

## Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking and the Impact They Have on Language Teaching

### تصورات المدرسين للتفكير النقدي وأثرهم على تدريس اللغة

Nassira Ouslimani <sup>1\*</sup>, (Mustafa Benboulaïd University Batna2)  
saracouslimani@gmail.com

Hachemi Aboubou <sup>2</sup>, (Mustafa Benboulaïd University Batna2)

Received in	22-01-2020	Accepted in	16-12-2020
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### Abstract

Providing an active learning environment that requires students to think critically is considered one of the tasks of foreign language teachers. This paper aims to explore teachers' perceptions on developing critical thinking among students and the impact they could have on language teaching. A qualitative study was conducted using a questionnaire addressing the teachers in the English department of Batna-2 University. The results revealed that the majority of the teachers recognized the central role played by critical thinking in the effectiveness of language pedagogy, but they gave priority to the need to teach the content subject rather than teaching for critical thinking. They perceived students as passive and unable to develop critical thinking skills, while they expressed a concern that teachers themselves may not have mastered critical thinking. A targeted professional development in the field of critical thinking is required to enable the teachers to effectively help students to think critically.

**Keywords:** Teachers' Perceptions, Critical Thinking, EFL students, Language teaching

### المخلص

التفكير النقدي عملية معقدة تتطلب مستوى عالي من المهارات المعرفية في معالجة المعلومات لذلك يعتبر توفير بيئة تعليمية نشطة فيها أنشطة مختلفة تتطلب من المتعلمين التفكير بشكل نقدي أحد مهام مدرسي اللغات الأجنبية. كان الغرض من هذا البحث استكشاف تصورات المدرسين حول تنمية التفكير النقدي بين الطلاب والتأثير الذي يمكن أن يحدث في تدريس اللغة. تم إجراء دراسة نوعية باستخدام استبيان موجه لمدرسي قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باتنة -2. أظهرت النتائج أن غالبية المدرسين أدركوا الدور المركزي الذي يلعبه التفكير النقدي في فعالية أصول التدريس اللغوية، لكنهم أعطوا الأولوية للحاجة إلى تدريس موضوع المحتوى بدلاً من تدريس التفكير النقدي. لقد أدركوا أن الطلاب سلبيين وغير قادرين على تطوير مهارات التفكير النقدي. علاوة على ذلك، أعربوا عن قلقهم من أن المدرسين أنفسهم ربما لم يتقنوا التفكير النقدي. تشير النتائج إلى الحاجة إلى التطوير المستهدف للتطوير المهني للمدرسين في مجال التفكير النقدي لتمكينهم من مساعدة الطلاب بشكل فعال على ممارسة التفكير النقدي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تصورات المعلمين، التفكير النقدي، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تعليم اللغة

\* Corresponding author

## **Introduction**

Creating a learning environment that makes possible the promotion of critical thinking (CT) skills can be seen as a crucial goal of education around the world. Hove (2011) affirms that “in order to better prepare our students for the challenges they will face, teachers need to explicitly teach critical thinking strategies, equipping young people with twenty-first-century skills” ( p.7). Similarly, Brown (2004) argues that an ideal language program should go beyond the linguistic competence and try to develop CT skills among language learners. Moreover, teachers are responsible for introducing critical thinking to their students and to help them acquire its skills while learning the language (Limpman, 2003). Paul and Elder (2009) argue that the way students are taught is the main factor that affects their ability to think critically, therefore, teachers need to be informed about the value of CT skills and the strategies of teaching them and try to identify different classroom areas as the proper place to emphasize and teach these skills (Schafersman, 1991).

Furthermore, the perceptions of language teachers affect their teaching practices, thus the implementation of critical thinking in their classrooms. Paul (1995) affirms that teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors sometimes limit the teaching of critical thinking. Consequently, researchers are often concerned about teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and how they convey the meaning of this concept to students (Moore, 2013; Flores et al., 2012). Similarly, the choice of the teaching methods and techniques influence the possibilities to stimulate CT skills among students. As asserted by Duron et al. (2006), the conference format of teaching, an approach of large trend in higher education, may not encourage active learning of critical thinking by students. Although the use of this method is on decline, providing a multitude of facts necessary for the completion of studies or preparing students for the success of standardized tests, remains a priority (Luhtala, 2011, p. 24). Hence, many teachers, who feel that their primary responsibility is to dispense knowledge of the subject matter and to evaluate the amount of information that the student can recall, forget to incorporate critical thinking skills into their courses. To shed more light on this issue, this paper aims at examining Batna-2 EFL teachers' perceptions of CT and the influence that could have on their teaching methods.

