


Enhancing Critical Thinking, Communication Skills, and Self Confidence through Inquiry Based Learning in Secretaryship Courses

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the effects of inquiry-based learning (IBL) on critical thinking dispositions, communication skills, and self-confidence of vocational English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in a Secretaryship course at a Faculty of Language Education in Indonesia. Given the limited number of participants (15 students), the study is positioned as a small-scale mixed-method case study aimed at providing in-depth contextualized insights rather than broad generalization. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative assessment using the Communication, Teamwork, and Self-Confidence Questionnaire (CTSQ) and qualitative data from students' reflective journals. The CTSQ measured six dimensions: truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, critical thinking self-confidence, and inquisitiveness. Descriptive statistics showed improvements in all dimensions, with the overall mean increasing from 4.63 to 4.88, indicating a positive impact of IBL on students' cognitive and affective dispositions within this specific instructional context. Qualitative analysis revealed three main themes: development of practical professional skills, enhancement of conceptual understanding, and strengthening of soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and self-confidence. Students reported that role-play, scenario-based tasks, and inquiry-oriented activities increased their engagement, allowed them to practice real-world professional interactions, and fostered autonomous learning. Overall, the findings suggest that IBL can serve as an effective pedagogical approach for integrating critical thinking, communication competence, and confidence in vocational EFL education, particularly in small, context-specific classroom settings. The study contributes contextually grounded, evidence-based guidance for designing learner-centered instruction that bridges theory and professional practice, while acknowledging its exploratory case-study scope.

Keywords: *Inquiry-Based Learning, Critical Thinking Dispositions, Communication Skills, Self-Confidence, Vocational EFL, Secretaryship Course*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and knowledge-driven world, effective communication and critical thinking are essential skills for learners, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where students are expected to engage in professional interactions (Dominguez Romero & Bobkina, 2026; Lazou et al., 2026; Sajidin, 2026). Vocational students in Indonesia, specifically those enrolled in the Secretaryship course within the Faculty of Language Education, English Language Department, must not only acquire English proficiency but also develop practical skills such as appointment-making, client handling, and professional communication. Traditional teacher-centered instruction often limits opportunities for active engagement, critical inquiry, and real-world practice, which can hinder the development of these essential skills. Therefore, innovative pedagogical approaches that promote active learning, collaboration, and reflection are necessary to prepare students for workplace challenges.

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is grounded in constructivist theory, which posits that learners construct knowledge actively through experience, exploration, and reflection rather than passively receiving information (Piaget & Inhelder, 2019; Vygotskiĭ & Cole, 1978). By encouraging students to investigate problems, ask questions, and seek evidence, IBL fosters deeper understanding and higher-order thinking (Li, 2025; Pipicano & Delgado, 2025; Waked, 2025). In EFL vocational courses such as Secretaryship, constructivist principles suggest that students not only learn linguistic forms but also internalize communicative strategies through authentic, problem-based activities relevant to professional tasks.

Critical thinking development in education has been widely associated with Bloom's taxonomy (Gunarso et al., 2024; Muhammad Afif Marta et al., 2024; Setyowati et al., 2022), which emphasizes cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) further highlights the role of self-efficacy, showing how collaborative inquiry and successful problem-solving experiences can enhance students' confidence in their abilities. Integrating IBL in EFL vocational contexts encourages students to analyze information, evaluate alternatives, and justify decisions while simultaneously building confidence in professional communication scenarios.

Despite curricular reforms promoting 21st-century skills, many EFL students continue to struggle with critical thinking and professional communication due to limited exposure to authentic problem-solving tasks and overreliance on rote learning (Noni Agustina & Al Baqoroh, 2023). In many classrooms, language instruction prioritizes grammar accuracy and textbook completion rather than analytical discussion, negotiation of meaning, or decision-making activities (Lin, 2018). As a result, students may demonstrate surface-level comprehension but experience difficulty articulating arguments, responding spontaneously in professional situations, or handling unexpected workplace scenarios in English (Liu & Wang, 2024). For Secretaryship students in particular, these competencies are professionally indispensable. Secretaries serve as organizational gatekeepers who coordinate meetings, manage correspondence, negotiate schedules, and communicate with diverse stakeholders, often in high-stakes contexts that require clarity, diplomacy, and sound judgment. Weak critical thinking may lead to poor prioritization or ineffective problem resolution, while limited communicative confidence can hinder professional performance (Hapsari & Prasetyarini, 2025). However, current instructional practices in many EFL settings remain fragmented, separating language skills from authentic workplace simulations and rarely integrating cognitive, affective, and professional dimensions within a coherent pedagogical framework (Chandra Handa, 2025). This gap underscores the need for an instructional model that systematically cultivates critical thinking, communication competence, and self-confidence in an integrated manner.

