

ORAL PRESENTATIONS AS CATALYSTS FOR CRITICAL THINKING: INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is a core competency in higher education, especially in EFL contexts where students must engage both linguistically and cognitively. This study investigates how oral presentations function as catalysts for critical thinking among Indonesian EFL undergraduates. Guided by an interpretive phenomenological approach, data were collected from 13 English education majors through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic framework. One salient finding shows that students strengthened analytical reasoning and reflective judgment through both individual and collaborative presentation practices. Four themes emerged: presentations triggered analytical reasoning, fostered reflective learning, enhanced confidence, and revealed contrasts between individual and group tasks. These findings illustrate that oral presentations provided authentic opportunities for students to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and engage in collaborative reasoning. The study thus offers empirical evidence that classroom presentations can foster sustained cognitive engagement when accompanied by structured reflection. The study demonstrates that oral presentation tasks can effectively promote students' intellectual engagement, and it contributes to EFL pedagogy by underscoring the role of reflection, scaffolding, and balanced task design in enhancing critical thinking within oral presentation courses. It suggests that incorporating structured reflection and guided feedback into public speaking classes can strengthen both linguistic performance and cognitive growth.

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to think critically is widely recognized as a foundational competency in 21st-century education (Shaw et al., 2020), especially within the framework of higher-order cognitive skills required for academic and professional success. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the development of critical thinking (CT) is intricately linked to the acquisition and application of language skills (Bankole-Minaflinou, 2019; Song et al., 2024). English, functioning as both a medium of instruction and intellectual inquiry, offers learners

not only linguistic competence but also the opportunity to engage in analytical reasoning, argument construction, and reflective thinking. One instructional activity that embodies this dual function is the classroom presentation (Haile et al., 2024; Mak, 2021), which encourages students to engage deeply with content, synthesize information, and articulate ideas clearly and persuasively. Presentations in EFL settings are thus not merely performance tasks; they are pedagogical spaces where language use intersects with cognitive growth. This study, therefore, introduces the topic in a focused manner, highlighting the role of presentations as communicative and intellectual tasks. However, despite the prominence of presentation-based instruction in many Asian EFL environments, the specific ways in which Indonesian undergraduates experience these tasks as catalysts for critical thinking remain largely undocumented.

Despite growing interest in integrating CT into language curricula, there remains a limited understanding of how classroom presentations specifically contribute to this process, particularly from the learner's perspective. Few studies have examined Indonesian EFL students' lived experiences of oral presentations as vehicles for the development of CT, which positions this study within an underexplored area of inquiry. Indonesia, as a country where English is taught extensively but remains a foreign language, presents a unique cultural and educational context for exploring how academic presentations may act as a vehicle for fostering students' CT skills. Addressing this gap positions the present study as both timely and necessary. Understanding students' personal experiences and interpretations of these tasks is essential for designing pedagogical approaches that are both contextually relevant and cognitively enriching. While previous work in Southeast Asia has tended to focus on presentation competence, anxiety, or product-based outcomes, the introspective dimensions of how learners internalize presentation tasks as opportunities for deeper reasoning have rarely been examined. This study extends the literature by prioritizing students' reflective interpretations rather than performance metrics, offering insight into the cognitive work that occurs behind the act of presenting.

Previous studies have often emphasized test scores, performance outcomes, or quantitative indicators, yet few have investigated how EFL students themselves perceive the cognitive and reflective dimensions of presentation tasks. This absence underscores the significance of the present inquiry. In response to this gap, the present study seeks to explore the perceptions of EFL university students in Indonesia regarding the role of English presentations in enhancing their CT abilities. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: "What are the perceptions of English education majors regarding the role of classroom presentations in enhancing their CT abilities?" Accordingly, the research objective is to uncover how students interpret their experiences with English presentations as catalysts for analytical thought, reflective practice, and intellectual engagement. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform EFL curriculum design, enrich the theoretical discourse on the intersection of language and CT, and promote greater student agency by foregrounding learners' voices in academic development. Through a qualitative lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how English presentations can move students from mere expression to meaningful reflection. By amplifying the perspectives of Indonesian EFL students, this study contributes a viewpoint that is often underrepresented in international scholarship, offering qualitative insights that complement the dominance of quantitative approaches.

CT has emerged as a cornerstone of higher education, widely regarded as essential for effective problem-solving, reasoned decision-making, and the promotion of independent thought (Loyens et al., 2023; Ruano-Borbalan, 2023). Scholars such as Facione (2000) and Ennis (1996) define CT as a purposeful, self-regulatory process involving analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation, and reflection skills. In EFL settings like Indonesia, these skills become closely tied to language use, as students must express reasoning through a foreign

language while responding to local academic expectations. This study positions oral presentation activities within this context by examining how Indonesian students engage with CT while preparing and delivering academic talks.