### **I. What is Critical Thinking?**

Critical thinking could be said beyond challenging a statement or opinion. Many definitions have been attributed to Critical thinking. We can classify some of them as follows:

1/In the line of its description as a cognitive process as defined by Diane Halpern:

Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed – the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences,

calculating likelihood, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task. (Halpern, 1996, p.5)

2/ According to the characteristics, dispositions and attitudes attributed to a critical thinker, listed in the following definition of Richard Paul:

As we come to think critically in the strong sense we develop special traits of mind: intellectual humility, intelligence, courage, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity and confidence in reason. A sophistic or weak sense critical thinker develops these traits only in a restricted way, consistent with egocentric and socio-economic commitments. Richard Paul (1993, p.33)

## **II. Critical Thinking in Education**

Robert Ennis (1996a) suggests that CT plays an important role in all aspects of life, political, social and private. It guides people to analyze the coherence of arguments of politicians and to examine the plausibility of information in the midst of abundant views, especially in the Internet (Connor-Greene and Greene, 2002). Richard Paul (1993) suggests that CT is vital to students to analyze and understand the big amount of information to which they are exposed, argue and defend their positions, and anticipate consequences and make good personal and civic decisions.

Harvey Siegel (1988, p.55–61) has identified three considerations to support integrating CT in education: first, respect, educational institutions and teachers are morally obliged to respect the student as a person and honor his/her demands for reasons and explanations. A teacher should deal honestly and recognize the student's equal moral worth and recognize his/her right to ask questions and exercise his/her independent judgment. Second, preparation for successful adulthood by making the child self-sufficient, free from unwarranted beliefs and attitudes that prevents creativity and competency to take control of his/her life. The third justification is the necessity to initiate students into the rational traditions in such fields as history, science, mathematics, arts and philosophy, and allow the student to acquire the ability to grasp the relevance of various reasons for judgments and evaluate the weight of such reasons properly. In addition to these three considerations, Siegel (1988, p. 62–90) responded to two objections: the ideology objection that adopting an educational ideal presupposes a prior ideological commitment and the relativism objection that can ultimately be handled by the theory of CT and that the cultivation of CT cannot avoid indoctrination.

## **III. Critical thinking in English Language Teaching**

The integration of CT has been carried out in some educational institutions in foreign language classes. For example, in British schools, the National Curriculum (NC) of the Department for Education and Employment Report on Research (DfEE, 1999) introduced thinking skills into modern foreign

language classes (MFL). They came out with the result that teaching CT abilities helps students to communicate in the new language, to produce various types of spoken and written languages and to be creative in the use of the foreign language. Moreover, it facilitates language learning, as in the case of inferences of unknown linguistic items and reflection on the links between languages (DfEE, 1999, Lin and Mackay, 2004). Incorporating CT skills in language classroom could make learners aware of their progress and develop linguistic autonomy (Lin and Mackay, *ibid*). Another example, Allen (2004) conducted a study in US University where he examined the engagement of American students who learned French as a foreign language in portfolio writing in which they examined French cultural stereotypes. The results revealed that students appreciated writing portfolios that made them more aware of their metacognitive processes.

Additionally, Critical Pedagogy is based on the notion of empowering learners to speak freely about their learning experiences. This includes their participation in making decisions about their language programs and assessment, which is an essential key to success. Similarly, teacher training programs should enable the teachers to implement criticality in the language classroom. Criticality is defined as the integration of explicit social criticism in pedagogy and research, in order to examine and transform inequitable social conditions and their understanding by peoples (Norton & Toohy, 2004 p. 12).