Prior studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of IBL in enhancing critical thinking (Arifin et al., 2025; Ditingki et al., 2025; Kunnath & Botes, 2025) and communication skills (Nahar & Machado, 2025; Ratnah et al., 2025; Seprie et al., 2025) in educational settings. In vocational education, role-play and scenario-based learning improve students' practical problem-solving, interpersonal communication, and professional competence (Blackman & Ríos, 2025; Rababah, 2025; Tran et al., 2025). In EFL classrooms, inquiry-oriented activities such as group discussions (Rezai et al., 2025; Zhen, 2025), project work (Amri & Sert, 2025; Andargie et al., 2025; Tanaka, 2025), and reflective journals (Almutawa & Alfahid, 2024; Khoir & Susanti, 2025; Sun, 2025) increase learner engagement, self-confidence, and critical thinking dispositions. However, these studies often examine general education contexts rather than vocational EFL courses focused on professional skills like Secretaryship.

Despite the documented benefits of IBL, few studies have explored its combined impact on critical thinking, communication skills, and self-confidence among vocational EFL students in Indonesia. Most prior research focuses either on cognitive skill development or language acquisition, without systematically linking cognitive, affective, and professional outcomes. Moreover, there is limited evidence using mixed-methods designs that integrate quantitative measures such as the Communication, Teamwork, and Self-Confidence Questionnaire (CTSQ) with qualitative reflections from students.

This study addresses these gaps by applying IBL in a vocational EFL Secretaryship course in an Indonesian university. By combining practical simulations, role-play, and inquiry-oriented tasks with mixed-methods assessment, it investigates measurable improvements in critical thinking dispositions and communication skills while capturing students' perceptions of learning experiences. This approach provides novel insights into how IBL can simultaneously enhance cognitive, professional, and affective learning outcomes in a context-specific vocational EFL setting.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of inquiry-based learning on critical thinking dispositions, communication skills, and self-confidence of vocational EFL students in a Secretaryship course. Specifically, it aims to determine whether IBL leads to measurable improvements in CTSQ scores across six dimensions and to explore students' reflections on how learning activities influenced their practical, conceptual, and soft skills. The study contributes both theoretical and practical knowledge for designing effective, learner-centered EFL instruction in vocational and professional education contexts in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design using a convergent parallel approach to investigate the effects of inquiry-based learning (IBL) on vocational EFL students' critical thinking dispositions, communication skills, and self-confidence. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same research phase, analyzed separately, and then merged for comparison and interpretation. The convergent approach enabled the researcher to examine whether statistical changes in students' scores corresponded with their reflective experiences and observed classroom behaviors. The design combined quantitative assessment using the Communication, Teamwork, and Self-Confidence Questionnaire (CTSQ) with qualitative analysis of students' reflective journals and classroom observations. The mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of data, providing a comprehensive understanding of both measurable outcomes and students' perceptions of the learning process.

The study involved 15 students enrolled in the Secretaryship course within the Faculty of Language Education, English Language Department, at a university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students who were actively engaged in the course and had completed the required learning activities. The sample included a balanced representation of male and female students, with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years.

The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments to evaluate the effects of inquiry-based learning (IBL) on vocational EFL students' critical thinking, communication skills, and self-confidence. The primary quantitative instrument was the Communication, Teamwork, and Self-Confidence Questionnaire (CTSQ), consisting of 30 items across six dimensions: truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, critical thinking self-confidence, and inquisitiveness. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants completed the CTSQ both before (pretest) and after (posttest) the IBL intervention. Qualitative data were gathered through reflective journals, in which students documented their weekly experiences, learning challenges, and personal growth, and classroom observations, where the researcher recorded students' engagement in role-play, discussions, and inquiry-oriented tasks. These qualitative tools provided deeper insights into the students' perceptions of learning and practical skill development.

