Teaching Critical Thinking in EFL Classroom: Students and Teachers' Perspectives

تدريس الفكر النقدي في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: وجهات نظر

الطلاب والأساتذة

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Abstract

The present article investigates the perspectives of students and teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking in EFL classroom. It also explores the way teachers conceptualise the term in their teaching practices as well as the approaches and methods they adopt to teach the concept of critical thinking. In this regard, 14 Algerian English language teachers were sent an online questionnaire. Nine narrative journals have also been analyzed by means of descriptive and analytic methods with first year English degree students, at the department of English, University of Algiers 2 (Algeria).In addition, ten empirical studies which have relation with the topic under investigation have been examined to reinforce the analysis and discussion of the data obtained. The results of the questionnaire indicated that the majority of participants conceptualize critical thinking as reflective judgment and most of them do introduce the concept in their classes. For the narrative journals, the participants showed awareness of the importance of critical thinking not just in their learning processes but also in their whole life in general.

Keywords: critical thinking- education-explicit instruction- learning processes- teaching practices.

الملخص

يهتم هذا المقال في البحث عن وجهات نظر الطلاب والمعلمين إتجاه تدريس الفكر النقدي في التعليم، كما يسعى لاستكشاف الطريقة التي يصور بها المعلمون المصطلح في ممارساتهم التعليمية بالإضافة إلى الأساليب والطرق التي يعتمدونها لتدريس مفهوم الفكر النقدي. وفي هذا الصدد، تم إرسال استبيان إلكتروني إلى 14 أستاذ جزائري في اللغة الإنجليزية وتم تحليل تسع مجالات سردية بطريقة وصفية وتحليلية مع طلاب السنة الأولى بجامعة الجزائر 2 (الجزائر)، وكذلك تم تحليل عشر دراسات تجريبية التي لها علاقة مع موضوع البحث لتعزيز التحليل ومناقشة النتائج التي نم الحصول عليها. أشارت نتائج الاستبيان إلى أن معظم الأساتذة يصورون الفكر النقدي على أنه التأمل في القرار، ومعظمهم أكدوا أنهم يدرسون الفكر النقدي في قسمهم. وأشارت نتائج المجالات السردية إلى وعي المشاركين بأهمية الفكر النقدي ليس فقط في عمليات التعلم الخاصة بهم ولكن أيضا في حياتهم بشكل عام،

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإرشادات الواضحة-التعليم-الفكر النقدي-عمليات التعلم- ممارساتهم التعليمية.

Introduction

Learning and teaching in the 21st century have yielded substantial changes in education to mesh with the requirements of the global market. By implementing the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system in Algerian higher education, the aim was to build an active generation of students with educational and professional skills that are mobilized both nationally and internationally to be in line with those needs (i.e., 21st century needs). In this perspective, the role of the teacher is to act as a guide and a facilitator of knowledge acquisition, whereas students as agents and active participants in the classroom. Ongoing assessment is the required model in this system; it is characterized by the encouragement of tutorials, coaching, portfolios, projects and oral presentations, group work, seminars and conferences. Overall, the aim of assessment consists in monitoring students' progress and fostering their understanding of the input material; however, reality seems to be different from what is expected. The majority of students round off the academic year with a lack of critical thinking skills because the purpose of teaching and learning is based on facts rather than the training of students' minds to think. In fact, the concept of critical thinking does not seem to be present in all the modules at the university level but only in a few of them such as the module of critical writing. However, how do teachers and administrators conceptualize it still appears under-researched. Hence, the present article aims at investigating the perspectives of students and teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking in education. The context we have chosen to undertake the research is the department of English, University of Algiers 2, Algeria during the academic year 2017-2018. The rationale behind delving into the present research is to find out whether critical thinking can be taught within an EFL context or not. In this regard, an online questionnaire was sent to 14 Algerian English language teachers to explore their conceptualization of critical thinking and whether they introduce the concept in their classes or not. We have also asked nine first year students to write a narrative journal to speak about their experiences in studying critical thinking. In addition to this, ten empirical studies have been analyzed to strengthen the data of the present research.

