

Teachers' Perspectives: Developing Undergraduate EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking (CT), its importance in EFL classes, and its teachability, which aims to develop undergraduate EFL learners' skills. Not only does it present first-hand information about the teachers' widespread understanding of CT, but it also analyzes the relevant instructional experience in depth. To provide an objective analysis of the EFL teachers' conceptualization and visualization of CT skills in a home setting, a questionnaire has been distributed to a sample population of EFL teachers at Birzeit University in Palestine. This measuring tool provides a description of variables that affect implementing CT in class. The paper also tries to defend the need to equip teachers with an unambiguous thoughtful understanding of CT concepts and instructional strategies that develop learners' ability to think critically. Based on the respondents' answers, the paper concludes the discussion by confirming that critical-thinking-based instruction should be better practiced in EFL classes.

Keywords: Conceptualization, Critical Thinking, Instruction, Rubrics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is considered a cornerstone of educational goals in the 21st century. Like most teachers, scholars, and educationalists, our EFL teachers advocate the necessity of teaching CT skills and integrating them into the English language courses. More importantly, the Cambridge Unlock series, the EFL textbooks used at our university, have added Critical Thinking to its title in the second edition (2019). For example, the title of Unlock 4 reads: Unlock 4 Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking. This indicates that CT skills are basic components of the EFL courses that need to be covered. Having this in mind, our teachers try their best to approach and equip their learners with these skills. It is true that our teachers generally tend to focus on helping their learners improve their language; still, CT and language development, as Carter (2020) put it, go together. Consequently, there is a need to review, explore and analyze the teachers' visualization of the CT concept and its applicability in class. This descriptive study provides evidence on how EFL teachers view and address CT skills and the in-class practices that would develop these skills in the undergraduate learners' classes, particularly in writing. To cover these domains, the researcher used a questionnaire as a research tool, which aimed to highlight the teachers' perspectives of the CT concept from different angles and how the respondent teachers implement CT in their teaching setting.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study tries to give answers to the following broad questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' views of the concept of critical thinking in EFL class?
2. How can teachers' perceptions of critical thinking be reflected in EFL classes?
3. What instructional strategies do EFL teachers use in teaching critical thinking?

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Much research has recently been geared towards the importance of critical thinking (CT) in EFL; however, not much attention has been paid to EFL teachers' perceptions of the concept. The study describes and analyzes teachers' understanding of CT, its applicability, and teachability in instructional settings in EFL classes. It reveals the need to develop clear CT-oriented strategies and integrate them into their instructional practices in class.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL teachers highly value the importance of approaching and teaching critical thinking (CT) skills. The main issue is their precise perception of the CT concept and their ability to include it in the teaching and learning process of language

skills, especially in academic writing. Researchers' attempts to give a clear and specific definition of critical thinking have left the concept "difficult to define and, consequently, difficult to study" (Abrami *et al.*, 2008, p. 1103). Choy and Cheah (2009) concluded that it is questionable to state that the learners' ability to explain certain concepts means that the learners think critically.

Nevertheless, some scholars relate critical thinking to higher-order skills (HOTS) (Ennis, 1996; Beyer, 1988). These skills involve processes of connecting information meaningfully and using it to deal with problems. It is obvious that the CT definition is still controversial. For example, this study's findings show that the teachers conceptualize CT in different ways. Yet, whatever definition is given, CT remains an important skill that students need to think and argue logically and read beyond the given literal text. CT enables learners to learn independently and make decisions, which they definitely need beyond the walls of their classroom. Halpern (1998) stated, "There is virtually no disagreement over the need to help college students improve how they think" (p. 450). This motivates EFL teachers to integrate CT into their teaching strategies and practices, but not as a separate skill by itself. However, some scholars argued that CT skills involve thinking which is viewed as a natural process (Sternberg & Williams, 2002). Accordingly, EFL learners are likely to acquire and learn such skills within the overall process of learning or through a variety of language activities, tasks, and other classroom practices. If this is the case, pedagogical debate on whether to explicitly include teaching CT skills in lesson plans or not is justifiable. Still, EFL teachers should better realize that thinking, though a natural process, cannot be left alone, as this leads to partiality and distortion of information, which are undesirable instructional outcomes (Duron *et al.*, 2006). Teachers must foster the significance of thinking critically, objectively, and reasonably.

