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Elucidating the EFL Teachers' Salient Role in Incorporating Critical Thinking within the Classroom: the case of EFL Teachers at Salhi Ahmed University Centre, Naama

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Abstract

The concept of critical thinking has long been the ultimate interest of educators. This study aimed at substantiating the connection between critical thinking and the role of EFL teachers in its implementation. The present research attempts, also, to elucidate the approaches, activities, techniques, and strategies as well that EFL teachers opt for in order to effectively integrate critical thinking within EFL classrooms. Accordingly, this research is based on qualitative and quantitative types of data analysis in which a questionnaire was undertaken. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that EFL teachers perceive critical thinking to be an outstanding skill to rely on in EFL classrooms. They showed positive inclinations towards the incorporation of such skill in higher education. In addition to that, they tend to include critical thinking both implicitly and explicitly. Besides that, they prioritize creating a student-centered environment while relying on debates, open-ended questions, analyzing information, and the like.

Key Words: Critical thinking, critical thinking in education, critical thinking in ELT, EFL teachers, EFL students.

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1. Introduction

It is an axiom that to broaden the arena of knowledge in a wide array of fields, thinking is a vital necessity. Accordingly, thinking makes it possible for people to comprehend the world and successfully figure out a way to approach it rather than haphazardly drowning in the unknown. In all scopes of life, a storm of progress is exceedingly cropping up and every sphere is getting more sophisticated with each passing day. Recently, the education industry has been witnessing immense changes with a constant need for neoteric and innovative methods for the sake of boosting the quality of learning and teaching processes. As we are in the era of increasingly developing technology, it effortlessly brings about an everquickening pace of accessing information. Nevertheless, one should recognize that what we perceive as modern in the present day might surprisingly become obsolete tomorrow. For that very reason, we cannot merely depend on what is being relayed to us through technology. As a matter of fact, with the incessant production of information, people passively and unintentionally soak up the waves of information. The world is, then, confronted with a serious conundrum that, sooner or later, has to be dealt with. To this end, scholars, experts and researchers of every ilk have been relentlessly seeking to solve the problem of consuming knowledge without taking into consideration that the latter might be distorted, fallacious, or inaccurate.

Instilling critical thinking in education is of paramount importance as it strengthens students' ability to think and permits them to take advantage of their rationalism, logic, and creativity. Putting this into perspective, critical thinking should be an integral parcel of the teaching-learning process. Being regularly exposed to critical thinking will eventually promote students' discernment and impartiality. Succinctly put, merging critical thinking is exceptionally indispensable in education. And for that so, English language learners should not be exempted from integrating critical thinking into their curriculum. On top of that, to get rid of mugging up and regurgitating knowledge that can lead to the accentuation of a huge gap and many handicaps in education, the role of teachers must never be condoned. These days, accessing information is no longer arduous. Thus, it becomes the teacher's ultimate responsibility to stay more prepared than ever before. For this reason, this research work casts light on explaining the EFL teachers' salient role in integrating critical thinking in the classroom. It also seeks to investigate the way they implement it. To this end, the following questions are posited:

1. What is the EFL teachers' role in incorporating critical thinking in the classroom?

2. How should EFL teachers implement critical thinking in the classroom?

As to tackle these questions, it is hypothesized that:

- 1. EFL teachers play a paramount role in incorporating critical thinking skill in the classroom.
- 2. EFL teachers should explicitly and implicitly introduce activities that trigger their students to think critically.

1.1. Methodology

The current study adopts the quantitative and qualitative research methods in which data is gleaned by means of a questionnaire that is dealt with both qualitatively and quantitatively. Having melded both close-ended and open-ended questions together in the questionnaire provided valuable input to the research.

1.2.Target Population:

The participants who served in the present investigation are EFL University teachers, at the Department of Foreign Languages, Salhi Ahmed University Centre in Naama during the academic year 2022-2023. To scrutinize the EFL teachers' role in incorporating critical thinking within the classroom and how they do this so, 14 full-time teachers from the English Department took part in the study while they were selected on a random basis, i.e., they were chosen to be part of this research work without specifying their specialties or experiences in teaching EFL.

