

Exploring critical thinking from the teacher's eyes: The case of the department of English-Badji Mokhtar university-Annaba

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Abstract: the novel and increasingly changing forms of knowledge in the current world place a premium for university teachers to cultivate sophisticated faculties of rational reasoning and critical reflection in students. Following this line of thought, an investigation was carried out in order to probe into teachers' use of instructional strategies that foster critical thinking in EFL learners. The present paper sought, therefore, to investigate particularly teachers' role in developing critical thinking skills in learners of English as a foreign language. For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was designed, on the basis of readings from relevant literature, and given to teachers from the department of English at Badji Mokhtar university. Results were interpreted using both a qualitative and quantitative approach. In line with the underlying assumptions, the findings display significant implications as regards the implementation and teaching of instructional strategies to develop critical thinking in EFL classrooms. A set of pedagogical recommendations were suggested regarding teachers' pivotal role in cultivating critical thinking in EFL students.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; Instructional Strategies; Sophisticated Faculties; Learners of English as a Foreign Language; Teachers of English as a Foreign Language.

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1- Introduction:

Currently, the university teacher has a double-edged mission in the face of the unprecedented educational changes and the aftermath of globalization, namely, disseminating knowledge and developing the 'mind'. In other words, in addition to diffusing content-based information, teachers are expected to cultivate in learners criticality and self-discovery (O'Malley, 2016). In fact, teachers worldwide are faced with new challenges as a result of new educational paradigms that place increasingly complex demands on language learners to develop cognitive and metacognitive skills that do not qualify them only for a good position in the future but rather enable them to manage various academic and non academic intricate, changing and non-linear hindrances. Hence, endeavor is made, through this paper, to consolidate the aims of the Algerian academicians and specialists regarding ensuring quality in higher education institutions. It is the author's belief that the sustainment of permanent development is a long process with far-reaching goals. It needs necessarily a huge investment of human capital and resources. This agrees also with other international educational orientations that regard high quality of education and proper professional training as contingent on the intellectual enrichment of both the individual and society.

In this framework, an investigation has been undertaken on EFL teachers at the department of English during the academic year 2019-2020 in order to assess the extent of their involvement in criticality development in EFL classrooms. Our main objective was, hence, finding out whether or not teachers use instructional strategies to instill critical thinking among EFL learners. To this end, the following research questions were posited:

- Do university teachers use instructional strategies in the EFL classrooms that foster criticality?
- Do they encourage the development of critical skills in their students?

1.1. Hypothesis:

- EFL teachers do not sufficiently implement and teach critical thinking skills in the classroom.

2.1. Critical thinking:

The concept of critical thinking has been for a long time a topic of heated debate among educators and scholars. Intertwined with other multi-dimensional concepts such as freedom; integrity; citizenship; intellectual discipline; creativity and empathy (Uribe-Enciso et al., 2017), the foregoing review of literature reveals that the concept of critical thinking is a multi-dimensional construct that does not lend itself easily to scientific definition. This is due, following (Zhou et al, 2012) contention, to the existence of several sub-categorization in the literature in relation to thinking processes. According to Ennis (1987) critical thinking entails three basic components: a) critical thinking disposition; b) implementation of Bloom's (1956) higher-order thinking skills and c) strategic problem solving strategies. Moreover, Weinstein (2000) suggests another approach to critical thinking that is inclusive of: 1) skillful thinking; 2)-responsible thinking, 3)-non-routine thinking, 4)-criteria setting; 5)-self-correction and 6)-sensitivity to context.

Furthermore, Lun et al. (2010) conceives critical thinking as a concept that is represented by a set of behaviors such as 'overt questioning' or 'debating of ideas' and entails significant skills and dispositions like illustratively, resourcefulness, intrinsic goal orientation, open-mindedness and clarity. Additionally, they provided a summary, on the basis of a synthesis made on specificities and features related to critical thinking, of major critical skills found in the literature as associated with university level that is: identification of assumptions behind an argument; recognizing important relationships; making correct references from data; drawing conclusions from the information or data provided; interpreting the merit of a conclusion based on available information; evaluating credibility of a statement and its source and making self-corrections.

