

## Teachers' and Learners' Attitudes towards Critical Thinking Skills: A Case Study in the Iranian EFL Context

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### Abstract

Modern and forward-looking approaches to education and learning no longer treat learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Rather, they claim to nurture self-monitored and self-disciplined thinkers who are shown to be academically successful and promising. This qualitative case study aimed at exploring the teachers' and learners' attitudes towards critical thinking within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context of Iran. To this end, the attitudes of eighty Iranian EFL learners and their teacher towards inclusion of critical thinking exercises into their regular syllabus were gauged. The results obtained from 18 unstructured interviews indicated that teacher's and learners' responses were diametrically opposed; while learners' performance improved and they became more motivated, the teacher reported distress and dissatisfaction with the new approach to the syllabus. Thematic Content Analyses (TCA) and language skills tests also revealed that the L2 reading comprehension ability of learners benefited more than other skills. Other context-based factors and implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** critical thinking skills, EFL learners, Iranian EFL classes; EFL attitude

### INTRODUCTION

In various ways, the need to gear up learners for critical thinking has gained momentum over the last decades (Abdel-Hack & Helwa, 2014; Al Sharadgah, 2014; Birjandi & Alizadeh, 2012; Birjandi, 2012; Fahim & Shiekhi Behdani, 2011; Fahim, Bagherkazemi and Alemi, 2010; Mall-Amiri & Ahmadi; 2014; Shangarfam & Mamipour, 2012). Whereas this may sound new to teaching practitioners, critical thinking has probably been a long-standing concern in that "[P]hilosophers, psychologists, and educators have, throughout history, unanimously emphasized the art, science, and practice of thinking" (Fahim & Mirzaiee, 2014, p. 4). The demand is duly reflected in van Gelder's (2005) statement that "almost everyone agrees that one of the main goals of education, at

whatever level, is to help develop general thinking skills ...." (p. 41). This new trend is seemingly one of the many spin-offs of shifting grounds in education that are deemphasizing the so-called 'spoon feeding' instruction or 'banking education'. Teaching and learning English as a foreign language is, undoubtedly, one of the areas where fostering critical skills would yield rewarding outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Characterizing Critical thinking

Different accounts of critical thinking (CT) have been given by authorities each representing a particular line of thinking or a disciplinary affiliation. Following Astleitner (2007 as cited in Mall-Amiri & Ahmadi; 2014, p. 489), critical thinking is a higher-order thinking skill which includes evaluating arguments, and is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which ends in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference. As Bowell and Kemp (2005) put it, "critical thinking is an individual's engagement in/deciding on/ responsibility for actions they deal with in daily life" (p.4). What is operationally more appealing, however, is characterizing the nature of critical thinking against the broad brushstroke of human thinking. Some believe that critical thinking is a skill like the other skills a human being might possess. Others believe that it is a specific critical disposition or orientation. In this latter sense, as Mason (2008) states,

If critical thinking is constituted by dispositional knowledge, some suggest that this would be in the sense of a moral perspective or set of values that motivates critical thinking ... some mean by this, knowledge about concepts in critical thinking such as premises, assumptions, or valid arguments (p. 2).

Mason (2008), therefore, raises the issue of content knowledge that is believed by some to be essential to thinking critically. Aside from an enduring and stable feature, namely disposition or intellectual orientation, critical thinking is associated with a number of learning and teaching benefits in various studies including (Cottrell, 2005; Ennis, 1993; Judge, Jones & McCreery, 2009):

1. improving attention and enhances concentration,
2. enabling people to extract the key points in a text or other message rather than becoming easily distracted by less important points,
3. giving learners the capability of how to make themselves understood,
4. improving skills of analysis that learners can utilize in various situations, and
5. making individuals familiar with their own bias and prejudice while doing analyses.
6. enabling learners draw logical conclusions based on the evidence they have access to.

The literature on CT in EFL/ESL is already flourishing with a good bulk of studies reporting that CT makes language learning experience sound more meaningful to EFL/ESL learners. By having full control over their thinking processes, EFL/ESL learners can monitor and evaluate their unique ways of learning more successfully (metalinguistic awareness), and critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners' achievements (see Liaw, 2007; Rafi, 2009; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011)

With the growing number of Iran's high-quality distance education programs on the one hand (Rabiee, Nazari & Gharibshaeen, 2012) and the academic merits of English for the booming population of graduate and post-graduate hopefuls on the other, CT skills will have to be accommodated in English language instruction.