1. Literature Review

1.1. *Conceptualization of Critical Thinking*

How to think rather than what to think has been a subject of research among educational psychologists and philosophers. As a matter of fact, different definitions have germinated due to the opposing views about the meaning of critical thinking. Practical strategies have also been developed in order to help

individuals reason more and become reflective thinkers. According to Egege and Kutieleh (2004), critical thinking is the only concept that helps to compare secondary school from university, and it varies from one culture to another because it has a relation with academic history and tradition. These scholars consider that good reasoning springs from a good depiction of critical thinking skills such as the evidence of reasoning, the tools used, and the language as well as the structure of arguments. Lau (2011) linked critical thinking with creativity; he provided us with eight crucial characteristics of a critical thinker (p. 2):

A critical thinker is the one who:

a. Understands the logical connections between ideas.

b. Formulates ideas succinctly and precisely.

c. Identifies, constructs, and evaluates arguments.

d. Evaluates the pros and cons of a decision.

e. Evaluates the evidence for and against a hypothesis.

f. Detects inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning.

g. Analyses problems systematically.

h. Identifies the relevance and importance of ideas, justifies one's beliefs and values.

i. Reflects and evaluates one's thinking skills.

All these characteristics sound crucial indeed; however, knowing them only is not sufficient if we do not apply them in the context of language use. We need in fact to harness the power of education by putting emphasis on practical strategies and techniques to boost those characteristics within the students. In addition, Davies (2015) compared between critical thinking and criticality. He said that the latter is a wide concept, which contains three elements: Thinking, reflecting, acting, and aims at radical development. Whereas, critical thinking refers to the skills of argumentation, which aims at educating an individual. This goes in harmony with Davies and Barnett's (2015) three perspectives of critical thinking (as cited in Wilson, 2016) such as 'skills', 'criticality', and 'critical pedagogy'.

1.2. *Problems of Critical Thinking in Education*

Dewey (1910) and Freire (1976) were the ones who spoke of the problems of teaching in education. For example, Freire has well clarified in his book the reasons behind students' failure at school. In the book, he used 'banking' as a metaphor to delineate the educational issues; he reported that education becomes 'an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the

depositor' (Freire, 1976, p.72). In agreement with Freire, we think that some teachers still prefer to act as transmitters of knowledge rather than as guides, and therefore, students rely on rote learning rather than on meaningful and reflective ones. Therefore, students' failure to exhibit critical thinking skills might be due to education as it is the place where their ideas are shaped and knowledge accumulated. We also share the point of view of Freire when he pointed out that education needs to be based on a 'dialogue'. In this case, both teachers and students take part in the learning process, and critical thinking is highly practiced. Following Freire's argument, Dewey noticed that the failure of education, in general, was the result of the focus on the product of enquiry, which aims at making students learn by heart rather than think critically. In support, Hogan (2006) noticed in his experience as a lecturer that much time is given to didactic instruction and the reading of textbooks rather than the analysis and evaluation of knowledge (as cited in Dwyer, 2017).

Long and Plucker (2015) state that the training of students' creative thinking is given less attention by teachers and that the latter showed a negative attitude towards the concept. Snyder and Snyder (2008) mentioned four barriers that hamper the development of critical thinking in education such as (1) the lack of training, (2) limited resources, (3) biased preconceptions, and (4) time constraints. Indeed, in education, many teachers seem to find difficulties to foster their students' critical thinking because they are themselves not critical thinkers and do not appear to possess the knowledge on how to teach critical thinking in their classes. Some of them are competent but the lack of materials and time constraints might not allow them to achieve that. The different interpretations given to the term (i.e. critical thinking) have mystified teachers too in understanding and promoting it in their courses. Finally, yet importantly, Giroux (2017) argues that the majority of universities are affected by conservative ideologies, slavish methods, and administrators' lack of critical understanding of education as a weapon for encouraging imagination and democratic public life.

