Adapting coursebook speaking activities for critical thinking development among non-native speakers

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking (CT), a core component of 21st-century skills, has gained significant attention in English language teaching (ELT), especially within the context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Recognizing its relevance not only as a life skill but also as a language learning strategy, this study investigates the application of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) activities in English language classrooms. The research process included a brief literature review on 21st-century skills in language education, followed by an analysis of a selected course book to identify opportunities for CT integration. Modified tasks were then designed to enhance both language use and cognitive engagement. Following implementation, a questionnaire and T-test analysis were conducted with 66 students to assess their perceptions of CT development and spoken English proficiency. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted with 7 students to provide a more in-depth investigation. Findings suggest that incorporating HOTS-based activities not only fosters learners' critical thinking skills (CTS) but also leads to noticeable improvements in their speaking performance. Therefore, such activities are recommended for wider use in English language classes.

Keywords: critical thinking, HOTS, TESOL

Introduction

Despite the different categorization of 21st-century skills, CT is consensually considered so significant by scholars, including Schafersman (1991) and Tiruneh et al. (2014), that it should be an essential goal of higher education. At the International Conference on "Language Teaching and Learning: Innovation and Best practices" in Hanoi in October 2010, the eminent researcher and educator David Nunan emphasized that 21st-century skills should be integrated into language teaching practice. This means students should be equipped with CT techniques apart from subject knowledge because competence is not merely confined to the latter. However, engaging students in CT activities is likely to be a struggle for a lot of teachers

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(Tempelaar, 2006). The authors, for this very reason, adjusted speaking activities to promote more CT integration in Business English classes, aiming to develop CTS alongside speaking competence.

Literature review

Higher order thinking skills

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) refer to higher levels of thinking, aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), which comprises six levels. Anderson et al. (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1.

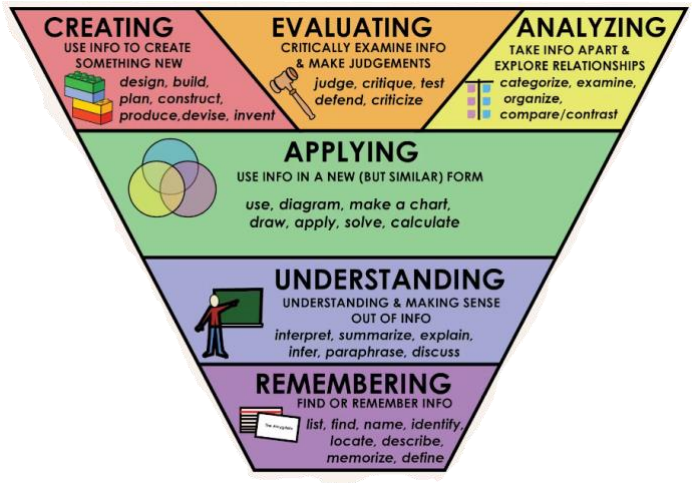
Comparison of Bloom's and Revised Taxonomies

Level	Bloom (1956)	Anderson et al. (2001)
1	knowledge	remember
2	comprehension	understand
3	application	apply
4	analysis	analyze
5	synthesis	evaluate
6	evaluation	create

Inaim's diagram (as cited in Alger et al., 2018) illustrates the revised Bloom's taxonomy, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Revised Bloom's taxonomy



It can be seen that the top three (analysing, evaluating, and creating) belong to higher order of thinking. HOTS, therefore, go beyond rote learning and comprehension to application. Rajendran and Idris (2008) consider HOTS as the expanded use of the mind to cope with new challenges. According to Ramos et al. (2013), HOTS include the ability to think critically and creatively, analyze, and solve problems.

The importance of HOTS in the teaching and learning process has been proven in various studies. According to Ben-Chaim et al. (2000), the development of HOTS (or higher order cognitive skills) is pivotal to promoting the transition of students' knowledge and skills,

regardless of their majors, into responsible action. Barak et al. (2007) claim that HOTS practices provide students with a good environment to develop their critical thinking capacities. Teemant et al. (2016) note that the intentional application of HOTS activities enables students to learn more, as well as increases their academic achievement and English proficiency in terms of four language skills. Nurmaharaeni et al. (2022) also marked positive impact of HOTS on students' reading comprehension. This means learners are expected to be able to identify and evaluate the problem as well as come up with new effective solutions.