Given the above arguments, this study aims to probe into the on-going processes of four EFL classes where the teacher tries to make his students better critical thinkers. Students' responses to teacher efforts have also been investigated very carefully in pursuit of finding insightful pedagogical implications for both language teachers and curriculum developers. The researcher chose the design to be a longitudinal case study as "case studies enable a researcher to study contemporary phenomena in a real-life setting, where boundaries between context and phenomenon tend to be blurred" (Gibbert & Ruigruk, 2010; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

### **Findings on Critical Thinking in EFL**

The literature on CT is rich and flourishing. In fact it covers a range as vast as the disciplinary borderline between psychology and the other sister disciplines. In this study; however, the attempt is made to focus on those that particularly address the EFL within the Iranian context of situation. Fahim, Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) investigated the link between test-takers' CT ability and their Reading performance on TOEFL reporting a significant difference favoring the participants with greater skills in thinking critically.

Fahim and Sa'edpour (2011) similarly focused on the effect of CT skills on the reading comprehension of Iranian learners. They found that involvement in debates a critical thinking activity during their instruction. They concluded that the critical thinking activity improved reading; nevertheless, the critical thinking test did not yield significant differences.

Fahim and Ahmadi (2012) examined the effect of CT and comprehension and recall. They showed that high critical thinkers outperformed non-critical thinker on texts disregarding content familiarity. Fahim and Mirzaiee (2013) concentrated on dialogic critical thinking approach and its effect on argumentative EFL writing. Results indicated that when writing is complemented by dialogic critical thinking, the argumentative writing ability improves. Mall-Amiri & Ahmadi (2014) suggested that there EFL learners' critical thinking and metacognitive strategies are significantly correlated.

There were other studies investigating the content of the instructional books regarding critical thinking ability.

Birjandi & Alizadeh (2013) compared EFL textbooks employed in the Iranian institutes and reported that for the lower order critical thinking skills, no differences can be detected among the books, but 'Top Notch' series enacted more CT skills than others. Azizi (2012) came up with a pessimistic interest with the Iranian EFL textbooks used as university sources arguing that the students at Iranian universities are not likely to develop CT skills due to the content of the textbooks.

Thus, the research questions for the present study are as follows:

- How do the exercises implemented by the teacher affect learners' critical thinking ability after two semesters?
- How do learners respond to the methods used by the teacher to augment their critical thinking skills?
- How do the learners respond to the inclusion of so-called 'critical thinking exercises' into the curriculum?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The teacher participating in this study was a non-native speaker of English with an M.A degree in Teaching as a Foreign Language (TEFL) who was paid to participate in the study. His work experience as an ELT teacher included several years of teaching spoken English in private language institutes in Tehran. He was teaching New Interchange Series to two groups of pre-intermediate and two groups of upper-intermediate learners at the time of the study. Four classes were selected for this study. Learners were 38 female and 42 male students in two proficiency levels of upper-intermediate and pre-intermediate. For each proficiency level, there was a female-only class and a male-only class as the institute did not follow a coeducational system.

### **Classroom Practices**

Interview with the participating teacher revealed that he supported autonomous learning, enhancing critical thinking skills of learners, and continuous assessment. He had his students engaged in dairy writing as a reflective task. During the initial four sessions, he informed students on some issues which he believed anyone should be aware of in order for their individuality to work for them and make them better learners. In the beginning, he gave information about rote learning, meaningful learning, critical thinking, intelligence types and brain dominance. Then he explained different learning styles, learning strategies and study skills. Each introduction part took about 15 minutes of class time. The rationale underlying having the initial training sessions is

twofold. First, by making students familiar with the aforementioned concepts and processes, the learners would know, after the inclusion of critical thinking skills practices, what they were doing, why they were doing that and how to do it. Second, it was aimed to make students more motivated and engaged in the exercises and activities designated to them as it has been shown that learners dedicate more time and effort on tasks when they know the purpose and rationale of doing the task (Nunan, 2004; Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

## Procedures

A variety of standard puzzles and exercises (exemplified below) were selected from the following outstanding books about critical thinking skills:

1. Critical Thinking Puzzles (DisPezio, 1996)
2. An Introduction to Critical Thinking and Creativity (Lau, 2011)
3. Critical Thinking (Moore & Parker, 2012)
4. Invitation to Critical Thinking (Rudinow & E. Barry, 2008)

The chosen puzzles and practices were of two types. One category were practices related to linguistics and language learning. The second type were activities related to the general critical thinking ability.