1.3.Research Instrument:

The present research work hinges upon the use of a questionnaire. Questionnaires are "printed forms for data collection, which include questions or statements to which the subject is expected to respond, often anonymously" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). The questionnaire used in the current research comprises two types of questions. The first six questions, i.e., close-ended questions, entail eliciting quantitative data. Whereas, five other questions were presented as open-ended questions in order to grant the subject freedom to answer. In overall, the questionnaire was administered to teachers at the end of their lectures. All of them were given the time needed to fill in the whole questionnaire to make sure that no question would be left unanswered.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1.Conceptualizing Critical Thinking:

Critical thinking is an oft-used concept in the 21st century. There have been propagated a plethora of definitions for such terms. However, with the apparent existence of a mountainous literature about critical thinking, there cannot be found a single consistent meaning that would satisfy the masses, i.e., a unanimous agreement is quite challenging if not impossible to reach. Straightforwardly, probably no other topic has aroused such controversy considering that a myriad of research works have been allocated to better understand this concept and eventually make the best use of it. To start with, the American philosopher, John Dewey was the one who first singled out the concept of critical thinking even though he did not really make ample use of such a concept. Dewey introduced what he termed "reflective thinking" as an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any

belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1910). Otherwise stated, according to Dewey, critical thinking is an active process that necessitates thinking about things thoroughly, inquiring closely, asking questions, and hunting for information to approach the queries rather than passively absorbing information from others. Moreover, another extensively used definition of critical thinking was that of Robert Ennis: Critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do (Ennis, 1995). In Ennis's definition, there's an explicit implication that there must be a decision to be made in the process of critical thinking. Furthermore, the language of Michael Scriven and Richard Paul in defining critical thinking seems to be more comprehensive and precise. They perceive it as 'the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action' (Scriven & Paul, 1987). Moreover, as an attempt to describe critical thinkers, it can be claimed that a critical thinker can:

- raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely; gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively;
- reach well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;
- Communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Taken from (Paul & Elder, 2012)

2.2.Critical thinking in Education:

In the first place, critical thinking is used broadly, not to say loosely, in education. One of the major calls, in recent years, for further incorporation of critical thinking in education stems from the fact that teachers ought to fare so well with challenges and problems they run across during their classes. Simply put, all students, no matter their major, are constantly exposed to misinformation in which only the critically minded who can filter and nullify the information they conceive as misleading and inaccurate. However, there are some students who tend to be more predisposed to rely on any source of information available. To fix such a problem, integrating critical thinking within classrooms, although it could be a daunting task, is a necessity. Students have to be regularly exposed to critical thinking because a sporadic exposure to such a skill might not satiate the students' needs. In other words, though nurturing critical thinking in education is of higher significance, still it could be many educational systems' Achilles heel since classrooms are crowded with students with diverse abilities.

One of the most topics that aroused controversy in education research is whether thinking critically can be learned through the student's self effort of exploration or whether it must be officially integrated as part of the curriculum. Some researchers, like (Sternberg & Williams, 2002), believe that since thinking is an innate ability that everyone has, many learners seem like they do not need to learn critical thinking. Some others, however, like (Black, 2005) claimed that if students get instruction on how to think, they are most likely to develop their thinking skills. All in all, even though human beings are endowed with the ability to think, it is quite crucial for teachers to assist their students and guide them so that these skills would be refined. Cuseo (1996) stated that "critical thinking involves reflecting on the information received, moving away from "surface" memorization and toward deeper levels of learning". In simple terms, critical thinking denies viewing the teacher and the textbooks as primary sources of information, it rather goes further than that to consider learning as elaborating the information being received into a different form by learners.

Many scholars delineated the significance of critical thinking in education. Ku (2009), for instance, pointed out that the educational reform is primarily based on the improvement of critical thinking skills because these skills will equip 'students with the competency necessary to reason about social affairs in a rapidly changing world' .In other words, accessing information and having knowledge would not suffice. Critical thinking should be nurtured in students so that they can solve problems in both their professional and personal lives.

2.3. Critical thinking in ELT:

There is no doubt that Critical Thinking is crucial in all fields (Changwong, Sukkamart, & Sisan, 2018; Heard, Scoular, Duckworth, & Ramalingam, 2020; Nazir, 2010; Santos, 2017). Infusing critical thinking in all walks of life is crucial and education should not be deprived of this ideal. However, critical thinking has been given meager attention in comparison to the four language skills. Unfortunately, teaching English as a foreign language has conventionally put much emphasis on the expansion of language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) while overlooking the development of students' critical thinking.