The relationship between language learning and CT is inherently reciprocal (Shen & Teng, 2024). Language is both a vehicle for thought and a tool for cognitive development, making it integral to the development of higher-order thinking. In Indonesian EFL classrooms, oral presentation tasks draw this connection clearly because students must interpret information, organize ideas, and express their reasoning in English. This makes presentations a relevant site for examining how CT develops within a foreign language context.

English oral presentations have become a central feature in many EFL classrooms due to their ability to integrate multiple language skills with cognitive and organizational demands (Dumlao, 2020). When students engage in presentations, they are tasked with selecting and researching topics, synthesizing information, structuring arguments, and delivering content to an audience. This process requires them to move beyond memorization and toward meaningful engagement with academic material. Unlike passive learning methods, presentations provide opportunities for students to take an active role in constructing knowledge, which enhances both language proficiency and intellectual autonomy (Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2022).

In addition to fostering linguistic competence, presentations contribute to the development of broader communication and interpersonal skills (Al-khresheh, 2024). They require students to practice clear articulation, logical organization, and appropriate use of language, all within the context of public speaking. These tasks help improve students' fluency and coherence while encouraging adaptability to different audience expectations. Presentations also support the development of self-confidence (Cahyadi, Suriani, & Nisa, 2024), particularly when students become more comfortable expressing ideas in a second language. Group presentations further encourage collaborative learning, as students must engage in negotiation, shared decision-making, and mutual support to complete the task effectively.

More importantly, English presentations can be a platform for critical engagement and intellectual growth. The act of preparing and delivering a presentation encourages students to evaluate sources, construct arguments, and anticipate counterpoints (Greene & Yu, 2016). These tasks mirror the demands of academic discourse, where reasoning, analysis, and justification are central. Moreover, the post-presentation phase often involves reflection, peer feedback, and self-assessment (Iglesias Pérez, Vidal-Puga, & Pino Juste, 2020), all of which contribute to students' metacognitive awareness. In this way, presentations are not merely assessment tools but active learning experiences that cultivate both communicative competence and CT.

Oral presentations and public speaking have long been acknowledged as pedagogical strategies that promote CT, particularly in EFL and ESL contexts. Al-Issa and Al-Qubtan (2010) emphasized that oral presentations support analytical, evaluative, and synthesizing capacities among learners while simultaneously enhancing communicative competence. Similar benefits were echoed in Ati and Parmawati's (2022) study, where students perceived oral presentations as a means to reflect on language use and foster critical awareness. In more technical fields, Berjano et al. (2013) and Hysaj and Suleymanova (2020) reported that oral presentation tasks promoted professionalism and cognitive development, including summarization, constructive criticism, and logical reasoning. Moreover, Ramos (2020) and Nurhayati (2023) found that speech preparation, vocabulary mastery, and reflective practices were key to supporting both persuasive communication and intellectual engagement. Together, these studies establish oral presentation as a multidimensional activity that advances both language skills and CT.

While the positive effects of oral presentations are clear, several studies explored the instructional conditions that optimize these outcomes. Yin et al. (2024) found that EFL students

demonstrated stronger CT when presenting self-selected topics compared to teacher-assigned ones, suggesting that topic ownership influences analytical depth. Yang and Gamble (2013) showed that integrating CT into classroom discourse, such as through debates and peer critiques, yielded significantly better outcomes in both English proficiency and higher-order thinking. In support of these approaches, Abrami et al. (2015) argued that strategies like dialogue, authentic tasks, and mentoring are highly effective for enhancing CT across disciplines. Similarly, Rieger et al. (2017) demonstrated that composing ‘Scientific Elevator Speeches’ led students to identify knowledge gaps and clarify their arguments, while Wagner (2019) emphasized that Paul and Elder’s CT framework enables students to construct and deliver logically sound presentations. These studies collectively suggest that instructional scaffolding, rather than presentation alone, is key to enhancing CT.

Another theme in the literature is the interdependence between language proficiency and CT expression. Luk and Lin (2015) observed that students in Hong Kong displayed richer critical reasoning in their first language (Cantonese) than in English, highlighting the inhibiting effect of limited language proficiency. Zhang and Kim (2021) similarly reported that higher English proficiency levels led to greater gains in students’ CT dispositions following an English public speaking course. These findings align with Urcos et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of communicative competencies in supporting analytical and evaluative skills. Sieroka et al. (2018) also underscored the importance of engaging broader audiences through accessible, critically informed discourse. The ability to express complex reasoning through language was further supported by Nurhayati (2023), who emphasized that vocabulary mastery directly influences students’ capacity to articulate logical arguments. These studies stress the need for language instruction that also builds expressive competence as a foundation for CT. Yet, very little is known about how these processes unfold in Indonesian universities, particularly in courses where presentation tasks carry both linguistic and cognitive expectations. This study responds to that gap by offering an in-depth account of how students experience these academic demands.