It should be noted that there is not a clear-cut borderline between an exercise assessing linguistic critical thinking ability and an exercise assessing general critical ability; as we can consider the example C a kind of reading comprehension ability. The exercises were distributed over one session time and took about, as a whole, 15 minutes of session time. Each session time lasted for 90 minutes. Because the case study teacher believed that learning outside the class is as much important as learning inside the class, learners were assigned to do some critical thinking exercises outside the class. However, these exercises were complementary and minor to the core exercises prescribed by the curriculum and course book. The teacher employed both peer-assessment and self-assessment strategies to monitor learners' performance. The researcher intended to see the classroom practices through the eyes of case study teacher and his students. The term 'unstructured interview' has been used interchangeably with the terms, 'informal conversational interview', 'in-depth interview', 'non-standardized interview', and 'ethnographic interview' in the literature (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Punch (1998) defined unstructured interviews as "a way to understand the complex behavior of people without imposing any *a priori* categorization, which might limit the field of inquiry" (cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1).

According to the rationale behind this study and underlying premises of qualitative case studies, no predetermined hypothesis or expectation was set prior to this study. The main benefit of an unstructured interview is its conversational and informal nature,

which enables the interviewer to be highly responsive to variety of individual differences and situational changes (Patton, 2002; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The interview time were set weekly during which the case study teacher and the researcher talked about classroom practices of the previous week. The aim was to evaluate what had happened in the classroom over the previous week and to gain a clear understanding of teachers' practices and students' responses to them. The questions asked during the interview and the sequence of questions were mainly based on what Kvale (1996) has suggested to be included in unstructured interviews (Inozu, 2011; Kavale, 1996):

1. Introducing questions, such as "How was your experience as a teacher last week?"
2. Follow-up questions, such as "what do you exactly mean by that?"
3. Probing questions, such as "How do you consider it to be successful?"
4. Specifying questions, such as "What was your response to your students' statements?"
5. Direct questions, such as "Do you see your teaching methodology working?"
6. Indirect questions, such as "What are your students' reactions? Are your reactions similar?"
7. Structuring questions, such as "let's stop talking about this and move on."
8. Interpreting questions, such as "How do you interpret the way your students see you as their teacher?"
9. Silence signaling for "giving time to the interviewee to reflect more".

A total of 18 unstructured interviews were conducted in a very friendly and cozy atmosphere. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews mainly included explanations, reports, comments, and discussions about the classroom practices, experiences and whatever the case study teacher recounted as students' reactions and responses to classroom proceedings. After paving the way for asking the main target questions, the researcher and the case study teacher discussed various classroom experiences. The theme for each discussion varied time to time based on what the case study teacher verbalized as the classroom experiences of previous week. For example, in the interview conducted on eighth week, the case study teacher was very content with the classroom observations:

The researcher: What mostly makes you gratified?' (probing question),

The teacher: Presenting critical thinking practices has really motivated my pupils.

The researcher: How did you find that?'(follow-up question).

The teacher replied: Students are very active during the class time and they do all their homework orderly.

During the interviews, the researcher took detailed notes and read them soon after the end of each interview. For avoiding misinterpretation of any point, during each

interview, the researcher regressed back and repeated his question or appealed for more clarification whenever he felt a misunderstanding might have happened. The data obtained from each interview were put in a pool to be analyzed later.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis (TCA) was used for descriptive presentation of the transcripts obtained from the unstructured interviews. Themes are repeated patterns across data sets and are closely related to a specific research question (Braun, 2006). In doing a thematic analysis, a researcher attempts to identify a few number of themes which informatively reflect the underlying patterns of textual content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TCA is the most basic type of qualitative analytic procedures because it informs all the other qualitative methods in some way (Anderson, 1997). The researcher used the stages provided by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) as the framework for data analysis. First, the interview transcripts were gone through deeply for getting a universal understanding of the textual content.

