

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking as A 21st Century Skill in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract:

The current study aims at investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking as well as the strategies they use to incorporate critical thinking into their EFL classes. Moreover, it aims at investigating the challenges that EFL teachers face when incorporating critical thinking strategies in their classrooms. The current study was conducted with twenty EFL teachers at 4 secondary schools. The findings indicate that the participating teachers have some but inadequate knowledge about critical thinking and they sometimes incorporate certain techniques to cultivate critical thinking among language learners. It is recommended that there should be more focus on exploring critical thinking conceptions and practices among EFL teachers working at different levels.

Key words: Critical Thinking, 21st Century Skill, Secondary schools.

1. Introduction

The recent literature on education reforms and curriculum development focuses on the demand for 21st century skills and their integration and implications in classrooms. Accordingly, the concept of 21st century skills has become very popular. Such skills include critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, information and communication technology literacy, leadership and responsibility as well as social and cross-cultural skills. They have recently been recommended to be developed by the 21st century learners. According to Devkota (2017) 21st century learners are smarter, dynamic and more informed. The learners today are flooded with information and options. They have connection with the people around the globe and they have access to the better contents.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms have been thought to be a great scenario to develop 21st Century skills. Consequently, EFL directors, scholars and editors are impelling teachers to foster these skills in general and critical thinking in particular in their lessons. This is because critical thinking is regarded as one of the most essential and crucial factors of success in the 21st century (Zhou, Jiang & Yao 2015). Critical thinking re-emerges as a component to prepare the 21st century generations to survive with the changing era (Berliner, 2009).

2. Critical Thinking

In the information era, being able to think make people successful in life. Thinking is equivalent to being human, and is generally known as a purposeful mental activity, its background, its subcategories, and its implications have been defined in many different ways. Critical thinking has become a high priority in almost every institution and educational system around the world, particularly since the second half of the 20th century. Developing the learners' critical thinking skills has become an educational ideal that schools strive to achieve (Elfatih, 2017).

Critical thinking was originated from western countries a century ago. Dewey first mentioned critical thinking as reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933). The recent decades have witnessed the devoted contributions made by western researchers (Fung, 2014), who emphasized the overriding importance of cultivating one's critical thinking and have begun to develop a wide variety of programs to train students' critical thinking. Critical thinking should be regarded as one of most essential and crucial factors of success in the 21st century.

Modern societies often require people to possess remarkable knowledge and strong thinking skills, referred to as critical thinking skills as well. However, in most countries the educational system does not allow it. Students are not given the chance to practice their thinking skills since they are taught to be passive thinkers. Realizing the place of critical thinking in acquiring foreign languages, many educators have been examining the feasibility of integrating critical thinking in teaching English as a foreign language. In other words, they are trying to find out its benefits with EFL instruction (Küleççi & Kumlu, 2015).

Several debates have been carried out in order to propose an exact definition for the term critical thinking, its domain and skills. Rudinow and Barry (2004) defined critical thinking as «a collection of perceptual tools, each of which was defined with several logical activities and techniques. These tools are used in finding the logic behind issues, making decisions, defining relations, recognizing priorities, etc».

Furthermore, Brown and Keeley (2007) defined critical thinking in terms of a set of qualities and abilities including: 1. awareness of a set of interrelated critical questions; 2. ability to ask and answer critical questions at appropriate times; and 3. desire to actively use the critical questions. Costa and Kallick (2008) defined critical thinking skills as the most important skills of the 21st century, which are used to determine the capability of thinking, in understanding

the logical connections among issues, theories, and ideas, to perceive the importance and priorities of ideas, to evaluate possible arguments, and to propose solutions.

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Mason (2008) considered critical thinking as the capability to utilize different types of information derived from different sources, to process the gathered information in a responsive, creative and logical way, to challenge the probable solutions, to analyze them culturally and historically, and to offer conclusions which can be defended and justified.

According to Facione (2011), the ability in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation is the most basic concept of critical thinking.

Furthermore, Rainbolt & Dwyer (2012) Critical thinking is defined as the skill of making a decision based on the right reasons because there is the skill of evaluating arguments to compose good cases in real life.

Although critical thinking has been an important focus of the teachers in many countries for many years where there have been lots of changes occurred in education related to the rapid changes of today's world. The need for critical thinkers has increased because the living conditions of people have nowadays become harder and more complex than they used to be. As critical thinking is considered to be a vital skill for the 21st century, it has become a desirable educational outcome by educators (Lai, 2011).

