

Developing the Communicative Competence through Critical Thinking Skills: some Constraints

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Receipt date : 2024-01-26; Acceptance Date: 03/07/2024

Abstract: Developing the communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires the use of different strategies including the implementation of critical thinking. However, creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and engages the learners in communicative tasks in the EFL classroom is a challenging task for teachers. Accordingly, this article explores the constraints faced by language teachers at Bejaia University when implementing critical thinking skills to develop the communicative competence of their students. To achieve this purpose, an online survey questionnaire was conducted among the EFL teachers. The results showed which constraints do the teachers face to implement critical thinking in their classes namely the lack of a specific coaching about how to teach critical thinking in order to acquire more knowledge and methodology , lack in the materials that support it, in addition to the fact that learners lack critical thinking abilities.

Keywords: 21st century skills; communicative competence; critical thinking; teachers' constraints.

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1- Introduction

The 21st century has been marked by significant advancements across all the domains including science, business, and education among others. Hence, there rises a need to prepare the learners for a different and skills-oriented world. 21st century students need to develop critical thinking skills and communicative competence as being amongst the necessary 21st century skills.

Communicative competence encompasses speaking, active listening, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Similarly, critical thinking skills enable learners to think and take the right decisions concerning their learning. In this context, Halpern (1996, 1998) asserts that critical thinking can be systematically taught, acquired and subsequently applied in a variety of settings. In the classroom setting, theorists and educators agreed on the importance of thinking skills in language development; language learning and thinking skills are often treated as interdependent processes (Miraman and Tishman, 1988; Suhor, 1984). For the language acquisition, critical thinking involves the ability to analyze, evaluate language use, make connections between language and culture and use language in a creative manner. Studies have shown that the implementation of critical thinking skills can lead to language proficiency (Ennis, 1993; Norris and Ennis, 1989). Critical thinking skills enable learners to think creatively, to deliver messages in the most effective way to use the appropriate English in suitable contexts and mainly for the right purpose. In the same token, a good understanding of grammatical, linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of the English language needs a high thinking order. Thus, to be proficient, learners need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language. However, the EFL teachers face many challenges when implementing critical thinking and encounter some constraints in developing their students' communicative competence. In line with this, we formulated the following research main question: what are the constraints that teachers face when implementing critical thinking skills for the sake of developing the students' communicative competence?

1.1- Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to the ability of an individual to effectively communicate in various settings with different interlocutors. It involves not only linguistic competence but also social and cultural knowledge, as well as pragmatic skills. Dell Hymes (1966-1968) was the first scholar to introduce the

concept “Communicative Competence” on the basis of Chomsky’s “competence” and “performance”. Communicative competence has emerged in the early 1970’s. This newly emerged concept had significantly contributed to the field of linguistics and language teaching (Bern, 1990). Chomsky’s view of language was restricted to the mere knowledge of grammatical rules. Hymes viewed that being accurate, is not enough for the speaker to be competent. So, he proposed another crucial criterion that he labeled "appropriateness" which goes hand in hand with correctness to form the sociolinguistic rules. As many other scholars, he agreed on the fact that learning a new language is not only about knowing its governing rules, but it is also about knowing how to communicate using those rules as well. For him, communicative competence is the aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts (Brown, 2007). Several researchers have written about the communicative competence and have used and issued lot of definitions. Table 1 summarizes them as they are used by James Cummins, Dell Hymes, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, Lyle Buchman and Elaine Tarone.

The most common definition is the one proposed by the North American linguists Canale and Swain (1980) which conceived communicative competence in terms of four components that are explained in what follows:

1.1- a. **Grammatical competence**: (structural competence) the knowledge of language inventory (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling).

1.1- b. **Discourse competence**: the knowledge of language structure as being combined with cohesive texts.

1.1- c. **Socio-linguistic competence**: the knowledge of social and cultural conventions of language use that governs communication in a specific culture, such as the appropriate use of vocabulary, register, politeness strategies in conversations.

1.1- d. **Strategic competence**: the knowledge of communication strategies which manage to avoid misunderstanding and breakdown of conversations.

The most recent definition of communicative competence was worked out by a group of international experts involved in Language Learning for European Citizenship project. It is included in the document known as Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) and defines communicative competence as encompassing:

1.1- e. **Linguistic competence**: including lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence

1.1- f. **Sociolinguistic competence**: linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, register differences, dialect and accent. competence, discourse competence, functional competence, and design competence.

1.1- g. **Pragmatic competence**: discourse competence, functional competence.