The research was conducted with 15 students enrolled in the Secretaryship course within the Faculty of Language Education, English Language Department, at an Indonesian university. Initially, participants completed the CTSQ pretest to establish baseline levels of critical thinking dispositions, communication skills, and self-confidence. The six-week IBL intervention then involved a series of structured activities, including role-play simulations of professional tasks (e.g., making appointments, handling clients, managing conflicts), scenario-based problem-solving exercises, collaborative group discussions, and video observation with guided analyses. These activities aimed to integrate practical skills, conceptual understanding,

and soft skill development. At the end of the intervention, students completed the CTSQ posttest and submitted reflective journals documenting their experiences and learning insights.

Quantitative data from the CTSQ were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean, median, and standard deviation for each dimension. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to examine the statistical significance of differences between pretest and posttest scores, and tables were used to explain trends in students' development across the six dimensions. Qualitative data from reflective journals and classroom observations were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns and insights related to practical skill enhancement, conceptual understanding, and the development of communication, collaboration, and self-confidence. Integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred during the interpretation stage through side-by-side comparison and joint display tables, where statistical results were compared with qualitative themes to identify convergence, complementarity, or divergence. This integrative process strengthened the validity of the findings by confirming whether numerical improvements were supported by students' narratives and observed behavioral changes. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the effects of IBL on students' cognitive and affective outcomes.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily provided consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the collection, analysis, and reporting of both quantitative and qualitative data. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring that students' rights, privacy, and well-being were protected throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISSUSSION

The CTSQ (Communication, Teamwork, Self-confidence Questionnaire) data were analyzed for 30 items across 15 students. Scores for each dimension were calculated separately for the pretest and posttest. The mean, median, and standard deviation (SD) were used to describe students' critical thinking and communication skills before and after inquiry-based learning activities.

Table 1. Result of CTSQ questionnaire

Dimension	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Pretest Median	Posttest Median	Pretest SD	Posttest SD
Truth-Seeking (Items 1-5)	4.50	4.80	5.00	5.00	0.35	0.18
Open-Mindedness (Items 6-10)	4.60	4.85	5.00	5.00	0.30	0.20
Analyticity (Items 11-15)	4.55	4.90	5.00	5.00	0.32	0.15
Systematicity (Items 16-20)	4.60	4.87	5.00	5.00	0.28	0.17
Critical Thinking Self-Confidence (Items 21-25)	4.65	4.90	5.00	5.00	0.25	0.12
Inquisitiveness (Items 26-30)	4.70	4.95	5.00	5.00	0.20	0.10
Overall CTSQ Score (Items 1-30)	4.63	4.88	5.00	5.00	0.28	0.15

The truth-seeking dimension evaluates students' tendency to actively seek reliable information and evidence before forming opinions. The pretest results indicated that students already valued accuracy in their reasoning, with a mean score of 4.50. After participating in inquiry-based learning activities, the mean score increased to 4.80, showing a notable improvement. Students reported feeling more comfortable questioning information from peers and media and demonstrated greater willingness to revise their opinions based on evidence. This indicates that the learning activities strengthened their commitment to critically evaluating knowledge rather than accepting ideas at face value.

Open-mindedness measures students' tolerance and fairness toward differing viewpoints. Initially, students scored an average of 4.60, reflecting a moderate openness to alternative perspectives. Posttest results increased to 4.85, suggesting that students became more willing to consider and respect opinions different from their own. The improvement indicates that collaborative activities, such as group discussions and debates, encouraged

students to listen actively, acknowledge stronger arguments, and engage respectfully in dialogue. This enhanced their ability to approach discussions without bias and increased their appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Analyticity refers to the ability to use reasoning and evidence to identify problems, evaluate arguments, and make informed decisions. The pretest mean of 4.55 increased to 4.90 after the intervention, showing a significant enhancement in students' analytical skills. Students reported that they were better able to identify weaknesses in arguments, understand causal relationships, and connect ideas logically. Inquiry-based tasks, such as problem-solving exercises and scenario analyses, encouraged them to focus on evidence-based reasoning, which contributed to improved performance in evaluating information and solving complex problems systematically.

Systematicity assesses students' ability to approach tasks in an organized and methodical manner. The pretest mean score of 4.60 rose to 4.87 in the posttest. This improvement reflects students' enhanced planning and structured approach when handling problems and tasks. They demonstrated greater attention to detail, double-checked their reasoning, and preferred following step-by-step strategies when learning new concepts. The structured nature of the inquiry-based activities, which often required students to collect, analyze, and present data in order, likely contributed to their growth in this dimension.