2. Methodology

The present exploratory research aims at analyzing the perspectives of students and teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking in EFL classes. It also seeks to explore the way Algerian English language teachers conceptualize critical thinking and the approaches as well as methods they adopt to introduce it in their classes. To reach these aims, 14 English language teachers accepted to answer the online questionnaire, which consisted of ten questions (See Appendix A1). These

participants are from different regions (e.g. Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Algiers, Constantine, Khenchela, Tebessa, Mostaganem) ; seven participants hold an MAA degree and seven others are part-time teachers pursuing their doctoral studies. Concerning the students, they consist of nine participants of first year degree at the department of English, University of Algiers 2 (Algeria). Every participant was invited to write a narrative journal about their experiences in learning critical thinking during the module of study skills in the academic year 2017-2018. The present study also provided an account of ten empirical studies, which have been analyzed analytically.

- This article is based on two research questions which are stated as follows:
    1. How do Algerian English language teachers conceptualize critical thinking?
    2. What are the perspectives of students and teachers towards teaching critical thinking?

3. Results and Discussion
3.1. Results and Analysis of Teachers questionnaire

The majority of participants (50%) conceptualize critical thinking as reflective judgment while 35 % of respondents opted for metacognitive process and others (14%) define it as deciding what to believe and do. Concerning the practical strategies that teachers use to improve students' critical thinking skills, 57% of participants chose asking for open-ended questions and similar percentages (50%)were given to testing for strength test and looking for counter-arguments. When it comes to question 3, 71% of participants agree on the fact that critical thinking is culturally-appropriate and they all agree that culture shapes behaviour. Another important question that was asked in the teachers questionnaire is whether the participants introduce critical thinking to their students or not, the result obtained revealed that 85% of them do introduce the concept by adopting both the explicit and implicit approaches. In addition, the participants stated various qualities that a critical thinker should possess, among them curiosity, empathy, open-mindedness, creativity, and honesty. It seems that the pedagogy of the oppressed has an influence on the participants. The latter showed different forms of oppression that pervade the current education, these are: Learning by heart, neglecting L1 culture, students 'less freedom to express their ideas and thoughts, and fear of negative evaluation. Finally, some suggestions have been provided by the participants to improve EFL students' critical thinking skills; for example, initiating debates, getting large cultural

backgrounds on critical thinking, encouraging personal interpretations in the class and accepting different views.

3.2. Results and Analysis of Students' Personal Narrative Journals

For recall, the aim of students' personal narrative journals was to investigate the perspectives and experiences of the participants towards the learning of critical thinking during the module of study skills. Nine participants took part in the present research; they were referred to as pseudonyms: Malia, Warda, Samah, Mina, Rima, Salma, Fadia, Amel, Zina. The participants' personal narrative journals have been analysed by means of descriptive and analytic analysis at the end of the first semester in the academic year 2017-2018.Critical thinking was taught explicitly and the emphasis was put forward on the strategies for becoming a good critical thinker such as avoiding stereotypes, identifying premises, inferences and assumptions, avoiding enthymeme, tautology, and non sequitur, tolerance of ambiguity, line of reasoning, the overall summary of the argument, careful selection of facts, as well as evaluation of others' ideas and arguments. An illustration of the participants' perspectives regarding the learning of critical thinking is shown in Table 1 (See on page 7).

Table 1: Analysis of Students' Personal Narrative Journal

Students	Perspectives
Malia	'…my favourite one "critical thinking". This subject is really beneficial in many aspects…'
Warda	'…how to be a critical thinker is a positive learning method…'
Samah	'…critical thinking was very beneficial for me…'
Mina	'…I find teaching "critical thinking" benefical…'
Rima	'…I can gain numerous benefits from mastering critical thinking skills…'
Salma	'I did find teaching critical thinking binifical because it made me more aware of what is surrounding me…'
Fadia	'Critical thinking is the most beneficial key in study skills…'
Amel	'…I really enjoyed this topic and find it very beneficial…'
Zina	'Learning critical thinking is of course beneficial to our brain, to become aware of some elements like stereotypes…'

3.3. Results and Analysis of the Empirical Studies
Table 2: Analysis of the Empirical Studies (Teachers' Perspectives about Teaching Critical Thinking in EFL Classes).

