



## The Impact of Creative Writing Activities in English Lessons on Students' Critical Thinking Skills

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### Abstract

This study examines the effects of creative writing activities on the development of critical thinking skills among high school students in English lessons. A total of 100 participants were involved, with 50 students engaging in creative writing practices—such as story composition, poetry analysis, and reflective journaling—while the remaining 50 followed a traditional English curriculum. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests measuring critical thinking skills, complemented by qualitative evidence from student journals, interviews, and classroom observations. The results revealed a substantial improvement in the experimental group, which demonstrated a 25% increase in critical thinking scores, compared with a modest 5% increase in the control group. Qualitative findings further indicated that creative writing strengthened students' ability to consider alternative viewpoints, solve complex problems, and reflect on their thinking processes. Students also reported greater confidence in expressing ideas and a deeper awareness of the rationale behind their decisions. Overall, the study suggests that creative writing serves as an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing critical thinking and cognitive development. It highlights the broader educational value of creative writing beyond the English classroom and proposes directions for future research on its long-term impact.

**Keywords:** *creative writing, critical thinking, education, problem-solving, reflective journaling, English lessons.*

### Introduction

Critical thinking—commonly defined as the ability to think independently, analytically, and reflectively—is widely acknowledged as a fundamental skill for academic achievement and lifelong learning (Facione, 2015). It encompasses the capacity to examine information critically,

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evaluate arguments, synthesize ideas, and generate well-reasoned judgments. As modern societies increasingly demand individuals who can navigate vast amounts of information and solve complex problems, educational systems worldwide have prioritized the integration of critical thinking skills into their curricula.

English education provides a particularly rich environment for cultivating critical thinking. Beyond acquiring linguistic competence, students are expected to interpret texts thoughtfully, analyze themes, and communicate ideas clearly and persuasively. While traditional English lessons—centered on grammar, reading comprehension, and literary analysis—contribute significantly to language development (Javid, 2023), they may not fully address the cognitive demands required for higher-order thinking. Consequently, educators are exploring more creative and interactive methods to enhance students' analytical abilities.

Creative writing has gained considerable attention as one such method. Activities such as storytelling, narrative design, and poetry writing allow students to engage deeply with complex ideas, experiment with language, and express personal and social perspectives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Through these tasks, learners are encouraged to question assumptions, explore alternative interpretations, and examine human experiences from multiple angles.

Existing research suggests that creative writing can play a significant role in fostering critical thinking (Sternberg, 1999). The cognitive processes involved in crafting narratives—structuring ideas logically, developing coherent plots, and shaping characters with multidimensional motivations—mirror the analytical skills required in academic argumentation and problem-solving. Thus, incorporating creative writing into English lessons has the potential to strengthen students' ability to think critically, reason effectively, and approach learning with greater independence.

Creative writing also provides a supportive environment in which students can experiment with ideas and explore alternative viewpoints without the pressure of producing conventional or error-free responses (Kress, 1994). This freedom promotes cognitive flexibility—an essential dimension of critical thinking that involves approaching problems from multiple angles and evaluating a range of possible solutions (Perkins & Salomon, 1989). Through crafting narratives, students not only exercise their imagination but also practice essential cognitive skills such as problem-solving, analyzing cause-and-effect relationships, and making reasoned decisions in complex situations. These mental operations are directly transferable to critical thinking demands encountered both in academic contexts and in real-world scenarios (Babayev, 2022).

Although the educational value of creative writing has been recognized in existing literature, empirical investigations specifically addressing its impact on critical thinking remain relatively scarce. The limited number of studies available suggests that creative writing contributes to the development of critical thinking by encouraging self-reflection, strengthening problem-solving



abilities, and enabling learners to articulate and defend their ideas more effectively (Harris, 2010; Wallace & Williams, 2008). Nevertheless, further research is necessary to determine the extent to which creative writing can enhance critical thinking across diverse student populations, educational levels, and instructional settings.

The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating the influence of creative writing activities in English lessons on high school students' critical thinking skills (Babayev, 2023). By examining how narrative construction, storytelling, and other creative writing practices contribute to students' abilities to analyze texts, evaluate arguments, and generate original solutions, the study aims to provide empirical evidence supporting the pedagogical value of creative writing as a tool for fostering critical thinking.

## Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to evaluate the impact of creative writing activities on students' critical thinking skills within the context of high school English lessons (Alisoy, 2024). Combining quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for a comprehensive examination of both measurable learning outcomes and the subjective experiences of students. The research was carried out in a high school setting with a total of 100 students enrolled in two 11th-grade English classes. One class—the experimental group—engaged in structured creative writing activities, while the comparison class followed a traditional English curriculum.

## Participants Section

The study involved 100 high school students from two 11th-grade English classes in an urban public school. The experimental group comprised 50 students who participated in weekly creative writing tasks, whereas the control group included 50 students who received conventional instruction focusing on grammar, literary analysis, and essay writing, without any creative writing component. Both groups were matched on their previous English academic performance to ensure that differences observed in post-intervention outcomes could reasonably be attributed to the creative writing activities rather than pre-existing disparities in ability.

The sample was intentionally selected to reflect demographic diversity in gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The experimental group included 25 males and 25 females, with a similar gender balance maintained in the control group. Ethnic representation mirrored that of the school's broader population, consisting of Hispanic students (40%), African American students (30%), Caucasian students (20%), and students from other ethnic backgrounds (10%). Levels of parental involvement varied across participants, with some reporting strong familial support for academic work, while others indicated limited engagement from their parents or guardians.

## Creative Writing Activities



The creative writing activities implemented in the experimental group were intentionally designed to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective engagement. Four main types of activities were introduced throughout the study:

### **1. Story Creation**

Students composed short stories in response to thematic prompts such as *personal identity*, *conflict resolution*, and *ethical decision-making*. Each assignment required students to construct multidimensional characters, design coherent plots, and consider diverse perspectives when shaping narrative events. These tasks encouraged learners to evaluate complex situations, reflect on motivations, and justify narrative decisions.

### **2. Poetry Analysis and Creation**

Students examined poems from various literary traditions and subsequently created original poems using techniques such as metaphor, symbolism, imagery, and rhyme. This activity required students to interpret layered meanings within poetic language and apply similar analytical processes when crafting their own poetic pieces, thereby deepening their understanding of literary devices and enhancing their critical interpretation skills.

### **3. Collaborative Narrative Building**

Working in small groups, students co-constructed stories, with each member responsible for developing a different section. This activity emphasized teamwork, negotiation, and the integration of multiple viewpoints. Students critically evaluated the contributions of peers, resolved narrative inconsistencies, and adapted ideas to maintain coherence and thematic unity, thereby strengthening collaborative problem-solving skills.

### **4. Reflection Journals**

Following each creative writing session, students completed reflective journal entries describing their writing processes, challenges encountered, and insights gained. This ongoing reflective practice aimed to promote metacognition by encouraging students to examine their reasoning, evaluate their decision-making strategies, and identify areas for cognitive growth.

Across all activities, students were consistently encouraged to question assumptions, explore alternative interpretations, and provide reasoned justification for their creative choices.

## **Data Collection**

To evaluate the impact of creative writing on critical thinking, the study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources. Data collection spanned 10 weeks, with the experimental group participating in weekly creative writing sessions.

### **1. Pre- and Post-Tests**



Both the experimental and control groups completed a standardized critical thinking assessment before and after the intervention. The test measured several components of critical thinking, including the ability to analyze complex texts, identify logical fallacies, evaluate arguments, and construct evidence-based counterarguments. The assessment included reading comprehension items, argument evaluation tasks, and short analytical essays. Comparative analysis of pre- and post-test scores enabled the researcher to measure changes in critical thinking performance.

## 2. Student Journals

Reflective journals submitted weekly by the experimental group served as a qualitative data source. Entries were evaluated using a rubric assessing depth of reflection, clarity of reasoning, and originality in problem-solving. Journal analysis focused on identifying patterns related to cognitive growth, such as the ability to consider multiple viewpoints, justify decisions, and evaluate their own thinking processes.

## 3. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students selected to represent diverse academic levels and demographic backgrounds. The interviews explored students' perceptions of how creative writing influenced their critical thinking. Sample interview questions included:

- *How have creative writing activities influenced your ability to think critically in other subjects?*
- *Can you describe a moment when a creative writing task helped you view a problem from a new perspective?*
- *Do you feel more confident in solving problems after participating in creative writing activities?*

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring insights and common experiences.