Critical thinking self confidence dimension evaluates students' trust in their own reasoning abilities and decision-making. The pretest mean of 4.65 increased to 4.90 post-intervention, indicating that students gained greater confidence in their ability to analyze information, make decisions, and justify their opinions logically. Role-playing, discussions, and collaborative problem-solving provided opportunities for students to practice and validate their reasoning skills. As a result, students reported feeling more capable of handling complex or ambiguous situations, demonstrating that inquiry-based learning positively impacted both their cognitive and affective aspects of critical thinking.

Inquisitiveness measures students' curiosity and motivation to explore new knowledge. Students' scores increased from a pretest mean of 4.70 to a posttest mean of 4.95, the highest gain among the six dimensions. This indicates that the learning activities fostered a strong desire to learn beyond what was directly taught. Students frequently asked questions, explored unfamiliar topics, and showed persistence in learning even when tasks were challenging. The emphasis on active inquiry and exploration in the learning process stimulated intrinsic motivation and intellectual curiosity, which are essential traits for lifelong learning and professional growth.

Practically, students developed skills in making appointments, handling clients, and managing conflicts through role-play activities. Conceptually, inquiry-based learning promoted deeper understanding by encouraging independent exploration, video observation, and analysis of real-life scenarios. In terms of soft skills, significant improvements were observed in communication, professionalism, teamwork, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Direct quotations from students provided empirical evidence of their experiences, reinforcing the quantitative data collected from pretests, posttests, assignments, and video assessments.

Table 2. Result of Reflection

Theme	Number of Students Mentioning	Percentage (%)	Example Quote
Communication Skills	15	100%	"...critical thinking and communication skills improved significantly." (S1, Khairunnisa)
Professionalism	15	100%	"...importance of handling situations professionally." (S4, Sindy)
Collaboration / Teamwork	13	87%	"...working in groups helped me understand different perspectives..." (S1, Sherly)
Critical Thinking	14	93%	"...analyze various appointment dialogues, and identify the appropriate language structures on my own." (S1, Sherly)
Confidence	14	93%	"...gained confidence and improved speaking skills." (S12, Secondrina)

The reflections indicate that students significantly enhanced their practical skills in secretaryship through active engagement in role-play and real-life simulations. Many students highlighted that performing appointment-making, handling visitors, and managing phone calls allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge in realistic contexts. For instance, Sherly noted, "The role-play activities were especially useful because they allowed me to practice real-life situations, such as scheduling a meeting, rescheduling due to conflicts, or responding politely to urgent clients." Similarly, Sindy emphasized that creating and practicing dialogues helped her improve her ability to handle unexpected situations professionally. These reflections confirm that inquiry-based learning (IBL) effectively bridges the gap between theory and practice, preparing students for actual office environments.

Students also reported that the inquiry-based learning approach deepened their conceptual understanding of appointment-making and secretarial duties. By observing examples, analyzing dialogues, and answering guiding questions, they were encouraged to explore the material actively rather than passively receiving explanations. Agastya expressed this by saying, "From the beginning, the class felt lively because we were asked to actively observe, predict, and construct our understanding from the examples given." This active exploration helped students internalize language patterns, communication strategies, and professional procedures, making the learning experience more meaningful and memorable.

Beyond technical skills and conceptual understanding, the inquiry learning process fostered the development of essential soft skills. Many students emphasized improvements in communication, teamwork, and self-confidence. For example, Aike stated, "Working in groups improved my communication skills, as we had to discuss our interpretations and compare our findings," while Secondrina noted, "Through role-play activities, I gained confidence and improved my speaking skills." The reflections suggest that IBL not only enhances knowledge and practical competence but also cultivates interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, which are crucial for effective performance in professional settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that inquiry-based learning (IBL) positively influenced EFL students' critical thinking dispositions, communication skills, and self-confidence in the Secretaryship course. Quantitative analysis of the CTSQ demonstrated improvements across all six dimensions, with the overall mean increasing from 4.63 to 4.88. These results suggest that IBL effectively promotes higher-order thinking, as students actively engaged in problem-solving, evaluating arguments, and making informed decisions.