Teachers need to use critical thinking in their teaching process. If teachers, Mason (2008) assumes, had a better understanding of the adaptive character of human reasoning, they would appreciate that students' logical reasoning also has to be trained in a domain-specific or context- sensitive way. In simpler terms, students have to be taught how to develop their abilities to reason and this takes time to acquire full mastery of applying a set of logical principles, and then, use them in various contexts.

It is quite consequential to integrate critical thinking within EFL classrooms because students learn the language for communicative purposes. However, their attention should be also drawn to how to display their ideas using critical thinking while using English. Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) stressed the importance of incorporating critical thinking in EFL teaching by stating ' Critical thinking has been recently introduced and gained a high position in ELT settings so that nowadays enhancing critical thinking in learners is considered one of the foreign language teachers' tasks' (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). The researchers demonstrated why is critical thinking a necessity in EFL settings: -'Firstly; if language learners can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully - Second, critical thinking expands the learning experience of the learners and makes the language more meaningful for them. -Thirdly, critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners' achievements' (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011).

3. Research Results

3.1. Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, data gleaned from the questionnaire is systematically displayed and dealt with both quantitatively and qualitatively in a bid to endorse the hypotheses this research work was based on.

Question 01: *Have you ever introduced critical thinking to your students?*

At first, as an introductory question, EFL teachers were asked whether they have ever introduced critical thinking to their students. Such a question has been chosen on purpose as it enables the informants to glimpse what the gist of the present study is really about. The figure bellow reveals the answers elicited from the participants. As shown bellow, basically all (100%) EFL teachers have already introduced critical thinking to their students which proves that they are aware of its significance. Besides, they are even acquainted with the role they play in the classroom because mentioning critical thinking during their lectures means they walk their students through the skills that are mostly required nowadays.

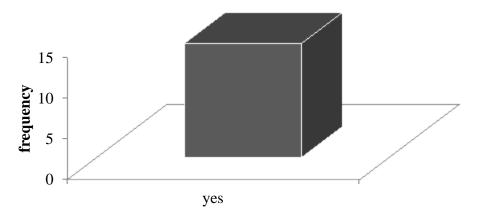


Figure 1: Introducing Critical Thinking to EFL Students.

Question 02: *EFL teachers play a significant role in integrating critical thinking in classrooms.*

The second question was raised to figure out whether or not EFL teachers agree that they play an important role in incorporating critical thinking. The results

show that they all agree with the fact that they do participate in the integration of critical thinking which means they know to which extent it is needed for students to be exposed to critical thinking by means of activities provided by teachers.

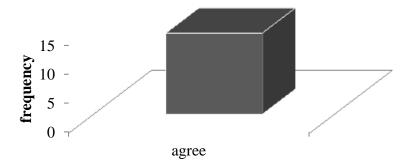


Figure 2: EFL Teachers' Role in Integrating Critical Thinking.

Question 03: *Do you think that incorporating critical thinking helps your students to be more independent?*

This question intends to recognize EFL teachers' insights on how critical thinking is pertained to being independent in thinking. More precisely, they were asked if they think that critical thinking implementation in the classroom leads EFL learners to be independent. Indeed, each one of them answered with a yes, i.e., they accept that critical thinking allows their students to be autonomous and self-reliant.

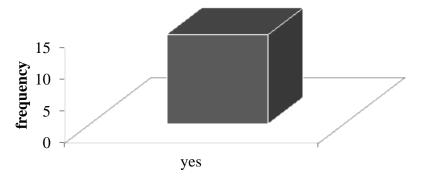


Figure 3: EFL Teachers' Thoughts on Whether Critical Thinking Helps Students to be Independent.

Question 04: Which approach would you opt for in order to implement critical thinking?

The fourth question is concerned with which approach EFL teachers are mostly predisposed to opt for in order to incorporate and nurture critical thinking within the classroom. Namely, these approaches are implicit and explicit types of instruction. While the former is all about relying on techniques and methods that generate learning results by introducing the target topic in a suggestive or implied manner, the latter approach is when teachers frankly present the desired objective in a direct and explicit manner. In this question as well, all the informants went on to depend on both of the approaches. In other words, they incorporate critical thinking within the classroom both implicitly and explicitly.

The results can be discernibly noticed in the figure bellow that displays the teaching approaches undertaken by EFL teachers to implement critical thinking:

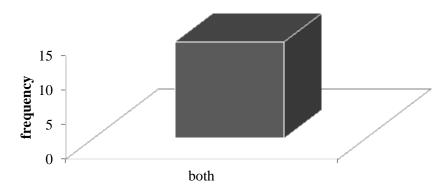


Figure 04: The Teaching Approaches that EFL Teachers Rely on to Implement Critical Thinking.