Several scholars point to the value of dialogic, immersive, and student-centered learning environments in fostering critical thought. Kuhn (2019) positioned CT as a dialogic practice that flourishes through peer-to-peer interaction, much like in public speaking. Irianti et al. (2024) found that flipped classrooms in public speaking courses increased both engagement and critical reflection, especially when students were responsible for preparing and delivering content. Lata et al. (2014) similarly highlighted the role of structured discussions, retrospection, and peer evaluation in encouraging traits such as intellectual humility and fair-mindedness. From a broader perspective, Lau (2024) traced the historical and philosophical foundations of CT, reinforcing its relevance across genres and learning contexts. However, Kaur and Ali (2017) noted that within the Malaysian academic setting, research on academic oral presentations remains limited in scope, often neglecting rhetorical structures and multimodal elements. This reveals a broader methodological gap in analyzing how different components of oral tasks interact to support CT.

Despite the contributions of the existing literature, most studies have relied heavily on quantitative approaches, focusing on performance metrics or test-based indicators of CT. There is a noticeable absence of phenomenological studies that center on learners’ lived experiences and reflective perceptions, particularly in Southeast Asian EFL contexts. While studies such as those by Kaur and Ali (2017) and Hysaj and Suleymanova (2020) call for culturally contextualized research, few have examined how students internalize and interpret their experiences with classroom presentations. Moreover, even though numerous works underscore the value of scaffolding, vocabulary, and feedback, there remains limited exploration of how these elements are perceived by students as influencing their own critical thought processes.

Consequently, the complex cognitive and emotional dimensions of presentation tasks in EFL settings remain underexplored.

This study, therefore, addresses these gaps by examining the perceptions of Indonesian EFL university students on the role of classroom presentations in enhancing their CT abilities. Guided by a phenomenological approach, it prioritizes learners' reflective voices, offering insights into the interplay between language use, cognitive engagement, and personal growth. The research contributes to the field by providing empirical evidence from a culturally underrepresented context, expanding the discourse beyond test scores to include introspective student perspectives, and suggesting pedagogical implications for designing presentation tasks that promote both linguistic proficiency and cognitive sophistication. By doing so, the study enhances our understanding of how oral presentation and public speaking can serve as powerful catalysts for CT development in higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a pure qualitative research approach grounded in interpretive phenomenology to explore how EFL university students perceive their experiences with English presentations as a means of fostering CT. Interpretive phenomenology (Smith et al., 2022) is particularly suited for examining lived experiences, as it emphasizes the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their actions, thoughts, and interactions. While phenomenology as a tradition is well established, the discussion in this study is presented concisely to avoid redundancy and to highlight its practical relevance for the inquiry at hand. Rather than seeking to generalize or quantify outcomes, this approach aims to uncover the depth and complexity of personal reflections, contextual influences, and internal cognitive processes.

In the context of this study, phenomenological principles guided the development of interview prompts that encouraged participants to articulate both the cognitive and affective dimensions of their experiences. Reflective journals were employed as complementary instruments to capture meanings that might not emerge in spoken dialogue, thereby allowing for a more complex account of students' perspectives. The researcher's role was one of empathetic engagement, providing space for participants' interpretations to unfold while maintaining reflexive awareness of positionality during the research process. This practical alignment between phenomenological theory and data collection methods ensured that the study remained focused on uncovering the lived meaning of oral presentation tasks.

The phenomenological lens also facilitated an in-depth understanding of the dynamic relationship between language performance and cognitive engagement, thus aligning with the study's objective to uncover the inner dimensions of learning that are often overlooked by surface-level assessments. To strengthen the credibility of the design, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to minimize researcher bias and to ensure that emerging interpretations were firmly grounded in the data. Trustworthiness was further enhanced through member checking, in which participants were invited to confirm the accuracy of their transcripts, and through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting key analytic decisions. These strategies reinforced the rigor of the research design, ensuring that the findings were both richly descriptive and dependable.

Subjects

This study was situated in the English education department of a university located in Jakarta, Indonesia. The department offers a range of courses aimed at developing students' linguistic, pedagogical, and academic competencies. Among these is the Public Speaking course, a subject designed to enhance students' ability to communicate effectively in English