#### **IV. Teaching For Critical Thinking:**

Teachers play a central role in developing students' CT skills. Whereas perception is a process by which important information is extracted from physical stimulation, we assume that teachers' perceptions influence their classroom behavior. Sainn et al. (1980) identify three important positions about perception. First, perception does not depend only on the stimulus but is also determined by the individual's experience, intentions, and social needs. Second, the preceptor is not passive and indifferent when s/he perceives something, but s/he actively selects the information and makes assumptions to decide what is really happening. Third, perception is a high cognitive process that helps an individual construct a model of his world to help anticipate future events and manage them properly. Thus, teachers who see themselves as mediators allow the learner to learn by teaching relevant skills and strategies. They promote interaction with learners who, in turn, actively participate in the learning process, whereas teachers who see themselves as information disseminators do not take into account the attention and feedback of learners. They only control the teaching situation.

Moreover, the practice of CT is necessary to improve critical thinking among students (Moore & Parker, 2012). Stimulating the process of critical thinking among students allows them to develop their curiosity and engage in their personal development. The processes of analysis, CT and the search for

truth, as well as the traits of self-confidence, curiosity, maturity, and open-mindedness, usually appear when critical thinking is fostered (Facione, Sánchez, Facione and Gainen, 1995). It is, therefore, necessary to train students in critical thinking. Halpern (1998) argues that the process of CT involves scientific training and scientific methods to seek meaningful connections to our judgments. She proposes four structural components to improve the teaching and learning to think: “a dispositional or behavioral element, a teaching and a practice with critical thinking skills, structured activities designed to facilitate transfer across contexts, and a metacognitive component used to direct and evaluate thoughts” (Ibid, p.451).

#### **V. Aim of the study**

The present investigation focuses on teachers' perceptions of CT among their students and how this might influence their teaching methods and it investigates their capacity to induce CT thinking among their students.

#### **VI. Research Questions**

- How do EFL teachers perceive CT?
- How do they perceive their students' capacity to engage in CT process?
- How do they perceive the role they play in integrating CT in their teaching processes?
- What are the factors they perceive as barriers to develop CT skills?

#### **VII. Hypotheses**

- Teachers may not have a well-constructed idea about CT.
- Teachers might perceive students as unable to develop CT.
- Teachers might be unable to use critical thinking in their classes.
- The teaching/learning environment may impede the implementation of CT in the language classroom.

#### **VIII. Research Methodology**

##### **A. Research Method**

The investigation of teachers' perceptions of CT lends itself to a qualitative approach. Qualitative approaches are used to analyze the behavior, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people and what is at the core of their lives (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). A semi-structured questionnaire was designed on the basis of a review of the relevant literature. A pilot study was conducted with five teachers and some questions were adjusted to better correspond to the objective of the research.

The study focused on teachers' perceptions of CT among their students and how this might influence their teaching methods and investigates their capacity to induce CT among their students.

### **B. Population and Sampling**

A purposive sample was used. A total of 30 teachers participated in the study, representing approximately 42 % of the total academic staff of English Department at Batna2 University. All participants were permanent teachers chosen for their greater teaching experience.

### **C. Data Collection Procedures**

The study was held during the academic year 2017/2018. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers after the end of their courses. Each teacher was given the necessary time to answer the questions. The respondents were asked to answer a total of 8 open-ended questions. The questions were focused on drawing their perceptions about CT.

### **D. Data Analysis and Discussion of the Findings**

The analysis was inductive. The interpretive approach was used to answer the research questions. The interpretive approach is based on a description of social reality and lived experience of human being. It aims to understand the meaning of the participants' experiences in order to provide a "thick description". This implies the need for a comprehensive synthesis and analysis of the data obtained. Meanings obtained using this approach, are conceptualized as temporary knowledge (Greene, 2000). The answers were classified according to themes interpreted from the data.

Since the study was based on an interpretative approach, it is not possible to claim total objectivity in the data analysis process. We managed our own subjectivity by respecting the words and sensitivities of the participants in the context of research (Holliday, 2002). We considered teachers' responses from our own understanding and definition of CT.