2.1. The role of the teacher in criticality development:

In the process of criticality development, the teacher is deemed an important actor of change and an essential partner in developing learners' minds and behaviors. Through providing students with specific modalities and skills, teachers are likely to play an active role in enlarging the spectrum of students' knowledge and widening their perspectives. It is the author's belief that when students possess such intellectual instruments, they are likely to function in a productive, generative and creative way and ultimately 'enact *change* in apposite way.

As a matter of fact, wealth of research in the educational field has emphasized the significant role that teachers play in the teaching learning enterprise (Ulug et al, 2011). Many studies in the field of language learning have underscored the potent impact that teachers have upon student's psyches and behaviors through the attitudes they adopt *vis a vis* learners and the approaches they embrace in the classroom (Arnold, 2011).

In this orientation, the overriding goal of the teacher as an educator is perceived as the development of critical 'mindsets' in learners that is, developing learners who are able of making consistent and reasonable assessments instead of passively accepting, flawed, at times, information and assertions from others. In this respect, Amrous & Nejmaoui (2016) contend that university graduates are expected to make "an intelligent" use of the knowledge they acquired at the university to bring concrete, practical and innovative solutions to problems they are bound to face in their professional life later on.

However, in the Algerian academic setting, a scant attention is granted to the teaching and use of critical thinking strategies in EFL classrooms at the university level. It seems, unfortunately, that teachers are not always aware of the strategies and requirements they should implement for the development of critical reflection in learners. Adopting an intuitive approach, they generally emphasize solely the comprehension of the subject matter in question rather than equipping learners with solid tools of analysis and exploration.

From an insider perspective, it is often the case that teachers in the context of teaching English as a foreign language, display sentiments of dismiss and frustration about the passive learning habits of the learners and their attraction towards rote learning and ready-made materials. Nevertheless, it is the author's belief that teachers, through professional tutorial coaching can have a strong influence in building in learners 'novel' habits of learning and modifying their 'modes of functioning' through creating for them concrete spaces for knowledge acquisition where they can read, understand, analyze and evaluate information from different sources and construct, on this basis, their own personalized theories and assumptions.

2- Method and Tools:

2.1. Population and Sample:

The population of this current investigation comprises EFL teachers at the Department of English Language, Faculty of Letters, Human and Social Sciences, Badji Mokhtar University –Annaba during the academic year 2019-2020. The total number of the population is estimated at 60 full-time teachers and display noticeable differences in terms of age, gender, teaching experiences and qualifications in EFL.

The respondents who took part in the study are 12 full-time teachers from the English Department. To ensure reliability of data, the EFL teachers were chosen on a random basis depending on their availability the day of the administration of the questionnaire. They were teachers who were in charge of different modules related to both graduate (Licence) and post-graduate level (Master 1 and Master 2) and taken from the three streams taught in the field of EFL namely, linguistics; British/American literature and British/American civilization.

The debriefing of data shows that nine out of the twelve respondents were female teachers. This was expected given the fact that the number of female teacher in the whole population is largely superior than the male teachers. This could be explained by the fact that

females tend to be more attracted than males towards language arts and foreign language learning and thus often engage in postgraduate studies in this area(Kobayashi, 2002).

2.2. Research Instrument:

In order to check our hypothesized relationship between the insufficient use of instructional strategies displayed by teachers in EFL classroom and the narrowed criticality manifested by EFL learners, a questionnaire was designed as the measuring tool of the study, on the basis of web readings in the literature related to assessment of critical faculties among learners(Sarigoz, 2012) and to teachers perceptions and practices(Dwee et al,2016). Composed of a total of eight questions, the questionnaire entails seven close-ended questions and one open ended question. It purports specifically to highlight the teachers' opinions about the use and implementation of instructional strategies that are likely to enhance critical thinking in EFL classrooms. The introductory page entails some information about the respondents including the gender and their area of specialization and their experience as shown by the number of years they spent in teaching EFL.

