# Encouraging Students' Critical Thinking Skillsin the Midst of Information Wars

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## Introduction

1  The concept of "critical thinking" and its correlation with media literacy formation in the context of target language learning in higher education institutions is considered. The peculiarities of critical thinking skills encouraging in the period of information war and actual martial state are regarded as well.

2  It is noted that the main features of developed critical thinking are the ability to evaluate the received information, formulate reasonable conclusions and assessments, produce new original ideas, overcome stereotypes of thinking; make reasonable decisions,successfully solve problems in a non-standard way; quickly change approaches to problem-solving. The integration of media literacy and critical thinking development into foreign language courses in higher education institutions can significantly enhance the learning experience.

3  The efficient realization of Jean Monnet Module is fulfilled due to application of various heuristic technologies. Usage of such heuristics as Socratic dispute, Socratic questions, Associations, Analogies, Bloom taxonomies, Brainstorming, Interactive lecture, case studies, Searching-Creative Activities, etc. are under review. It is underlined that the method of Socratic dispute makes students be aware of new challenges which Ukraine is facing in terms of armed aggression and dynamic development of information technologies.

4  It is known that application of heuristic techniques for enhancement students' critical thinking and media literacy during target language training is beneficial to the learning process. Fostering these essential competencies is integral to cultivating a

well-informed and discerning populace that is better equipped to navigate the complex and ever-evolving media landscape with confidence and efficacy.

5    This can be achieved by incorporating interactive and distance learning technologies, as well as emphasizing intercultural communication. To foster critical thinking is important for citizens of all ages, because in the world where there is an information war and fake news, it is vital to be able to recognize information, analyze sources and motives, and make informed decisions. Critical thinking skills enable people not to drown in an information avalanche, and not to succumb to all kinds of manipulations.

6    Since November 2022, in the midst of the unprovoked russian military aggression against Ukraine, the international project "EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students' media literacy in Ukrainian HE" started functioning at Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) with the support of Jean Monnet Foundation within the framework of the EU Erasmus+ Program (EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students' media literacy in Ukrainian HE, 2022).

7    The project is aimed at popularizing the main directions of EU policy in the field of media education and involving Ukrainian higher education institutions in the European discourse on media literacy in the state of the wartime. It is based on the strategies of the European Union, because European countries during the 20th century (including in the conditions of the Cold War and significant information activity of the USSR) gained comprehensive experience in the large-scale implementation of media literacy at all levels (Celot, 2015).

8    In this discourse, media literacy includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, ethical, and creative abilities that enable a citizen to access information through media; effectively use, safely and responsibly create and share media content across various media platforms (Kuleba, 2022).

9    **Article purpose.** The paper is targeted to reveal the concept of "critical thinking" and its correlation with media literacy formation in the context of target language learning in higher education institutions; regard the peculiarities of critical thinking skills encouraging in the period of information war and actual martial state; examine the application of heuristic technologies (Socratic dispute, Socratic questions, Associations, Analogies, Bloom taxonomies, Brainstorming, Interactive lecture, case studies, Searching-Creative Activities, etc.) for boosting students' critical thinking skills.

## Literature review

10    Nowadays a considerable quantity of young people hardly works on information. They can read or view it. However, they are not always able, or sometimes they do not want to analyze and understand it, as they lack critical thinking skills (Fomenko & Bilotserkovets, 2022).

11    Critical thinking as a term was introduced by John Dewey in his work "How We Think" in 1910 to define scientific thinking, the essence of which is to make carefully considered and independent decisions. Mainly, it is characterized by such properties as awareness and self-improvement. Critical thinking is based on the laws of logic and on comprehending the psychological processes that take place in human minds (Dewey, 1910).

12   Currently, researchers and educators define the content of the term "critical thinking" in different ways. Cottrell (2023) notes that "criticality means taking into account alternative views on various issues" (Cottrell, 2023: 12). Lipman (2023), sees critical thinking as teaching the ability to reflect and justify an opinion. Critical thinkers are characterized by a skeptical attitude towards everything. To think critically means to freely use mental strategies and high-level operations for formulating reasonable conclusions and assessments, making reasonable decisions (Lipman & Sharp, 2023).

13   Daniel Kahneman (2013), has expressed the following ideas about a certain structure of the system of human thinking: while the first system works in automatic mode and very quickly, almost without effort and without special control, the second system functioning is based on conscious mental effort. People have two levels of perception of the world that surrounds them, thanks to which they realize the surrounding reality. The subject level is non-reflective thinking, without awareness, inattentive. The meta-level is critical reflective thinking, based on awareness of what is happening, attentive.