Authors	Year	Research Topic	Methodology	Results
Choy &Cheah	2009	Teacher perceptions of critical thinking among students and its influence on higher education.	1. Interpretive approach. 2. Questionnaire.	Critical thinking is a crucial element in the learning process; however, none of the participants seems to understand the concept of critical thinking.
Kanik	2010	Teachers' conceptions of critical thinking and practices.	1. Writing Communication Test. 2. Argument Analysis Test. 3. Inference Analysis Test.	Some participants think critical thinking is innate; others say it is developmental.
Wagley	2013	Critical thinking in teacher education: Perceptions and practices of teacher candidates and college faculty.	1. Qualitative descriptive method. 2. Survey based on Facione (2010) and McGuire (2010). 3. Field test.	Both teacher candidates and faculty members demonstrated a lack of knowledge on critical thinking terms.
Li	2016	Teachers' understanding of critical thinking skills in EFL classroom in China.	1. Self-complete questionnaire. 2. Focus group interview. 3. A follow- up classroom observation. 4. Video-based reflection.	Teachers' difficulty to conceptualise critical thinking skills.
Tuzlokova et al.	2017	Critical thinking in the language classroom: Teacher beliefs and methods.	1. Online survey	The participants revealed their interest in incorporating critical thinking in language teaching because they find it important and significant.

Buphate& Esteban	2018	Integration of critical thinking approaches in Thailand university classrooms: Perceptive analysis.	1. Questionnaires to students and teachers.	Students' lack of knowledge on critical thinking and their need to enhance it in their classes.
Lin	2018	Developing Critical thinking in EFL classes: An infusion approach.	1. Mixed method approach 2. CCTDT. 3. CCTST. 4. Students' compositions. 5. Interview 6. Questionnaire. Students' self-evaluations of group discussions in class.	The researcher believed in the ability to teach critical thinking within Chinese learners.
Saleh	2019	Critical thinking as a 21st century skill: Conceptions, implementation and challenges in the EFL classroom.	1. Open-ended questionnaire	All the participants believed that Libyan EFL university students are not ready for critical thinking and that it is not easy for them to develop it.
Zhang & al.	2020	Investigating university EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking and its teaching.	1. Questionnaire. 2. Follow- up interview	The participants agreedthat critical thinking need to be implemented within EFL curriculum and classroom teaching.
Khalid & al.	2021	Pre-service teachers' perceptions of barriers to promoting critical thinking skills in the classroom.	1. Exploratory mixed-method. 2. Online survey. 3. A focus group discussion	Critical thinking makes learning enjoyable. The participants showed three items that hinder the implementation of critical thinking in the classroom such as students' background, teaching method, classroom structure.

The results obtained from teachers questionnaire, students' personal narrative journals and the empirical studies showed that both students and teachers believe on the idea that critical thinking is an important concept in education. For instance, in the teachers questionnaire, different interpretations have been given to critical thinking; in this case, to develop students' critical thinking skills, a clear conceptualization and explanation of the term has to be done in education. This means that before teaching critical thinking, we need to take into account the way teachers understand the concept in order to arrive at a final and common understanding of the term to be able to transfer the information to students. In addition, the pedagogy of the oppressed sounds a problem in education; students are considered as passive recipients of knowledge unable to solve problems or express their ideas freely because of fear of negative evaluation. Hence, it is necessary to design plans and look for appropriate strategies in order to make critical thinking at the corner stone in education. This might happen through coordinating meetings, workshops and conferences as well as constant reading to gain background knowledge and understanding of the concept.

