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“Sharpening Minds: A qualitative analysis of Critical Thinking in writing and speaking activities of 2nd year Baccalaureate EFL students”

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Abstract

Critical thinking (CT) has emerged as a crucial competency for success in both academic and professional domains within contemporary education. This research attempts to explore the degree to which second-year baccalaureate students demonstrate CT abilities through their written opinion essays and verbal interactions (podcasts) on the theme of Parental Portrayals in Media. Employing a qualitative methodology and Silbey's adapted Grounded Theory, the study aims to address the primary inquiry: To what extent do students showcase critical thinking in their written compositions and spoken exchanges? The theoretical framework encompasses various perspectives on CT, emphasizing its multifaceted nature and significance in navigating complex challenges. Utilizing a twelve-hour learning situation, students participated in diverse activities, ultimately resulting in the creation of opinion essays and podcast productions. Data analysis will focus on identifying instances of CT within students' expressions, including their integration of information, reasoning, and synthesis of viewpoints considering the six stages of Bloom's Taxonomy. The outcomes of this study seek to enrich our understanding of CT development among baccalaureate students.

Keywords: critical thinking, opinion essay, podcast, EFL students, writing and speaking, qualitative approach.

Resumen

El pensamiento crítico (PC) ha emergido como una competencia crucial para el éxito tanto en los ámbitos académicos como profesionales en la educación contemporánea. Esta investigación intenta explorar el grado en que los estudiantes de segundo año de bachillerato demuestran habilidades de PC a través de sus ensayos de opinión escritos y sus interacciones verbales (podcasts) sobre el tema de las Representaciones Parentales en los Medios. Empleando una metodología cualitativa y la Teoría Fundamentada adaptada de Silbey, el estudio tiene como objetivo abordar la pregunta principal: ¿En qué medida demuestran los estudiantes pensamiento crítico en sus composiciones escritas e intercambios hablados? El marco teórico abarca diversas perspectivas sobre el PC, enfatizando su naturaleza multifacética y su importancia para enfrentar desafíos complejos. Utilizando una situación de aprendizaje de doce horas, los estudiantes participaron en diversas actividades, resultando finalmente en la creación de ensayos de opinión y producciones de podcasts. El análisis de datos se centrará en identificar instancias de PC en las expresiones de los estudiantes, incluyendo su integración de información, razonamiento y síntesis de puntos de vista considerando las seis etapas de

la Taxonomía de Bloom. Los resultados de este estudio buscan enriquecer nuestra comprensión del desarrollo del PC entre los estudiantes de bachillerato.

Palabras clave: pensamiento crítico, ensayo de opinión, podcast, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, escritura y habla, enfoque cualitativo.

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1. Introduction, Objectives and Research Question

Critical thinking (CT) has emerged as one of the most essential soft skills in contemporary education, lauded for its pivotal role in academic and professional success (Altuve, 2010; Crenshaw et al., 2011; Facione & Facione, 2013, cited in Castaño et. al., 2023). In an era characterized by rapid social transformation, CT is recognized as a fundamental cognitive resource, integral to performing tasks and solving complex problems (Halpern, 1998; Ku, 2009; Phan, 2010, cited in Castaño et. al., 2023). Over the past decades, numerous scholars and educators have advocated the necessity of teaching critical thinking to help students operate effectively within society, make better judgments, and take informed personal, business, or leadership decisions (Braun, 2004; Fisher, 2001; Kalyczynski, 2001; Willingham, 2007, cited in Stefanova et. Al., 2017).

Additionally, scholars like Khatib, Marefat, and Ahmadi (2012) and Qing (2013, cited in Stefanova, et al., 2017) argue that the EFL context provides valuable opportunities for teachers to foster critical thinking skills among students. They argue that the unique dynamics of learning a foreign language involve analytical and reflective processes, which can be used to enhance students' cognitive abilities. In this context, Castaño et al. (2023) emphasize that EFL teaching should transcend language instruction and instead create an inclusive environment where students are encouraged to engage in deep, reflective thinking about social issues. They argue that there should be no restrictions on the topics or the depth of discussion, as such limitations could delay the development of critical thinking. According to Castaño et al. (2023) by integrating critical thinking into EFL teaching, educators can help students not only improve their language skills but also become more skilled at analysing, questioning, and understanding complex social phenomena. This approach highlights the dual benefit of EFL education: enhancing linguistic proficiency and parallelly nourishing essential critical thinking skills, thus preparing students to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing world.

The motivation for this master's dissertation arises from a practical teaching experience involving a twelve-session teaching unit titled "Parental Portrayals in Media" at a public high school in a neighbourhood in Barcelona. The unit was designed to engage students in debates and discussions, culminating in the production of an opinion essay. The enthusiasm and active participation of the students in expressing their opinions both orally

and in writing sparked a curiosity to explore whether they utilized critical thinking in their written and oral expressions.

This dissertation aims to investigate the extent to which second-year baccalaureate students demonstrate critical thinking skills in their opinion essays and oral expressions. By employing a qualitative approach and utilizing Silbey's (2021, cited in Kruszynska, 2024) adapted version of Grounded Theory, this study seeks to answer the central research question:

To what extent do second-year baccalaureate students demonstrate critical thinking through their opinion essays and speaking activity about Parental Portrayals in Media?

The structure of this dissertation is organized into six sections. The first section, the introduction, presents the topic and objectives of the study. The second section provides a theoretical framework that contextualizes the study's focus. The third section details the methodology used in the research. The fourth section describes the data analysis process. The fifth section discusses the results of the analysis. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and implications of the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, a better understanding of the topic of Critical Thinking in EFL will be provided throughout the recollection of some of the existing literature about the topic. The following section is divided into three different main aspect which frame the research: the definition of Critical Thinking and CT in writing and speaking language.

2.1 The definition of CT

Certainly, there is a notable lack of consensus on a definitive definition of CT. While researching the concept and its various definitions, it became evident that different researchers offer diverse interpretations of CT. This divergence in viewpoints means that a universally accepted definition of CT remains elusive.

From a psychological standpoint, CT is often perceived as a set of mental and cognitive activities encompassing reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and problem-solving. Scholars like Warnick and Inch (1994) describe CT as an “ability to explore a problem, question, or situation; integrate all the available information about it; arrive at a solution or hypothesis; and justify one’s position” (p. 11). This definition underscores the process of integrating information and arriving at justified conclusions.

Similarly, Halpern (2013) defines CT as a "type of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating probabilities, and making decisions" (cited in Castaño et. al., 2023, p. 2). Halpern (1997) further elaborates that CT involves "the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It describes thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed" (cited in Alsaleh, p. 21). This perspective highlights the strategic and goal-oriented nature of CT, emphasizing its role in achieving favourable outcomes through deliberate and reasoned thinking.

