

Table 2. GRASPS structure of the mini-projects

Project	Role and situation	Audience	Product
"Reading Map"	Book analyst: compares the books read	Parallel class	A map showing character, problem, decision and personal attitude
"Let's Recreate the Tale"	Tale author: changes the ending	Younger pupils	A tale with a new ending and an explanation of the choice
"Book Recommendation"	Librarian: recommends a book	Members of the class library	A recommendation card ("I recommend it because...")
"Fact and Opinion" newspaper	Editor: separates news from opinion	School pupils	A two-column wall newspaper

At the end of each project, the learner justifies their choice: why this particular ending, this book or this news item was chosen. For critical thinking, the value lies precisely in this justification, while the external attractiveness of the product is secondary.

4. A four-week cycle linking the game and the project

The essence of the proposed system is that the game and the project do not merely complement each other but follow one another in the logic of learning: the game is a practice task (a skill is repeated in a familiar setting), and the project is a transfer task (the same skill is applied independently in a new, broader situation) [8]. One cycle is designed for four weeks (Table 3).

Table 3. A four-week cycle linking the game and the project

Week	Main activity	Function
1	Two or three games (e.g., "Text Detective", "Fact or Opinion?"); the teacher gradually raises the question level	Practice: the skill in a familiar text
2	"Question Maker" and "If I Were the Character..." games; the class chooses its own questions	Practice: asking questions and evaluating
3	Mini-project: purpose, plan, execution	Transfer: independent work in a new situation
4	Project presentation and assessment; a new text is chosen for the next cycle	Transfer and feedback

The advantage of the cycle is that, without changing the lesson structure, the teacher devotes a short time at the beginning or end of each lesson to the game, and assigns the project to out-of-class time or to the inquiry part of existing lessons. When choosing texts, it is important that they contain open-ended situations, the possibility of alternative interpretations and hidden meanings.

5. Formative assessment tools

The outcome of critical thinking is visible not in a one-off test but in consistent observation; therefore, assessment should be formative in nature [9]. The following tools are proposed. First, the "question level count": in the game "Question Maker", the teacher marks the questions composed by pupils according to the

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Anderson–Krathwohl levels [6]; a decrease in remembering questions and an increase in analyzing and evaluating questions from the beginning to the end of the cycle is a sign of growth. Second, “two stars and a wish”: after a project presentation, pupils name two strengths of a classmate’s work and give one specific suggestion; this practices self-assessment and reasoning. Third, the “because” observation sheet: in each game, the number of pupils who justified their answers is recorded. These tools serve not for grading but for planning the next lesson, and they are simple enough for the teacher to use without extra preparation.

CONCLUSION

Developing critical thinking in native language and reading literacy lessons is an important direction for improving the content of primary education. The following conclusions were reached on the basis of the analysis. First, tying games to the analyzing, evaluating and creating levels of the taxonomy when selecting them ensures that a game is not merely entertaining but oriented toward thinking. Second, designing mini-projects according to Kilpatrick’s stages and the GRASPS structure gives the learner a real situation and audience. Third, a four-week cycle in which the game performs the practice task and the project the transfer task links them into a single system. Fourth, assessment should observe question level, the soundness of reasoning and the feedback given on classmates’ work. The effectiveness of the proposed system should be tested through experimental work.

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