## 4. Teacher Observations

Throughout the intervention, the researcher conducted systematic classroom observations to document student engagement, participation in discussions, and use of critical thinking strategies during creative writing activities. A structured checklist was used to record behaviors such as questioning assumptions, making inferences, evaluating peers' ideas, and providing reasoned arguments.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using paired-sample *t*-tests to compare the critical thinking performance of the experimental and control groups. This statistical procedure



enabled the researcher to determine whether improvements in critical thinking scores differed significantly between the two groups over the course of the intervention.

Qualitative data obtained from student journals, interviews, and classroom observations were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. An iterative coding process was employed to identify recurring themes related to critical thinking development. Multiple readings of the data ensured accuracy, consistency, and reliability in theme identification. These qualitative findings provided nuanced insights into students' cognitive processes and their perceptions of how creative writing contributed to their critical thinking abilities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the appropriate school authorities. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Students were assured that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential. To protect privacy and ensure transparency, all data were anonymized, and personal identifiers were removed before analysis and reporting.

### **Results**

The study's findings draw on both quantitative data from critical thinking assessments and qualitative data from journals, interviews, and classroom observations. The results indicate clear differences between students who participated in creative writing activities and those who received traditional English instruction.

### **Quantitative Results**

#### **Pre- and Post-Test Performance**

The critical thinking assessment administered at the beginning and end of the study evaluated students' abilities to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, and form reasoned conclusions. Comparative analysis of pre- and post-test scores revealed notable distinctions between the two groups.

#### **Experimental Group (Creative Writing Condition)**

Students in the experimental group demonstrated substantial improvement in critical thinking skills. Their scores increased by an average of **25%**, corresponding to a mean gain of **8.5 points out of 40**. A paired-sample *t*-test confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant ( $t = 5.6, p < .001$ ), indicating a strong positive effect of creative writing activities on critical thinking development.

#### **Control Group (Traditional Curriculum)**



The control group showed only minimal improvement, with an average increase of **5%**, or **1.8 points out of 40**. The paired-sample *t*-test revealed that this gain was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.3, p = .19$ ), suggesting that the traditional English curriculum had little measurable impact on critical thinking growth during the study period.

### Summary of Quantitative Findings

The comparative results indicate that creative writing activities produced significantly greater gains in critical thinking than traditional English instruction. These findings highlight the potential value of integrating creative writing into English curricula to promote higher-order thinking.

### Qualitative Results (Intro)

Qualitative data collected from journals, interviews, and classroom observations offered deeper insights into the ways creative writing shaped students' critical thinking. The thematic analysis revealed several recurring patterns that illustrated how students cognitively and emotionally engaged with the creative writing tasks.

#### Theme 1: Enhanced Ability to Consider Multiple Perspectives

Many students in the experimental group reported that creative writing activities helped them better understand and appreciate different perspectives. Writing stories with complex characters and motivations required them to think critically about why characters acted the way they did, often leading to insights about how different life experiences can shape viewpoints.

One student stated, "In my story, I made one character really selfish, but I had to think about why they acted that way. It made me realize that people aren't just good or bad, they have reasons for everything they do." This insight reflects the cognitive process of considering alternative viewpoints—a key component of critical thinking.

#### Theme 2: Improved Problem-Solving Skills

Students in the experimental group also reported an increase in their ability to solve problems creatively. As part of the creative writing activities, students had to overcome obstacles in their stories, such as resolving conflicts between characters or ensuring a logical plot progression. These activities mirrored the problem-solving processes required in academic tasks, which involved identifying problems, evaluating potential solutions, and selecting the most effective course of action.

For instance, a student reflected, "When I had to figure out how my character would get out of a tricky situation, I realized that sometimes in real life, there isn't just one answer. You need to think through different possibilities before deciding what's best." This reflection underscores how the act of writing allowed students to engage in metacognitive processes—thinking about their thinking—which is critical for developing problem-solving skills.



### **Theme 3: Increased Confidence in Articulating Ideas**

The creative writing activities also fostered a sense of confidence among students in expressing their ideas. Several students mentioned that through the process of writing and revising their stories, they learned how to articulate complex ideas more clearly and confidently. They were more willing to share their thoughts in class discussions and felt empowered to present their arguments with supporting evidence, both in their creative writing and in other subject areas.

“I never thought I was good at writing, but when I started creating stories, I realized I could come up with really cool ideas and explain them well. Now I feel like I can do the same in other subjects, like history or science,” said one student.