Five years earlier, Paul (1992) provided a comprehensive definition, describing CT as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" (cited in Alsaleh, p. 22). This definition stresses the disciplined and active nature of CT, focusing on the evaluation and application of information to guide beliefs and actions.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993, as cited in Castaño et. al., 2023), advocate for a philosophical approach to understanding CT. They argue that a deep comprehension of the thinking process is essential for evaluating beliefs, claims, and actions effectively. According to them, critical thinking cannot be divorced from its philosophical roots, as it requires a detailed understanding of the context in which reasoning occurs. They emphasize the significance of contextual knowledge in facilitating better critical thinking outcomes. By considering the broader context, individuals can more accurately assess information, recognize biases, and make informed judgments.

In a similar line, Facione (1990, cited in Castaño et. al., 2023), provides a comprehensive definition of critical thinking. He describes it as a conscientious and self-regulatory cognitive process aimed at interpreting, analysing, and evaluating information. Facione's definition underscores the active and reflective nature of critical thinking, highlighting its role in fostering intellectual autonomy and sound decision-making.

These perspectives collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of critical thinking. While Bereiter and Scardamalia stress the importance of philosophical inquiry and contextual understanding, Facione's definition encapsulates the cognitive processes involved in critical thinking. Together, they offer valuable insights into the complexity of critical thinking and its significance in navigating an increasingly complex world.

Overall, while there are varying definitions of CT, common themes include the emphasis on reasoning, problem-solving, and the strategic use of cognitive skills as well as the importance of contextual knowledge. These definitions collectively contribute to an understanding of CT as a multifaceted cognitive process essential for effective decision-making and problem-solving in various contexts.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of CT provided by Warnick and Inch (1994) will be implemented. They describe CT as the ability to thoroughly examine a problem, question, or situation; integrate all pertinent information; develop a solution or hypothesis; and justify one's conclusions. This definition emphasizes on identification and understanding of the context in which the problem is occurring before arriving to a conclusion and opinion. In addition, this definition aligns with the higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2010) since it emphasizes analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as key components of advanced cognitive processes.

Bloom's Taxonomy, a widely recognized framework in education, categorizes cognitive skills into six levels: Knowledge “Remember”, Comprehension “Understand”, Application “Apply”, Analysis “Analyze”, “Evaluation” and “Create” (Figure 1). Parallely, Warnick and Inch include these higher levels focusing on the abilities to analyse (examine a problem or situation), synthesize (integrate information), and evaluate (justify one’s conclusions). By adopting this definition, the study aims to investigate how these critical thinking skills are present in both speaking and writing works of Baccalaureate students.

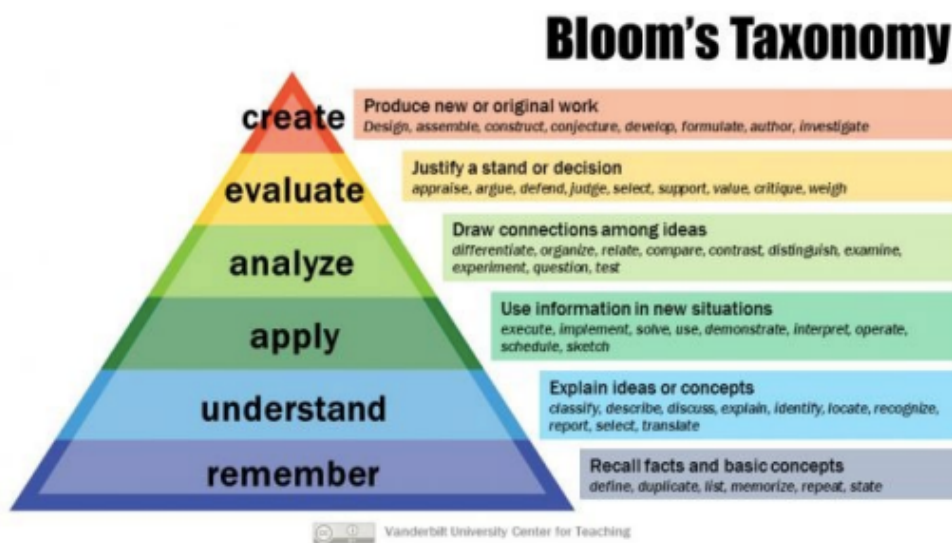


Figure 1. Graphic of the six levels or categories of cognitive skills of the revised Bloom’s taxonomy provided by the Vanderbilt University Centre of Teaching (Armstrong, 2010).

2.2 CT in written and speaking activities

According to a study conducted by Alagozlu (2007) titled “Critical Thinking and Voice in EFL Writing”, about international students when expressing criticality in English academic essays and how their cultural backgrounds influence their writing, shows several problematic areas. For instance, insufficient subject knowledge, a lack of authorial 'voice,' which can obstruct students' expression of critical thinking. In addition, Alagozlu (2007) interviewed students and the interviews revealed a tendency to refrain from articulating their own claims or viewpoints due to a fear of invalidation or lack of appreciation. Instead, students often just reuse information they have been taught without

offering critical analysis or commentary, to question or engage critically with course material may stem from the traditional educational systems in their respective cultural contexts, which prioritize rote learning over independent thinking. Despite potentially harbouring initial inclinations toward critical thinking, students' dispositions are often stifled by the educational structures they encounter throughout their academic journey. In summary, international students often face challenges in expressing criticality in their English academic essays, influenced by factors such as limited subject knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and the educational systems they are accustomed to. These challenges underscore the importance of fostering an environment that encourages independent thought and critical engagement within academic writing contexts.

As for the speaking activities, CT plays a crucial role in enhancing EFL students' speaking abilities. According to Ramezani, Larsari, and Kiasi (2016, cited in Andania, et al., 2024, p.117)), students who exhibit strong critical thinking skills tend to outperform their peers in speaking classrooms. This suggests that the ability to think critically is closely linked to better oral communication skills in an EFL context.

Similarly, Rahmawati (2021) underscores the importance of mastering speaking skills, noting that despite its significance, many students struggle with speaking English. Based on her research and teaching experiences, she identifies a major issue: students' difficulties in generating ideas during the speaking process. This often results in students being unable to develop their thoughts coherently, leading to fragmented and underdeveloped speech. Rahmawati (2021) concludes that this challenge is largely due to a lack of critical thinking skills. She argues that successful speaking ability is influenced by various factors, with critical thinking being a key component.

Developing this further, it becomes evident that fostering critical thinking skills in students can significantly improve their ability to articulate ideas clearly and effectively in spoken English. Critical thinking enables students to analyse and organize their thoughts, leading to more coherent and persuasive speech. This highlights the need for EFL teaching strategies that not only focus on linguistic competence but also on enhancing students' cognitive abilities to think critically.