3- Results and Discussion:

Q1-Do you organize brainstorming in classroom during debates or team-work activities? yes/no.

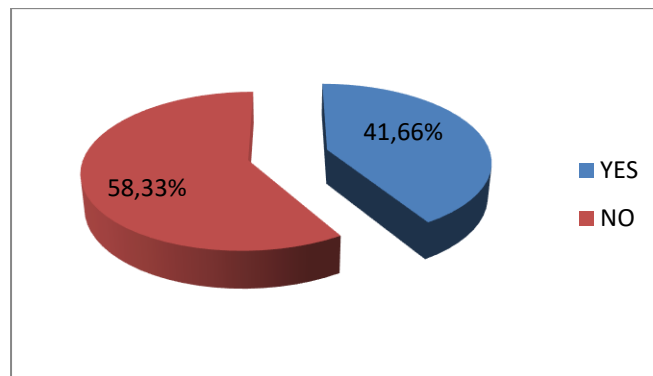


Figure 1: teachers and brainstorming

This question aims at collecting information about whether or not teachers use brainstorming in EFL classroom. It should be noted that brainstorming is a teaching strategy that encourages creative productivity and consists of granting opportunity for students to freely express their opinions, views and perceptions regarding a given topic and then making a deeper analysis and reflection of the different ideas on the basis of group dynamics. In this process, the teacher's role is paramount as it consists basically at guiding and organizing the discussions in the classroom.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of stimulating brainstorming in EFL classrooms during debates or team work. The results show that 58,33% of the surveyed teachers endorse the statement while 41,66% opt for the no alternative. We trust that including brainstorming as a major teaching strategy in the EFL classroom would enable students, in the course of their learning to engage in reflective judgments and assessments and ultimately take decisions in a mindful and knowledgeable way (Ahmed, 2014).

Q2-Do you teach students in classroom the ways to collect and select appropriate facts and information? yes/no.

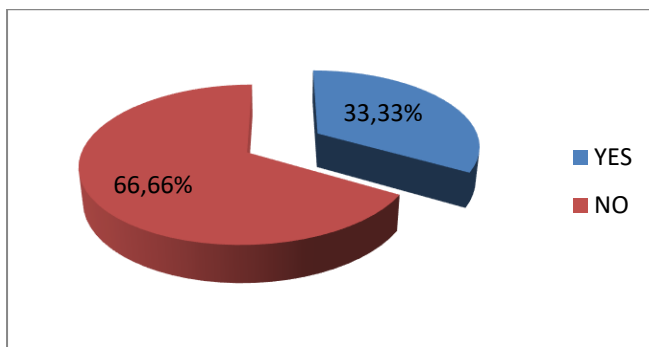


Figure 2: teachers and information fluency

As it is shown in graph 02, 33,33% % of the teachers state that they teach students how to collect data and amass information while 66,66% of the surveyed teachers say the opposite.

It is the author’s belief that the linguistic mastery of English is not sufficient to achieving academic success. The pervasive demands of the present world characterized by a digital and technological revolutions requires from learners to be information fluent. *Information fluency* means being able to make an intelligent and selective use of data from the large board of information with respect to his/her own personal needs, goals, choices and expectations. It is based on processing and filtering information and extracting what is useful to accomplish required tasks following one’s prioritized objectives(Lombard, 2016).