14   Critical thinking at the meta-level gives an individual the opportunity to analyze certain information: to understand what is happening and examine the events around him/her. Intuitive thinking is characterized by the speed of its flow, lack of clearly defined stages, minimal awareness (Kahneman, 2013). Henri Bergson (1934) has opposed intuition to logical thinking, seeing its essence in the direct and integral understanding of an object without prior training and logical analysis, by "swiping" through the stage of research and experimental study. The comparisson of intuitive and critical thinking has reveal ed, that the first one is less effective and more susceptible to manipulation (Bergson, 1934).

15   In the era of post-information society people face new challenges, and regardless of age and profession, there is a vital need to develop critical thinking (Khalifa, 2019). Critical thinking is applied into information processing, communication, decision making, problem solving, generating new ideas. People with intuitive thinking see only one way to solve a problem and are rarely able to look for other possibilities for solving problems. Concurrently, critical thinking and creativity enable people's ability to produce new original ideas, overcome stereotypes of thinking; successfully solve problems in a non-standard way; quickly change approaches to problem-solving (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021).

16   Critical thinking regarding modern mass media as a means of transmitting information in a post-information society, or media literacy, is a skill that allows a person to make reasonable independent decisions: identify problems, ask questions; analyze, compare, synthesize, evaluate information from any sources; consider from different angles of view, put forward alternatives and evaluate them; formulate arguments, make a conscious choice based on one's own judgments (Levitin, 2016). Developing critical thinking involves students' obtaining a whole set of skills, abilities, and attitudes.

17   Heuristic pedagogy represents a comprehensive approach for encouraging critical thinking comprises the integrity of the use of technology, heuristc didactical techniques, peculiar teaching philosophy, internal attitudes of the educator, which are conveyed in interaction with students. Critical style of thinking and heuristic values that shape human behavior are interrelated. Unreflective, dogmatic thinking often correlates with the following internal attitudes: categorical assumption ("it can only be so, everything else is wrong"); closedness to new experiences ("we haven't done this

before, and we won't"); belief in authorities based on hierarchy ("if someone higher in status says so, then it must be done").

18  On the contrary, heuristic methods (Analysis through Synthesis, Socratic dispute, Socratic questions, Associations, Analogies, Bloom taxonomies, Brainstorming, Interactive lecture, case studies, Searching-Creative Activities) are vectored to foster students' ability to ask questions and check information because the first step in the development of critical thinking is the formation of a critical attitude to any information (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020).

19  In the midst of the war citizens naturally want to know everything what is going on, strive to learn "fast, insider news", so they subscribe to a bunch of Telegram-channels, news sites, in particular anonymous ones. Nevertheless, they need to realize: many news aggregators are not run by media people, but by manipulators whose task is to provide information first and from the necessary point of view. They fall into this information field and live in a constant pressure, excessive consumption of which is guaranteed to lead to mental disorders over time.

20  To counter this challenges, citizens need to build up informational immunity, to become fact-checkers, to constantly probe the veracity of information, take a critical approach to evaluating the content, analyzing it for the presence of facts and analytics, get rid of categorical statements, but encourage different points of view and reflection (Kuleba, 2022).

21  Researches have revealed: if an individual develops critical thinking skills, he/she will cope with emotional stress more successfully. After all, the ability to analyze and evaluate, the habit of reflection, introspection extends to one's own emotional world. This helps people to understand their emotional states, to independently verbalize what they are experiencing, to predict the consequences of different options for expressing emotions, train the skills of intellectual processing of external and internal emotional information (Levitin, 2016).

## Methods

22  In order to achieve the purpose of the study, various research methods were utilized. Theoretical methods involved analysis and generalization of scientific sources to uncover the main issues under the research. This approach allowed authors to collects and summarize valuable issues from scholars' contributions and obtain authors' experience in enhancing students' media literacy and critical thinking skills in foreign language training at HEIs. The descriptive technique was used to present effective methods and technologies for boosting media literacy and critical thinking during foreign language teaching.

## Results

23  **Heuristics methods and technologies**. Heuristics methods and technologies are widely used for provoking students' thinking, namely Socratic dispute, Socratic questions, Associations, Analogies, Bloom taxonomies, Brainstorming, Interactive lecture, case studies, Searching-Creative Activities, etc.

24    While learning the issues of "Information space: national and global contexts", that concerns the history of media, European information space nowadays and the most influential information agencies, students are working the following objectives:
- give definitions to the following concepts: "information space" and "national information space";
- comment on the specific features of the European information space;
- define components and functions of a national informational space, realize the necessity of its defense;
- present the stages of the evolution of media from the ancient times up to the present; perform searching activity in electronic media.