before an audience. The course includes structured presentation assignments, peer evaluations, and self-reflective components, making it a fitting context for investigating the perceived influence of English presentations on the development of students' CT skills. As the course emphasized not only language performance but also confidence-building and audience awareness, it provided a relevant and meaningful framework for exploring students' reflective experiences.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on specific inclusion criteria aligned with the study's objectives. Only students who had completed the Public Speaking course and reported a positive learning experience were considered. Exclusion criteria, such as students who had not completed the course or who were unwilling to engage in reflective inquiry, were applied to ensure that the participants could meaningfully contribute to the research objectives. Eligible students expressed that the course had helped them build confidence in speaking English, and that they were both interested in contributing to the study and willing to engage in reflective thinking on their experiences. Out of 20 students who initially expressed interest in participating, 13 were chosen to ensure gender balance and maintain a manageable scope for in-depth qualitative analysis. The final group comprised 7 female and 6 male undergraduate students, offering diverse perspectives while representing a relatively balanced gender composition. While gender balance was taken into account, other demographic factors such as academic year, proficiency levels, and prior presentation experience were not systematically reported, which may limit the contextual richness of the findings. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, labeled from Participant 1 to Participant 13, to protect anonymity during data reporting. It is also acknowledged that selecting students who reported primarily positive learning experiences may have limited the range of perspectives captured; students with more negative or challenging experiences might have provided additional insights into the obstacles of linking oral presentations to critical thinking.

Before data collection, all participants provided informed consent after receiving a detailed explanation of the research procedures. They were assured that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Measures were taken to maintain the confidentiality of participants' personal information, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process to ensure participants' comfort and trust, thereby fostering an environment conducive to authentic and reflective engagement. Participants were encouraged to share both positive and challenging aspects of their experiences, with assurances that honest reflections would be valued equally and without judgment. This was intended to reduce potential pressure to present only favorable accounts, thereby supporting the authenticity of the data.

Instruments

To obtain rich, detailed, and contextually grounded data, this study employed multiple qualitative data collection techniques. These methods were selected to allow participants to express their experiences both narratively and reflectively, providing a multidimensional understanding of how English presentations contributed to the development of their CT skills. The combination of written reflections and spoken narratives helped to triangulate data sources and enhance the credibility of the findings. In practice, triangulation was achieved by comparing journal entries with interview responses, enabling the researcher to identify both convergences and divergences in students' accounts, which strengthened the reliability of the interpretations.

The first method involved the use of reflective journals. Each participant was invited to compose a written account detailing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings during the preparation and delivery of their English presentations. They were encouraged to reflect

specifically on the cognitive processes involved, such as organizing ideas, evaluating content, responding to feedback, and making critical judgments. To guide these reflections, prompts such as “What steps did you take to organize your presentation?” and “How did the presentation task make you reflect on your way of thinking?” were provided. These prompts ensured that journals captured dimensions of both performance and critical reflection. This initial written reflection served not only as a form of data but also as a preparatory exercise that encouraged deeper introspection ahead of the follow-up interviews. The reflective journal prompts were reviewed by two colleagues with expertise in EFL pedagogy and qualitative research to ensure alignment with theoretical constructs of CT and to improve clarity before use in the study.

Following the submission of reflective journal entries, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant. Lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, these interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to probe students' personal insights into their learning strategies, challenges, and mental engagement before, during, and after giving presentations. Sample guiding questions included: “How did preparing for the presentation change the way you approached the topic?” and “Can you describe a moment during your presentation when you felt you had to think critically?” Providing such guiding questions ensured direct alignment with the study's focus on CT. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency in the topics explored across participants, while also providing flexibility for elaboration and clarification (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was piloted with two students outside the main sample to test clarity and appropriateness. Feedback from this pilot informed minor adjustments to question wording, thereby increasing reliability and consistency across interviews. Conducting interviews after the reflective journals allowed participants to build upon their initial reflections, enabling a richer and more coherent narrative of their experiences. Insights from journals were often used to shape follow-up interview questions, allowing the researcher to explore specific themes raised by participants in greater depth and ensuring methodological coherence. This sequencing strengthened the depth and authenticity of the data, aligning with the interpretive phenomenological approach adopted in the study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from reflective journals and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible yet rigorous method that facilitates the identification of patterns within qualitative data. This study adopted the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), which is widely recognized for its systematic approach to organizing and interpreting rich, descriptive data. Thematic analysis was particularly appropriate given the study's aim to explore students' perceptions and internal thought processes, allowing for both semantic and latent meanings to be uncovered through careful interpretation.

The first stage of analysis involved familiarization with the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, after which the researcher immersed himself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and reflective journal entries to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' narratives. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where significant phrases, expressions, and ideas that reflected CT and reflective engagement were highlighted and systematically coded. As part of this process, coding was conducted manually, allowing for close engagement with the data and ensuring that detailed meanings were not overlooked. The coding process followed an inductive orientation, with codes emerging directly from participants' words and reflections rather than being predetermined by theoretical categories, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the students' lived experiences.

In the subsequent stages, the initial codes were grouped and reviewed to identify overarching themes that captured recurring patterns or notable variations in the participants' experiences. The themes were refined to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and relevance

to the research question. To enhance the credibility of this stage, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with qualitative research, which helped in challenging interpretations and minimizing individual bias. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing emerging interpretations with a few participants, allowing them to confirm or clarify the accuracy of the representation.