3. Data Collection Process

In this section, an in-depth description of the context in which the evidence was gathered will be presented. This will include a thorough description of the specific target group who participated in the study, highlighting any relevant background information that influenced their involvement. The section will also elaborate on the ethical procedures that were meticulously followed to ensure the integrity of the research process, such as obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality. Furthermore, this section will tackle the limitations that emerged during the research process. By providing this comprehensive overview, the section aims to offer a clear understanding of the research context, as well as its participants and data collection process.

3.1 Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a public high school situated in a neighbourhood of Barcelona, Spain. The participants were fifteen second-year Baccalaureate students, aged between 16 and 17 years old. These students attended three 60-minute English lessons each week. The lessons were taught by the author—a Master's student at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)—alongside another Master's student from the UAB. Both were undertaking their English placement as part of their Master's program during the data collection period.

The participants engaged in a comprehensive twelve-hour learning module spread over two months, focusing on the theme "Parental Portrayals in Media." The module incorporated a variety of speaking and writing activities, although it did not include explicit instruction in critical thinking. The structure of the learning module was designed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the topic and consisted of the following phases:

1. Introduction: In this initial phase, students were introduced to a range of authentic materials depicting various family types present in contemporary society. The primary activity involved creating an oral presentation in which students analysed TV show characters and their respective family situations. This activity aimed to enhance students' observational and descriptive skills, as well as their ability to convey information clearly and effectively in spoken English.

2. Body: During this phase, students were provided with an article discussing the evolution of the concept of "nuclear families." They were then tasked with creating a podcast video in groups. In this podcast, they summarized the article and concluded with their personal opinions on the topic. This activity was designed to improve students' abilities to synthesize information from written texts and express their viewpoints coherently in spoken form. It also encouraged collaborative learning and critical engagement with the material.

3. Final Product: For the final task, students were required to write an opinion essay in the format of an email. This essay was a response to a hypothetical email from a dissenting listener of their podcast. The objective was for students to articulate and defend their viewpoints in writing, demonstrating their ability to engage in persuasive and reflective writing. This task aimed to assess their skills in constructing well-reasoned arguments and responding to differing perspectives.

3.2 Data Limitations

It is crucial to recognize various types of research and data limitations that could have affected the findings and therefore prevent generalizations from being made. The study's sample size is an important limitation because it only consists of six second-year baccalaureate students from a public high school in Barcelona. It's possible that the small sample size won't offer an accurate picture of EFL students. Furthermore, the majority of participants belonged to the same age and class group, which limited the study's ability to include a variety of viewpoints. The analysis may have been further constrained by the use of opinion articles and podcast transcriptions as primary data sources. Furthermore, considering that the author serves as both a researcher and a teacher, biases may have been incorporated into the data collection process.

3.3 Ethical Procedures

To ensure the ethical integrity of the research on critical thinking (CT) abilities in second-year baccalaureate students, necessary authorizations were obtained from the school's headmaster and secretary before data collection began. Additionally, an email was sent to the placement tutor and school administration requesting permission to use the students' written opinion essays and podcast videos while ensuring their anonymity to protect their

privacy. Data were anonymized and securely stored, accessible only to authorized personnel, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with ethical standards.

4. Methodology

Given that the previous section provided a thorough description on the type of data collected and its context, this section aims to define the methodology that will be employed to explain the theoretical framework and methods applied to analyse the data. In this section, the methodology approaches used in data collection and data analysis will be thoroughly described. This section will cover the research design, sampling technique and data collection instruments and the theoretical framework sustaining the analysis.

4.2 Methodology in data collection and analysis

Given that this dissertation's research is conducted without any pre-hypotheses or pre-judgments, the data will be examined through the lens of CT, while ensuring an unbiased approach. To achieve this, the study will utilize Sibley's (2021, cited in Kruszynska, 2024) adapted version of Grounded Theory as the analytical framework. Grounded Theory is a qualitative approach that fits well with this study because it lets theories develop directly from the data, without being influenced by preconceived ideas or hypotheses. Its flexibility and adaptability make it perfect for studying complex issues like critical thinking in educational settings.

Sibley's (2021) adaptation of Grounded Theory, as cited in Kruszynska (2024), refines this methodology by incorporating specific strategies to ensure the rigorous application of CT throughout the data analysis process. This adaptation prioritizes the use of empirical data as the primary source for generating codes, thereby ensuring that the analysis remains closely tied to the evidence.

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study will utilize a line-by-line coding technique to analyse both the transcribed podcast videos and the opinion essays. This method entails examining each line of text individually and creating codes that encapsulate the main idea presented. Consequently, a codebook for the opinion essays and the video transcriptions (see Appendix 9.1 and 9.2) was developed to compile the codes, their descriptions, the students' quotes, the number of students sharing the same code, and its connection to Bloom's Taxonomy domains and measurable verbs. The goal of this detailed coding

process is to ensure that each data segment is thoroughly understood and accurately represented.

In the data collection phase of this master dissertation, opinion essays were obtained from a cohort of second-year Baccalaureate students, with 18 out of 19 students submitting their essays. These essays were written as part of the trimestral evaluation tests, which encompassed reading and listening components alongside the writing task. For the writing segment, students were tasked with composing an opinion essay within a constrained time frame of 20 minutes, following two drafting sessions conducted prior to the trimestral evaluation.

Given the limitation of time for essay composition and the volume of essays collected a systematic sampling approach was adopted to facilitate manageable analysis. Consequently, it was decided to focus on the work of two specific groups, each comprising three students. As mentioned in the previous subsection "Context and Participants," the students engaged in two key activities that formed the basis of the data analysed: the opinion essay, which was completed individually, and the podcast video, which was a group effort. The selection of these groups was based on a combination of their language proficiency levels, which ranged from A2 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the grades they received on their opinion essays.

Group A consisted of two male students and one female student. This group had an average writing grade of 7.4 out of 10, indicating a relatively higher level of writing proficiency among its members. On the other hand, Group B was composed entirely of three male students, with an average writing grade of 4 out of 10, reflecting a lower level of writing proficiency.

For the speaking activity data collection, students were organized into groups of three, tasked with recording themselves in a simulated podcast format. This activity entailed summarizing an article discussing the evolution of the "nuclear family" and expressing their individual opinions on the subject matter. Each group was given two days to send a draft of their scripts, record their discussions, and submit a video lasting between 3 to 5 minutes. From, four groups who submitted their video, two specific groups were selected for analysis, coinciding with the students whose opinion essays were chosen for

examination. This deliberate selection aimed to ensure continuity in the data analysis process, allowing for a comparative study of critical thinking skills manifested in both written and spoken expressions within the same students' groups.