### **Theme 4: Reflection and Self-Awareness**

The reflective journaling component of the creative writing activities played a critical role in enhancing students' self-awareness and their ability to reflect on their cognitive processes. Through weekly journal entries, students were encouraged to think about how their writing related to their own lives, and many indicated that this helped them become more aware of their thinking patterns and decision-making processes.

For example, a student commented, "Writing stories has made me more aware of how I think. Before, I didn't really pay attention to how I make decisions, but now I try to understand the reasons behind my choices. It helps me make better decisions." This type of reflection not only nurtured critical thinking but also fostered a deeper understanding of the students' own learning processes.

#### **Classroom Observations:**

Classroom observations corroborated these findings. The experimental group demonstrated more active participation in discussions, particularly when discussing character motivations, ethical dilemmas, and narrative choices. In contrast, students in the control group tended to engage more passively in class discussions and often focused on surface-level analyses of texts. During group discussions in creative writing sessions, students in the experimental group frequently challenged each other's ideas, asked questions to clarify reasoning, and built upon one another's thoughts—behaviors characteristic of critical thinking.

Observations also revealed that students in the experimental group appeared more confident in expressing their opinions and were more willing to engage in debates or offer alternative viewpoints during class discussions. These behaviors were less frequent in the control group, where students often adhered to established interpretations or relied on teacher guidance to navigate their responses.

### **Summary of Findings**



- **Quantitative:** The experimental group showed a significant improvement in critical thinking scores (25%) compared to the control group, which showed a modest improvement of 5%. This suggests that creative writing activities had a substantial impact on the development of critical thinking skills.
- **Qualitative:** The analysis of student journals, interviews, and classroom observations revealed that creative writing activities encouraged students to consider multiple perspectives, improved their problem-solving abilities, increased their confidence in articulating ideas, and fostered self-awareness through reflection.

In conclusion, the combination of creative writing activities and reflective practices appears to have a strong positive impact on students' critical thinking skills. The results suggest that engaging students in creative writing can help them develop essential cognitive skills that are transferable across various academic subjects and real-world scenarios.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that creative writing activities can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills (Javid & Sayyara, 2024). This section will explore the implications of these results in the context of existing literature, discuss the mechanisms through which creative writing may foster critical thinking, and consider the broader impact of these findings for educational practice. Furthermore, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research will be addressed.

## Implications of the Findings

The results of this study align with previous research suggesting that creative writing can stimulate cognitive processes essential for critical thinking. As noted by Harris (2010), the reflective and imaginative nature of creative writing encourages students to think more deeply about complex issues, consider diverse perspectives, and evaluate their own thought processes. In this study, the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in their ability to analyze and evaluate arguments, indicating that creative writing fosters the very skills associated with critical thinking—problem-solving, argumentation, and the ability to approach issues from multiple angles (Facione, 2015).

Moreover, the increase in critical thinking abilities was not limited to the creative writing tasks alone. Many students reported that the skills they developed through writing stories, analyzing character motivations, and reflecting on their own processes translated into their ability to engage more thoughtfully with texts in other subjects. This suggests that creative writing may serve as a powerful tool for developing transferable cognitive skills that extend beyond the English classroom. Students in the experimental group felt more confident in their ability to engage with complex ideas and communicate their thoughts clearly, a skill that is vital across disciplines (Javid,



2023). This finding echoes the work of Perkins and Salomon (1989), who argued that creative tasks that promote cognitive flexibility—such as creative writing—can have broad applications in developing critical thinking across various contexts.

### **Mechanisms of Impact**

The improvement in critical thinking among the experimental group can be attributed to several key features of the creative writing activities. One of the most prominent mechanisms is the engagement with complex problem-solving tasks. In the creative writing exercises, students were required to construct narratives, resolve conflicts, and explore characters with complex motivations. These tasks mirror the critical thinking process of evaluating multiple perspectives, considering potential outcomes, and making decisions based on evidence. As one student noted, creating stories helped them realize that problems often have more than one solution—a crucial aspect of critical thinking (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Another mechanism is the promotion of reflective thinking. The reflective journaling component of the study encouraged students to engage in metacognition—thinking about their own thinking. As students reflected on their creative process, they had the opportunity to evaluate their choices, question assumptions, and refine their ideas. This metacognitive activity not only improved their self-awareness but also encouraged them to approach problems more strategically and with a greater sense of intellectual independence. The reflective aspect of creative writing has been shown to enhance critical thinking by helping students understand the reasoning behind their ideas and actions, thus fostering deeper cognitive engagement (Wallace & Williams, 2008).