Question 05: Which among the following activities are you most likely to depend on in order to integrate critical thinking?

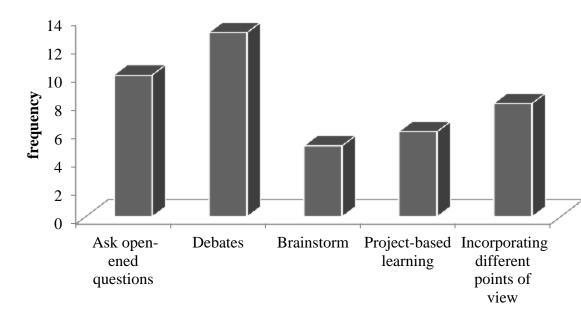


Figure 05: Activities EFL Teachers Depend on to Integrate Critical Thinking.

This question addressed which activities EFL teachers take advantage of to integrate critical thinking when needed. Participants here were allowed to tick more than one box. The figure above summarizes their answers.

Since participants were permitted to choose more than one answer, all 14 EFL teachers ticked more than one box. Thoroughly, the first option, i.e., asking open-ended questions as an attempt to integrate critical thinking is carried out by 10 EFL teachers (24%). The next activity, however, was chosen by 13 (31%) which implies that discussing different topics in EFL classrooms is highly used and made use of. Meanwhile, brainstorming activity has been referred to by 5 (12%) informants. Brainstorming is actually a beneficial activity that helps in generating new ideas on any given topic and this in return massively contributes into shifting away from the traditional teaching strategies to modern ones. Brainstorming allows students to voice their views and express themselves freely and with no constraint which is the main aim of teaching and learning about critical thinking. The fourth activity was taken advantage of by 6 EFL teachers (14%). This activity is projectbased learning, in which learners are required to actively engage in experiences by applying their knowledge and skills. The last choice was about incorporating different points of view during the lecture. And this is applied by 8 EFL teachers (19%). Getting insights on various perspectives about any given topic enables EFL learners to process and analyse information by looking at the same topic from different angles and so recognizing that there can be multiple different and even contradictory ideas on the same topic tackled. This way, as well, they learn how to build an opinion about any topic.

Question 06: What do you often prioritize in your class?

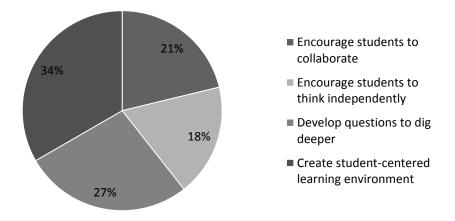


Figure 06: Activities EFL Teachers Adopt in the Classroom.

The main goal of question number six is to know the oft-used practices by EFL teachers. The figure above displays data gathered from the answers to the sixth question. Since respondents were given the opportunity to choose more than one

activity, all of them did so. Results revealed that 11 (34%) participants (EFL teachers) frequently create student-centered learning environment. 8 (27%) Participants (64%) also support the usage of questions that are most likely to provoke students and push them to dig deeper. In addition to that, the first activity was about encouraging students to collaborate and work together, it was selected by 7 (21%) informants. In the end, the least used activity is encouraging students to think independently as shown above in the figure.

Question 07: *How would you define critical thinking?*

Question number seven aims to explore how EFL teachers perceive critical thinking. The findings obtained from the analysis of this question showed that 6 out of 14 EFL teachers describe critical thinking as a substantial skill that has become the interest of today's world because of the constant changes people are witnessing. They also referred to critical thinking by defining it as the intellectual stimulus that immensely contributes to the development and growth of the individual. For instance, one of the respondents noted that: *Critical thinking is a necessary skill for growth and intellectual development. It is a needed skill nowadays because of the fast growing challenges that the world is witnessing.*

Then, 6 teachers went on to define the concept as the ability to question, analyze, and evaluate information one might receive or produce. They also described it as a process that involves mental exercise to make rational and logical inferences. One of the informants commented: *Critical thinking is an intellectual process that requires thinking clearly and rationally in order to understand the logical connection between ideas through questioning, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and making inferences about what you read, hear, say, or write. Another participant wrote: <i>Critical thinking is one of the best modern teaching methods that develops student autonomy and helps them analyse and synthesize the presented piece of information.* This participant views critical thinking as an influential teaching strategy that closely resolves around the improvement of students' autonomy, i.e., it leads students to take charge of their own learning.