Critical thinking skills

CTS play an influential role in every aspect of life because they are closely associated with ability to solve problems creatively and make effective decisions. As Shakirova (2007) notes, CTS enables students to address social, scientific, and practical issues effectively. According to Scriven and Paul (1987) define critical thinking as a structured and thoughtful approach that involves the active and skilled use of processes such as conceptualization, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information obtained or produced through observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, which serves as a basis for forming beliefs and guiding actions. Mishoe and Welch (2002) and Facione (2015) share a viewpoint on the characteristics of a critical thinker, some of which include the ability to assess arguments, provide appropriate feedback, reject incorrect or irrelevant information, analyze problems, and find new solutions. Snyder and Snyder (2008) claim that CTS refers to a set of cognitive skills and can be gained through training and practice. That teaching CT is essential is, thereby, noticeable to educators (Bracken et al., 2009). Fisher (2001) recommends that CT should be taught so that students can cope with problems in education as well as their daily life. This aligns with Ho and To (2022), who emphasize that HOTS help learners develop their reasoning and decision-making abilities in both academic and real-life contexts. They further stress that critical thinking should be systematically taught through structured classroom practices that allow students to question, analyze, and synthesize information before making informed decisions. Activities such as debates, group discussions, and individual problem-solving can help enhance students' CTS (Freeley & Steinberg, 2000).

Critical thinking and speaking integration

While English-speaking skills play a critical role in various contexts, especially in education and the workplace, Muhammadiyeva et al. (2020) claimed that CT is important in foreign language learning and teaching. The researchers emphasized that to achieve fluency in a language and develop the ability to think critically and articulate ideas, students should engage in speaking activities that incorporate critical thinking skills. As for Goh and Burns (2012), CT enables learners to express their thoughts clearly, justify their opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions.

Several scholars in the field of language learning and education discuss how speaking activities promoting critical engagement foster both fluency and cognitive skills for problem-solving in real-world contexts. Specifically, Rezaei et al. (2011) propose techniques that foster students' CT development, including debates, problem-solving tasks, self-assessment, and peer-assessment. Similarly, Goh and Burns (2012) emphasize that speaking activities can engage learners in deep thinking, which not only improves fluency but also nurtures essential problem-solving skills. They propose a variety of speaking activities, such as brainstorming, debates, problem-solving tasks, and opinion-gap activities, which not only enhance learners' speaking skills but also foster the development of critical thinking by encouraging idea generation, evaluation, and argumentation. In line with this, Richards and Rodgers (2014) highlight that speaking activities that require analysis and evaluation help students prepare for complex, real-

world communication tasks such as negotiations and decision-making. These activities not only encourage the development of speaking skills but also cultivate the cognitive processes necessary for navigating professional environments effectively. In a recent study, Truong (2024) highlighted that the use of higher-order teacher questions effectively promoted learners' CT by encouraging them to analyze and evaluate ideas more deeply, which in turn enhanced their speaking performance.

In an in-depth review of CT aimed at analyzing the academic contributions to tertiary students' CT development, López-Ruiz et al. (2021) concluded that it is essential to develop CT in higher education because it is regarded as an indispensable skill for surviving in a globalized world full of challenges.

Hughes (2014) suggests combining activities to teach language and facilitate CT. The activities focus mainly on questioning at the A2+ level, ways to develop receptive CTS, and applying arguments and opinions to their own views in either written or spoken form.

In the context of Vietnam, Ho et al. (2018) also assert the significance of developing CTS for students. The authors point out the hindrance for this and recommend the cooperation and participation from all parties.

Tu et al. (2019) investigate the frequency of HOTS activities in a general English course book at a university of Vietnam and suggest some adjustments to promote and integrate more HOTS into the course.

It can be seen that numerous Vietnamese and foreign studies have proven the essence of integrating CTS into tertiary education, in general, and in language classrooms, in particular. Some suggested activities are also given. However, the recommended activities are just for general English. Additionally, no formal studies in Vietnam have been systematically conducted to investigate the effectiveness of implementing improvised activities in promoting critical thinking integration in EFL classes. To fill part of this research gap, the researchers decided to conduct action research on implementing improvised activities to enhance the integration of critical thinking in Business English classes, with the aim that these approaches can be widely applied in EFL classes.

Research Questions

In order to fulfill the study objectives, the following research questions are raised:

1. How do students perceive the impacts of adapted speaking activities on their critical thinking skills in English?
2. How are students' speaking skills improved after implementing adapted speaking activities towards more critical thinking integration?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted during the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year with 66 third-year non-English majors from two classes of Business English (taught by one of the researchers) at Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI) - a public university of Vietnam. During this term, students took the final 10-week blended course of Business English. On a weekly basis, they attended two 100-minute on-site speaking classes and studied additional lessons on vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, and writing via the internal LMS, eop.edu.vn. By the

end of the course, students' English proficiency was expected to be equivalent to B1-level according to the CEFR. Students were also expected to be equipped with soft skills to enter the job market. In week 10, they had a speaking test assessed based on the criteria by Ta et al. (2023) including *(1) answer questions, (2) enrich answers, (3) use wide range of related vocabulary, (4) use varied grammar structure, (5) pronunciation, (6) fluency, (7) self-correction, and (8) question for clarification/ repetition*.