Furthermore, since this study's aim is to explore the presence of CT in writing and speaking activities, the six categories of Bloom's Taxonomy will be used as analytical domains. This framework will guide the categorization and interpretation of the codes, allowing for an in-depth examination of the cognitive processes involved. By aligning the analysis with Bloom's Taxonomy, the study aims to identify and evaluate the different levels of critical thinking exhibited in the participants' written and spoken outputs. This approach ensures a systematic and rigorous assessment of CT, enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the findings.

5. Analysis and Results

5.1 Students' Opinion Essays

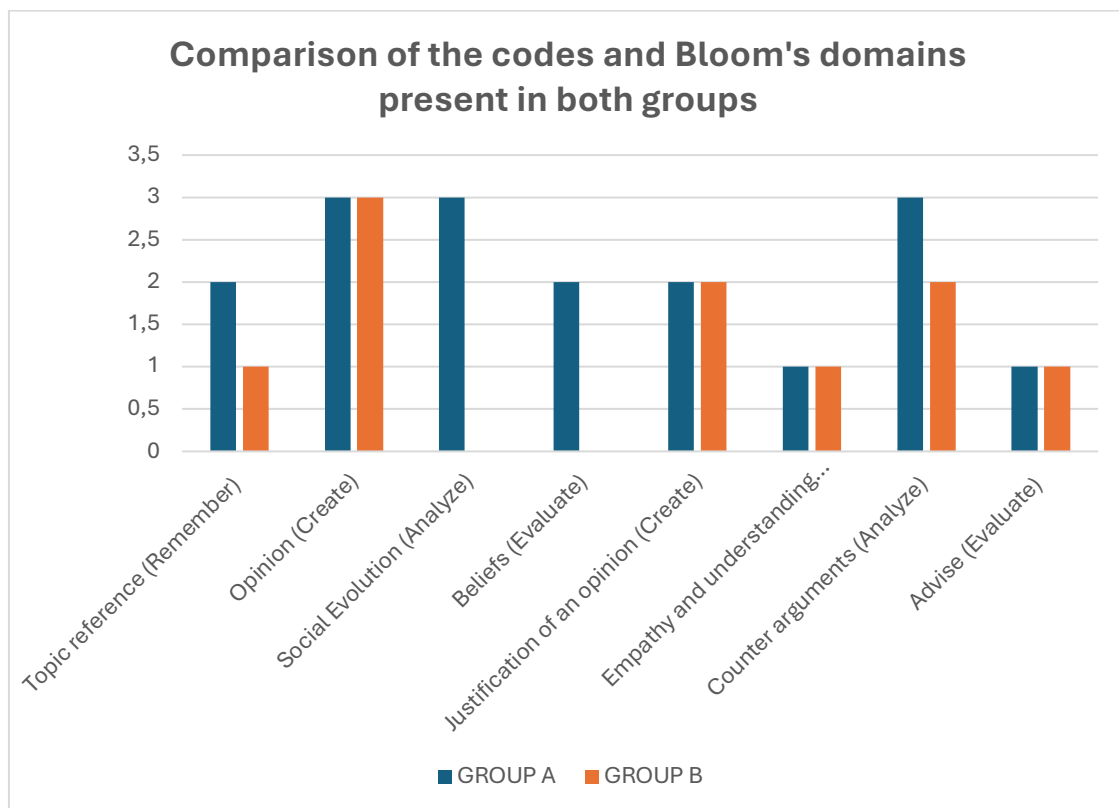


Figure 2: Representative graphic of the categories and their domains present in both groups' opinion essays.

Figure 2 offers a detailed comparison of the line-by-line codes and Bloom's domains exhibited in the opinion essays of Group A and Group B students. The analysis reveals that the most frequently repeated domains in both groups were Remember, Create, Analyze, and Evaluate. Specifically, the Remember domain involves recalling facts and stating concepts, while the Create domain focuses on producing new or original work. The Analyze domain is characterized by drawing connections among ideas, and the Evaluate domain emphasizes justifying a stand or decision. Notably, the domain Apply which concerns the use of information in new situations, was absent in the opinion essays of both groups.

As illustrated in Figure 2, in the category of the code Topic Reference, in Group A 2 students made specific references to the email they have received (see Image 1). Nevertheless, only 1 student from Group made these references, suggesting that Group b has a lesser ability to recall and connect with the topic.

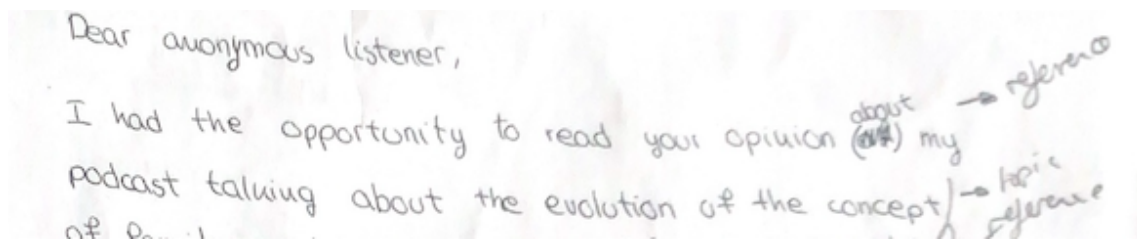


Image 1. An example of line-by-line code of “Topic Reference” from the opinion essay of Student 1.

The code “Opinion”, related to the Create domain, was created for the lines where students expressed their opinions and point of views. The 3 students from each group articulated their opinion about the received email (see Image 2). This is an indication that all of the students from both groups – regardless of their group’s average mark – voiced their opinion about the topic and the email.

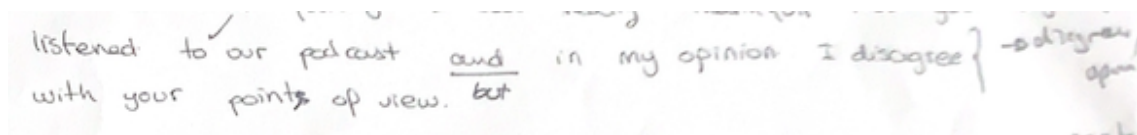


Image 2. An example of line-by-line code of “Opinion” from the opinion essay of Student 3 (Group A)

The code “Social Evolution”, related to Evaluate domain, was created for the lines were students referred to the argument of societal changes over time since it shows an interesting level of critical thinking and society awareness. In this case, only the students in group A were able to make a reference to the past, while Group B avoided mentioning this argument resulting into a gap in their argumentation skills.