At last, the other 2 teachers have mentioned problem solving as a great outcome of critical thinking since it enables students to be more prepared and skillful in dealing with different situations, may it be inside or outside the classroom. An activity of such a great significance through which teachers could better integrate critical thinking in the class, stimulates students to obtain decent results while actually enjoying the learning process because it gets them out of the conventional. A teacher expressed this saying: *Critical thinking is a modern skill that has to be integrated in the class because it provides students with an opportunity to understand and figure out a way to solve problems, even those related to real life. Through asking challenging questions, students become aware of the use of critical thinking.*

Question 08: Do you think that EFL teachers should implement critical thinking in their classrooms? If yes, how? If not, why?

Basically, this question seeks to scrutinize the informants' views with regard to critical thinking incorporation in the classroom. The respondents were

asked to put forward their perceptions of whether or not EFL teachers ought to include critical thinking during their lectures. They were required to either explain, if yes, how the inclusion procedure takes place or, if not, why critical thinking should not be a part of their teaching process. As a matter of fact, when inspecting if EFL teachers ever embrace or deny the significance of immersing critical thinking in their classrooms, a unanimous agreement has been reached because all the teacher-participants believe that critical thinking should be employed and that it is their duty to implement it on the grounds. Now, it is time to explore how the respondents approach the insertion of critical thinking in their classrooms since they all think that EFL teachers need to do so.

Above all, there is something extremely common among all the participants in their attempts to answer the 'how' question. The majority have thrown some light on creating an environment of debates and sharing opinions. In other words, they associate classroom debates with generating opinions and coming up with creative ideas because in order for students to be able to participate and discuss controversial topics, he/she has to build an opinion and defend it. In the same vein, one of the teachers expressed her thoughts saying: Yes, through creating a learnercentered environment, introducing thought provoking topics/ideas, encouraging students to participate, and motivating them to share their opinions. Approximately, 8 (57%) respondents mentioned the need to prompt students to exchange ideas, share impressions and views. According to them, this can be accomplished through encouraging students to run debates and discussions in the classroom. In addition to that, 3 (21%) respondents stressed the importance of utilizing activities that demand analyzing information. The remaining 3 (21%) informants did not accurately answer the 'how' question because obviously they did not understand the purpose that the question was allocated to achieve. They simply kept stating why critical thinking is crucial in the EFL classrooms. A respondent wrote: Yes, critical thinking enhances the four language skills; namely: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It leads students to be creative and active during and after the courses.

Question 09: What is the EFL teachers' role in incorporating critical thinking?

This question aims at eliciting thoughts from participants on what is the responsibility of EFL teachers in integrating critical thinking during their lectures. The results showed that 4 (29%) participants explained that in order to successfully mingle lectures with critical thinking activities, EFL teachers need to encourage students to freely voice their views without the fear of reprehension. This way, the EFL student will definitely depend on his/herself in reaching the sought-after learning outcomes. A participant answered the question by stating: *The EFL teachers' role in incorporating critical thinking is encouraging students to be independent and autonomous learners by providing them with some sort of opportunities that nurture their critical thinking abilities.*

While 3 (21%) participants believed that EFL teachers are meant to guide their students throughout the lecture, other 3 (21%) respondents claimed that EFL teachers should draw their students' attention towards boosting problem-solving

abilities through critical thinking activities. One of the comments delivered by the first category of participants was expressed as follows: *EFL teachers should guide students towards obtaining the learning outcomes through using different activities and strategies.* Another comment extracted from the second group of participants can be presented like so: *EFL teachers must open discussions and improve students' ability to solve problems.* Moreover, 2 other respondents tackled this question through mentioning that the openness of classroom debates should be given a great emphasis. That is to say, it is the teacher's ultimate role to motivate students to be expressive and free during debates. The last 2 informants expect from learners to be reasonable and intellectual after introducing critical thinking. And to do this so, according to them, EFL teachers need to make sure that students become capable of relying on reason and logic to achieve rational conclusions.

Question 10: What strategies and methods do you adopt for the sake of incorporating critical thinking in your classroom?