Design of the Study

This study employed an action research design because, as part of teaching, it is believed to help change the classroom in a positive way (Burns, 2010). Moreover, it enables the researcher to systematically implement changes and observe their effects within a real classroom setting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Following the basic action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), the study involved four key stages:

(1) Planning phase: A detailed analysis of the textbook used in the course was conducted, focusing on evaluating the extent to which speaking activities promoted HOTS. In more detail, in this phase, basing on Table 1, the authors systematically examined the speaking activities in the textbook, focusing on the action verbs used, and categorized them under analysis, evaluation, and creation. This process revealed that most activities lacked the critical components necessary to equip students for an increasingly competitive job market. The following statistics illustrate the frequency of action verbs related to analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

Table 2.

Distribution of speaking activities and HOTS activities by unit

Unit	Number of activities	Number of HOTS activities	Note of HOTS activities
1	8	2	Ask for explanation
2	9	0	
3	8	1	Ask for a choice, requiring explanation
4	9	0	
5	9	2	Ask for a choice, requiring explanation
6	8	1	Ask for a choice, requiring explanation
7	12	1	Ask for evaluation
8	7	1	Ask for analysis and evaluation

It can be seen that only 8 out of 70 activities help develop students' critical thinking skills. Units 2 and 4 have no HOTS activities listed, indicating a focus on lower-level cognitive tasks. Meanwhile, HOTS activities in other lessons mostly involve asking for explanations or choices that require justification.

(2) Acting phase: Based on the findings, specific activities were adapted and designed for implementation in the classroom. These activities were then applied to the students in real classroom settings to address the identified gaps. The researchers identified areas for improvement and redesigned them accordingly. Some activities were also improvised to shift from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills, following the frameworks of Rezaei et al. (2011), Saputra et al. (2019), Permadi and Zakiyah (2021), and Alger et al. (2018). Specifically, the authors focused on adjusting activities related to discussions and monologues. The adapted activities, presented in the Appendix, were applied from week 2 to week 9 of the term for the two Business English classes with 66 students at HaUI.

(3) Observing phase: Data were collected through various methods, including surveys, interviews with students, and T-tests, to evaluate the impact of the interventions on student performance.

(4) Reflecting phase: Data collected were analyzed and interpreted to assess the effectiveness of the adapted activities. This reflection process provided insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention, guiding any necessary adjustments for future cycles of action research. Specifically, the data collected from pre- and post-tests as well as questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare students' performance before and after the intervention, while one-way repeated measures ANOVA was employed to examine the statistical significance of perceived improvements across different speaking sub-skills. In parallel, qualitative data from student interviews were transcribed, manually coded, and thematically analyzed to extract recurring patterns, insights, and learner perceptions. This triangulated approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness, highlighting both its strengths and areas for improvement to inform future cycles of action research.

Data collection & analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, with a greater focus on quantitative data (a survey questionnaire and T-test analysis) in combination with semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, adapted from Rosa, P. (2021), was designed to gauge participants' opinions on the use of improvised speaking activities and delivered to students during the second lesson of week nine. It consisted of eleven closed-ended questions, using a five-point Likert scale from 'Totally disagree' to 'Totally agree' for responses. The first seven questions aimed to assess students' perceptions of how improvised speaking activities influenced their critical thinking skills, including analyzing, evaluating, problem-solving, and particularly those related to creating. The remaining four questions explored students' views regarding the extent to which such activities improved their speaking skills.

Following this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven students, selected based on convenience sampling. The authors decided on seven interviews because initial indicators of metathemes had already emerged by the sixth (Guest et al., 2006). For confidentiality purposes, each interviewee was assigned a coded identifier (S#1 to S#7) based on the sequence of the interviews. All interviews were recorded using the recording software on an Oppo A95. The interview recordings were transcribed using a sound transcription program. The transcripts were shared with the interviewees for their revision and confirmation. The data collected were then analyzed in relation to the two research questions to identify common themes, patterns, and variations in participants' responses.