Furthermore, when expressing their “Beliefs” (Evaluate), two students from Group A took a stand and articulated their personal beliefs. However, Group B did not demonstrate any example in this code category, indicating an inability to demonstrate evaluative skills.

As for the “Justify their Opinion” code related to the Create domain, two students from each group provided arguments in order to support their opinions (see Image 3). Both groups demonstrated a balanced level of skill when creating arguments without taking into account their average marks.

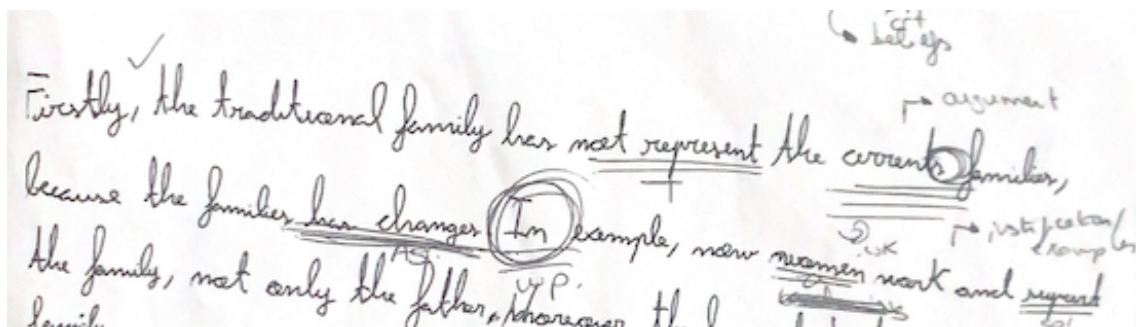


Image 3. An example of line-by-line coding of “Justify their opinion” from the opinion essay of Student 6 (Group B).

In addition, some students demonstrated a level of “Empathy and Understanding” (see Image 4) with the dissenting listener’s opinion where they expressed an ability to recognize and identify different point of views. Both groups had only one student each demonstrating a level of empathetic understanding towards other opinions.

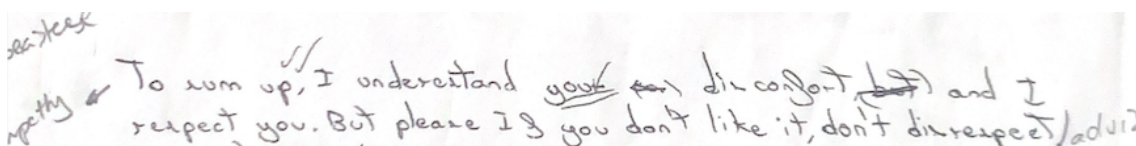


Image 4. An example of line-by-line coding of “Empathy and understanding” from the opinion essay of Student 6 (Group B).

The code “Counterarguments” related to the Analyse domain was created for the lines where students used arguments to strengthen their own positions. In this category, all 3 students from Group A presented counterarguments showing skills in analyzing and debating different views (see Image 5). In contrast, group B had two students presenting counterarguments.

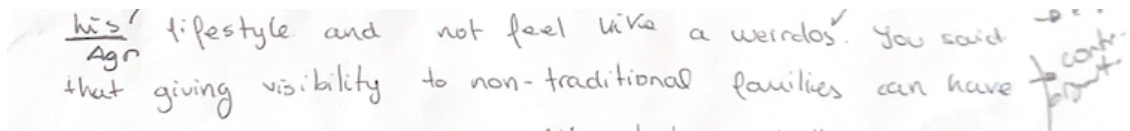


Image 5. An example of line-by-line coding of “Counterarguments” from the opinion essay of Student 3 (Group A).

Finally, the code “Advice” (Evaluate) was created since in each group one student provided advice to the dissenting listener (see Image 6). This demonstrates that one student from each group was able to formulate and propose solutions.

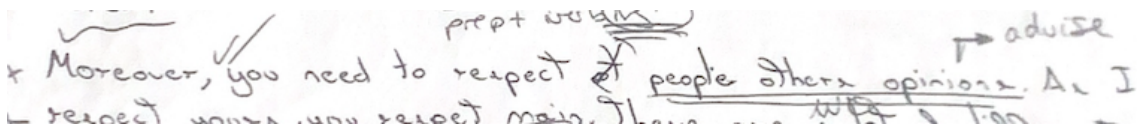


Image 6. An example of line-by-line coding of “Advice” from the opinion essay of Student 5 (Group B).

With all factors considered, Figure 2 shows that as compared to Group B, Group A not only interacts consistently and in a wider range of categories, but also more successfully uses higher-order thinking abilities like analysis and evaluation. This difference indicates that Group A students have a better developed capacity for critical thought and a deeper level of engagement with the subject matter, which is consistent with their higher average results.

5.2 Students' Podcasts

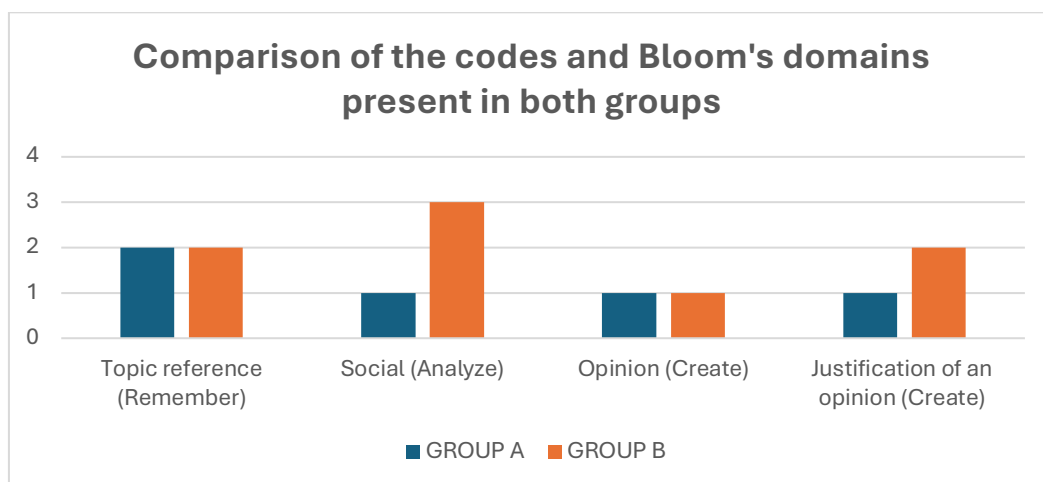


Figure 3: Representative graphic of the categories and their domains present in both groups' podcast transcripts.

Figure 3 presents the codes and Bloom's Taxonomy domains related to the codes that are displayed in the podcast transcripts of Group A and Group B, Groups A and B are rated on four different codes/categories: Topic Reference (Remember), Social Evolution (Analyze), Opinion (Create), and Justification of an Opinion (Create).