The second stage concerns with the determining of the thematic framework. Rather than clustering the data into predetermined groups, content coding was implemented. To wit, the data were coded based on recurring patterns with reference to issues such as learner behaviors, affective domain of learners, usefulness and practicality of exercises and practices prescribed by the teacher, students' perception of learning activities, learner reactions to classroom practices, teacher reflection and teacher evaluation as identified in interview transcripts. To help improve the credibility and validity of research findings, the technique of member check or informant feedback was used. Member check simply means submitting research data to respondents for verification and can be conducted after the data have been gathered or during data gathering process (Bryman, 2008; Doyle, 2007). Accordingly, the findings of the study were relayed to the case study teacher to see whether the researcher had interpreted and construed the materials properly.

### **RESULTS**

After the initial analysis of interview transcripts, two recurring themes were identified namely, case study teacher's affective response to inclusion of "critical thinking skills" into the syllabus (first theme), and students' responses to inclusion of "critical thinking skills" into the syllabus (second theme). At a later stage, several subthemes were recognized and added for analysis in great details. Table 1 presents the theme number 1 and its subthemes along with examples.

In general, as the data show, the case study teacher has negative feelings towards the inclusion of critical thinking skills exercises into the syllabus. Initially, he expressed satisfaction with the new proceedings; however, gradually, he found himself under pressure. It should be noted that his new responsibilities were different from his previous roles as a traditional instructor: he was not the full authority in the classroom,

he had to be involved in more “reflective teaching” practices, he had to spend more time preparing the classroom materials and he had to allocate more time for reflection on classroom practices out of the class. It is interesting that despite the fact that students started to take more responsibility for their own learning and part of teacher’s duties were shifted onto pupils, the case study teacher complained about his work pressure and preferred regression to his previous roles. This contradiction may be justified from two different perspectives: novelty of new roles and more cognitive demands.

**Table 1.** Teacher’s reactions to inclusion of critical thinking skills into the syllabus

Teacher’s impression of optimality of “critical thinking exercises”	Teacher’s impression of his new roles
Week 6: “ Not only have these exercises motivated me more, but also my students seem to be more active and dedicated”	Week 2: “I guess this semester my roles are not going to change much”
Week 12: “ I am stressed because perhaps I am lagging behind the syllabus aims and objectives”	Week 8: “ I really do not know what I am doing and why I am doing that in the classroom”
Week 18: “I will not anymore direct my pedagogical practices toward more continuous assessment and inclusion of Critical Thinking Exercises”	Week 14: “ I feel more comfortable when I have the traditional role; I’d like to be the authority in the classroom”
	Week 17: “Sometimes I think because of this syllable I went under much pressure for nothing”

First, the case study teacher had been teaching English several years taking the traditional role, so the total “newness” of his responsibilities in this syllabus may be a decisive factor affecting his final judgment about his experience as a more reflective teacher trying to enhance critical skills of his students. Second, the new syllabus required more cognitive demands on the part of teacher as he had to be more reflective on his own practices in addition to students’ practices. Table 2 indicates the second theme and some related excerpts taken from the pool of data as examples.

In stark contrast to the case study teacher’s feelings towards inclusion of critical thinking skills into the syllabus, learners seemed to be more content with the new type of exercises. The learners found new exercises to be more challenging and difficult; however, they liked them because of their puzzle-like nature. Students also tended to be cooperative with each other and the teacher. A very important finding is the improvement of learners’ performance on reading comprehension tasks which has been reiterated many times by the case study teacher during the interviews. From the point that students do their exercises more carefully and on a more regular basis, it can be concluded that whenever learners are interested in a type of activity, they devote more time and energy on them. Therefore, in any type of syllabus, it is worth trying to find learners’ interests along with their needs for inclusion of practice tasks (Emmer, Everton, & Anderson, 1980). The performance of learners on reading comprehension tasks was found to improve. Readers normally test their thoughts against the ideas of



author of the text when they aim to draw conclusions; if they read critically, they are able to compare what they know to what the author has expressed, so this is the high level of critical thinking ability which enables readers to draw logical conclusions.