25    The students are presented with a concept of information space, as an environment where information is formed, collected, stored and distributed, it includes information interaction of organizations and citizens, satisfaction of their information needs, individual and social consciousness, information and telecommunication infrastructure and information itself.

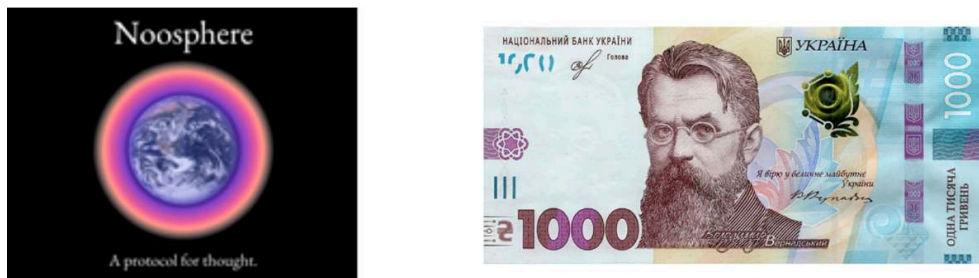26    Next they are asked a Socratic question: "Do these two pictures have anything in common?", figure 1.



Figure 1. The tasks for a Socratic question.

27    Applying the heuristic of searching analogies, they are getting an insight, that it was the Ukrainian scientist V. I. Vernadskyi, who primarily suggested the ideas of space filled with information or the formation of an "intelligent" space – the "noosphere". He singled out the following socio-cultural factors forming the noosphere: the spread of man over the entire surface of the planet; development of means of communication; discovery of new sources of energy (nuclear, solar, etc.); mass democratization of the state system; the explosion of scientific creativity in the 20th century, and the information environment, that thanks to the cultural assimilation of technology, turns out to be an indispensable means of forming the unity of the human mind.

28    Bloom taxonomies usage enables students' realizing that the national information space is understood as the entire set of information flows of both national and foreign origin, which are available on the territory of the state: newspapers, magazines, other periodicals, books, printed materials, news agencies, films, television, radio, other electronic media and communication services, all types of information storage and dissemination technologies.

29    The national information space creates conditions for the participation of citizens in making significant decisions and determines the availability of legal information for various categories of people, the level of openness of the information space largely depends on the openness and public order for democratic changes. In addition, mass media provide representatives of various social groups with the opportunity to publicly

express their opinions, find and unite like-minded people, clearly formulate their interests and represent them in public opinion, so, you can do the tasks with fill in the gaps, figure 2.
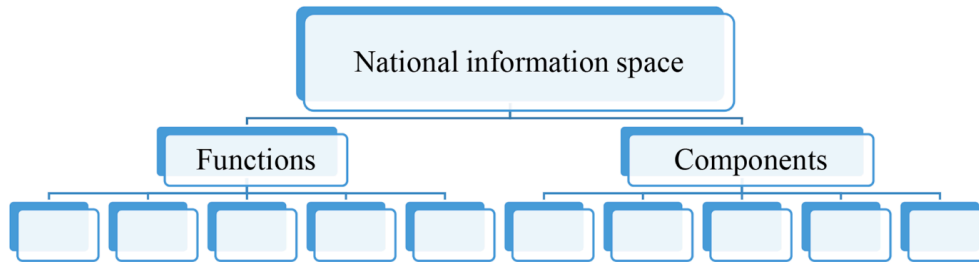


Figure 2. The task to fill in the gaps with functions and components of the national information space.

30    The method of Socratic dispute makes students be aware of new challenges which Ukraine is facing in terms of armed aggression and dynamic development of information technologies, that require a clear response in matters of information security. The information security of the state is supported by the "Information Security Strategy of Ukraine" adopted in 2021, which made it possible to limit the broadcasting of russian TV channels and russian media products, control printed literature, introduce economic sanctions (restriction of the activities of some russian social networks), expel from the territory of the state employees of russian propaganda media, etc. (Kolesnikov & Oliynychuk, 2021), the task for critical thinking, figure 3.



*What do you think the author of the picture wanted to express?*

*Write down a caption for it.*

Figure 3. The task for critical thinking to answer the question.

31    Using the heuristic of associations, students are suggested to answer a question: "What do you think the author of the picture wanted to express?" and write down a caption for it.