Q3-Do you teach students problem solving strategies in the classroom? yes/no

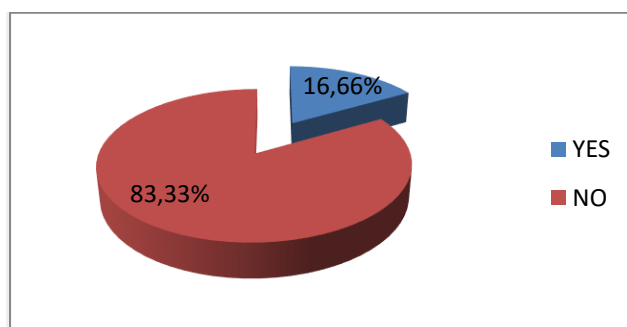


Figure 3: teachers and problem solving strategies

This question targets teasing out information about teachers’ use and teaching of problem solving strategies in EFL classroom. Surprisingly enough, the largest proportion of teachers that is, 83,33% say that they do not teach problem solving strategies in EFL classrooms while 16,66% of the teachers endorse question.

Emphasis should be laid on reconsidering the role of project-based activities in EFL classrooms. It is only through an enquiry-based learning that learners can develop a genuine and deep understanding of the material and actively propose thoughtful solutions to problems (Ghahremani-Ghajar et al, 2011). Besides, project-based assignments and activities would increase learners’ receptiveness to various theories, hypotheses and assumptions and provide them with the opportunity to amend their faults and misconceptions.

Q4-How often do you provide students with reading assignments and other home works that sustain what they learn in the classroom? Very often/ sometimes/Rarely/No answer

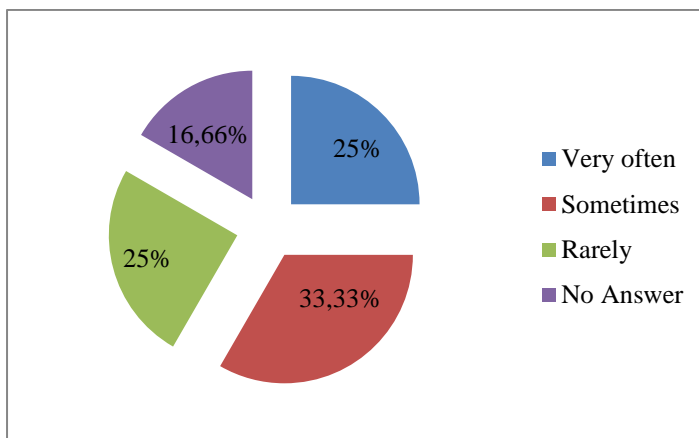


Figure 4: teachers and extra reading assignments

Data recorded in figure 4 shows that the largest proportion of teachers(33,33%) opt for sometimes; 25% opt for very often; 25% chose rarely and 16,66% provided no answer to the question. As it can be deduced, findings demonstrate a mitigated tone regarding teachers’ emphasis on reading assignments in EFL classrooms.

Providing students with reading assignments will widen the scope of students’ knowledge and will enrich his vocabulary in English language. Besides, the inclusion of artistic masterpieces is likely to sharpen learners’ criticality; develop their sensitivities and stimulate their cognitive, affective and spiritual responsiveness and tolerance of differences (Dirkx, 1996).

Q5-How often do you use well-known, great classical literary works in your classroom?
Very often/ sometimes/Rarely/No answer

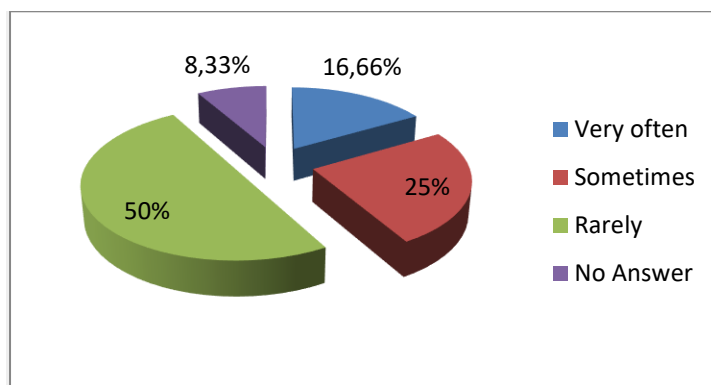


Figure 5: teachers and classical literary works

Figure 5 reveals that 50% of the EFL teachers opt for rarely; 25% opt for sometimes; 16,66% opt for ‘very often’ and 8,33% provided no answer to the question It is the author’s contention that rote learning or passive reading or listening to the material taught in class would not be sufficient to developing learner’s reading abilities (Alderson, 2010). Rather, training learners to adopt a critical approach that applicable inside and outside the confine limits of the classroom requires from learners to raise questions about the material; build their ‘own personalized’ understanding of the material and find out adequate solutions in case there are problems.