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2.1. Importance of Critical Thinking

To develop the ability of learners, thinking critically is a very important component in the contemporary education system. In the modern world, active longitudinal learning, problem solving and empowerment are recognized as the necessary skills to survive (Akdere, 2012). To this end, there is a consensus that critical thinking helps individuals to become active and effective life- long learners, and important problem solvers leading to empowerment (Lai, 2009).

According to Harizaj & Hajrulla (2017) one of the factors that affect learner's communication is the learner's ability to think and act critically. Through critical thinking, learners develop the ability to communicate in English very well. Therefore, fostering critical thinking stimulates autonomous learning. They added that critical thinking students become autonomous and self- confident. Critical thinking skills can be taught at all levels of studies from secondary students to university students as well.

2.2. Critical Thinkers and Education

Developing the ability to think critically is a vital component of real, meaningful teaching and learning. Critical thinking helps us solve problems, make decisions and reach our goals. Thinking is not a passive but an active process. It can be said that critical thinking can be considered in two respects: to achieve a goal and to make a decision (Tosuncuoglu, 2018).

In accordance with the vital place of critical thinking in education, critical thinking is a recently highlighted concept in the field of English as a foreign language. In her paper about critical thinking in EFL, «Language teaching through critical thinking and self- awareness», Üstünlüoğlu (2004) states that language teachers have recently focused on the active role of the learner, and this focus has brought cognitive theories of learning to the agenda rather than behaviorism. Halpern (2003) took a step further in this idea as he expressed that critical thinking skills suggest irresistible opportunity for forming and adjusting to change and novelty.

Consequently, critical thinking lies at the very core of language.

Without it, there can be no concepts that build on each other, as language just becomes the placement of words in a particular syntax without clear logical connections. Critical thinking involves the ability to differentiate the usage of words in various contexts and implicitly understand the language (Tosuncuoglu, 2018).

2.3. Critical thinking skills

The Delphi study, identified six core skills that are believed to be associated with critical thinking. Facione (2013) introduced a brief summary of these skills as follows:

- Interpretation: is to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria. Interpretation includes the sub - skills of categorization, decoding significance, and clarifying meaning.
- Analysis: is to identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions.
- Evaluation: is to assess the credibility of statements or other representations which are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion; and to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statements, descriptions, questions or other forms of representation.
- Inference: to identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to deduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation.
- Explanation: being able to present in a cogent and coherent way the results of one's reasoning. This means to be able to give someone a full look at the big picture: both «to state and to justify that

reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based; and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments.

- Self - regulation: to mean «self - consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, and evaluation to one's own inferential judgments with a view toward questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results This skill is also known as deductive reasoning.

Teaching Critical Thinking .2.3.1

The literature on foreign language teaching echoes the need to incorporate critical thinking into English language pedagogy (Tung & Chang, 2009). Likewise, Brown (2004) suggested that the objectives of language curricula should not be limited to developing learners' linguistic competence only, but should also include improvement of critical thinking skills among language learners. Qizi (2018) presented some suggestions to enhance critical thinking among language learners as follow:

1. Force students search more, use Internet, read some researches, reports in order to gain more information about the topic; learners should not be focused only on the textbooks, books or other sources they use in the classes.
2. Include activities in the tasks which encourage the learner to think about the major objectives of the course, including developing critical thinking.
3. Provide learners with the feedback which helps learners to understand that thinking is an important part of their learning process. The feedback should not tell about how well they have carried out the tasks in the classes, but about how better they can improve their abilities in the future. The feedback should help them to work harder and harder on themselves.

4. The theory should be cooperated with practical education. Learners should know how to use the theory, which they have learnt in the lesson, in the practice, as well. In that case, they can catch the meaning of the course and they can make their learning process more enjoyable.
5. Use ongoing assessment rather than one - shot exams at the end of the semester. One - shot exams need limited time, while in on - going assessments teachers are able to assess a large range of knowledge, skills of students, including critical and creative thinking skills.
6. Use more creative activities and tasks in the classrooms in order to enhance students' motivation and inspiration. Creativeness makes the lesson more joyful. As a result, they can get not only much information about the topic, but also pleasure, satisfaction and delight from the lesson.

2.4. Challenges of Implementing Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom

While one of the stated goals of education is to improve critical thinking skills in the students, there appear to be many obstacles to achieving this goal. Paul and Elder (2009) suggest that a major factor in the inability of our students to think critically is how they are taught. The perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of teachers sometimes constrain the teaching of critical thinking skills. Some teachers feel that students lack the necessary background to think critically, have learning disabilities that prohibit critical thinking, or feel that it is too time consuming because of the necessity of providing material for mandated standardized tests (Reynolds, 2016).