T-Test analysis was employed to compare students' speaking performance between the pre-test, conducted in the first week, and the progress test two, administered in the final week. In the pre-test, students were assessed by their own instructor. For the post-test, to minimize potential bias and ensure objectivity, the assessment was conducted by another instructor from the same department who was not involved in the intervention.

Findings and discussion

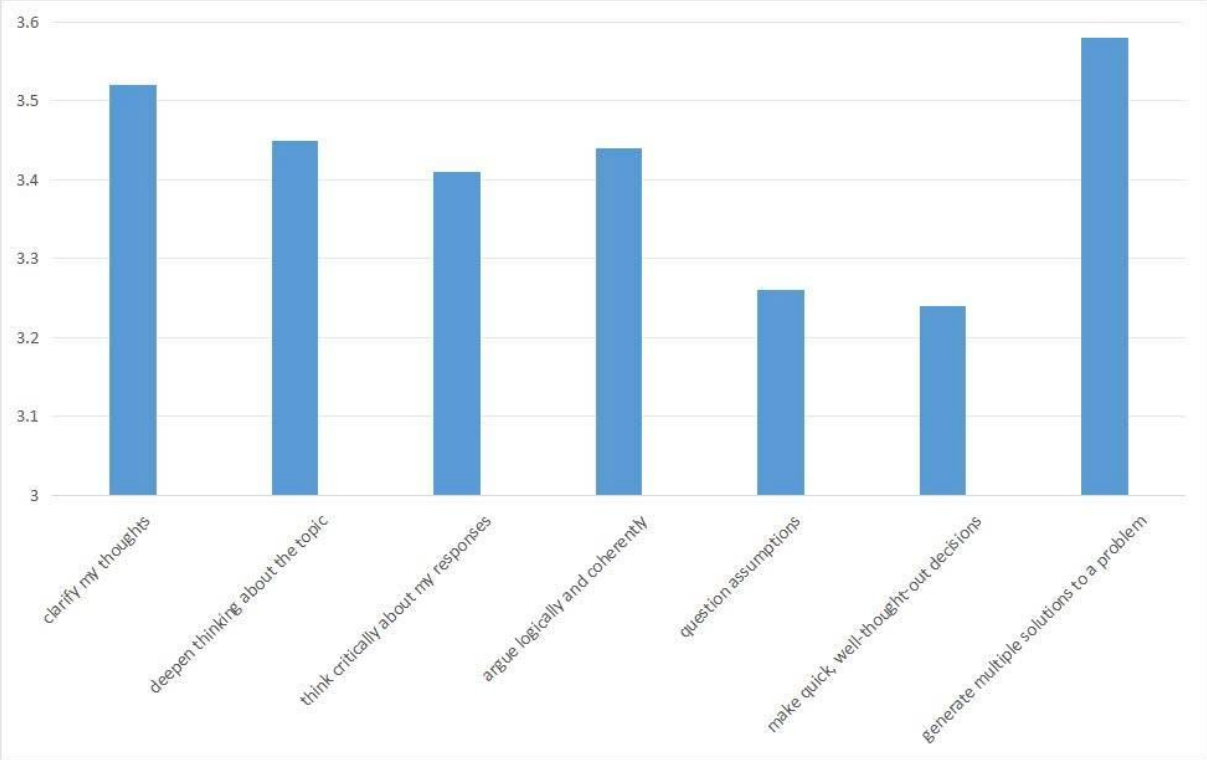
The data collected from the questionnaire, interviews, and T-test were carefully analyzed to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the implemented speaking activities in addressing the two research questions concerning students' development in critical thinking and speaking skills.

Students' perceptions of the impacts of adapted speaking activities on their critical thinking skills in English.

Students' perceptions of the impacts of adapted speaking activities on their critical thinking skills in English were illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2.

Impacts of adapted speaking activities on students' critical thinking skills



As it can be seen from the figure 2, the results indicate a generally positive perception, with the majority of items receiving mean scores above the neutral threshold (2.61-3.4). Among the seven aspects assessed, the ability to generate multiple solutions to a problem during discussions received the highest average score (3.58), suggesting that students found improvisation particularly effective in creating and enhancing their divergent thinking—the ability to brainstorm and approach problems from multiple angles without relying on pre-structured answers. This is in line with interview' results. S#1 commented, *"The activities pushed me to think on the spot and come up with different ways to say the same thing-it helped me get more creative with my ideas."*

This was followed by clarification of thoughts before expressing them in English (3.52), and engagement in deeper thinking about the discussion topic (3.45). These results reflect the cognitive benefits students perceived in terms of organizing and deepening their thoughts prior to verbal expression. This suggests that students were able to analyse information and ideas more thoroughly before articulating a response. Evidence from interviews reinforces these points. Typically, *S#2 shared, "Before I speak, I now spend more time thinking through what, why and how I want to say. That helps me speak more clearly, coherently and avoid common mistakes in expression."*