Q6-How often do you use project-based learning activities in the classroom? Very often/sometimes/Rarely/No answer

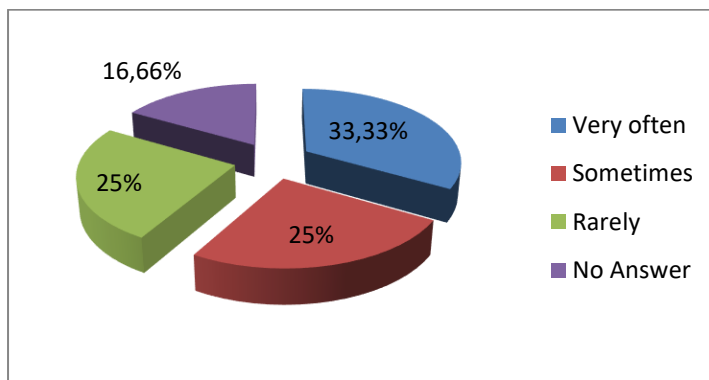


Figure 6: teachers and project-based activities

Project-based instruction is a very useful pedagogy to be implemented in the language classroom for university students. Projects related to class curriculum can engage students for ample and varied opportunities for interchange and creativity. Following this thread, students will learn via projects to set priorities, plan their projects design and take decisions and hence will acquire a multitude of linguistic and social skills that are central to critical thinking (Dimmitt, 2017).

As it is displayed in graph 6, 33,33% of the surveyed teachers say that they very often use project-based learning activities; ; 25% say that they sometimes do it; 25% say that they rarely do it and 16,66% of the respondents did not provide any answer.

7-As an EFL teacher, how do you evaluate your students’ critical thinking skills? high/average/low.

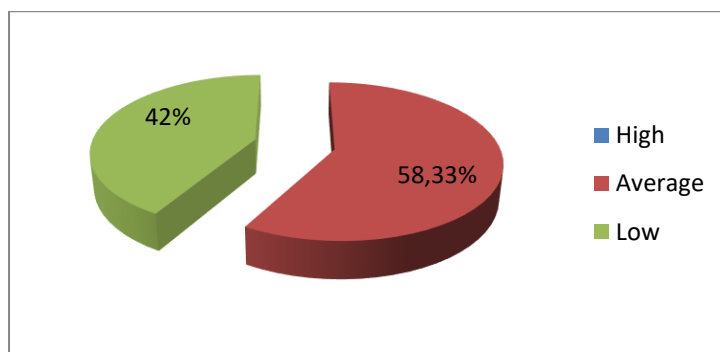


Figure 7: teachers’ evaluation of students’ critical thinking

Current educational research converge on the fact that teachers, through the pedagogy and behavior they adopt in the educational environment, are likely to strongly influence the development of learners’ critical thinking capabilities. This is due to the huge impact teachers exert on learners’ motivations perceptions and actions(Dehghayedi & Bagheri, 2018).

Regarding teachers’ evaluation of learners’ critical thinking faculties, 58,33% of the respondents depict, as shown in Figure, their students’ critical thinking skills as ‘average’ while 42% of the teachers consider them as low. It is interesting to note that there is a convergence among the twelve teachers to avoid the extreme positive option ‘high’ and to opt for mitigated (average) or negative tone(low).

From an insider perspective, it seems that teachers converge on the fact that learners display narrowed critical abilities but differ- given their variances in terms of knowledge,

experience, perceptions and practices- in their assessments of learners' critical thinking skills. Thus, teachers should discuss this issue in an attempt to reach an agreement about the critical thinking skills that should be cultivated in students and that ought to be calibrated, unavoidably, according to students' needs, levels and expectations.