**Table 2.** Students' responses to inclusion of critical thinking skills into the syllabus

<b>Learners' feelings towards teacher's new roles</b>	<b>Learners' feelings towards new classroom practices</b>	<b>Caliber of learners' classroom performance</b>
Week 7: " they ask more questions about classroom activities and they seem to be on a more friendly basis with me"	Week 13: " although some of learners did not like critical thinking skills exercise, the majority welcomed new exercises and found it to be fun"	Week 4: " learners are more cooperative with each other and they exchange information between themselves more frequently"
Week 16: "They write positive comments on their assignment papers. One of them says he has found new exercises to be more challenging and time-consuming; however, he likes doing them"	Week 18: "as a whole, they have positive feelings towards the new curriculum. In their journals, most of them express their satisfaction; especially they hail the puzzle-like nature of exercises. They saw usual classroom language practices boring"	Week 15: "their reading comprehension skills have improved as the peer-assessments show" Week 18: "They do their grammar exercises more carefully; they also do their exercises more orderly"

Summary of results of this study can be recapitulated as follows:

A) Teacher's responses to inclusion of critical thinking skills exercises into the Syllabus:

- More cognitive demands expected from the teacher
- Teacher's lack of experiences in handling the new syllabus made him distraught

B) Learners' responses to inclusion of critical thinking exercises into the syllabus:

- Learners' motivation and classroom participation enhanced
- Learners demonstrated better performance on reading comprehension tasks

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed at examining the potential changes which might occur after inclusion of exercise concerned with critical thinking skills during two successive academic semesters. The target group of the study comprised of 80 pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners of English in Tehran, Iran. It cannot be claimed that the results drawn from the pool of transcripts data are completely objective; however, plenty of effort have been made to ensure the validity of analysis.

Although some students expressed negative attitudes toward the new activities, the majority of learners' response to the inclusion of critical thinking exercises was totally

positive. The performance of learners improved in general. They tended to be more 'engaged' in classroom activities. Specifically, the reading comprehension ability of learners was observed to have been progressed. This finding is in line with what Hosseini, Bakhshipour, Sarfallah, and Dolatabadi (2012) have found: there is a positive relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. Moreover, the improvement in terms of learner skills is supported by Azizi (2012), Birjandi and Alizadeh (2013), Fahim and Ahmadi (2012), Fahim and Mirzaiee (2013), Fahim and Sa'edpour (2011), Fahim, Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010), Mall-Amiri and Ahmadi (2014).

Inozu (2011) investigated an EFL classroom in which the teacher tried to develop more autonomous learners. He found that learners showed negative attitudes towards the new syllabus. He further justifies this by claiming that, because Turkey is a developing country and in the educational system of developing countries teachers spoon-feed learners, students in his case study expressed negative reactions towards accepting the role of more autonomous learners. Therefore, the results of this study do not agree with Inozu's findings because in this study, too, learners were required to be more autonomous, though indirectly. The results of these two studies are compared due to the similarities of the setting and context of these two studies and considering the fact that Iran is a developing country too.

Bearing in mind the fact that the teacher frequently complained about his lack of time in adapting himself with the new classroom proceedings, the teachers' negative response can be prevented by training teachers with more time-management skills in teacher training programs. Teacher training programs also, must train teachers familiar with the latest trends and developments in the area of language teaching and practice. Considering this, the traditional student-teacher relationship in the educational system of developing countries must be put aside. In these kind of educational systems, most of education bulk is on teachers' shoulders as the pupils are the passive recipients of knowledge imparted by teachers. Although the responsibility of teachers is heavier in traditional education system, optimality of learning is not proportionate to teachers' efforts.

It has been shown that quality of learning increases as learners become more autonomous and more engaged in discovery learning (Bruner, 1961; Dean & Kuhn, 2006; Dunbar, 1993; Mandarin & Preckel, 2009; Saab, van Joolingen, W., & van Hout-Wolters, 2005). Given the result of this study, inclusion of critical thinking exercises into an EFL class should be taken into account cautiously as teachers should be fully aware of the nature and objectives of each exercise or task presented in the classroom. Teaching practitioners may also benefit a lot from the learner engagement in critical thinking tasks. Assessment in language, in being inherently subordinate to language teaching practice, can be informed of critical thinking as language learning and assessment construct.

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation is the process of data gathering which was only limited to use of teacher's recount of classroom proceedings. Neither classroom observation nor interviews with students were conducted. The second limitation concerns the issue of co-educationality. Even though students were of both genders, each class was a same-sex class including only male or female learners.

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