Taking these definitions into reflection, it can be agreed that teachers have to create real communicative settings in the EFL classroom. This can be successfully achieved through using different modes within the classroom environment. Due to the fact that “Our students need practice in using the linguistic form for the social purpose of language” (Bratt, 1992, p. 54) as contended by Bratt. Obviously, this can be easily realized through different strategies including the implementation of critical thinking.

In Algeria, various studies have examined the communicative competence teaching among different levels, populations, and in different contexts. They revealed that there is a gap between the theory and practice. For instance, the findings of Ababsa and Fellahi (2013) showed that EFL teachers focus primarily on grammar and syntax at the expense of communicative aspects. This could limit teachers to engage effectively the learners in real-world communicative tasks. Similarly, the study of Nouar (2016) found out that the Algerian university students lacked pragmatic skills and communicative strategies.

1.2- Critical Thinking

In the context of language acquisition, thinking involves the cognitive processes used to grasp and internalize linguistic structures, vocabulary, and communication norms. Learners engage in various mental activities to make sense of language patterns, understand meanings, and apply these linguistic skills in different contexts. According to Paul and Elder (2008), “thinking is a cognitive process that we use in an attempt to gain knowledge or understand something.” In other words, thinking is an activity in which we use different mental processes for the purpose of understanding or acquiring new knowledge.

However, and although it is widely used, critical thinking has been regarded as a concept difficult to define with precision. According to Sternberg (1986) critical thinking is “The mental processes, strategies, and representations people

use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts.” (Sternberg ,1986, abstract). In other words, critical thinking is a cognitive task that individuals engage in to solve problems, learn and make decisions.

Critical thinking in language teaching as Brown (2004) asserted is that in an ideal academic language program, the curriculum’s objectives should go beyond linguistic factors to develop critical thinking among learners. Accordingly, the integration of critical thinking into foreign language classroom is of prime importance and several studies have proved its efficiency in improving the learners’ language proficiency (Ennis, 1993; Norris and Ennis ,1989; Liaw ,2007; Kusaka and Robertson,2008). Furthermore, when the learners are trained to take charge of their own thinking, they will be able to monitor and evaluate their way of learning and therefore, improve it. Moreover, critical thinking involves the learners in their learning and when they are involved, they will learn accurately.

2- Method and Tools:

In order to investigate the constraints that the EFL teachers face in the classroom when implementing critical thinking skills to develop the communicative competence, an exploratory research design was chosen. The objective was to gain a nuanced understanding of the specific obstacles faced by teachers in this context. The research tool employed was an online survey questionnaire comprising six carefully crafted items. This questionnaire was distributed among a targeted sample of 45 EFL teachers affiliated with Abderrahmane Mira University of Bejaia. The teachers were voluntary and they willingly agreed to align their teaching approaches with the goals outlined in the study.

3- Results and Discussion

The respondents were EFL teachers at Abderrahmane Mira university of Bejaia, who oriented their course to fit the objective of the study. The questionnaire is of six items. Here are the questions and the interpretation of their answers:

Question1. What is the most important aim/ objective of a language course?

The common answers are:

- a. To acquire knowledge about the language.
- b. To develop the communicative competence of the learners.
- c. To acquire the basic skills.

The answers to this question have explicitly shown that the teachers are aware of the core target of any language course, which would allow them to advance the field of language learning and, thus, support it through any efficient strategy.

Question2. How would you define the Communicative Competence?

The responses provided indicate a limited or narrow understanding of communicative competence among teachers, primarily focusing on specific aspects of language skills such as accuracy in language use, writing, oral proficiency, fluency, and advanced skill levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, it is essential to underscore that communicative competence encompasses a broader scope.

Communicative Competence, as aforementioned, comprises not only linguistic proficiency but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic components. It involves not just the ability to use language accurately and appropriately but also an understanding of cultural nuances, social context, and the effective application of language in various real-life situations. It extends beyond mere fluency or proficiency in writing and oral expression to include the capacity to convey ideas and thoughts effectively, considering social appropriateness, context, and audience expectations.

It is crucial for educators to expand their comprehension of communicative competence, by incorporating its multifaceted nature into their teaching methodologies. For this, teachers should be encouraged to expand their understanding of this concept to better guide their students in language learning. Here are the responses:

- a. The ability to use language correctly and appropriately
- b. The writing and oral competence
- c. A high level of expressing ideas and thoughts
- d. To be fluent in English

Very advanced four skills

Question3. How would you define critical thinking?