8-According to your experience in teaching English at University level, what would you recommend to improve your students' critical thinking abilities?

It is the author's view that the inclusion of an open ended question in addition to the previous close-ended question will enable teachers to respond 'in the best possible way' (Choy & Cheah, 2009) and to feel free to answer according to their own perceptions and views rather than being 'limited' by the researcher's proposed alternatives. The analysis of teachers' responses displayed thought-provoking results regarding the way teachers perceive critical thinking and the channels through which it can be incorporated into English curricula and syllabi.

Teachers' recommendations about the improvement of students' critical thinking recorded in question eight can be summarized as follows:

- Teaching critical thinking as a separate course (T1).
- Involving EFL students in conferences, seminars and workshops on critical thinking (T2).
- Including critical thinking as a major theme to be taught to all streams and levels (for both graduates , first, second and third year) and postgraduates (master 1 and Master and doctoral students) (T3).
- Designing group work and team activities to enhance critical skills (T4).
- Offering specialized training programmes for teachers on critical thinking (T5).
- Reducing the large number of classes and allotting more time for the development of critical thinking (T6).
- Involving students in the topics they would be interested in learning and organizing debates around them (T7).
- Designing for EFL learners project-based activities that need practical investigation and enquiry outside the classroom (T8).
- Planting seeds for autonomy and creativity through strengthening EFL learners' confidence and effectiveness (T9).
- Creating a stimulating classroom environment that favors communication and exchange (T10).
- Consolidating learners' proficiency in the English language to empower them to seek information on their own (T11).
- Alleviating teachers' pressures to cover the syllabus and grant more space and time for the design of activities that foster critical thinking (T12).

3.1. Summary of the Results:

The present research sought to tap teachers' opinions and perceptions about their use of instructional strategies to foster critical thinking among university learners in the specific context of learning English as a foreign language. Focus was laid on understanding the role that university teachers play in the promotion of critical thinking among EFL university students through the use of instructional strategies that target the development of criticality.

The findings emanating from data processing underline thought-provoking insights as regards teachers' perceptions about the use of instructional strategies that promote critical thinking in the EFL classroom. The research results, with an eye to making a link with the proposed hypothesis, supported the hypothesis that teachers do not make a sufficient use of instructional strategies to develop critical skills in EFL learners. Therefore, as a consolidation to the hypothesis of the study, findings recorded in the questionnaire instrument, as voiced by most EFL teachers, highlight 'modest' utilization of instructional strategies that foster critical

thinking among learners. According to the analysis of the questionnaire results, most of the respondents perceive that they do not teach students enough strategies to enhance their: information fluency (Q2); problem solving abilities(Q3); active reading capacities(Q4); literary and artistic sensitivities (Q5); project-based skills (Q6). Additionally, the majority of the EFL teachers voice 'an average' mitigated appraisal about students' critical thinking skills while a nearly close proportion of teachers perceive that learners display 'low' critical thinking skills in the EFL classroom (Q7).

3.2. Pedagogical Recommendations:

The current investigation demonstrates the importance of critical thinking as a concept that stands as an essential ingredient for knowledge construction and stresses the need to develop critical thinking mindsets and skills among EFL university learners. This tallies with other previous studies that regard the development of critical thinking in academic settings as paramount to sound educational functioning Duron et al.(2006). Yet, it is our contention that the development of critical thinking is intimately closed to the type of perceptions and attitudes adopted by teachers in the language classroom. This stands in agreement with Choy & Cheah (2009)'s view that we should utterly rethink the type of perceptions attitudes and instructional strategies teachers adopt in the classroom prior to asking them to teach critical skills to learners. This stems, accordingly, from the fact, that teachers are often complacent with information dissemination and focus on 'the comprehension of the subject matter' (p.198) rather than the enhancement of critical thinking in EFL learners.