Encouragement of critical thinking during conversations and improvement in the ability to argue points logically and coherently received slightly above-neutral mean scores. (3.41 and 3.44 respectively). These aspects reflect the evaluating skill set, which includes forming judgments, constructing arguments, and assessing the strength of one's reasoning. Although not rated as highly as creating or analyzing, these results suggest that improvisation still supported students' development in organizing claims, using evidence, maintaining logical flow in discussions, and fostering structured and reasoned communication. The perceptions were also echoed in interviews, as illustrated by S#5's statement *"I used to say whatever came to my mind, and sometimes I had long pauses because I ran out of ideas. Now, I can back up my opinions with clearer explanations and examples, and connect my ideas more coherently."*

The lowest mean scores were reported for enhancement of quick and well-thought-out decision-making in discussions (3.24) and the development of the ability to question assumptions during discussions (3.26). These aspects fall under the higher-order domains of evaluation and problem-solving, where students must not only interpret information but also challenge underlying beliefs and make effective judgments in real-time. With mean scores within the neutral range, these figures indicate that they were less confident in challenging implicit assumptions or making critical decisions under pressure—tasks that typically require deeper intellectual maturity and more scaffolding. This challenge was also reflected in qualitative feedback. S#7 admitted, *"I still find it hard to challenge someone's opinion directly or spot hidden assumptions-I'm afraid I might say something wrong."*

In summary, while most aspects of critical thinking were viewed positively—especially those related to idea generation and thought organization —more advanced critical thinking elements, such as questioning assumptions or making quick decisions, were perceived as less impactful. In other words, improvised speaking activities were perceived as especially effective in fostering creative thinking and idea organization, while their impact on evaluating and problem-solving- particularly in the form of critical judgment and rapid decision-making - was not strongly endorsed by the students, as indicated by neutral mean scores, possibly reflecting some uncertainty or skepticism about their practical relevance.

Students' speaking skills improvement through adapted speaking activities with a focus on integrating critical thinking.

A high level of consistency was observed among the survey findings and the T-test results, all of which pointed to a clear improvement in students' English-speaking performance. This is visually supported by Tables 3, 4, and 5 below, among which Table 3 presents the survey results, while Tables 4 and 5 display the T-test findings. Specifically, table 5, based on a one-way ANOVA conducted at the 0.05 significance level, provides clearer statistical evidence supporting the trends observed in table 4.

Table 3.

Students' views on their speaking skill improvement through adapted speaking activities

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Improvement in students' confidence	3.55	0.807
Development of students' ability to expand their answers	3.62	0.855
Improved use of cohesive devices/linking words	3.38	0.718
Overall enhancement of students' English-speaking proficiency	3.48	0.749

Table 4.

Comparison of students' pre-test and post-test by means

		Answering Question	Extending answer	Vocab	Grammar	Pronunciation	Self-correction	Fluency	Questioning back
Pre-test	Mean	8.09	5.42	6.39	6.20	6.21	0.27	5.77	0.29
	Std. Deviation	0.52	0.61	0.55	0.66	0.67	0.45	0.42	0.46
Post-test	Mean	8.21	6.23	6.73	6.77	6.56	0.33	6.06	0.41
	Std. Deviation	0.41	0.60	0.51	0.55	0.53	0.48	0.60	0.50

Table 5.

Means comparison

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Answering Question	Between Groups	.485	1	.485	2.213	.139
	Within Groups	28.485	130	.219		
	Total	28.970	131			
Extending answer	Between Groups	21.280	1	21.280	57.982	.000
	Within Groups	47.712	130	.367		
	Total	68.992	131			
Vocab	Between Groups	3.667	1	3.667	12.936	.000
	Within Groups	36.848	130	.283		
	Total	40.515	131			
Grammar	Between Groups	10.939	1	10.939	29.609	.000
	Within Groups	48.030	130	.369		
	Total	58.970	131			
Pronumciation	Between Groups	4.008	1	4.008	11.017	.001
	Within Groups	47.288	130	.364		
	Total	51.295	131			
Self-correction	Between Groups	.121	1	.121	.568	.453
	Within Groups	27.758	130	.214		
	Total	27.879	131			
Fluency	Between Groups	2.735	1	2.735	10.058	.002
	Within Groups	35.348	130	.272		
	Total	38.083	131			
Questioning back	Between Groups	.485	1	.485	2.138	.146
	Within Groups	29.485	130	.227		
	Total	29.970	131			