Also, there is a prevalence of lecture in many secondary classrooms because of the necessity to provide a vast amount of information included on standardized tests. While this method of delivery is on the decline, the focus still remains on providing the multitude of facts required for completion, or preparing students to take standardized tests (Luhtala; 2011). Aliakbaria and Sadeghdaghighib (2013) explored the views of 100 EFL Iranian educators about the barriers

to critical thinking implementation and found students' attitudes and expectations, self - efficacy constraint and teachers' lack of critical thinking as major obstacles. Student constraints can be ascribed to lack of chance to practice thinking skills, mostly due to the overloaded curriculum and their own attitude towards thinking.

To sum up, the most frequently reported obstacles were: (1) the need to deliver a large amount of information to cover content; (2) student concerns of getting a good grade vs actually learning the content; (3) insufficient time for instructors to learn new teaching methods; 4) teacher's perceptions that critical thinking is not necessary for success of the student and it is not a valuable education outcome or a primary objective of their teaching. and (5) lack of student motivation to become critical thinkers.

3. Context of the Problem:

In the very fast changing world, it is important to engage students in 'thinking' in every area of the community. For this reason, there is a shift away from classical teaching and learning that aims to transfer knowledge without giving students any time to consider and to digest to a more thought - based education that aims to enable students to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. Van Gelder (2005) notes one of the main goals of education, at whatever level, is to help develop general thinking skills, particularly critical thinking abilities. He suggests that the education system and teaching methods need to be improved to grasp this. On the other hand, there are some problems in education in forming critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, critical thinking has been an important focus of EFL teachers in many countries for many years where there have been lots of changes occurred in education related to the rapid changes of today's world. The need for critical thinkers has increased because the living conditions of people have nowadays become harder and more complex than they used to be. As critical thinking is considered to be a vital skill for the 21st century, it has become a desirable educational outcome by educators (Lai, 2011).

Despite the fact that secondary education stage in Egypt aims at preparing students for practical life as well as developing their everyday life

skills including their critical thinking skills (Ministry of Education, 2014), rote learning is still one of the features characterizing the Egyptian educational system. According to Ahmed (2010), students are encouraged to memorize what they study rather than engage in critical and creative thinking processes. Culturally, Egyptian students who memorize what they study are regarded as cleverer than those who do not. This is reinforced by most exams in the different educational stages in most courses which ask students questions that mostly require them to recall what they have memorized during their study. This leaves no place for the development of critical thinking skills (El Safory, 2018). Thus, schooling is thereby driven exclusively by the need to score high grades in national examinations, which determine access to university places. These exams reinforce rote memorization and suppress critical thinking (Fahmy et al., 2008).

4. Statement of the Problem:

The current research is an attempt to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of critical Thinking as a 21st century skill and to investigate their views about the challenges they encounter in this process.

5. Questions of the Study:

The current study therefore aims to explore EFL teachers' conceptions and implementation of critical thinking as a 21st century skill in the secondary stage and to explore their views about the challenges they encounter in this process. This investigation was conducted through answering these questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking in EFL classes?
2. How do EFL teachers integrate critical thinking into their lessons?
3. What are the obstacles that prevent teachers from focusing on critical thinking in their classes?
4. Which strategies are effective in promoting critical thinking in language classrooms?

6. Aim of the Research:

This study aimed at exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of critical

thinking in EFL classes.

7. Delimitations of the Study:

- 1- Only twenty secondary school teachers EFL teachers.
- 2- Second semester of the academic year 2018 - 2019.

8. Significance of the study:

The present study is expected to help in the following areas:

1. The current study may enhance EFL teachers' awareness about the importance of developing critical thinking among their students.
2. It would motivate teachers to better understand critical thinking and its implementation in the EFL classrooms.
3. Curriculum designers can understand their role in this process and identify the kind of support they should offer for students and teachers.
4. This study may also provide insight for curriculum designers regarding the barriers to teaching critical thinking within the classroom, possibly changing the assessment system and the teacher evaluation system.

9. Method of the Study

Teachers' perceptions of critical thinking skills were investigated by using the descriptive analytical method and the qualitative method. In what follows, the participants, the instrument used to collect the data and the data - collection and analysis procedures are elucidated.

A. Participants

Twenty EFL teachers (male and female) from four different secondary schools were selected randomly to explore their perceptions of critical thinking skills and challenges of teaching critical thinking. Their teaching experience was between 3 to 15 years.