Each theme was then clearly defined and named to reflect its conceptual significance, ensuring it aligned with the study's objectives. Finally, the findings were structured and reported using illustrative quotes from participants to support the interpretation and to preserve the authenticity of their voices. Triangulation between reflective journals and interviews further validated the themes, ensuring that insights were consistent across different data sources. An audit trail was also maintained to document analytical decisions, thereby increasing transparency and supporting the trustworthiness of the analysis. This rigorous analytical process ensured that the results were both credible and meaningful, offering a comprehensive understanding of how English presentations serve as a platform for CT in the EFL university context.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The thematic analysis of reflective journals and interview transcripts revealed four major themes that encapsulate students' perceptions of English presentations as catalysts for CT. These themes highlight how presentation activities promoted analytical reasoning, self-reflection, confidence building, and cognitive adaptation across different formats of delivery. The findings are supported by verbatim excerpts from the 13 participants, identified anonymously as Participant 1 through Participant 13. To ensure clarity, the descriptive accounts of participants are presented first, followed by analytical commentary that interprets the meanings of these experiences. This structural distinction is intended to help readers differentiate raw evidence from interpretive insights, thereby maintaining transparency and rigor.

Presentations as Triggers for Analytical Thinking

Participants consistently emphasized that the process of preparing for English presentations was intellectually stimulating, requiring them to go beyond surface-level understanding. Unlike routine language exercises or examinations, presentations were perceived as cognitively demanding tasks that necessitated the ability to process, evaluate, and rearticulate academic content. Students reported that they could not simply memorize or replicate information; rather, they had to engage critically with various sources, assess their credibility, and organize ideas logically to convey coherent arguments. This shift from passive to active engagement marked a significant departure from their usual learning routines and encouraged them to take intellectual ownership of the material.

Several participants highlighted how this process deepened their analytical thinking. Participant 3 remarked, "I couldn't just copy from one source. I had to find different references, compare them, and decide which one made more sense for my topic." This process of cross-referencing and selecting relevant information pushed students to apply criteria for judgment, a key component of CT. Participant 9 echoed this sentiment by stating, "I realized I had to think deeper about the topic because I knew I would be asked questions after the presentation. It pushed me to anticipate and prepare stronger arguments." Participant 12 similarly noted, "When I prepared, I had to check which examples were strong enough to explain my point. If I chose the wrong one, people might not understand, so I had to be very careful." These reflections suggest that the anticipation of real-time audience engagement further heightened their cognitive readiness and strategic preparation.

The necessity of structuring content effectively also emerged as a catalyst for analytical development. Participants noted that organizing their thoughts into a clear introduction, body, and conclusion helped them clarify not only how to present but also how to understand the subject matter more deeply. Participant 6 shared, “I used to just follow what was on Google, but now I try to build my own explanation from what I read. That’s what I learned from preparing the talks.” Participant 2 added, “When I arranged my slides into sections, I realized it was also arranging my own thinking. The structure made me see connections I didn’t notice before.” This transformation from reproducing information to constructing original interpretations indicates that presentation tasks encouraged independent reasoning and the internalization of complex ideas.

Moreover, the process of crafting presentation slides and anticipating possible questions supported students’ ability to predict counterarguments and defend their positions - an essential element of critical discourse. The cognitive demand of tailoring content to fit time constraints while ensuring clarity and depth further trained students to prioritize key points and filter out irrelevant information. Participant 8 explained, “Because the time was short, I had to choose the most important parts. It made me think, which ideas are really central and which ones I can leave out.” As a result, the act of preparing for English presentations became an exercise not only in language use but also in disciplined and structured thinking. Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that presentations provided an authentic context in which analytical skills could be meaningfully developed and applied.

From Speaking to Reflecting

Another prominent theme was the reflective nature of the presentation experience. Many students reported that the process did not end with speaking in front of the class; rather, it continued through self-evaluation and reconsideration of their performance and audience reactions. This post-presentation reflection deepened their metacognitive awareness and helped them recognize areas for growth.

Participant 1 explained, “After each presentation, I always think, ‘Did I make my point clear?’ or ‘Did I answer the questions well?’ That helps me improve next time.” Participant 11 added, “When my classmates gave feedback, it made me realize I didn’t explain the topic properly. I reflected on how to fix that.” Participant 7 similarly reflected, “Sometimes I realized after presenting that I forgot to mention an important point, and that mistake stayed in my mind so I would not repeat it the next time.” These moments of introspection contributed to a cycle of continuous improvement and deeper engagement with academic content.