The answer to this question revealed our participants varying degrees of understanding and interpretation of the concept of critical thinking. Some responses exhibit a deeper comprehension, reflecting an awareness of the fundamental principles and aspects associated with critical thinking. These definitions emphasize key elements such as ongoing assessment, evaluation of situations, questioning, problem-solving strategies, analytical thinking, and the formation of informed opinions based on reasoning. However, there is also evidence of ambiguity and

inconsistency across some responses, suggesting a potential lack of a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking among certain participants. Some definitions appear to touch upon components of critical thinking but lack precision or depth, indicating a need for further elucidation or exploration of the concept.

Below are some of the participants' definitions:

“Critical thinking is a personal ongoing assessment about learning”.

“It is the skill that enables an individual to evaluate the different situations he deals with in his daily life by looking for arguments and questioning things instead of trusting blindly”.

“It refers to mental process, strategies people use to solve problems”.

“Being open-minded”.

“It is a way of thinking in which you don't accept all the arguments you are exposed to but rather having a critical attitude toward a given learning situation”.

“The ability to analyze, evaluate and break down a problem into smaller parts in order to arrive at a solution and form an opinion about a certain situation”.

Question4. Do you implement critical thinking in your classroom?

This question shows that EFL teachers are aware of the importance of critical thinking skills. All the participants (100%) answered by “yes” about implementing it in the classroom.

Question5. What are the activities and strategies do you use to implement critical thinking in the classroom?

Figure 2 offers a comprehensive overview of the pedagogical methods employed by teachers to foster critical thinking skills among learners. The data reveals that a significant majority of teachers, accounting for 85.7%, emphasize the facilitation of connections between ideas and information as a key strategy. This approach is recognized as highly beneficial, as it cultivates in learners the capacity to engage in logical and systematic thinking. By encouraging the establishment of links between concepts, this method not only enhances cognitive abilities but also nurtures analytical skills crucial for effective problem-solving and decision-making.

Additionally, a notable percentage of 57.1% teachers are actively engaging learners in problem-solving activities. This pedagogical approach capitalizes on learners' mental processes, prompting them to apply critical thinking skills in resolving complex problems. Encouraging such activities not only stimulates cognitive development but also fosters resilience, creativity, and adaptability in learners as they navigate and overcome challenges.

Furthermore, half of the teachers, i.e 50%, incorporate collaborative work within their teaching methodologies. Collaboration not only enhances interpersonal skills but also fosters diverse perspectives, enabling learners to engage in discussions, share ideas, and collectively explore solutions. This collaborative approach contributes significantly to the development of critical thinking by promoting teamwork, communication, and the synthesis of varied viewpoints.

Interestingly, a minority, 28.6% of teachers, specifically encourage learners to inquire, ask questions, and voice their opinions. This practice, while less prevalent, is instrumental in cultivating a culture of inquiry and autonomy among learners. Encouraging questions and expressions of opinion nurtures a mindset of curiosity, independent thinking, and active engagement with the subject matter.

In sum, the strategies employed by teachers to instill critical thinking skills encompass a range of methodologies, from fostering connections between ideas to engaging learners in problem-solving, collaborative work, and promoting an environment conducive to inquiry and expression. These diverse approaches collectively contribute to the holistic development of learners' critical thinking abilities, empowering them to navigate complex challenges and become adept, analytical thinkers.

Question6. What are the Challenges that you encounter when teaching critical thinking skills to develop the communicative competence?

Figure 3 effectively outlines the challenges encountered by educators when endeavoring to integrate critical thinking into the development of communicative competence. The data underscores several prominent obstacles that slow down the effective teaching of critical thinking skills. Primarily, a substantial majority of participants, comprising 92.9%, highlighted the absence of specific coaching or guidance on how to effectively impart critical thinking skills. Addressing this gap through comprehensive training programs could better equip educators to adeptly incorporate critical thinking into their teaching methodologies. Furthermore, a significant percentage, 71.4%, noted a lack of critical thinking abilities among learners. This deficiency could potentially be linked to the absence of dedicated

inclusion of critical thinking within the formal school curriculum. Integrating structured programs that explicitly cultivate critical thinking skills from an early stage might mitigate this deficiency and nurture a generation of students good at analytical reasoning and problem-solving. Moreover, time constraints emerged as a notable challenge, as reported by 51.1% of participants. The demanding nature of covering prescribed syllabi within set timeframes is tricky for teachers in allocating adequate time for in-depth exploration and instruction of critical thinking skills. Additionally, half of the participants (50%) identified a lack of supporting materials tailored to foster critical thinking as a challenge. Access to resources and materials specifically designed to cultivate critical thinking could significantly aid teachers in creating engaging and effective learning experiences. Finally, 28.6% of teachers highlighted their own lack of knowledge about critical thinking as a barrier. This underscores the importance of continuous professional development and ongoing training initiatives to enhance educators' understanding and application of critical thinking methodologies within the context of developing communicative competence. Addressing these obstacles demands a comprehensive approach involving training initiatives, curriculum reforms, resource development, and ongoing support to empower educators in effectively nurturing critical thinking skills among learners.