On the other hand, learners need to value thought excellence and the understanding of the point of view of the other, as this will help them become self-directed and confident in communicating in EFL. To achieve these goals, teachers need to integrate CT into EFL course activities (Lin & Xiang, 2019). By developing the learners' CT skills, teachers can create a challenging learning setting that fosters motivation among learners. At this stage, the learners are prepared to move from lower-order thinking skills, e.g., memorizing, to more analytical skills that require them to carry out tasks that involve evaluation, decision-making, and problem solution. The activities that underlie CT thinking are likely to enable the learners to judge the knowledge they attain and participate actively in class. Studies confirmed that by developing the learners' ability in this respect, teachers can improve their learners' language proficiency (Liaw, 2007), which is considered a key goal of instruction.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study used a 12-item multiple-choice questionnaire as an instrumentation tool that was objectively designed to serve the research. The respondents were 22, 11 female and 11 male, EFL teachers who are on duty in the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022 at the Department of

Languages and Translation at Birzeit University. The questionnaire consisted of two sections; a bio and 12 items. The respondents' teaching experience ranges between 5 to 25 years.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to provide an objective analysis of the questionnaire results, the researcher gives a thorough discussion of the results by item. The respondents' answers to the items are presented by percentage.

A. I Understand what the Term 'Critical Thinking' Means

- a. Making clear and logical judgments 27.2 %
- b. Judging according to established personal criteria 9%
- c. Understanding and evaluating opinions and solving problems 81.8%

More than a quarter of the teachers (27 %) agreed that CT is a skill that is related to the learner's ability to make clear and take logical decisions. However, less than 10 % considered personal standards as important principles for judging things and issues. A significant percentage (81 %) approved that CT is best defined as the learner's ability to understand, evaluate opinions and solve problems. It should be noted that some teachers selected more than one choice. The different perceptions of CT never mean devaluing this skill in instruction or failing to acknowledge its importance. In their study about EFL teachers' attitudes towards CT teaching, Barjesteh and Vaseghi (2012, *as cited in* Asgharheidari & Tahriri, 2015) noted that the different definitions of CT have common ground, which is its association with the ability to make decisions and solve the problem.

B. Teaching Critical Thinking Skills Is Usually Stated Explicitly in My Lesson Plan

- a. Yes 59.09 %
- b. No 40.90 %

About 60% of the teachers overtly include teaching CT skills in their lesson plans. Apparently, the teachers are guided by the components of the Cambridge Unlock textbooks they are using. The structure of each unit in these books comprises skills and subskills, including CT as a separate heading. However, (40 %) of the teachers avoid putting down teaching CT as a lesson objective by itself. This explains the reasons why some scholars state that CT skills need not be taught (Sternberg & Williams, 2002).

C. Teaching Critical Thinking Skills is Essential in EFL Instruction

It is not surprising that all teachers of the sample population (100 %) stressed the importance of CT in their EFL classes. Given this fact, the teachers are required to explore, employ and contextualize practical techniques that reflect their emphasis on the vivacity of CT in their classrooms. Teachers can highlight the importance of teaching strategies that develop CT skills in many ways, e.g., training them to ask the appropriate questions about a given issue, evaluate and judge information, and make decisions (Salehi, 2019; Quitadamo & Martha, 2007).

D. Critical Thinking Skills Should be Taught Integratively with the Other Language Skills

All the respondents agreed that CT skills should not be taught separately, away from other language skills. This explains why some researchers insist that critical thinking cannot be delivered and taught as an isolated skill. Cruickshank (1986) noted, 'It is unclear, however, whether or not thinking can be taught' (p.82). Cambridge Unlock reading and writing textbooks used in our EFL programme labels a subskill component under the writing part of each unit; nevertheless, CT is integrated into the writing task, which motivates the learners to think beyond the presented material. For example, the learners are asked to support their writing by giving evidence, presenting reasonable arguments, and, eventually, voicing out their own ideas. CT skill is not delivered as an independent skill. (Satriani *et al.*, 2019).

E. My EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills can be Best Developed Through

- a. Reading 31.81 %
- b. Speaking 9 %
- c. Listening 4.54 %
- d. Writing 36.36 %
- e. All 40.9 %

Elder and Paul (2006, *as cited in* Gandimathi & Nafiseh, 2018) considered CT an important factor in the acquisition of reading and writing. This may explain why the respondent teachers think that these two skills, about (32 %) for reading and nearly (36 %) for writing, take the lead in developing their learners' critical thinking skills. Kellogg (1999) mentioned that writing and thinking are twins, as the former can present visions to the thinking process. However, more than one-third of the teachers (40.9 %) believe that the four language skills do the job. Surprisingly, about 5% underestimate the role of listening in improving such skills. One may assume that some teachers view listening skills as a passive learning experience that does not require interaction, which is definitely not the case. Speaking (9 %) is also considered a skill that makes no significant difference in improving CT.

F. My EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Ability in Essay Writing Should Be Developed Through the Following Writing Stages

- a. The pre-writing (brainstorming) 68.18 %
- b. Drafting 18.18 %
- c. Redrafting 9 %
- d. Final draft 4.54 %
- e. All stages 13.63 %

About two-thirds of the teachers (68 %) viewed the brainstorming stage in essay writing as the step that best materializes the learner's ability to develop their CT skills. Obviously, at this stage, the learners discuss different points of view about a given topic so that they could be able to produce ideas and solve problems. Not only does the brainstorming technique involve creativity, but it is also an essential tool to generate ideas. These abilities are valued as major features of CT. In contrast, about (5 %) of the teachers considered finalizing the essay the least important stage, as it comprises the proofreading and deciding on the writing output.

