



CRITICAL THINKING AS A 21st CENTURY SKILL: CONCEPTIONS, IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the conceptions, implementation and challenges of critical thinking in the FL classroom. 24 Libyan EFL university instructors participated in this study though completing an open-ended questionnaire sent via FB messenger. The content analysis applied to the participants' answers revealed different conceptions and misconceptions of critical thinking. It also revealed that the majority of the participants implemented critical thinking in different aspects of their teaching. Some social, cultural and administrative barriers limited the effectiveness of this implementation. Nevertheless, the development of this kind of thinking for 21st century EFL learners is a necessity, not an option.

Keywords: critical thinking, conceptions, barriers

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed significant changes in all aspects of life, including education. 21st school students should develop different skills from those developed by students in the last century. 21st schools and universities as well should prepare students for a different social life, a different economic world and a more demanding and skills-oriented workplace. It is the century of digital literacies, technological advances, multicultural societies, human mobility, global communication, social networking, innovations and creativity and inclusiveness. In other words, 21st century students need to develop the necessary 21st century skills. Like other countries, Libya aims to develop its education in all aspects of methods of teaching, learning materials and assessment strategies for all subjects in order to prepare its citizens for living effectively in the changing globe. This study therefore aims to investigate some Libyan EFL university instructors' conceptions and implementation of 'Critical Thinking' as a

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21st century skill and to explore their views about the challenges they encounter in this process. This investigation was conducted through answering these questions:

- What are the Libyan EFL university instructors' conceptions of critical thinking?
- What are the challenges these instructors encounter in integrating critical thinking in their teaching?

2. 21st Century Skills

The recent literature on education reforms and curriculum development focuses on the demand for 21st century skills and their integration and implications in classrooms (Savu et al. 2014; Cox, 2014; Boholano, 2017). Accordingly, the concept of 21st century skills has become very popular in this literature recently (Robinson & Kay, 2010; Fandiño, 2013; Savu et al. 2014; Cox, 2014; Boholano, 2017). However, there is a lack of consensus about what it really means and what skills it exactly refers to. There is an obvious overlap between this concept with other labels such as transferable skills and soft skills (Cox, 2014). For example, these skills were defined in Malaysian 21st century skills instrument (M-21CSI) as five distinctive elements: i) Digital age literacy; ii) Inventive thinking; iii) Effective communication; iv) High productivity; and iv) Spiritual value (Soh, et al. 2012). Nevertheless, there seems to be an agreement about describing 'critical thinking', 'communication', 'creativity', and 'collaboration' as 21st century skills (Walser, 2008; Nadire, 2009; Black, 2009; Bashir, 2013; Mathis, 2013; Bialik & Fadel, 2015; Uehara, 2016).

P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning is the most widely cited document in the writings about the 21st century skills. This popularity reflects the fact that this framework has been carefully designed to offer clear guidelines for implementing these skills this document was first introduced in 2002 as a conclusion of input received from teachers, education experts, and business leaders in USA. It clearly describes the skills, knowledge and expertise 21st century students should possess in order to succeed in job market and life. It also outlines the support needed for leading the reform towards this end (P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2007; Wilson, et al., 2000). This framework therefore represents the main reference for this paper.

3. Critical Thinking

The concept of critical thinking applies to all sorts of knowledge and implies the true engagement of learners in the process of knowledge construction through reflecting and thinking deeply. Curiosity and questioning are necessary characteristics of those who think critically as they always try to find answers for the questions they raise. The term appeared in the literature in the mid-twentieth century through critical philosophy (Rezaei, et al. 2011) with the notion of looking for evidence to support claims or beliefs (Hughes, 2014). Brown and Keeley (2007:2) defined critical thinking in terms of a set of qualities and abilities including: *"1. awareness of a set of interrelated critical questions; 2. ability to ask and answer critical questions at appropriate times; and the; 3. desire to actively use*

the critical questions". Throughout this paper, the concept of critical thinking will be defined according to these characteristics. More recently, Hughes (2014:2) outlined the main ideas implied in the definitions of critical thinking of more than 100 English language teachers in a recent online webinar. These ideas implied: questions raising, questioning views, ideas and research results, evaluating information, analyzing and selecting materials, reflective reasoning, formulating and defending opinions, encouraging learner autonomy and independent learning, making sound decisions, problem solving and identifying subjective views (of their own and of others) and weaknesses and strengths.