3.1- The Constraints faced by teachers in the process of Implementing Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom

Indeed, implementing critical thinking skills is not as easy as it may appear. Hence, numerous challenges and constraints may be faced. Some of the challenges, as reported by previous studies, are related to instructors, learners, time constraints and classroom materials as well. Saleh (2019) reports in his study that insufficiency of time is a serious barrier in implementing critical thinking. Besides, he found that teachers lack clarity in relation to the concept. By the same token, Marin and Pava (2017) assert that the shortage of time is among the constraints of teaching critical thinking. In addition, they add that teachers lack training on critical thinking and that schools do not provide teachers with the necessary materials to engage learners in activities that promote critical thinking.

Implementing critical thinking in the EFL classroom at the Algerian university can prove to be quite challenging. This requires, on the one hand, addressing the

difficulty by offering comprehensive training programs and resources for teachers. On the other hand, it involves using interactive teaching methods, and creating a supportive environment that encourages students' involvement and learning.

In this study, the light has been shed on the main constraints the EFL teachers at Abderahmane Mira university of Bejaia face in the classroom when implementing critical thinking skills to develop the communicative competence. The constraints can be summarized in what follows:

- 1.Lack of a specific coaching about how to teach critical thinking in order to acquire more knowledge and methodology “know and know-how”.
- 2.Learners lack critical thinking abilities.
- 3.Time constraint.
4. Lack in the materials that support critical thinking.

4- Conclusion

The present paper has been an endeavor to highlight the importance of implementing critical thinking in the language classroom. It also discusses the challenges faced by EFL teachers. We have explored the question of whether teachers understood the communicative competence as a central focus of any language course. We also examined their grasp of the concept of critical thinking, and how they implement it in their classroom instruction. Furthermore, we explored the barriers that limit its effective implementation and how the practitioners coped with it to overcome the constraints. Indeed, developing the communicative competence is not easy and teaching critical thinking skill is a demanding task. Yet, with adopting new practices, developing new methods and materials, these impedema can be reduced and removed. The role of the EFLteacher is prominent, and the learner should be active, dynamic and more importantly involved in his learning.

As for the pedagogical implications to teachers, we modestly suggest the following recommendations:

Pedagogues must work to equip teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and materials to adequately teach critical thinking so that the teachers instruct students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information to form opinions and make decisions based on evidence.

Careful planning of the communication activities should be emphasized to serve

the multiple ends of debating, group discussions, and problem solving exercises. Adopting autonomous learning approaches like teaching learners to predict, analyze, find patterns, compare results, express opinions, and so on. Training learners on how to use different cognitive strategies and to regulate their own learning and provide opportunities for reflection. Encouraging the classroom communication and address cultural differences to build their assumptions and cultural beliefs, thus, value the diversity. To conclude, EFL teachers need to prioritize critical thinking in their trial at developing the communicative competence. This approach will help students develop the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century and become effective and thrive in today's fast-paced globalized world.

Appendix of Tables and Figures:

Table 1: Categorization of language competences according to Chomsky, Hymes, Cummins, Canale and Swain, Bachman

	Form	Function
Noam Chomsky	Competence	performance
Dell Hymes	linguistic competence	communicative competence
James Cummins	cognitive / academic language proficiency CALP	basic interpersonal communicative skills BISC
Michael Canale Merrill Swain	grammatical + discourse competence	sociolinguistic + strategic competence
Lyle Bachman	organizational competence	pragmatic competence
Elaine Tarone	linguistic system	production strategy communication strategy

(Brown 2000, 30, 246–248)

Figure 1: Implementation of Critical Thinking Skills in the Classroom

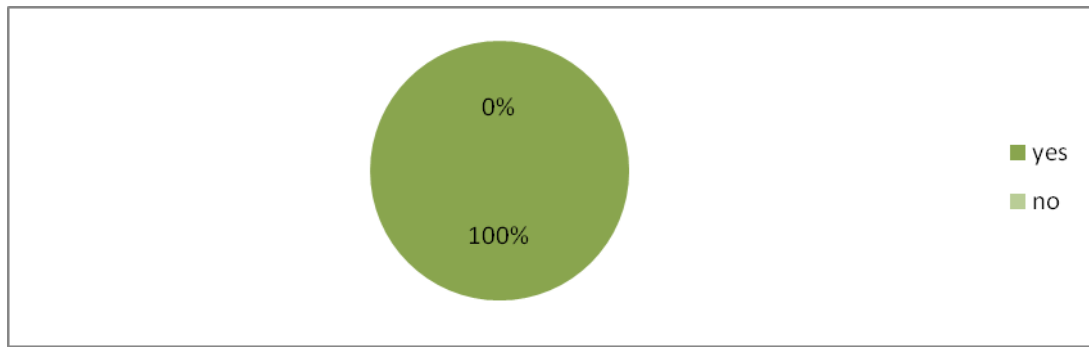


Figure2: Activities and Strategies that the EFL Teachers Use to Implement Critical Thinking Skills in their Classes