Both groups exhibit comparable levels of demonstration of the code "Topic Reference" (Remember), with two students from Group A and two students from Group B mentioning the subject of the email they received. This suggests that there is no significant difference between the two groups' recollection and response to the subject matter (see Appx. D). As for the "Social Evolution" (Analyze) code, there is a significant difference between the groups. While Group A had two students referencing the social evolution, Group B showed a higher demonstration of this code since all the students from the group used social evolution as an argument to discuss their point of views (see Appx. C). Thus, this suggests that despite the lower average mark of Group B, they demonstrated a stronger ability to make arguments in a speaking activity.

Furthermore, as we can see in Figure 3, two students from each group articulated their points of view, with the code "Opinions (Create)" appearing in both groups equally. This similarity shows that all students feel equally at ease expressing their opinions and forming arguments, independent of the average mark in their group. This leads to the "Justification of an Opinion" (Create)" a code which appears two times in Group A, while

the 3 students from Group B added more justifications to their opinions which indicated that Group b students have higher skills in constructing arguments.

Overall, Figure 3 indicates that in a speaking activity Group B is more prevalent in thinking critically and opinion justification, whereas Group A consistently engages in all categories. Despite their overall lower average results, this implies that Group B students have gained a decent ability to understand societal developments and defend their claims.

6. Discussion

This section aims to connect the study's findings with the theoretical framework presented at the beginning of this dissertation. The framework provides a comprehensive description of Critical Thinking (CT) in the context of EFL, focusing on both speaking and writing activities. The results of the study, as detailed in the Analysis and Results section, offer several interesting insights that can be directly linked to the theoretical perspectives on CT. This discussion will elaborate on these connections, illustrating how the empirical findings support and extend the theoretical understanding of CT in EFL education.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, Warnick and Inch's (1994) definition of CT was adopted for this study due to its emphasis on analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information—core components of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) as per Bloom's Taxonomy. The study's results from the students' opinion essays and podcasts reflect a practical application of these HOTS. For example, the frequent presence of the Analyze and Evaluate domains in both groups' essays indicates that students are actively engaging in CT processes such as justifying decisions and connecting ideas, which aligns with Warnick and Inch's description of CT. This alignment demonstrates that the students are effectively employing critical thinking skills in their writing and speaking activities.

6.1 Students' Opinion Essays

According to Alagozlu (2007), EFL students normally face difficulties and challenges when expressing CT in their writing works because of cultural and educational

backgrounds. Seemingly, the findings from the opinion essays corroborate this idea. As illustrated in the previous section of Analysis and Results, when comparing the codes and Bloom's domains in both groups' opinion essays there is a significant imbalanced level of engagement in different cognitive processes. While Group A, who has a higher average mark demonstrated a balanced performance in all codes, Group B only shows performance in specific codes and domains such as the Social Evolution and the domain Analyze and Justification of an Opinion and the domain Create. Hence, Group A, with higher average marks, demonstrated a bigger range of CT skills such as referencing society changes over time and openly expressing their beliefs. This suggests that students from Group A could have had better critical thinking strategies due to their cultural and educational background.

Nevertheless, even though Group B's essays demonstrated fewer instances of CT skills, they still made an effort and displayed their opinions and its justifications. Furthermore, Group B both groups are characterised by the absence of the Apply domain which indicated a struggle to use new information in new situations. This finding aligns with Alagozlu's (2007) and Rahmawati (2021) observation that EFL students tend to reuse information previously taught, highlighting the need for pedagogical strategies to enhance independent thinking skills.

6.2 Students' Podcasts

Ramezani, Larsari, and Kiasi (2016) and Rahmawati (2021) underscored the crucial role of CT in enhancing speaking abilities within EFL contexts. The analysis of the podcasts reveals significant differences between the two groups. Despite having lower overall average marks, Group B showed strong abilities in constructing and justifying arguments, as indicated by the frequent appearance of the "Social Evolution" and "Justification of Opinion" codes. Group B's active engagement in analyzing social issues aligns with the Analyze category in Bloom's Taxonomy and Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) emphasis on contextual understanding. This finding challenges Rahmawati's (2021) assertion that students struggle to generate ideas during the speaking process. Instead, it suggests that Group B students are more proficient at verbalizing their critical thoughts in a speaking context. This may be attributed to the dynamic and spontaneous nature of the activity, which appears to create a more **encouraging** environment for expressing critical thinking.

In addition, the engagement that both groups showed when creating and justifying opinion (with Group B higher levels in justification) emphasizes on Facione's (1990) belief on the importance of synthesis and evaluation as key components of CT skills.

Overall, Group A's consistent engagement across all categories in their podcasts indicates a well-rounded development of critical thinking skills, supporting the notion that these students are more proficient in analyzing and evaluating information regardless of the medium. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that critical thinking involves not just cognitive skills but also the ability to contextually understand and navigate various scenarios (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

7. Conclusion

In light of the findings presented in the previous sections, this study's aim was to explore the extent to which second-year baccalaureate students demonstrate critical thinking through their opinion essays and speaking activity which was a podcast video. After analysing the sampled opinion essays and podcast transcriptions using line-by-line coding, some interesting insights were found which shed light on the presence of critical thinking in an EFL context. The response to the research question "To what extent do second-year baccalaureate students demonstrate critical thinking through their opinion essays about Parental Portrayals in Media?" Will be provided in this conclusive section of this dissertation.

The analysis revealed that second-year baccalaureate students display critical thinking to a considerable extent in their opinion essays. Students displayed a strong ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. The frequent appearance of these domains in both groups' essays indicates that students are actively engaging in critical thinking processes such as justifying decisions and connecting ideas. The students practiced integrating and justifying their opinions, reflecting a thorough examination of the topic. This practice aligns with the definition of critical thinking by Warnick and Inch (1994), emphasizing the importance of exploring a problem expansively and arriving at a well-justified conclusion. The students' balanced engagement across various cognitive categories in Bloom's Taxonomy indicates a comprehensive use of critical thinking skills. This was particularly evident in the frequent presence of the Analyze and Evaluate

domains, suggesting that students are capable of engaging in sophisticated cognitive tasks.

The difference between the performances of the two groups suggests that while some students excel in structured, reflective activities like writing, others thrive in more spontaneous, interactive contexts like speaking. Group A showed a more balanced and higher level of critical engagement in their essays, while Group B, regardless of their lower average mark, demonstrated significant analytical skills, particularly in the podcast activity.