B. Instrument

This study adopted a qualitative approach of investigation.

A questionnaire was used to generate data for this investigation. Twenty EFL teachers from four different secondary schools were involved in this study through answering a questionnaire with a total of 5 questions. The questions were focused on drawing out their perceptions on critical thinking. The topics for the questionnaire were initially developed based on a review of relevant literature. An initial list of ten questions was adjusted until there was finally a list of five questions. The questions were:

1. From your perspective, what is critical thinking?
2. What role, in your opinion, does critical thinking play in your classroom?
3. How do you integrate critical thinking into your lessons?
4. What are the problems faced by students when you are trying to teach them critical thinking? If so identify them.
5. Which strategies are effective in promoting critical thinking in language classrooms?

C. Procedures

In order to accomplish the aim of the present study, the researcher went through the following procedures:

- Reviewing related studies in the field of EFL critical thinking skills.
- Designing a teachers' perceptions questionnaire.
- Submitting the teachers' perceptions questionnaire to the jury members and modifying it according to their suggestions
- Choosing a random sample of 20 secondary stage teachers
- Administrating the questionnaire to the participants.
- Collecting and analyzing the obtained data statistically.
- Presenting and discussing the results of the study.
- Introducing conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

10. Results of the study:

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The results of the study are be displayed through answering the questions of the study:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking in EFL classes?

The first question of this study aimed to find out EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking. Participants were requested to explain what they understand from the term critical thinking. (45%) of the participants mentioned various definitions of critical thinking. Some of these definitions implied relevant principles of critical thinking while some others reflected a lack of understanding of this concept. Whereas (55%) of the participants stated that they could not give a clear definition to the term 'critical thinking due to the ambiguity of the term. Below are some of the participants' definitions of critical thinking:

- It means thinking twice and thinking out of the box.
- It is a strategy of thinking about thinking.
- Critical thinking is a way of solving learning problems.
- It is to think clearly and critically.
- It is not related to language teaching and learning. It is originally related to psychology

2. How do EFL teachers integrate critical thinking into their lessons?

The participants were asked to explain how they implement critical thinking in their classes, more specifically the strategies they use and the materials they prepare to this end. The analysis of their comments showed that some participants, approximately (40%) use some strategies to integrate critical thinking into their lessons. They mentioned the following strategies:

- Raising some controversial questions to create discussions
- Using wh - question words to enhance students' critical thinking.
- Using brainstorming and discussion
- team - based learning.
- cooperative learning.
- role playing.
- problem solving.
- flipped classroom

On the other hand, about (25%) of the participants stated that they believe that this concept is not relevant to language teaching and learning therefore they rarely use critical thinking strategies in the classrooms.

3. What are the obstacles that prevent teachers from focusing on critical thinking in their classes?

Teachers were also asked to reflect on the obstacles that prevent them from fully integrating critical thinking to their teaching. Even though the majority of teachers (70%) reflected enthusiasm for integrating critical thinking into their lessons, they also expressed their concerns, mainly the obstacles that hinder their practices. It is noteworthy that some teachers listed more than one obstacle. According to the majority of participants (65%), one of the most important obstacles is students' proficiency level in English. Considering that the students are required to express their opinions in

a foreign language using their limited sources, the teachers have to struggle with students' reluctance and resistance that make the teaching process harder. In addition, eleven participants (55%) stated that that in spite of the importance of integrating critical thinking into the EFL classes, they do not have sufficient time for teaching critical thinking due to the need to deliver a large amount of information to cover content.

Moreover, nine participants (45%) mentioned that student concerns of getting a good grade prevent teachers from focusing on developing their critical thinking skills. Additionally, Student expectation of lecture format instruction as well as student resistance to active learning represent barrier that hinder critical thinking integration. About (50%) of the participants agreed that insufficient class time, student expectation of lecture format instruction and students' behavior represent common barriers that hinder critical integration. On the other hand, seven participants (35%) considered lack of appropriate instructional materials and lack of knowledge of what constitutes critical thinking as challenges to critical thinking development. Eight participants (40%) mentioned that they had difficulty in assessing student work that reflects critical thinking. Furthermore, six participants (30%) stated that they had the feelings of unpreparedness to teach critical thinking skills.

These teachers' concerns led the researchers to identify four major themes voiced by educators as barriers to teaching critical thinking within the classroom:

For teachers: 1) Teachers do not have enough time or training to prepare and perform activities; 2) Teachers feel the need to cover content to prepare students for standardized testing; and, 3) The anxiety of the standards - based assessments does not lend itself to the improvement of student critical thinking;

For students: 1) Students have a lack of necessary skills to use/learn critical thinking; 2) students' proficiency; and, 3) lack of information.