Additionally, the act of watching peers present and reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses helped students adjust their approaches. Participant 13 stated, “Seeing others present gave me ideas, but also made me think about how I could do better or more clearly express my opinion.” Participant 5 added, “When I saw my classmates use examples effectively, I thought about how I could use better examples in my own presentation.” Participant 10 emphasized, “I often compared my performance with others and asked myself why their delivery was clearer. This comparison pushed me to practice more and improve my way of speaking.” Such peer comparison and subsequent self-assessment enhanced their critical awareness and learning strategies.

Negotiating Challenges and Building Confidence

Despite initial anxieties, participants acknowledged that repeated exposure to presentation tasks helped them manage stress and build self-confidence. Confronting the challenge of public speaking in English, a foreign language for them, was perceived as a transformative experience that fostered not only linguistic growth but also personal resilience and cognitive maturity.

Participant 4 admitted, “I used to be very nervous, but after doing it several times, I feel more confident and less afraid to express my ideas in English.” Participant 10 similarly shared, “I struggled with anxiety at first, especially with pronunciation, but now I focus more on the message and less on perfection.” Participant 2 noted, “At first, my hands were shaking, but over time I could control them and started to feel more natural when speaking.” Participant 8 commented, “Standing in front of the class used to feel impossible, but after several chances, I realized I could handle it. That experience gave me more courage to share my thoughts.” These reflections reveal a developmental trajectory from apprehension to empowerment.

Feedback from instructors and peers was also instrumental in this process. Participant 7 observed, “After I received constructive feedback, I was more aware of my weak points. It helped me not just with language, but also to improve how I think about my argument.” Participant 5 explained, “When my lecturer pointed out my weak structure, I worked harder to organize my ideas, and this made me more confident for the next presentation.” The iterative nature of presentation assignments encouraged students to treat mistakes as learning opportunities and to take active responsibility for their intellectual growth.

Cognitive Transformation in Group vs. Individual Presentations

The final theme addressed the differences in critical thinking outcomes between individual and group presentation formats. Students highlighted that while both formats were valuable, they engaged with content and ideas in distinct ways depending on the structure of the task.

Several participants reported that individual presentations allowed for deeper personal reflection and independent reasoning. For example, participant 2 remarked, “When I work alone, I really have to understand the topic because no one else is helping me. It pushes me to think more clearly.” In contrast, group presentations were described as opportunities for collaborative thinking and shared problem-solving. Participant 12 explained, “In a group, we exchange opinions, and sometimes we argue about the best way to explain something. That process helps me see different points of view.”

This distinction was echoed by other participants, who emphasized how the two formats shaped their thinking in complementary ways. Participant 5 reflected, “Working alone forces me to organize everything clearly in my head, while in groups I sometimes rely too much on others.” Participant 9 noted, “In group tasks, I often get new ideas from friends that I never thought of before, but when I do it individually, I have to depend on my own logic.” Participant 3 added, “When presenting individually, I felt more pressure to prepare thoroughly, but in group work, I could test my arguments through discussion.” Similarly, Participant 6 observed, “Both types help in different ways. Individual work made me think harder about the content, while group presentations taught me to listen carefully and respond to others’ reasoning.”

Although some students noted challenges in balancing group dynamics, many acknowledged that the exposure to diverse perspectives during group discussions enriched their understanding of the topic. Participant 8 concluded, “I think both types are useful. Group presentations help you learn from others, but individual ones make you more independent in thinking and speaking.” These contrasting yet complementary experiences highlight the cognitive flexibility required in both formats and suggest that a balanced integration of both in the curriculum can support comprehensive CT development.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that English oral presentations served as a powerful platform for stimulating analytical thinking among EFL university students. Participants indicated that the process of preparing and delivering presentations required them to interpret, compare, and evaluate sources, a core feature of CT. This aligns with the argument of Al-Issa and Al-Qubtan (2010), who emphasize that oral presentations naturally prompt learners to

synthesize information and evaluate relevance. Similarly, Yin et al. (2024) found that student autonomy in topic selection enhances critical engagement, a notion echoed in the present study, where participants expressed deeper investment when preparing material aligned with their interests. However, unlike Yin et al. (2024) controlled comparison between self- and teacher-assigned topics, this study demonstrates that even within a fixed academic course, learners can develop critical faculties through task demands and reflective learning. Rather than simply restating the descriptive results, this study emphasizes the interpretive significance: oral presentations provide a cognitive bridge between knowledge consumption and knowledge transformation, a finding that situates this study beyond confirmation of prior work. These processes also mark early forms of learner autonomy, as students made independent decisions about how to interpret information, how to justify these interpretations, and how to organize the material. Such independent judgment is a central indicator of higher-order thinking in CT pedagogy.