Additionally, the collaborative aspect of the narrative-building exercise likely played a significant role in promoting critical thinking. Working with peers to create a collective narrative forced students to engage in negotiation, debate, and the synthesis of diverse ideas. Collaboration in this context required students to critically evaluate their peers' ideas and integrate different perspectives into a coherent whole. This cooperative form of critical thinking has been shown to enhance the development of problem-solving skills by requiring students to articulate, defend, and reconsider their arguments in light of others' contributions (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

### **Broader Educational Implications**

The findings of this study have significant implications for English education and broader pedagogical practices. Integrating creative writing into English curricula offers students a dynamic and engaging way to develop critical thinking skills. As many contemporary educational frameworks, such as the Common Core Standards, emphasize the development of higher-order thinking skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), creative writing could be an invaluable tool for meeting these goals. By encouraging students to create their own narratives, analyze characters' decisions, and reflect on their thought processes, educators can help students build the cognitive flexibility necessary for critical thinking.



Moreover, as the study suggests, creative writing fosters an environment where students feel empowered to explore complex ideas without fear of failure. In contrast to more traditional forms of writing instruction, which may prioritize correctness over exploration, creative writing encourages students to take intellectual risks and challenge conventional ideas. This freedom to experiment with ideas may be particularly beneficial for students who struggle with more traditional academic writing or who find it difficult to express themselves in structured essay formats. As Kress (1994) points out, creative writing offers students a way to explore different facets of themselves and the world around them, which may lead to greater intellectual curiosity and a more open-minded approach to learning.

Furthermore, the study highlights the value of self-reflection in the development of critical thinking. Reflective writing, such as the journal entries used in this study, provides students with an opportunity to process their thinking and assess their learning progress. According to Dewey (1933), reflection is a key component of effective learning, as it encourages students to actively engage with their experiences and draw connections between new knowledge and existing understanding. By incorporating regular opportunities for reflection into the curriculum, educators can help students develop the skills to monitor and regulate their own thinking, which is essential for becoming independent critical thinkers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the results of this study provide valuable insights into the impact of creative writing on critical thinking, there are several limitations that should be considered. First, the study was conducted within a specific educational context (a high school in an urban district), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Future research should consider replicating this study in different educational contexts (e.g., rural schools, different grade levels, or international settings) to determine whether the results hold across diverse student populations.

Second, while the use of both quantitative and qualitative data provides a robust analysis, the study relied on self-reported data from student journals and interviews, which may be subject to bias. Future studies could incorporate additional objective measures of critical thinking, such as peer evaluations or analysis of students' written work across disciplines, to complement the self-reported data and provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of creative writing on critical thinking.

Lastly, the study's relatively short duration (10 weeks) means that it only captured the immediate effects of creative writing on critical thinking. Longitudinal studies that track the development of critical thinking skills over a longer period would provide more insight into the long-term impact of creative writing on students' cognitive abilities.



## Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the long-term effects of creative writing on critical thinking, particularly to assess whether the skills developed through creative writing persist beyond the English classroom and influence performance in other academic disciplines. Longitudinal studies could track students over multiple semesters or academic years to determine whether creative writing continues to support critical thinking development over time.

Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of different types of creative writing activities on critical thinking. For example, comparative studies could examine whether certain types of creative writing—such as poetry versus narrative writing—have differential effects on specific aspects of critical thinking, such as argumentation or problem-solving. Research that explores how creative writing intersects with other cognitive and emotional factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, could also provide a more holistic understanding of its impact on student development.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that creative writing activities can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills in English lessons. The findings reveal that engaging students in creative writing tasks, such as narrative creation and reflective journaling, encourages them to consider multiple perspectives, solve complex problems, and articulate their ideas with greater confidence. The experimental group showed a marked improvement in critical thinking abilities compared to the control group, supporting the idea that creative writing fosters cognitive flexibility and metacognitive awareness, both key components of critical thinking. These results highlight the value of incorporating creative writing into English curricula as a tool for developing transferable skills that extend beyond the language arts. As education increasingly prioritizes critical thinking across disciplines, creative writing offers a dynamic and effective approach to nurturing students' intellectual independence and problem-solving abilities, equipping them for success in academic and real-world challenges (Ismayilli et al, 2023). Future research should explore the long-term effects of creative writing on critical thinking and its broader applications.