Concerning the results of students' personal narrative journals, the participants noted that they became more aware of the things that surround them because of the elements taught on critical thinking. For recall, the elements consist of stereotypes, identifying premises, inferences and assumptions, avoiding enthymemes, tautology and non sequitur, tolerance of ambiguity, line of reasoning, the overall summary of arguments, careful selection of facts and evaluation of others' arguments. Those elements, assisted the participants in becoming skeptical (i.e., they are asking questions and trying to understand) and confident when expressing their own arguments. They also enabled them to accept others' arguments and listen to their ideas and suggestions. The study of Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2017) supports the results of students' personal journals in the present study. These scholars also relied on reflective journals to explore students' learning difficulties, learning strategies and the concepts learned in class. They concluded that this instrument helped students to reflect upon their learning experiences, the strategies they use and might use in the future.

The results of the empirical studies corroborate with the results of teachers questionnaire and students' personal narrative journals. The studies showed the positive attitudes of teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking. All of them confirmed that explicit instruction sounds an effective strategy that promotes students' critical thinking skills. As a person cannot drive until he gets his driving

license, a student cannot think well if he is not well instructed. Evidence comes also from Marin and Halpern (2011) who supported explicit instruction on critical thinking and who stated that effective thinking instruction is the one that is based on three outstanding elements such as (1) the introduction of the skill, (2) intentional practice and (3) transfer.

In sum, the results of the present research revealed the possibility of teaching critical thinking within an EFL context. It contradicts the findings of Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) who state that critical thinking is culturally-based which means that EFL communities were not brought up to question their authorities. In a study he conducted, Atkinson (1997) asserts that critical thinking could not be a definable concept since many professors at an American University were unable to define it during the interview. This statement was commented by Davidson (1998) who mentioned that the findings of Atkinson (1997) showed a lack of understanding of critical thinking rather than its indefinability. Besides, the present article revealed the positive attitude of both students and teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking because according to them, it boost students' confidence and argumentative skills, which are two crucial components in the learning process and professional career.

4. Conclusion

The present article aimed to explore the perspectives of students and teachers towards the teaching of critical thinking within an EFL context as well teachers' conceptualization of the concept in education. In this regard, we relied on online questionnaire, students' personal narrative journals and analyzed ten empirical studies, which have connection with the theme under investigation. The results showed that the majority of Algerian English language teachers conceptualize the term as reflective judgment. In addition, the results revealed the positive attitude of students and teachers towards the teaching of the concept. They also confirmed the effectiveness of explicit instruction on developing students' critical thinking skills and contradicted other studies that believe on the idea that critical thinking is culture-sensitive. We recommend in this article to consider the notion of criticality in Algerian higher education and create new platforms for developing students' critical thinking skills such as conferences, theatres and workshops.

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Appendices

Appendix A1

Dear teacher,

This questionnaire is part of a research paper that I am conducting on Algerian EFL students' critical thinking skills. I would be very thankful if you devote some of your precious time to answer it. Thank you for your cooperation.

Questions

1. How do you define critical thinking skills?

- Deciding what to believe or what to do.
- A metacognitive process.
- Reflective judgment.
- Others:

2. Which among these practical strategies do you think will better improve students' critical thinking skills?
- Testing for conceptual independence.
- Looking for counter-arguments.
- Asking open-ended questions.
- Identifying dependent reasons.
- Testing for logical strength test
- Others:

3. Do you think that critical thinking is:
- Culturally appropriate.
- Educationally appropriate.
- Socio-economically appropriate.
- Socio-politically appropriate.

4. Do you think that cultural differences influence students' critical thinking skills?

Yes   No
- **If yes, how?**
- **If no, why?**

5. Have you ever introduced critical thinking skills in your courses?

Yes   No

6. Which approach will you opt for in order to enhance students' critical thinking skills?
- Implicit instruction.
- Explicit instruction.
- Both of them.

7. What are the most important qualities that a critical thinker should possess?

8. Have you ever been influenced by the pedagogy of the oppressed?

Yes   No

9. According to you, what are the forms of oppression that pervade the current education?

10. Would you please provide any suggestions for improving EFL students' critical thinking skills in our education?