### **E. Data Organization and Description**

The analysis of the responses to the questionnaire was carried out using the process of topic ordering (Radnor, 2002) to prepare the qualitative data for analysis. Analysis of the main points of the data resulted in a total of 4 categories of teachers' perception of CT. To link the data with the research questions and the problem, the obtained categories were used to answer the four research questions. Although the results may only relate directly to teachers in the English department at Batna-2 University, they can provide useful information for other populations in similar situations.

**Table 1: List of questions in the questionnaire about teachers' perceptions of CT**

What do you think critical thinking is?
Do you think your students exercise CT? If so, how do you know?
Do you think you could generate CT in your classroom?
What are the difficulties do your students encounter when you try to teach them for CT?
Is it necessary to provide students with all information about the subject to teach? Why? and Why not?
Do you think it is possible to apply CT into your courses? Why and Why not?
What are the methods and tools do you use or could use to enhance CT among your students?
What are, in your opinion, the benefits of using CT in a language classroom?

## **IX. Analysis of the questionnaire**

**A. Research question 01:** How do EFL teachers perceive critical thinking?

### **B. Teachers' Definition of the concept of critical thinking**

The results show that the majority of respondents (25) perceived CT as a thinking process that would help students understand their courses and improve their learning outcomes. This implies that CT was seen as a means to stimulate students to better assimilate the knowledge presented in the classroom. One of them commented:

*Critical thinking is a way of thinking that facilitates the learning process and enlarges the knowledge and the understanding of the facts. It helps students to respond to classroom activities and to get better outcomes.*

The other five (05) respondents thought that CT involved reasoning, analysis, and evaluation. One of them commented:

*CT is to possess that ability to question and analyze whatever we read or hear, thus drawing our own conclusions and building our own views and opinions. It is a good reasoning that leads to specific or correct judgment or belief.*

## **Discussion**

From the results obtained, most respondents perceived that CT was important to help students in the learning process. However, none of them gave a clear idea of the concept of critical thinking or its components. The kind of thinking that involves solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihood, and

making decisions (Halpern, 1996). Teachers were more focused on students acquiring knowledge rather than reflecting and evaluating the material they learn.

### **a) Teachers' perceptions of the significance of critical thinking for language teaching**

Twenty eight respondents were convinced that CT was important in their classrooms. They felt that it deepened students' knowledge and made them independent thinkers. They also believed that through CT, students could apply what they learned in real life. One of them wrote:

*Critical thinking builds student's profile and character. It enables students to become active learners, creative and independent thinkers rather than being passive receivers.*

### **Discussion**

The results seem to imply that the concern of most respondents is the acquisition of knowledge by students, rather than thinking critically. Acquiring knowledge is important, but learning to analyze and evaluate is crucial for students high level thinking that is, CT, which encompasses conceptualization, application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation as defined by Paul and Scriven (1987).

## **C. Research questions 02**

How do teachers perceive their students' capacity to engage in CT process?

### **D. Teachers' perceptions of students' expression of critical thinking in their classrooms**

Twenty five respondents perceived students as passive, uninterested, shy and inhibited. They also perceived them as lacking language mastery and confidence to express new ideas. One of them commented:

*Unfortunately, all my students are passive learners, even when I use critical thinking. They accept whatever is given to them and would just give you back your own ideas without any analysis.*

The five other respondents felt that CT happened, but with only some students and the same ones and they knew that from their personal comments, questions and analysis of the subject taught. One of them mentioned:

*I know that students use critical thinking when they ask questions and defend their opinions using arguments. One can also deduce it from students' way of answering, debating and commenting different questions raised in class.*

### **Discussion**

Respondents, who perceived that some students had used CT, explained that they deduced that from their ability to defend their opinions using solid arguments. But, according to the definitions given above, these students do not



seem to reflect CT. This implies that the level of CT demonstrated by students depended on their teachers' understanding of the skills needed for this type of thinking.