The question above was developed to take a further and an in-depth inspection of what strategies and methods EFL teachers make use of in the classroom in order to incorporate critical thinking. The participants' answers exposed a remarkably desirable preference towards classrooms debates as a method to integrate critical thinking in the classroom. Debate as defined by Akerman and Neale (2011) is "a formal discussion where two opposing sides follow a set of preagreed rules to engage in an oral exchange of different points of view on an issue". They, participants, also stand in favour of offering students the chance to question and inquire as an attempt to boost students' creativity and ability to solve problems, and ultimately be qualified critical thinkers. Some of the participants expressed their unanimity on the considerable potential analyzing and synthesizing information could bring to EFL students in terms of maintaining a constant exposure to critical thinking. Some others have also stressed the need to encourage students to collaborate and work in groups as to teach them how to listen to and analyse varying views.

Question 11: What are the qualities that EFL teachers should possess so that they successfully integrate critical thinking in the classroom?

The comments stated on the account of this question showed that half of the participants opined that EFL teachers should be open-minded in order to incorporate critical thinking effectively. Some notes left by other participants had this in common; EFL teachers should be consistently up to date and innovative so that they properly take advantage of the modern tools and strategies to implement critical thinking and obtain satisfying results; they must improve their technical competence. Being knowledgeable teachers was also a quality that the participants considered important. Other answers included some traits like: patience, tolerance, and flexibility.

3.2.Discussion of the Main Results

Based on the findings the current research has successfully reached, a number of conclusions should be cast light on as an intention to summarize and discuss the major results of the work. According to teachers' questionnaire, EFL

teachers agreed upon the saliency of their role as important members of higher education trying to implement critical thinking in classrooms. It is noteworthy to say that the process of integrating such skill was positively approached because teachers believe in the influential outcomes it could bring about to the EFL classrooms. EFL teachers appreciate the reformations the higher educational system might gain due to employing the appropriate set of skills (in this case; critical thinking skill) in order to improve students' academic attainments. Indeed, teachers feel that how EFL students are taught and exposed to critical thinking is a huge determining factor on how prone they are to creativity, independence, and autonomy. The majority of teachers believe that running debates during lectures can steer students to the right direction which is acquiring the ability to defend their views. Another activity that teachers claim to motivate and spark students' critical thinking is asking open- ended questions or questioning. They rely heavily on this technique because they find it thought-provoking and engaging. In fact, the application of critical thinking does not hinge upon only getting insights and knowledge about it. Teachers must be willing to nurture such skill in their students. According to the findings, having a tendency towards working with recent methods and strategies requires EFL teachers to be; tolerant, open-minded, creative, selfconfident, and flexible.

4. Conclusion

No one can deny that education is definitely a pivotal matter in all walks of life. In the face of too many challenges and hurdles encountered by language learners and teachers in this intricate technological era, the need to benefit from higher order skills, like critical thinking, attains an ever greater saliency as a main goal of higher education institutions. The prevailing research on the field of teaching English as a foreign language has mostly spun around expanding the knowledge of language learners even beyond the walls of the academic settings. When infusing students with the right set of skills, they will become not only proficient and competent language users but also creative, autonomous, and independent members of the society. Incorporating critical thinking in classrooms is a long-term process, i.e., the exposure to such skill should not be on a sporadic and random basis. Students should be granted frequent opportunities to exercise critical thinking that is why the EFL teacher is the key and the mediator that enables students to peek the updates in education through his lenses. Having said that means that without EFL teachers, integrating critical thinking in EFL classrooms would not be a successful process. We are all capable of thinking since the latter as Duron, Limbach and Waugh (2006) claimed is a natural process entrenched in people, in other words, thinking does not demand a conscious effort; however, if left without refinement it can often be distorted or biased. It would never suffice to excel at thinking, without cultivating one's higher order skills. The present research work took place at Salhi Ahmed University Centre in Naama. It aimed at exploring the EFL teachers' role in implementing critical thinking within the classroom. To validate the research hypotheses, a questionnaire was designed and handed to EFL teachers. Then, data collected was analysed quantitatively and

qualitatively. Undoubtedly, EFL teachers are aware of the great outcomes they can generate from their learners if they introduce critical thinking during their lectures. For that, they mostly have a tendency towards the openness of debates in their classrooms because as Akerman and Neale (2011) stressed the significance of classroom debate, declaring that by putting forward different perspectives and offering controversial topics to learners and motivating them to defend their position, they will display their abilities to analyse, reflect, and scrutinize information. They, EFL teachers, depend on open-ended questions as an activity or strategy in order to make their students generate and organize ideas. **References**

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