The study also highlighted the integral role of reflection in reinforcing CT. Students reported actively analyzing their performance after presentations, identifying weaknesses, and learning from peer feedback. This mirrors findings by Ramos (2020), who showed that self-assessment and genre awareness significantly enhance learners' organizational and persuasive strategies. Moreover, Kuhn (2019) conceptualizes CT as a dialogic process, which is evident in participants' peer observations and post-presentation evaluations. While Abrami et al. (2015) underscore the value of structured discourse in supporting CT, the current study extends this understanding by showing how students independently develop metacognitive awareness through repeated cycles of performance and reflection. When students reviewed their slides, questioned the adequacy of their explanations, or evaluated the clarity of their arguments, they were engaging in metacognitive monitoring, a process that allowed them to track their own thinking and regulate their next steps. This capacity to oversee and adjust one's learning process reflects a deeper level of intellectual engagement that goes beyond linguistic production. The findings also correspond with Kaur and Ali's (2017) observation that visuals and rhetorical organization in presentations foster deeper thinking, which several participants implicitly reflected upon while describing their content structuring process. This suggests that reflective practices are not incidental but central to the pedagogical power of presentations, reinforcing the importance of systematically embedding reflection tasks into curriculum design.

Confidence-building and cognitive resilience emerged as additional benefits of the presentation experience. Initially anxious students reported significant growth in their ability to articulate ideas clearly in English, demonstrating the transformative potential of presentation-based pedagogy. This is in line with findings from Ati and Parmawati (2022), who highlighted the positive emotional and motivational impact of oral presentations on learners. Wagner (2019) supports this by stating that oral performance, when guided by CT frameworks, enhances both speaking skills and intellectual maturity. Similarly, Berjano et al. (2013) argue that public speaking in technical education settings promotes assertiveness and analytical reasoning, traits evident in participants' growing confidence and cognitive independence in this study. Furthermore, as Irianti et al. (2024) found in flipped classroom settings, the repetition of speaking tasks reinforces both fluency and critical awareness, suggesting a cyclical relationship between experience, reflection, and skill acquisition. Beyond affirming prior studies, these findings highlight why presentations matter: they provide iterative opportunities to transform emotional vulnerability into intellectual resilience, an outcome that is rarely captured in quantitative evaluations. This rise in confidence also signals increased autonomy, since students gradually took greater control over how they prepared, revised, and defended their ideas, reflecting a shift from externally guided to internally directed learning behaviors.

Another key theme from the findings was the comparative cognitive benefit of individual versus group presentations. Individual tasks encouraged deeper personal reasoning, while group formats promoted collaborative thinking and exposure to diverse viewpoints. These results resonate with Luk and Lin's (2015) insight that language proficiency and discourse elaboration vary across task types, suggesting that different formats activate different dimensions of critical cognition. Urcos et al. (2024) similarly highlight that carefully designed communicative tasks foster analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in learners. Yang and Gamble (2013) caution that generic group presentations may lack the cognitive rigor of debate or peer critique; however, the present study found that collaborative discussions during group preparation did, in fact, prompt CT. This suggests that when well-structured, both individual and collective formats can serve as complementary channels for developing learners' cognitive flexibility. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for teachers to deliberately design a balance of individual and group tasks, ensuring that learners benefit from both independent reasoning and collaborative dialogue. The interactions described by participants also point to shared metacognitive engagement. When students negotiated ideas, evaluated one another's suggestions, or reworked the logical flow of the presentation, they practiced joint monitoring of understanding, a process that advances both autonomous learning and collective intellectual responsibility.

In terms of instructional alignment, the findings are supported by the literature stressing the connection between vocabulary mastery, content clarity, and critical expression (Lau, 2024; Nurhayati, 2023). Participants' need to articulate complex ideas in clear English also recalls the challenges described by Luk and Lin (2015), where lower proficiency limited critical articulation. However, Zhang and Kim (2021) found that CT dispositions improved across all proficiency levels through English public speaking, suggesting that growth is possible with the right instructional support. Additionally, studies by Sieroka et al. (2018) and Lata et al. (2014) reaffirm that CT should be taught explicitly and contextualized in communicative practice. Rieger et al. (2017) further emphasize audience awareness and message coherence as triggers for analytical refinement, both of which featured in this study's participants' strategies. The integration of these findings suggests practical implications: reflective journals can be systematically embedded into oral presentation courses, peer feedback can be scaffolded to guide learners beyond superficial comments, and teachers can encourage students to articulate not only what they presented but also how their thinking changed during the process. These pedagogical applications move the discussion beyond description, offering concrete strategies for practitioners seeking to foster CT in EFL classrooms. More importantly, incorporating structured moments of metacognitive reflection can help students recognize their own growth as independent thinkers. As students track how they selected sources, adjusted arguments, and responded to feedback, they strengthen the self-regulation skills that form the basis of autonomous learning and sustained critical inquiry.