The findings underscore the importance of fostering critical thinking in both writing and speaking activities within EFL education. Plus, these findings align with the theoretical framework on critical thinking, which emphasizes the multifaceted nature of CT involving reasoning, problem-solving, and contextual understanding. The students' ability to engage in higher-order thinking processes and their balanced use of cognitive skills reflect the comprehensive nature of critical thinking as described by scholars such as Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) and Facione (1990).

In conclusion, second-year baccalaureate students are effectively demonstrating critical thinking through their opinion essays about Parental Portrayals in Media. Their ability to analyze, evaluate, and create well-reasoned arguments showcases their proficiency in higher-order thinking skills.

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9. Appendixes

9.1 Appx. A: The email of the dissenting listener the students have received in order to do their opinion essay.

Subject: Dissenting Opinion on Podcast Regarding Changing Portrayals of Family on Television

Dear Podcast Hosts,

I recently had the opportunity to listen to your podcast on the evolution of the concept of family on television over the past few decades. I appreciate your opinion on this topic, however, I personally disagree with your stated viewpoints.

First of all, as a listener, I am concerned about the glorification of non-traditional and unconventional family structures. This trend of showing alternative family models on television (such as same-sex couples, single-parent families and divorced parents, among others) disturbs me, as it seems that traditional values and structures are disappearing.

In my opinion, the traditional family unit, consisting of a heterosexual couple and their biological children, is the basic pillar of society. It provides stability, structure and moral guidance to future generations. Therefore, by modifying this model, television networks are destroying the fundamental values that have sustained societies for centuries.

Moreover, the normalization of non-traditional family structures on television can have damaging effects on viewers, especially if they are very young. By showing them portrayals of unconventional family dynamics, we run the risk of confusing and disrupting their understanding of family and social norms. The emphasis on diversity and inclusion in family portrayals often seems forced. It seems as if television producers are more concerned with fitting into what is considered "politically correct" than with accurately portraying the realities of family life.

To sum up, while I respect your right to express your opinion on this topic, I strongly disagree with what you said in your podcast. I hope that future debates will take into account the views of those who defend traditional family values and recognize the importance of preserving them in our society.

Thank you for considering my opinion.

Sincerely,
Anonymous listener

9.2 Appx. B: Code Book Opinion Essays

GROUP A WRITINGS (AVERAGE MARK 7.4/10)				
Code	Description	Example, quotes	Number of students	Bloom's Taxonomy Domains (measurable verbs)
Topic reference	Students make a reference to the email they have received	Student 1: "I had the opportunity to read your opinion about my podcast talking about the evolution of the concept of family [...]" Student 3: "I had the opportunity to read your email about the traditional family."	2	Remember (define, state, recall)
Opinion	Students give their opinion either agreeing or disagreeing with the email they have received.	Student 3: "[...] in my opinion I disagree with your point of view" Student 2: "In my opinion, I am glad about your comments, but I don't share your way of thinking about this topic" Student 1: "But I strongly disagree with your point of view."	3	Create (argue, assess, conclude, judge, justify)
Social Evolution	Students make a reference to how society has been changing throughout the time	Student 1: "For example, they are more respected since the past few decades." Student 2: "That the way of seeing how the family is now is more different than in the past. If you see a family now in the park for example, they are	3	Analyze (categorize, debate, contrast, compare, differentiate, distinguish, question)

		<p>more different than how it was in the past.”</p> <p>Student 3: “[...] traditional family has been the structure in our society. Nowadays, the structure and the definition of family is changing”</p>		
Beliefs	Students take a stand and express their beliefs	<p>Student 2: “I think you are wrong when you describe how a traditional family has to be.”</p> <p>Student 1: “But I think the traditional values aren’t disappearing. Quite the opposite, they are evolving.”</p>	2	Evaluate (create)
Justification of an opinion	Students use different arguments to justify their opinion.	<p>Student 1: “In my opinion, everyone has the right to love someone and everyone has the right to create a family. There are different ways to love, I mean, it isn’t necessary to be biologically connected [...]”</p> <p>Student 3: “I disagree with your opinion. All types of families need a place in this world.”</p>	2	Create (support, argue)
Empathy and understanding	Students express their empathy and understanding with the opinion of their podcast listener who disagrees with their podcast	<p>Student 1: “I don’t share the same opinion but I will respect your right to express your point of view.” / “I know that you are concerned about non-traditional unconventional family [...]”</p>	1	Understand (identify, recognize)

Counter Arguments	Students give counter arguments in order to support their point of view	<p>Student 1: “Moreover, present different structures of non-traditional families can help children to understand the different ways to love people”</p> <p>Student 2: “In addition, Tv show are doing a good job because in the programs they show that not only there is one type of family”</p> <p>Student 3: “You said that giving visibility to non-traditional families can have damaging effects on our kids, but you don’t have any scientific evidence to prove it.”</p>	3	Analyze (debate, compare, analyze)
Advise	Students give some advice to the dissenting listener.	Student 3: “I say you need evolve about what you have said/think”	1	Evaluate (create, formulate, propose)

GROUP B – WRITINGS (AVERAGE MARK 4/10)				
Code	Description	Example, quotes	Number of students	Bloom’s Taxonomy Domains (measurable verbs)
Topic reference	Students make a reference to the email they have received	Student 5: “I have received your mail about your concern with the topic expressed in my podcast.”	1	Remember (define, state, recall)
Opinion	Students give their opinion	Student 4: “Thank you for your	3	Create (argue, assess, conclude, judge, justify)

	either agreeing or disagreeing with the email they have received.	opinion but I totally disagree with your point of view.” / “I strongly disagree with almost all of your comments.” Student 5: “I do not stand with you on this topic. I believe that non-traditional family is more important in current society” Student 6: “I respect your opinion about the evolution of family portrayals [...]”		
Social Evolution	Students make a reference to how society has been changing throughout the time		0	Analyze (categorize, debate, contrast, compare, differentiate, distinguish, question)
Beliefs	Students take a stand and express their beliefs		0	Evaluate (create)
Justification of an opinion	Students use different arguments to	Student 6: “The traditional family does not represent	2	Create (support, argue)

	justify their opinion.	the current families, because the families have changed. For example, now women work [...] not only the father.” Student 4: “Therefore, I disagree that televisión destroys the society because they only search [...]”		
Empathy and understanding	Students express their empathy and understanding with the opinion of their podcast listener who disagrees with their podcast	Student 5: “[...] as a creator of a podcast, I understand you.” Student 4: “I respect your point of view [...]” / “I understand your discomfort and I respect you.”	1	Understand (identify, recognize)
Counter Arguments	Students give counter arguments in order to support their point of view	Student 4: “[...] if the family loves each other and educates correctly it’s alright.” Student 6: “[...] the non-	2	Analyze (debate, compare, analyze)

		traditional family does not represent a problem, because is the reality of this society”		
Advise	Students give some advice to the dissenting listener.	Student 5: “[...] you need to respect other people’s opinion. As I respect yours, you respect mine.” / “[...]you need to understand that we live in a country with freedom of speech.”	1	Evaluate (create, formulate, propose)