The substantial gains in truth-seeking, analyticity, and systematicity indicate that students became more adept at evaluating information and approaching tasks methodically. This aligns with constructivist theory, which emphasizes that learners construct knowledge through active engagement and reflection (Kozulin, 2007; Rochat, 2024). The increase in critical thinking self-confidence further suggests that students not only acquired cognitive skills but also trusted their ability to analyze and make decisions, consistent with Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

Improvements in open-mindedness and collaboration reflect enhanced communication competence. Qualitative reflections confirmed that role-play, scenario-based tasks, and group discussions encouraged students to articulate ideas clearly, listen actively, and respect differing perspectives. These findings support previous research highlighting the effectiveness of IBL in fostering communicative competence in EFL contexts (Li, 2025; Oktaviah et al., 2021; Parsaiyan & Gholami, 2023; Waked, 2025).

The highest gains were observed in inquisitiveness and self-confidence, suggesting that IBL stimulated curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn. Students reported feeling more confident in handling professional tasks, such as making appointments, managing clients, and resolving conflicts. The integration of practical simulations with inquiry tasks bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, enhancing both cognitive and affective learning outcomes.

The combination of CTSQ results and thematic analysis provides a holistic understanding of students' experiences. Quantitative improvements were supported by

qualitative evidence showing that IBL enabled active participation, problem-solving, and professional skill development. This demonstrates that IBL not only enhances measurable dispositions but also cultivates practical competencies and learner autonomy, essential for EFL education.

These findings suggest that incorporating IBL into Secretaryship or other EFL courses can improve critical thinking, communication, and professional readiness. Educators are encouraged to design learning activities that integrate inquiry, role-play, and collaborative problem-solving to foster both cognitive and affective competencies.

Despite the positive outcomes, the study involved a small sample of 15 students from a single Indonesian university, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the study focused on short-term effects; long-term retention of skills and dispositions was not measured. Future research could involve larger, multi-institutional samples and longitudinal designs to validate and extend these findings.

This study provides evidence that IBL is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing critical thinking, communication skills, and self-confidence in vocational EFL contexts. By integrating inquiry, collaboration, and practical simulations, educators can create meaningful learning experiences that prepare students for professional environments while fostering lifelong learning competencies.

To strengthen the quantitative interpretation of the findings, inferential statistical analyses were conducted. A paired-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the pretest ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.28$) and posttest scores ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.15$), $t(14) = 4.34$, $p < .001$. This result indicates that the increase in CTSQ scores following the inquiry-based learning intervention was not due to chance and reflects a statistically meaningful improvement. The inferential analysis therefore confirms that the intervention had a significant effect on students' critical thinking and communication-related competencies across the six measured dimensions. In addition to statistical significance, the magnitude of the intervention effect was examined using Cohen's d . Based on the mean difference (0.25) and a pooled standard deviation of approximately 0.22, the calculated effect size was $d = 1.14$, which is categorized as a large effect. This suggests that the improvement was not only statistically significant but also educationally substantial in practical terms. However, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of a ceiling effect, as the initial pretest scores were already high (above 4 on a 5-point scale). The restricted upper range of the scale may have limited the observable gain, potentially underestimating the true extent of students' development. Therefore, while the results demonstrate significant and meaningful improvement, future research with larger samples and more sensitive measurement instruments is recommended to further validate and extend these findings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of inquiry-based learning (IBL) contributes meaningfully to the development of higher-order thinking and professional competencies among EFL students in a Secretaryship course. Statistical analysis shows a positive trend across multiple dimensions of critical thinking disposition, reflecting students' increased readiness to analyze problems, evaluate information, and make reasoned decisions in academic and professional contexts. These improvements were not limited to cognitive aspects but were also reflected in students' growing confidence in expressing ideas and defending arguments during classroom activities. Insights drawn from reflective journals and classroom observations further illustrate how IBL encourages active participation and deeper conceptual engagement. Students demonstrated greater independence in exploring issues, improved collaboration during task completion, and stronger communication performance in simulated professional scenarios. The learning process shifted from passive content reception to interactive inquiry, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with authentic workplace situations relevant to Secretaryship practice. Taken together, the results underscore the pedagogical value of IBL in fostering integrated competence – combining critical thinking, communication, and self-assurance – within EFL higher education settings. Rather than

merely enhancing test-based outcomes, IBL appears to cultivate habits of inquiry and reflective practice that are essential for sustainable professional growth. Expanding future investigations to broader institutional contexts and longer time frames would provide deeper insight into how inquiry-oriented approaches shape long-term academic and career readiness.

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