As can be seen from the tables, the descriptive statistics further support the effectiveness of the adapted speaking activities in improving students' speaking skills. The highest mean score was recorded for the development of students' ability to expand their answers (M = 3.62, SD = 0.855), which aligns with the ANOVA result showing this skill had the most statistically significant improvement (F = 57.982, Sig. = .000). This consistency across both data sources highlights the activities' strong impact on encouraging students to elaborate on their responses more confidently and meaningfully. This trend is further supported by the increase in actual test scores, with the mean for extending answers rising from 5.42 (SD = 0.61) in the pre-test to 6.23 (SD = 0.60) in the post-test. Such an improvement reflects tangible progress in students' ability to provide more detailed and developed answers.

Interestingly, although students reported a relatively high level of confidence in speaking English (M = 3.55, SD = 0.807), the corresponding ANOVA result for answering questions did not show a statistically significant improvement (F = 2.213, Sig. = .139). Given the high pre-test mean score of 8.09, it is likely that students were already confident and competent in answering questions, resulting in only a marginal increase post-intervention and limited room for measurable improvement in this specific area. Their increased confidence may instead be attributed to improvements in other aspects of speaking proficiency, such as fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. In fact, these core areas demonstrated both statistically significant improvements and positive performance shifts. Vocabulary use improved from 6.39 (SD = 0.55) to 6.73 (SD = 0.51)**,** grammar from 6.20 (SD = 0.66) to 6.77 (SD = 0.55)**,** and fluency from 5.77 (SD = 0.42) to 6.06 (SD = 0.60)**.** Pronunciation also showed a significant gain, rising from 6.21 (SD = 0.67) to 6.56 (SD = 0.53) (F = 11.017, Sig. = .001). These improvements are further supported by student interview responses. S#2, S#3, S#4, and S#6 noted that they were able to "*construct longer and more complex sentences*", "*use appropriate linking devices*". S#1, S#2, and S#5 also mentioned that they had begun to "*use topic-specific vocabulary and terminology*" they had learned in class, which helped make their speech more precise and academic. In addition, S#2, S#4 and S#5 reported that their speech had become "*more fluent and smoother overall*" with fewer hesitations. Taken together, these insights suggest that while answering individual questions may not have changed significantly, the quality, complexity, and control in students' spoken output had improved, contributing to their greater confidence and perceived proficiency (M = 3.48, SD = 0.749).

The use of cohesive devices and linking words received a relatively modest mean score (M = 3.38, SD = 0.718), indicating that students were somewhat uncertain about their progress in this area. This suggests that although the activities may have implicitly supported their ability to organize ideas more logically, the improvement was not strongly perceived by the students themselves.

Two interactive speaking behaviors—self-correction and questioning back—were assessed based on their presence or absence during students' performance, rather than on a numerical scale. While there was a slight increase in their frequency, with self-correction observed in 0.27 of speaking turns in the pre-test and 0.33 in the post-test, and questioning back increasing from 0.29 to 0.41, the ANOVA results indicated that these changes were not statistically significant. Specifically, S#3 and S#7 shared that they had started to "*make spontaneous self-corrections, sometimes causing slight pauses*" in their speech. This reflects a developing level of metacognitive awareness in their language use. However, overall, the data indicate that, despite gains in overall fluency and confidence, students did not show marked improvement in spontaneously initiating questions or correcting themselves.

In short, the combination of descriptive and inferential statistics provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of adapted speaking activities in enhancing students' speaking skills. The most notable improvement was observed in students' ability to extend their answers, as reflected in both the highest mean score (M = 3.62) and the most statistically significant ANOVA result (F = 57.982, Sig. = .000). While students reported high confidence in speaking (M = 3.55), little change was seen in their ability to answer questions, likely due to already strong pre-test performance. Nevertheless, significant gains in fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—supported by both test results and interview data—suggest improved speaking complexity, coherence, and accuracy. Students reported constructing longer, more complex sentences, using linking devices and domain-specific vocabulary, and experiencing smoother speech delivery. Although the use of cohesive devices was less confidently rated (M = 3.38), modest progress was still evident. In contrast, self-correction and questioning back showed only slight increases and remained statistically insignificant, indicating that interactive micro-skills may require more targeted and sustained practice.