4. What do you think the effective strategies for promoting critical thinking in language classrooms are?

About (55%) of the participants listed some teaching techniques and strategies that they think might help in promoting students' critical thinking in the EFL classroom, such as: team - based learning, cooperative learning, role playing, problem solving, ask and answer and flipped classroom, discussion. Around (45%) of the participants mentioned that teachers need for further professional development on how to develop their students' critical thinking.

11. Discussion of the Results:

The self - reported data included in the questionnaire provided by participants offered an interpretative view of how teachers perceive and integrate critical thinking in their EFL teaching context. The results indicate that EFL teachers in this study have some but inadequate knowledge and understanding about critical thinking. They view critical thinking as a process that involves questioning an issue objectively from multiple perspectives. However, they still need to promote their understanding of critical thinking as a systematic and cognitive activity and need to know how to develop their skills for effectively enhancing it among students. It was not a sudden that three of the participants clearly declared their unfamiliarity with the concept of critical thinking and considered it as irrelevant to language teaching and learning. As exactly what happened before with the participant teachers in the study of Shahrebabaki and Notash (2015).

Another important aspect that is missing in their theoretical background and practice as there was limited inclusion of collaborative learning environments in their EFL classrooms in spite of their knowledge of the importance of collaborative learning. Group - work activities such as discussions and peer -assessment techniques did not have a dominant role in their teaching to develop critical thinking. This is contrary to what is always suggested that working cooperatively leads to achievement of higher levels of thinking compared to individual learning skills (Stapleton, 2011).

Furthermore, teachers have a very positive attitude towards inclusion of critical thinking into their course content. Critical thinking was definitely regarded by most of the participants as an important skill. The majority of the participants (75%) strongly advocated the need to focus on critical thinking processes and they require curriculum that allow students to learn to do certain things across the curriculum and transfer these skills into their lives outside school. However, some participants (25%) expressed their negative attitudes towards integrating critical thinking in language teaching and learning. This negative attitude did not stimulate them to use any strategies or techniques that foster critical thinking or to adapt learning materials that contain activities or tasks which require true engagement of students in solving problems or debating arguments. Some of the participants reported that they use a variety of techniques to support the development of critical thinking in students such as reading between the lines, questioning, making inferences, and connecting the topic to daily issues and concerns. Despite their enthusiasm, their effort to focus on critical thinking was discouraged.

Moreover, although most of the participant teachers reported different experiences about their implementation of this skill in their teaching, they all agree about the existence of serious challenges that hinder this implementation. All the participants emphasized this issue and reported about their own experiences with some of these challenges. They attributed these challenges to different reasons including home, school, student and teacher. Previous research also confirmed this result (Qing, 2013; Aliakbaria & Sadeghdaghighib, 2013; Kim & Pollard, 2017).

The findings of this study have useful implications for promoting EFL learners' critical thinking. The current study can enhance EFL teachers' awareness about the importance of developing this kind of thinking among their students and inform about the strategies and activities they can implement to achieve this goal.

12. Conclusions

English language classrooms represent an appropriate context for implementing critical thinking. EFL teachers can integrate it in different aspects of teaching and learning including methods of instructions, strategies of assessment and learning materials. However, there are certain social, cultural and administrative barriers which hinder the implementation of critical thinking in English language teaching and learning in FL contexts. Nevertheless, as a 21st century skill, critical thinking has become a necessity for 21st century EFL learners, not an option. Providing an appropriate atmosphere for developing this skill is a multidisciplinary process and requires cooperation and mutual understanding among all those who are involved in the teaching/learning process. The current study recommends that:

13. Recommendations:

In the light of the present study results, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Developing the 21st century skills should be integrated into EFL learning and teaching process as it is one of its objectives.
2. Critical thinking should receive due emphasis and attention on the part of teachers, students and parents.
3. EFL teachers should develop their higher - order thinking skills (HOTS).
4. Syllabus designers, should consider the importance of integrating critical thinking into EFL curriculum especially in the secondary stage.

14. Suggestions for further Study:

In the light of the present study results, the following further studies are recommended:

- (1) Exploring secondary stage students' perceptions of critical thinking.
- (2) Exploring teachers' perceptions of the 21st century skills in

teaching and learning in EFL classrooms

- (3) Investigating the factors that affect the development of critical thinking in EFL classes for students at different levels and in different stages.

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