### **A Teachers' perceptions of the difficulties faced by students in practicing critical thinking**

Twenty-eight respondents felt that students lacked CT skills. They stated that this was a skill they had never been exposed to or learned to do at the very beginning of their studies. For example, one of them explained:

*I think students will have to be aware of critical thinking to start. Indeed, students were trained in schools to memorize information and not ask questions. This has led them to trust and depend on their teachers to inform them. Therefore, it blocks their ability to analyze.*

Another said:

*Students do not even know what is CT. They do not have or did not learn about critical thinking skills. They feel lost when they are challenged.*

In addition, of the 28 respondents who felt that their students could not think critically, 25 expressed concern about the passive behavior of students in the classroom. They also described their students as lacking motivation or self-confidence to demonstrate CT. For example, one of them explained:

*Students are generally uninterested. Their thinking is limited; they do not easily accept new ideas especially when it comes to religion or taboo subjects. They are not even aware of the process itself.*

## **Discussion**

The majority of the respondents perceived that students lacked the skills to practice CT. They also considered students being unaware of CT as a skill as they were never exposed to it or trained to do it in their early education. The respondents perceived also that the students were not motivated about CT process as they did not respond well when asked to think critically. This would suggest the importance of helping teachers understand the importance of incorporating CT into their lessons.

### **A. Research questions 03**

How do teachers perceive the role they play in integrating CT in their teaching processes?

## **B. Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of critical thinking in their classrooms**

The majority (20) of the respondents perceived that they did not apply CT in their classrooms. They also expressed doubts about the possibility of integrating CT in their lessons and described it as a difficult task and that the students expect them to give notes containing all the needed information to answer the questions in their assessments. One of them expressed:

*Critical thinking rarely happens in my classroom, students rely on the teacher to give them all the information they need.*

The other ten respondents were certain that they could implement CT in their classrooms by giving a space to the students to exchange their opinions and by providing them with guidelines which would give them a chance to explore and learn to think critically on their own. One of them commented:

*I try to stimulate my students to exchange their views with each other and then agree or disagree, based on a solid ground. I usually open debates on subjects that are related to their personal interest and challenge them.*

## **C. Methods and tools teachers perceive efficient to integrate CT in their courses**

Twenty-five respondents perceived that questioning and debating were the methods that can bring about CT in their courses. One of them commented: *Using authentic materials like updated topics for debates and discussions, watching videos can help students to think critically.*

Five other respondents thought that presenting guidelines and asking the students to make researches could make students think critically. One of them wrote:

*We should leave a space for investigation so that students can use their creativity and their own touch.*

## **Discussion**

This result suggests that respondents did not use CT in their classrooms. Although some of them suggested that students could be encouraged to think critically by using some teaching techniques such as discussions and assignments, their perception that students usually depend on their teachers to provide them with all the material they need for their studies, suggests that CT was not used in their classrooms.

## **D. Research questions 04**

What are the factors that teachers perceive as barriers to improve critical thinking skills?

### **a) Teachers' ability to bring about CT in their classroom**

Twenty respondents were skeptical concerning their capacity to apply CT in their classrooms. They perceived the students as passive and limited in their thinking. One of them commented:

*It is very hard to bring CT among students. I tried, but in vain, students are programmed to become passive learners.*

Another respondent Commented:

*We have first to motivate the students to acquire knowledge and then push them to think critically.*

Fifteen respondents also expressed concern that teachers themselves may not have mastered CT, which has led students to not develop this form of thinking properly. For example, one of them said:

*a) Teachers need to be trained to acquire a certain amount of critical thinking and experience to be able to help students to think critically.*

Another commented:

*Teachers lack the awareness and the knowledge necessary to implement critical thinking in their courses*

The other ten respondents declared that they could bring about CT in their classrooms. They felt that opening debates and providing students with directions would give them a chance to explore and learn to think critically on their own.

Three respondents have expressed concern about students' questions that would be inappropriate. One of them commented:

*Students may ask inappropriate questions. They may become overcurious.*

### **Discussion**

The majority of respondents felt that it was difficult, if not impossible, to implement CT in their classrooms. They were not sure that teachers could think critically themselves and be able to encourage their students to think critically. Some of them were convinced that acquiring knowledge was a priority over CT, whereas others were concerned by negative consequences CT might generate in their classrooms.