Overall, results from questionnaires, interviews, and T-test analyses consistently revealed that students perceived significant gains in idea generation, thought organization, and the ability to express and support opinions—indicating growth in key CT components. While higher-order skills, such as questioning assumptions and making quick decisions, were less confidently reported, the overall trend reflected increased cognitive engagement. In terms of speaking performance, descriptive statistics and ANOVA results showed notable improvement across most speaking sub-skills, especially in the ability to expand answers, vocabularyuse, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation. These findings were reinforced by student reflections, which highlighted more structured, confident, and coherent speech. However, minor gains were observed in micro-interactional behaviors, such as self-correction and questioning back, which remained statistically insignificant.

The findings affirm the value of integrating CT into speaking instruction, particularly in EOP contexts. This aligns with Truong (2024), who reported that HOTS questions created opportunities for students to analyze and evaluate ideas more thoroughly, reinforcing the integration of CT into language instruction. In line with Muhammadiyeva et al. (2020) and Goh and Burns (2012), the results suggest that adapted speaking tasks enhanced both students' fluency and cognitive engagement. Students reported being better able to generate ideas, organize their thoughts, and justify their opinions-key CT components. Activities such as debates and problem-solving, as recommended by Rezaei et al. (2011) and Richards and Rodgers (2014), have proven effective in developing not only speaking proficiency but also the ability to think on one's feet, use precise language, and respond more coherently. These improvements were reflected in both student feedback and statistical gains, particularly in elaborating answers and using topic-specific vocabulary, which is regarded as essential for both language learning and communication (Truong & Van, 2024). However, skills such as questioning assumptions and making quick, well-reasoned decisions were less developed, aligning with Hughes (2014)'s observation that higher-order CT requires more scaffolding. This suggests that while improvisation fosters creativity and fluency, structured support is still needed for more advanced CT components.

In the Vietnamese context, this study adds to previous research (e.g., Ho et al., 2018; Tu et al., 2019) by offering practical classroom evidence of CT integration in EFL. It highlights the potential of adapted tasks in Business English to promote both communicative competence and cognitive growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that adapted speaking activities have a positive and multifaceted impact on students' development of critical thinking and their English-speaking skills. Firstly, in terms of critical thinking, students reported the strongest impact in areas related to idea generation and thought organization-particularly the ability to generate multiple solutions and clarify their ideas before speaking. These aspects reflect the development of creative and analytical thinking skills, which were consistently reinforced through real-time, unscripted interaction. Moreover, students noted an increased ability to construct logical arguments and engage more deeply with discussion topics, suggesting progress in reasoning and evaluative skills, though to a slightly lesser extent. The more complex domains of critical thinking-such as challenging assumptions and making quick decisions under pressure-were perceived less positively, with mean scores remaining within the neutral range. This suggests that such higher-order skills may require more time, scaffolding, and explicit instructional focus to develop effectively.

In addition, quantitative data, supported by student interviews, indicate that these activities were particularly effective in enhancing students' ability to extend their answers, express ideas with greater fluency, and utilize more precise vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Improvements were evident not only in performance-based tests but also in students' self-perceived gains in speaking proficiency and communicative confidence. However, interactive micro-skills such as spontaneous self-correction and questioning back saw only minimal improvement and did not reach statistical significance.

Overall, it can be said that adapted speaking activities hold strong pedagogical value in fostering not only foundational aspects of critical thinking but also core speaking competencies. They appear particularly beneficial for promoting fluency, idea elaboration, and creativity in language production. Nonetheless, for a more holistic development of communicative and cognitive abilities, future instructional designs should consider integrating targeted support for interactional strategies and higher-order critical thinking skills.

Limitations of the studies and recommendations for future studies

While the findings of this study provide encouraging evidence for the effectiveness of adapted speaking activities in enhancing both speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 66 students from two Business English classes at a single institution. This limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations or different educational contexts. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, including learners from different majors, institutions, and levels of English proficiency to gain more comprehensive insights.

Second, some interactive speaking behaviors, such as self-correction and questioning back, were not measured on a detailed scale but were simply recorded as present or absent, which limits the nuance of statistical analysis. Future research could employ more refined coding frameworks to investigate the frequency and contexts in which such behaviors occur.

Lastly, the study focused on Business English**,** and the activities were tailored accordingly. Therefore, the applicability of the adapted approach to other English learning purposes such as English for Occupational and Academic Purposes (EOP and EAP) remains to be further explored.

Future research is recommended to:

- Expand the participant base to include learners from various academic and linguistic backgrounds;
- Examine the role of teacher support and scaffolding in promoting higher-order thinking during improvised tasks;
- Explore the transferability of these activities to other English teaching contexts and proficiency levels.