3.1 Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom

The literature provides a strong evidence for the successful integration of critical thinking in EFL classroom instructions and for realizing language learners' criticality and language competence. EFL learners were found making associations and interpretations through using background knowledge and some "*traces of nascent criticality*" (Pineda-Báez, 2009:58). In this regard, Brown and Keeley (2007) recommended training students to ask the right questions in order to develop their ability to react critically to written essays, websites, claims and arguments. This will also promote their abilities for to judging the quality of lectures and lessons, forming their own arguments, writing critical essays and participating in class. Florea and Hurjui (2014) proposed some active-participative methods and techniques for working in small groups to develop critical thinking. Rezaei, et al. (2011) believed in the value of debates, media analyses, problem solving tasks and self and peer assessment for promoting students' critical thinking and highlighted the benefits of encouraging students to raise questions for the same purpose. Kim and Pollard (2017) recommended teachers to act as facilitators to create a critical thinking atmosphere. Similarly, Hughes (2014) outlined some interesting activities for promoting critical thinking in the language classroom including: 1) developing a critical mind set; 2) opinion and reason generator; 3) critical questioning; 4) recognizing context; 5) making connections between topics; 6) evaluating the reliability of sources; 7) stance; 8) identifying main arguments and supporting evidence; 9) fact or opinion; 10) vague or accurate; 11) where is it from?; 12) reading between the lines; 13) false conclusions; 14) writing headlines; 15) find the expression; 16) predicting the content of the text; 17) practicing the language for expressing critical thinking; 18) a for-and-against essay; 19) preparing a group discussion; 20) assessing presentation (for learning the procedures of these activities, see Hughes, 2014,8-26). In performing all these activities in classrooms, the instructors have to modeling critical thinking as this gives students not only a model, but also scaffolding and helps in building trust between instructors and students (Brookfield, 1997).

4. Challenges of Implementing Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom

Introducing innovations into educational contexts is often faced by resistance and challenges. Portelli (1994) referred to the misunderstanding of the conception and the difficulty of promoting in actual teaching. Some teachers' conservative educational ideology with traditional attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning is another serious challenge. This ideology shapes these teachers' teacher-centred approaches of teaching which do not promote critical thinking. The classes of these teachers tend to be strictly controlled and do not offer any opportunities for independent learning or inquiry-based learning. This can make the process of leading these teachers to change their attitudes and beliefs to align with progressive ideas about language teaching and learning very challenging. This is connected with the third challenge of "the soft liberal position" and the risks associate with it regarding the amount of freedom to be given to learners in their critical thinking and decision-making. The principal of critical thinking philosophy is not to limit, influence or interfere with learners' freedom to question and criticize. Any correction or intervention of the teacher with students' choices or decisions will be considered as imposition of his/her views on them and as a violation of critical thinking principles. Another challenge is related to "critical and feminist pedagogy" in terms of limiting critical thinking influence on performing the desired actions. Encouraging a detachment between the agent and the action and the researcher with the object of investigation is a fundamental feature of critical thinking pedagogy. This perspective argues that critical thinking is not a subject of teaching and that learners can become critical thinkers through their experiences in life. Therefore, creating an inquiry-based learning environment in classrooms and offering learners' sufficient opportunities for practicing this thinking represents a main task for language teachers. Moreover, teaching for critical thinking is not a risk-free endeavor as it implies democracy which may involve embarrassment for teachers, students, parents or head teachers. Recently, Qing (2013) investigated the challenges that faced promoting critical thinking among Chinese college students and suggested some strategies for overcoming these challenges. Most of the challenges were related to the different roles of instructors and students. The findings of Kim and Pollard (2017) also reported students' resistance to this paradigm and the activities associated with it such as group work. By the same token, Aliakbaria and Sadeghdaghighib (2013) explored the views of 100 EFL Iranian educators about the barriers to critical thinking implementation and found students' attitudes and expectations, self-efficacy constraint and teachers' lake of critical thinking as major obstacles. Brookfield (1997) highlighted the importance of surrounding the learner with those who practice critical thinking as this can lead him to develop similar attitudes and practices. Koosha and Yakhabi (2013) considered this factor as responsible for the failure in implementing CLT in FL contexts.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach of investigation. 23 Libyan EFL university instructors working in different universities across the country (Sabratha, Zawia, Tripoli, Marghab, Al-Asmariaya, Bengazi) were involved in this study through answering four open-ended questions sent to them via Facebook messenger. They were selected as colleagues of the researcher and this encouraged them to willingly participate and to write full answers. The questions were: *a) what does 'critical thinking mean to you?; b) Have you integrated critical thinking in any aspect of your teaching (method, materials, assessment)? If yes, please write some examples of this integration. c) what are the challenges of implementing critical thinking in your classroom? d) what are the effective strategies for promoting critical thinking in language classrooms?* The thematic method was applied for analyzing the participants' responses as this method has been found useful, comprehensive and flexible for analyzing qualitative data (Ibrahim, 2012). The identified themes were grouped in four distinctive categories and discussed accordingly.