G. Type of Essay Plays an Important Role in Developing My Learners' Critical Thinking Skills in Writing

- a. Yes 91 %
- b. No 9 %

Given the fact that a considerable number of the respondents consider writing the key skill to the promotion of their learners' CT abilities, it is not surprising that the type of the writing essay task is significant as well. The majority of the teachers state that the essay type is a reasonable factor in developing CT. The essay type helps learners to think critically of original ideas and how to support their arguments. Additionally, it is important to choose essay topics relevant to the learners' interests, culture, and values. For example, the writing task in Unlock 4 RW textbook reads: 'How has globalization changed your country?' (p.32), which can be considered engaging.

H. My EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Ability in Writing Can Be Best Developed Through Writing

- a. Argumentative essays 59.09 %
- b. Problem-solution essays 31.81 %
- c. Cause and effect essays 4.54 %
- d. Comparison and contrast essays 4.54 %
- e. All types of essays 27.27 %

Karanja (2021) concluded that teaching critical thinking should be covered in any writing course. Writing is an important skill that shows the learners' ability to express their own opinion on about a certain topic. The type of essay is a key factor in developing CT skills. Nearly two-thirds of the teachers (59.09 %) consider that learners can best improve these skills through writing argumentative essays. Such a type requires major writing skills such as presenting reasonable and sensible arguments, counterarguments, opinion-based ideas, and refutation skills. This gives good pedagogical justification for selecting the topics for argumentative writing, which should stimulate and provoke the learners to think critically. What characterizes this type of writing is that it allows the learners to logically present their arguments and the opposing counterarguments, even if they do not agree with them (Cottrell, 2005).

I. My EFL Learners Realize the Importance of Critical Thinking Skills in Their Writing

- a. Yes 68.18 %
- b. No 31.81 %

Although this item lacks objectivity, teachers must have based their responses on their ongoing observation and evaluation of their learners' writing. By realizing the importance of CT in writing, the learners can produce a piece of writing with clear cohesion, coherence, and explanations. Writing can give the learners a space to express their views and opinions when they do different types of writing tasks covered in their textbook. They also need to realize the strong and weak points of their ideas. (Moore, 2011).

J. Evaluating My EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills in Writing Is Set as A Separate Part of My Evaluating Writing Rubrics

- a. Yes 31.18 %
- b. No 68.81 %

The obvious discrepancy in responses to item 10 shows that it is not easy to follow a clear set when evaluating

writing. About 69 % of the teachers avoid putting down definite criteria in assessing writing. This indicates that there are no specific guidelines to evaluate whether learners have written critically or not. Hillock (2010, *as cited in* Karanja, 2021) noted that vague rubrics are used to evaluate writing. This stems from the fact that misconception of CT and its apprehensive teachability undermine the ability to set up a clear scoring guide or standardized evaluation criteria of writing.

K. We, As EFL Teachers, Need More Training About How to Teach Critical Thinking Skills

- a. Yes 100 %
- b. No 0 %

The respondents unanimously agree that they badly need training on how to teach and approach CT skills in EFL classes. Teachers need to be critical thinkers themselves in the first place; this makes them set an example for their learners when addressing critical-thinking-based class activities. Yuan and Stapleton (2020) stated that equipping teachers with good levels of CT would logically develop their ability to teach CT skills. Therefore, teachers need to join in-service training on EFL instructional approaches that explicitly integrate CT skills in teaching the different language skills.

L. My EFL Learners Are Generally Good Critical Thinkers

- a. Yes 22.72 %
- b. No 77.27 %

The data show that about 77 % of the teachers do not think that their learners are good critical thinkers. This calls for a serious review of instructional strategies employed in the EFL teaching and learning process. It should be emphasized that EFL learners need to be provided with critical thinking activities if we want to assist them to move beyond what they have learned from class instruction. Some of these activities, but are not limited to, include using questions to gear learners towards certain styles of participation and guiding them to replicate information or to employ the think-aloud technique (Barnes, 1986). However, the characteristics of good critical thinkers remain difficult to specify.

CONCLUSION

The research findings show that EFL teachers at home situation perceive that critical thinking is an important skill that needs to be developed. They understand that CT motivates learners to engage more in the learning process, and eventually, develop their overall achievement and performance in the language. However, there is a sort of ambiguity and undistinguishable thoughts of the precise understanding of the CT concept. This misperception calls for in-service training for teachers on instructional methods that best integrate CT in EFL courses and broaden their competency in efficiently implementing CT-based activities in class. Training teachers on how to explicitly evaluate CT in the four language skills should also be highlighted. Teachers realize that turning their learners from passive recipients into good critical thinkers is an ambitious goal that must be achieved, as it is no more an option.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest.

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