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Appendix

Original and Adapted activities

Nº	Original activities	Adapted activities
1 (lesson 2)	Work in groups of 5. *Talk about the corporate culture of a company or an organization you know*. Here are some suggested questions: • What is the company's name? • What are its slogan and logo? • What do its employees wear at workplace? • What are its missions and visions? • What are its core values and beliefs? • What special policies does the company offer its employees?	Work in groups of 5. *Talk about the corporate culture of a company or an organization you want to run in the future*. Here are some suggested questions: • What will the company's name be? • What will its slogan and logo be? *Why?* • What will its employees wear at the workplace? • What willl be its missions and visions? • *What will be the most important aspect of your corporate culture Why?*
2 (lesson 2)	Discuss with your partners to fill in the information about the corporate culture of a company or an organization. Then make a conversation about it.	Discuss with your partners to gather information about the corporate culture of a company or organization. Then make a conversation about it. *In your conversation, you should make sure to address the following points:* • *Do you think the mission and vision of the company are feasible? Why?* • *What potential challenges or opportunities might arise in achieving them?*
3 (lesson 3)	Work individually Talk about the guarantee policy of a product you have bought You should mention: • What is the name and type of the product? • What kinds of warranty does it offer? • What defects are covered under the warranty? • What damages aren't warranted? • How can a customer have it warranted? • What will happen if the warranty is lost or expires?	Work individually Talk about the guarantee policy of a product you have bought You should mention: • What is the name and type of the product? • What kinds of warranty does it offer? • What defects are covered under the warranty? • What damages aren't warranted? • How can a customer have it warranted? • What will happen if the warranty is lost or expires?

		• *How has the availability of the warranty influenced your decision to buy the product?* • *If you were the company, how would you improve the current warranty policy to attract more customers*
4 (lesson 4)	Work individually. Talk about negotiating style (Hard, Soft, or Principled) based on the following questions: • What is the objective of that type of negotiating style? • What is the bargaining position of the party with the negotiating style? • What are the advantages and disadvantages of the negotiating style? • What does a negotiator of that negotiating style tend to do?	Work individually. Talk about negotiating style (Hard, Soft, or Principled) based on the following questions: • What is the objective of that type of negotiating style? • What is the bargaining position of the party with the negotiating style? • What does a negotiator of that negotiating style tend to do? • *Which is more significant in this negotiating style—the advantages or the disadvantages? Why?*
5 (lesson 4)	Work in pairs. Discuss and answer the following questions: • Which company enters the negotiation with a Have to have objective? What is it? • What is Target's Intend objective? • What are the Tradable items from each company's perspective?	Work in pairs. Discuss and answer the following questions: • Which company enters the negotiation with a Have to have objective? What is it? • What is Target's Intend objective? • What are the Tradable items from each company's perspective? • *Imagine you are representing one of the companies. How would you prioritize and negotiate the tradable items to reach a win-win solution? Provide a rationale for your strategy.*
6 (lesson 6)	Imagine that you have three billion VND. Talk about an investment option that you would like to invest that amount of money in. Suggested questions: • Which investment option do you prefer? • What are its features? • What benefits can you get from it?	**Imagine that you have three billion VND. *Design an investment plan that optimally balances potential returns and risks.*** *Suggested tasks:* • ***Analyze*** *the advantages and disadvantages of at least two different investment options.* • ***Evaluate*** *the feasibility of each option based on current market trends and economic conditions.*

	• What risk(s) may you face when investing in it?	• ***Create*** *a detailed action plan for your preferred investment, including:* *- Specific steps to implement the investment.* *-Strategies to minimize risks.* *-Justifications for your choice compared to other alternatives.*
7 (lesson 7)	Work in pairs. Read and underline key information (qualities / skills / required experiences, etc.) included in both the job advert and the CV.	In pairs, analyze the job advert and CV. *After identifying key information such as qualities, skills, and required experiences, answer the following questions:* • *How well does the CV align with the job advert?* • *Are there any gaps between the candidate's qualifications and the job requirements?* • *Based on the analysis, suggest improvements to the CV that would make it more suitable for the job position.* • *If you were the employer, would you shortlist this candidate? Justify your decision.*
8 (lesson 8)	Work in groups of 3-4. Discuss what information should be included to answer the given set of interview questions as detailed as possible. • Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? • What are your greatest strengths? • What are your biggest weaknesses? • What experience do you have? What is your biggest achievement?	Work in groups of 3-4. Discuss what information should be included to answer the given set of interview questions as detailed as possible. • Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? • What are your greatest strengths? • What are your biggest weaknesses? • What experience do you have? What is your biggest achievement? *After discussing each question, evaluate which aspects of your background or experiences did you find most challenging to explain, and how can you improve these answers moving forward?*