32    Then students are engaged to a case study to explore why Ukraine has long chosen the path to European integration, which requires, among other things, the entry of Ukraine into the information space of the EU for the purpose of information exchange, ensuring information security and mutual cultural enrichment, popularizing Ukrainian culture and national values.

33    **The ability to work with knowledge on the emotional and rational perception.** The study has revealed that one of the most essential skills in the midst of the war is the ability to work with knowledge on the emotional and rational perception of the situation in which people have occurred and what its consequences can be for them; about how not to become easy targets for information manipulation during the war; about the difference between critical and intuitive thinking, and how they work in critical situations; about how to act rationally in the present, analyzing information, communicating with others, making decisions, and solving various problems.

34    The study also has provided valuable insights on how to effectively incorporate these aspects into foreign language training in HEIs. The authors' focus on media literacy and critical thinking development in higher education has aligned with the findings of nationally and internationally acclaimed studies. This issue was recognized as a crucial aspect of teaching and learning in the 21st century (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021; Bulgar & Davidson, 2018; Chanda, 2017; Cho et al., 2022; Gaine, 2012; Solnyshkina, 2022).

35    The selection of topics related to modern media for target language curriculum development is in accordance with the research findings in the field. Educators have observed that students exhibited a noticeable interest in using diverse digital and media resources and have been enthusiastic about acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to consume and disseminate content safely and efficiently (Gómez Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019; Lushchyk et al., 2021).

36    At the same time, the authors have concurred with the fact that the realities of the wartime have influenced the objectives of forming students' media literacy and should be taken into account (Malimon et al., 2022; Rudenko et al., 2022). The scholars stressed that the tasks of forming students' media literacy were slightly changed, namely: they analysed their media space and consciously approached the creation and dissemination of information; learnt to detect informational aggression (propaganda, fakes, misinformation, intimidation) and resisted it; developed practical skills in information verification; were able to avoid and resist communicative aggression; ensured the protection of their own information space from fraudsters, cybercriminals, and hostile attacks (Rudenko et al., 2022).

37    Despite the growing focus on digital literacy in policy and research, there remained a lack of practical guidance for classroom implementation. Particularly scarce is information on how educators can integrate digital literacy with subject-specific teaching, and how teachers can effectively promote digital literacy in different subjects (Hague & Payton, 2010). Moreover, it is important to focus on application of those methods and techniques in teaching foreign languages that encouraged critical thinking and conscious media consumption and distribution (Grizzle et al., 2021).

38    **Significant correlation and mutualistic relationship**. Existing significant correlation and mutualistic relationship between the development of media literacy and critical thinking were noted by the experts in the scientific community and could not be overstated. They understood the interrelatedness of these concepts and how they contributed to an individual's intellectual and psychological development, abilities to better comprehend and evaluate the vast amount of information available in post-information modern world; make informed decisions and benefit the democratic society (Senchenko, 2014; Vuorikari et al., 2022).

39    In particular, Bulgar and Davidson (2018) indicated that "media literacy is traditionally conceived as a process or set of skills based on critical thinking" (Bulger & Davison, 2018: 15). In their writing, Gaine (2012) emphasized the significance of cultivating critical thinking skills to fulfill the requirements of modern-day digital literacies and participatory democracy. Chanda (2017) pointed out that "the essence of media literacy is to build higher-order of critical and creative thinking skills – such as identifying key concepts, making connections between multiple ideas, asking relevant questions, identify false belief with the expanded notion of literacy that form the very foundation

of intellectual freedom and the exercising of responsible citizenship in a democratic society" (Chanda, 2017: 23).

40  Concurrently, the authors fully support aforementioned perspective and the study emphasizes the need to prioritize media literacy and critical thinking skills development in education and daily life, especially under martial time conditions. They firmly believe that fostering these essential competencies is integral to cultivating a well-informed and discerning populace that is better equipped to navigate the complex and ever-evolving media landscape with confidence and efficacy (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021; Lushchyk et al., 2022).

41  **Media literacy and critical thinking development.** The integration of media literacy and critical thinking development into foreign language courses in higher education institutions can significantly enhance the learning experience. By incorporating real-world scenarios and topics providing modern media into language instruction, students are better equipped to communicate effectively in the target language. This approach not only meets the needs of the students but also addresses the societal demands for language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding.

42  Overall, the inclusion of media literacy in foreign language courses offers a comprehensive and practical learning opportunity for students (Lütge, 2017; He, 2023; El-Henawy, 2019). According to He (2023) media technology offers a favorable opportunity to create authentic environments and establish realistic settings for English language learners to acquire the language. By incorporating media literacy-focused activities, students can improve their critical thinking abilities and significantly advance their foreign language acquisition.