In sum, this study contributes to the expanding field of CT pedagogy in EFL by demonstrating that English oral presentations can function not merely as language practice but also as meaningful intellectual activities. Unlike prior studies that emphasized measurable outcomes such as test performance (Yang & Gamble, 2013; Zhang & Kim, 2021), this study adopted a qualitative lens, capturing students' lived experiences, internal growth, and reflective capacities. By foregrounding learners' voices, it extends the literature on student-centered pedagogy and provides insight into how academic tasks are internalized as opportunities for cognitive development. The study also fills a contextual gap by focusing on Indonesian EFL learners, a group often underrepresented in current research. At the same time, this study acknowledges limitations: the sample was relatively small and focused on students with largely positive experiences, meaning that future studies should also explore the perspectives of learners who struggle with presentations. Nevertheless, the evidence from this study highlights

that metacognitive engagement and rising autonomy are central mechanisms through which oral presentations foster higher-order thinking. Recognizing these processes is essential for designing courses that do more than train students to speak; they also train students to think about their own thinking.

The findings of this study suggest a range of pedagogical strategies for fostering CT through English oral presentations. First, the integration of reflective practices, such as pre- and post-presentation reflections, can deepen metacognitive awareness by prompting students to critically evaluate their own learning and performance. Teachers can support this by using guided reflection prompts that ask students to identify which sources shaped their arguments, how they revised their reasoning, and what they would change in a future presentation. A short reflection form can be completed immediately after presenting to ensure timely engagement with these questions. Encouraging topic ownership is also vital; when students are allowed to select or negotiate their presentation themes, they tend to exhibit greater cognitive engagement and analytical depth, as supported by Yin et al. (2024). Additionally, offering a balanced combination of individual and group presentations accommodates diverse learning needs. While individual tasks nurture independent reasoning, group presentations foster collaborative thinking and expose students to multiple perspectives, thereby enriching critical engagement.

Equally important is the provision of constructive feedback. Structured peer and instructor responses help learners identify areas of strength and improvement, contributing to a continuous cycle of growth (Ramos, 2020; Wagner, 2019). One practical approach is to implement a peer feedback cycle in which students use a simple checklist that focuses on clarity of argument, relevance of evidence, and coherence of explanation. This feedback can be exchanged in pairs or small groups immediately after the presentation to encourage concrete revision plans. Educators should also scaffold both language and content, particularly for students with limited English proficiency, as linguistic constraints can hinder the expression of complex ideas (Luk & Lin, 2015). Support in the form of vocabulary development, guided rehearsal, and exposure to model texts can alleviate this challenge. Teachers may also introduce sentence starters for explaining reasoning, comparing sources, or responding to questions during the presentation practice stage, which can help students articulate their thinking with greater precision. Assessment tools should be thoughtfully designed to capture not only language proficiency and delivery skills but also evidence of reasoning, synthesis, and critical evaluation. A rubric that includes criteria such as strength of argument, coherence of logic, integration of sources, and responsiveness to questions can help students understand that thinking is an explicit part of the task. Rubrics can also guide instructors in giving consistent feedback on reasoning quality rather than focusing solely on language or performance. By embedding these elements into the instructional design, educators can transform oral presentations from performative tasks into powerful vehicles for developing both linguistic and CT competencies.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that English oral presentations, when thoughtfully implemented, serve as powerful pedagogical tools for fostering CT among EFL university students. Drawing from reflective journals and interviews with Indonesian English education majors, the findings revealed that presentations stimulated analytical reasoning, enhanced metacognitive reflection, built confidence, and fostered cognitive flexibility across both individual and group settings. These insights contribute to the growing body of knowledge that positions oral communication not only as a linguistic practice but also as a means of intellectual engagement. The study offers practical contributions by identifying instructional strategies, such as reflective scaffolding, topic autonomy, balanced presentation formats, and multidimensional assessment, that can effectively encourage students' CT abilities. More

concretely, the findings suggest that reflective journals could be systematically embedded into presentation-based courses, that scaffolding should include explicit modeling of how to evaluate and synthesize sources, and that instructors can design a balance of individual and group formats to foster both independent reasoning and collaborative dialogue. Digital portfolios and peer feedback protocols could also be incorporated as structured tools to track students' reflective growth and ensure that reflection becomes an integral part of oral presentation pedagogy.

However, the study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution scope, which may affect the generalizability of findings across broader contexts. Another limitation is that the selection of participants primarily reflected those with positive experiences, meaning that the voices of students who may have struggled or had negative perceptions were not fully captured. This exclusion may have shaped the findings by emphasizing growth and confidence more strongly than struggle and resistance, highlighting the need for future research to include a wider spectrum of learner experiences. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of oral presentation pedagogy, comparative studies across cultural settings, and the integration of multimodal elements to further enrich students' cognitive engagement. In particular, future studies could examine how reflection tools such as digital portfolios, scaffolded journals, or feedback logs mediate the relationship between oral presentations and the development of CT skills, thus providing more concrete pathways for implementation across diverse contexts.

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