9.3 Appx. C: Code Book Podcast Videos

GROUP A - PODCAST VIDEOS TRANSCRIPTIONS			
Code	Description	Example, quotes	Bloom’s Taxonomy Domains (measurable verbs)
Topic reference	Students make a reference to the article they have read	<p>“We have taken this information from three different articles”</p> <p>“First of all, I am going to talk about the definition of nuclear families”</p>	Remember (define, state, recall)

Social Evolution	Students make a reference to how society has been changing throughout the time	“It is not the same as in the past and it is possible that in the future the definition will change.”	Analyze (categorize, debate, contrast, compare, differentiate, distinguish, question)
Opinion	Students give their opinion either agreeing or disagreeing with the email they have received.	“In my opinion, I agree that [...]”	Create (argue, assess, conclude, judge, justify)
Justification of an opinion	Students use different arguments to justify their opinion.	“In my opinion, I agree that families shouldn’t need to be biological because families can be your school group.”	Create (support, argue)

GROUP B - PODCAST VIDEOS TRANSCRIPTIONS			
Code	Description	Example, quotes	Bloom’s Taxonomy Domains (measurable verbs)
Topic reference	Students make a reference to the article they have read	“We have taken this information from three different articles”	Remember (define, state, recall)

		“First of all, I am going to talk about the definition of nuclear families”	
Social Evolution	Students make a reference to how society has been changing throughout the time	<p>“[...] for understanding the interracial families or gay couples, I go to the past for understanding the evolution.”</p> <p>“[...] the interracial families or gay couples in the 60s, well, in the Cold War, the traditional family was like, well, it’s something[...].”</p> <p>“And in the 90s, the gay couples appeared in the TV shows[...].”</p>	Analyze (categorize, debate, contrast, compare, differentiate, distinguish, question)
Opinion	Students give their opinion either agreeing or disagreeing with the email they have received.	“In my opinion, I agree that [...]”	Create (argue, assess, conclude, judge, justify)
Justification of an opinion	Students use different arguments to justify their opinion.	<p>“In my opinion, I agree that families shouldn’t need to be biological because families can be your school group.”</p> <p>“I think that a family doesn’t need to be</p>	Create (support, argue)

		traditional, it needs to be something real [...]”	
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9.4 Appx. D: Transcriptions of the podcast videos of Group A and B

TRANSCRIPTION GROUP A

Hello dear listeners, we are Tao and today we are going to talk about nuclear families. We have taken this information from three different articles. First of all, I am going to talk about the definition of nuclear families.

All time the definition of nuclear families has been changing. Nowadays we have a lot of definitions and a lot of types of families like couples, monopartial families, blended families, etc. And one definition of families can be the families made up of people who love each other.

In my opinion, the definition of family depends on the people. It is not the same as in the past and it is possible that in the future the definition will change. Also, the traditional nuclear and biological family exists the concept of a chosen family.

It is made of friends, same-sex parents and so on. Basically, people who have an important role in a person's life. Actually, in the TV series Friends, we can see an example of a chosen family.

In my opinion, I agree that families shouldn't need to be biological because families can be your school group. I mean people with whom you can feel comfortable. In the past, TV programs used to show what a family should be like.

Nowadays, TV programs want to promote it. From my perspective, thanks to the TV programs, people have been able to express themselves without being judged. Because since they have seen it on TV, they will not feel that at all.

And that's all. Thank you for listening to us. If you have any questions, comment below.

TRANSCRIPTION GROUP B

Hello everyone, and welcome to the Civilized Podcast. (0:05) A podcast where we talk about everything you want. (0:09) We are Oscar, Michael, and you.

Hello there, nice to meet you. Hi everyone! Ok guys, well, first of all, as we said in the past and in years, the family has changed. The traditional family is being left aside for more diverse ones.

Do you think it's good to leave traditional families aside and give more attention to more diverse ones? Well, I think that having diverse types of families, more interracial and couples, I think it's good. But I also think that having a traditional family is good, I think it's not something bad. And it's something that, well, I don't know why, people are, how to say, are disliking this type of family.

They are preferring to go for, well, I can't say, any more interracial families or gay couples. In my opinion, for understanding the interracial families or gay couples, I go to the past for understanding the evolution. Because in Colgoga, the normal family consisted of a white family, the father works the night at 5 and the mother stays at home taking care of the children.

But today it's different. You know, you have an example? Yes, well, like I said, the interracial families or gay couples in the 60s, well, in the Cold War, the traditional family was like, well, it's something... Yes, the nuclear family. Yes, the nuclear family, yes, yes.

Women, men, children. It's a white family with the parents, with the father and the mother. But in the 50s, the interracial family for the series *Lucian IX*, it's a... But for the interracial couples, it's... It's... It's the first interracial couple on TV.

And in the 90s, the gay couples appeared in the TV shows. But the problem is that all of this became a simple checklist. Yes, it is.

So you are saying that nowadays, well, in series and films, if there is a family, it needs to be, well, it has to be a gay couple, so it means race or something like that, no? And you, Michael, what do you think? Well, I can't find an opinion on this topic, but the reality is what it is. Some people don't accept the couple or something, because they feel they are not alive in the past, but because they can't have a father or... Well, okay, so you are saying that some people don't like that there are more families than the traditional. Yeah.

Yeah, well, I think that a family doesn't need to be traditional, it needs to be something real, that it can be possible to have the father. I don't matter if it is a gay couple or interracial. If the family has... Well, I don't know.

At the age... Right. I have many children. I think that it is totally possible and normal to be a happy family.

Well, if you say... If a family don't have money, it can't be happy. You see that? Sorry. No, no, okay, well, obviously it is a family.

If a family don't have money, it won't be happy. Okay, okay, I agree. And you, Dylan, what do you think? I give you my opinion, yeah, before.

Okay. Do you have to share? Can you share with us your opinion? No, no, no, my opinion is very good. Okay, well, if you don't have any other suggestions, we can finish this podcast.

Yeah, so I hope you enjoy this podcast. So if you have any questions or doubts, let me know in the comments. And don't forget to like and subscribe.

Bye.

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Graphic of the six levels or categories of cognitive skills of the revised Bloom's taxonomy provided by the Vanderbilt University Centre of Teaching (Armstrong, 2010).

Figure 2: Representative graphic of the categories and their domains present in both groups' opinion essays.

Figure 3: Representative graphic of the categories and their domains present in both groups' podcast transcripts.