43  When acknowledging the benefits of using modern media for foreign language learning, it's also important to consider the accompanying challenges and some drawbacks. Share and Mamikonyan (2020) have raised valid concerns regarding the possible risks and benefits of digital and media tools for communication, which could have significant implications for society. While these tools have the potential to greatly improve societies worldwide, they also have a negative side, including the spreading of hate, the dissemination of misleading information, and the creation of oppression (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020).

44  We have taken note of the concern that has been raised by the scholars, and we also support the idea that it is essential for language teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique characteristics of media communication and impart critical thinking skills to their students so that they can analyze and evaluate information effectively.

45  In general, this holistic approach represented by authors in the current study and mentioned elaborations enables program compilers to choose effective teaching practices and methods that can enhance students' language acquisition. When it comes to teaching foreign languages, educators strive to incorporate various media resources, critical thinking exercises, and engaging activities to enhance the learning experience. This approach fosters critical thinking skills, encourages engagement with diverse perspectives, and helps navigate cultural differences with sensitivity and respect (Gómez Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019; He, 2023). Thus, our study contributes to the solution of the aforementioned problem.

46 **The techniques for enhancement students' critical thinking**. Overall, there is a consensus among researchers that application of heuristic techniques for enhancement students' critical thinking and media literacy during target language training is beneficial to the learning process. This can be achieved by incorporating interactive and distance learning technologies, as well as emphasizing intercultural communication. And we also hold this view (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Lushchyk et al., 2022).

47 We agree with Biletska et al. (2021) that the activity approach is based on the recognition of activity as the foundation, tool, and crucial factor for developing a creative and dynamic individual. This unique format helps to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in teaching foreign languages in HEIs.

48 Thus, our scientific opinions and practical experience reflected in the results of the study above are in line with the ideas of other recognized scientists. For instance, El-Henawy (2019) underlined that "it is necessary for students to build the 21st century literacy skills through technology-integrated instructions and classroom practices" (El-Henawy, 2019). Gaine (2012) argued in favour of adopting a critical approach towards digital literacies.

49 Students are encouraged to scrutinize new literacies and identify the underlying ideologies presented in multimodal texts. By doing so, they can gain a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of how these texts operate in society, and can use this critical insight to create their own multimodal texts which can serve as counter-narratives that challenge mainstream ideologies. Overall, this approach towards digital literacies can be highly valuable in promoting greater social awareness, critical thinking, and creative expression among students.

50 Braesel and Karg (2017) place great importance on the development of media literacy and critical thinking abilities in order to effectively meet the demands of contemporary world and engage in active participation in democratic processes. It is emphasized that this skillset is crucial for individuals to navigate complex issues and analyze information from various sources, ultimately leading to a more informed and well-rounded understanding of the social environment.

## Conclusion

51 Currently, during a full-scale war started by russia, it is especially important to cooperate and integrate the information spaces of Ukraine and the EU to ensure information security. Thus, modern students desperately need media literacy and critical thinking skills that will enable them to determine the nature of the information they are surrounded by; find out if it is useful and reliable; and protect themselves from misinformation.

52 The development of a critical thinking style, which involves the formation of reflective and evaluative mental activity aimed at finding and actualizing a worldview, life values and "building" their hierarchy, ensures the prevention of negative consequences of hostile informational and psychological influence.

53 Applying heuristic technologies (Socratic dispute, Socratic questions, Associations, Analogies, Bloom taxonomies, Brainstorming, Interactive lecture, case studies, Searching-Creative Activities, etc.) is expected to result in significant benefits as it

pertains to enhancing the media literacy, critical thinking and language proficiency of students in a comprehensive manner.

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## ABSTRACTS

The paper deals with the issues of students' media literacy and critical thinking boosting in the lessons of English as a foreign language during the realization of Erasmus+ Jean Monnet project "EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students' media literacy in Ukrainian HE" at Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine. It is considered to be pivotal for European integration paradigm of Ukrainian higher education.

Cet article traite des questions de la littératie médiatique des étudiants et de la mise en œuvre d'un enseignement à la pensée critique dans les cours d'anglais en tant que langue étrangère. Cet enseignement est intégré au projet Erasmus+ Jean Monnet intitulé « Extrapolation des stratégies de l'UE pour renforcer la littératie médiatique des étudiants dans l'enseignement supérieur ukrainien » à l'Université nationale agraire de Sumy, en Ukraine. Il est considéré comme essentiel pour le paradigme de l'intégration européenne de l'enseignement supérieur ukrainien.

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