### **a) The possibility to implement critical thinking in their classrooms**

Twenty respondents expressed that the teaching/learning environment and the classroom context prevented them from using CT. Students expected teachers to provide notes on all the information they need to answer the questions in their assessments. They felt that the language program, overcrowded classrooms, and the time allotted to the various sessions were inadequate to

instill critical thinking in their students. For example, one of the respondents commented the following:

*Many conditions should be met to instill CT in language teaching, a healthy environment with few students, available material, and enough time.*

Another said:

*Unfortunately it is not possible to implement CT in our classes. The LMD system does not allow us for such activities because of limited teaching hours, ununified syllabus and lack of teachers' training in critical thinking.*

Other ten respondents felt that students were not motivated and that they did not have language proficiency to understand the documents and conduct research.

One of them responded:

*Students do not have language mastery to be able to do research*

## **Discussion**

All teachers found that their teaching/learning environment did not help them integrate CT into their classes. Indeed, "discussion is facilitated by the comfortable atmosphere created when students do not have to find one right answer and when they are not judged for voicing their opinion" (Davis 1984, p.570). They felt also that many conditions should be met to develop CT skills among students. They perceived the time allocation, program content, and language level of students as barriers to implementing CT.

## **X. Interpretation of the Results**

The results reveal that the teachers are aware of the importance of CT in the learning process, yet they did not give a clear idea of what it is or what are its components, which confirms the first hypothesis that teachers may not have a well-constructed idea about CT. The teachers also believed that the students were passive, lack motivation and that they were dependent on their teachers to provide them with the material they need for their studies, which is in line with our second hypothesis, that teachers might perceive students as unable to develop CT skills. Besides, the teachers expressed doubts about the possibility of integrating CT in their classes and described it as a difficult task, which confirms the third hypothesis that teachers might be unable to use CT in their courses. Additionally, the teachers found that their teaching environment, such as the time allocation, program content and students' language level did not help them integrate CT into their classes, which goes in line with our fourth hypothesis that the teaching/learning environment might impede the implementation of CT in the language classroom.

Overall, we can assume that teachers' perceptions of CT and students' ability to develop CT skills influenced their teaching methods, which they oriented towards the completion of programs and language instruction without leaving room for the development of CT skills.

## **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

The majority of participants in this study recognized the central role played by CT in effective language teaching and pedagogy. According to them, teaching critical thinking skills enhances students' chances of success and achievement in both their studies and their social lives. However, many teachers associate critical thinking to intellectual stimuli without defining the forms they must take. They also perceive students' ability to defend their ideas as an evidence of students' exercise of CT skills. This implies that teachers themselves may not have a well-constructed understanding of critical thinking and the way to help students to develop CT skills.

The findings also show that teachers are not certain that their students could develop CT. Many of them perceive their students to be passive and lack the command of language to express their thoughts. Black (2005) suggests that a climate of high expectations and encouragement of teachers for their students, prompting them to express their thoughts, is a way to guarantee the success of CT in the classroom. They also perceive the time allocation and program content as barriers that prevent them from developing CT skills among students.

Furthermore, teachers' tendency to provide all necessary learning materials and the need to complete syllabuses would further imply a very structured approach to teaching and indicates that they were not able to incorporate CT into their courses. Teachers who perceive students as poorly functioning, limit exposure to CT and focus instead on teaching facts (Degani, & Vaakin, 2001). Consequently, students become less motivated and passive in their learning process. This creates a vicious circle which is not of benefits for language learning.

Therefore, a targeted teachers' professional development in the field of CT is recommended, including theoretical explanation to strength the basic principles of CT and practical examples that teachers can use, as well as a better understanding of approaches to teaching CT. Paul and Elder (2019) affirm that "if we understand critical thinking substantively, we not only explain the idea explicitly to our students, but we use it to give order and meaning to virtually everything we do as teachers and learners" (p.44).

## **Limitations and Further Research**

Although the study is limited to investigating teachers' perceptions and teaching procedures of CT at Batna-2 University, its findings may provide relevant information to other language teachers in similar educational contexts. Besides, they can motivate further research on the development of teaching methods to improve CT skills alongside language learning and conceptualize and establish curricula that give space and sustainment to the implementation of critical thinking in foreign language pedagogy.

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