Furthermore, the development of critical thinking goes necessarily through the implementation of what (Coyle 98, as cited in Uribe-Enciso et al, 2017) depicts as the '4cs framework' namely,, Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture. Accordingly, the first element, Content, is related to the subject or topic taught in the classroom The second element, Communication, refers to the use of the target language to achieve communication purposes such as conveying one's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The third element refers to development of higher cognitive skills of analysis, reflection and assessment that enable students to engage in self-discovery and decision taking The fourth C is associated with Culture and entails development of values related to respect and tolerance of differences.

We deem that the data recorded for the sample can constitute a starting point for further investigation not only in the field of EFL but across other areas and settings. The restricted number of the sample constitutes a major limitation of the study. Thus, it is our belief that the present investigation can pave the path for other future studies in order to get a better understanding of the factors that can deter the development of critical thinking in EFL learners. The exploration of critical thinking from the *teacher's eye* ought to be reinforced by other studies that tackle other dimensions and facets in EFL learning.

4- Conclusion:

The findings highlighted thought-provoking conclusions regarding what teachers 'think' they do for developing critical thinking in learners and what actually ought to be done for learners. The implications would imply a strong need to further discuss the concept of critical thinking in order to find out strategies that would help teachers in higher education bridge the gap between content delivery and active learning for the promotion of intellectual and aesthetic sophistications in EFL learners.

It is our contention that university teachers, in general, and EFL teachers, in particular, differ tremendously in the way they perceive importance of metacognition and its significance in the learning mechanism. Their differing perceptions regarding the development of critical thinking in students culminate from various sources of influence such as, to cite only few, teachers' background, teaching experience, personal convictions and instructional strategies.

Therefore, we should engage, as teachers and educators in deep reflection over the issue of critical thinking and ponder over the modalities that could be used to nourish critical 'spirits' in learners. Teachers given the significant role they play in activating the logical and

reasonable part of students' minds, should be aware of the need to guide and coach learners in their long and strenuous path towards knowledge construction. Along this way, not only should they sustain learners' effort to master the English language but also they should provide them, through this channel of communication, with opportunities to explore and make sense of the world.

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Appendix 1

Table (1) Demographic Information of the Sample

Code	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	M
Speciality	<u>LS</u>	LS	LS	LS	LS	CIV	LIT	LIT	LIT	CIV	LS	<u>CIV</u>
Experience /Years	≤ 5	10 ≥	≤ 5	10 ≥	≤ 5	20 ≥	10 ≥	10 ≥	10 ≥	10 ≥	10 ≥	≤ 5

Appendix 2

Code

*Please state you Gender ?

1-Male

2-Female

*What is your specialized field in EFL ?

1-Linguistic science and English language teaching

2- British or American Literature

3- British or American Civilization

*How many years have you been teaching EFL ?

1-Less than 5 years≤

2-Equals or more than 5 years≥

3-Equals or more than 10 years≥

4-Equals or more than 20 years≥

Thank you for your assistance and collaboration.

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Q1- Do you organize brainstorming in classroom during debates or team work activities ?

1-Yes

2-No

Q2-Do you teach students in classroom the ways to collect and select appropriate facts and information ?yes/no

1-Yes

2-No

Q3-Do you teach students problem solving strategies in the classroom ?

1-Yes

2-No

Q4-How often do you provide students with reading assignments and other home works that sustain what they learn in the classroom ?

1-Very often

2-Sometimes

3-Rarely

4-No answer

Q5-How often do you use well-known, great classical literary works in the classroom ?Very often/ sometimes/Rarely/No answer

1-Very often

2-Sometimes

3-Rarely

4-No answer

Q6-How often do you use project-based learning activities in the classroom ? Very often/ sometimes/Rarely/No answer

1-Very often

2-Sometimes

3-Rarely

4-No answer

7-As an EFL teacher, how do you evaluate your students' critical thinking skills ?

1-High

2-Average

3-Low

8-According to your experience in teaching English at University level, what would you recommend to improve your students' critical thinking abilities?

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