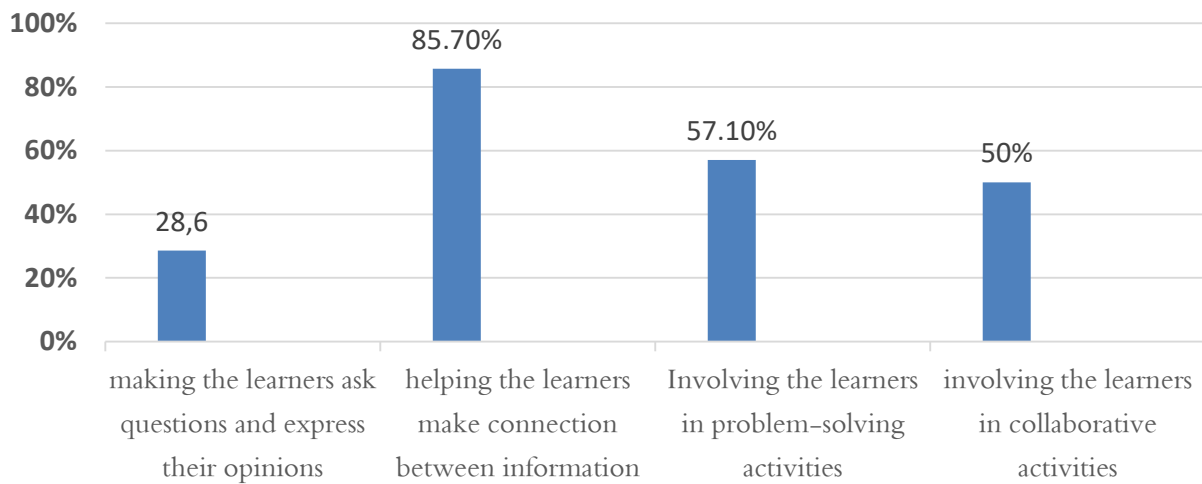
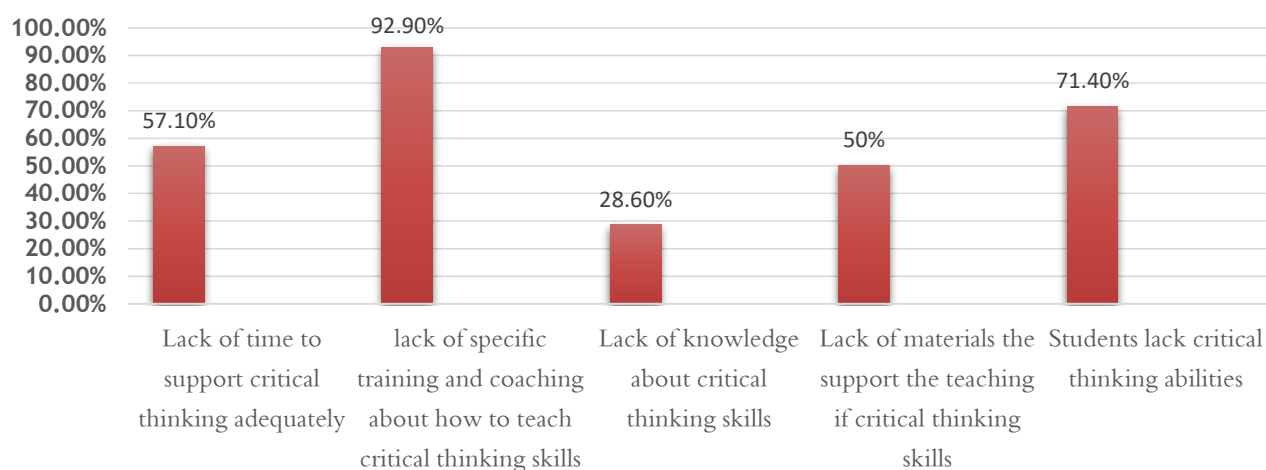


Figure3: Challenges that EFL Teachers Encounter when Teaching Critical Thinking Skills to Develop the Communicative Competence



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