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## A Self-Determination Theory Model of Gamified EFL Intrinsic Motivation

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**Abstract;** The growing use of gamification in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) areas has provoked important issues regarding how the design of a game can motivate and keep learners engaged for a long time. This paper presents a theoretical framework of the role of game elements grounded on self-determination theory in sustaining internal motivation in the case of collectivist EFL cultures, as opposed to previous models that considered gamification merely as a form of external reward. Through the analysis of the mediating factors of task authenticity and anxiety reduction, and the moderating variable of cultural power distance, the research offers a context-sensitive comprehension of the mechanisms through which gamified, need-supportive structures protract learner engagement. The proposed model brings into focus the importance of feedback loops, progression indicators, and social interaction in the process of enhancing perceived competence and relatedness in EFL learning. The structure additionally provides for the crafting of gamified pedagogical environments that support intrinsic motivation and sustainable learning practices. Hence, this study is a forte for theory development by incorporating self-determination theory in the EFL sector and providing a systematic basis for later investigations into the synergy between gamified learning and motivation.

**Keywords:** *Gamification; Self-Determination Theory; Intrinsic Motivation; Sustained Engagement; Language Learning Motivation; Gamified Instruction.*

### 1. Introduction

Gamification in the EFL teaching has transformed to be one of the fastest-growing pedagogical innovations that supports the integration of game elements such as point, badges, challenges,

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feedback, and rewards into the learning process in order to create a more interesting and motivating environment (Arunsirot, 2020; Deterding et al., 2011). It is one of the most common practices in EFL, and this has been made possible by the use of technology, for example, Kahoot!, Quizlet, and Padlet, which are all online platforms, and they are all providing fun and interactive ways to make students better in vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and language competence in general (Degirmencioğlu & Gılanlıoğlu, 2023; Qadri Tayeh & Malkawi, 2024; Sanemueang, 2025). The latest researchers assert the existence of several benefits that gamification can offer among which the boosting of syntactic knowledge, reflecting learning, and the lessening of anxiousness are the most emphasized ones (Huseinović, 2024; Jara Chiriboga et al., 2025). Gamification has not only been a source of fun but gamified systems have now become educational interventions based on theories of motivation such as flow and SDT, where the aim is to gradually, but surely, instill, with the help of the need satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the acquisition of the behavior, emotion, and cognition that corresponds to intrinsic engagement (Tursunbayevich, 2024; Luu et al., 2025).

Although the results are encouraging, a significant question remains to be answered that whether the gamified engagement actually intrinsic and self-sustainable or it is just fueled by external factors such as rewards and competition (Sailer & Homner, 2020). In many EFL classes around Asia, the teaching approach is predominantly teacher-centered, grammar-oriented, and exam-driven, consequently, limiting the amount of student autonomy and real communicative skills practice (Borja et al., 2015; Khaled et al., 2020; Nguyen & Boers, 2019). Such a milieu often results in compliant and extrinsically motivated learners instead of self-determined ones (Chang, 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Learners' anxiety, dependency on teacher validation, and lack of autonomy are some of the factors that lead to disengagement and ultimately to shallow learning (Lamb, 2017). Gamification is one of the methods that promise to solve these motivational deficiencies; however, some critics assert that the heavy reliance on rewards might only encourage extrinsic control rather than developing internalized, autonomous motivation (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler et al., 2017). Even though gamification was widely accepted, the majority of its designs still followed the behaviorist approach, which highlighted the compliance driven by rewards instead of the engagement driven by autonomy. This inconsistency in theory demands a new conceptualization of gamified learning based on the SDT viewpoint.

Self-determination theory (SDT), first created by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), is a very strong theory to explain that great learning environments nurture intrinsic motivation or disrupt it through satisfying the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The satisfaction of these needs leads to persistence, engagement, and well-being, which the learners experience very positively (Ryan & Deci, 2024). SDT, in the context of gamified EFL teaching, demonstrates the game mechanics specifically like leaderboards, badges, and feedback systems that may support or annoy these needs (Sailer et al., 2017). For example, leaderboards can be viewed as a source of recognition of one's capabilities and an avenue for competition, but at the