6. Results

Q1. What does 'critical thinking' mean to you?

The participants reported different definitions of critical thinking. Some of these definitions implied relevant principles of critical thinking whereas some others reflected a lack of understanding of this concept. Below are some of the participants' definitions of critical thinking:

- *It means thinking twice, thinking out of the box and reflecting on what to do and knowing how to do it.*
- *It means asking, analyzing, participating and giving feedback*
- *Critical thinking is to let the learner/student know about their mistakes and weaknesses. Instead of only marking the mistakes, the instructor can make that in the form of questions that may help the learner/student find an alternative for their wrong answer.*
- *It is helpful to teach them think of the dimensions of making correct answers. Knowledge is about HOW and WHY things are so and so, not about HOW MUCH the student/learner has in his/her memory.*
- *Students have to be makers of knowledge, not only users. No need for making more copies of old products.*
- *Critical thinking is a way of changing and solving learning problems. It is a strategy of thinking about thinking that improves student work in order to be of good quality by making judgments, applying assessment forms and dealing with knowledge constructions.*
- *to think clearly and rationally.*

- *the thinker (the student) analyzes the knowledge or data and makes his own idea about the knowledgeThus students will acquire new knowledge that enables them to analyze, criticize independently.*
- *it means developing students' ability to think deeply while processing new information*
- *critical thinking is a new concept for me.*
- *it is not related to language teaching and learning. It is about psychology.*

Q2. Have you integrated critical thinking in any aspect of your teaching (method, materials, assessment)? If yes, please write some examples of this integration.

Seventeen of the participants answered 'yes' about implementing critical thinking in their teaching and they reported different aspects of this implementation. The following statements explain some of these aspects:

- *I develop critical thinking through using two main wh-words namely "why" and "how". Such questions always urge my students to think twice between the lines.*
- *Concerning materials, I usually consider my students' background knowledge and use it as a starting point for my lectures.*
- *I use critical thinking when I teach courses such as teaching methodology, language testing, instructional strategies and speaking and listening*
- *I raise some controversial questions to create discussions*
- *I sometimes use assessment to motivate my students to encourage to participate.*
- *I use wh- question words and I insist on applying what is being learned rather than just restating what is represented.*
- *In teaching Translation courses, the students have to know why their translations could be wrong and what if some words are replaced with others.*
- *In writing courses, the compositions produced by students can be raised and checked with critical feedback.*
- *I encourage students to give opinions and make careful judgments about the good and bad written assignments.*
- *In reading, I always ask the students to read and think critically to reflect on what they read.*

The other six instructors did not integrate critical thinking in their teaching. Two of them believed that this concept is not relevant to language teaching and learning. One of them wrote: *"I did not implement critical thinking because I think it is not related to language teaching and learning. I always focus on developing students' communication skills in English which is the main goal of their learning"*.

Another instructor added: *"I myself do not have the ability to think critically and therefore it is not easy for me to integrate it in my teaching. I think neither the teachers nor the students are ready for this kind of teaching and learning"*.

Q3. What are the challenges of teaching critical thinking in your classroom?

The challenges reported by the participants were mostly context-based and related to students, instructors, school and home. Below are some examples of their responses:

- *student's inability to cope with this kind of thinking.*
- *students' inefficiency or awareness about critical thinking different issues.*
- *lack of sufficient time.*
- *difficulty of measurement.*
- *lack of effective communication.*
- *lack of problem-solving skills.*
- *home: home environment does not helpful for creating good thinkers.*
- *lack of facilities that help in implementing learning activities for promoting critical thinking in language classrooms.*

Q4. What are the effective strategies for promoting critical thinking in language classrooms?

The participants emphasized some teaching techniques and strategies that can help in promoting students' critical thinking. They suggested the following:

- *urging students to look for reasons, implied messages, and possible application for what is being learned.*
- *promoting team work.*
- *less direct questions. More critical, indirect and deep questions.*
- *brainstorming for solving problems or to creating good ideas.*
- *giving enough time for implementing critical thinking.*
- *more comparison and contrast tasks to develop critical thinking.*

7. Discussion

Integrating critical thinking in teaching English in Libyan universities represents a challenging task for instructors and its development seems to be a far-reaching goal for students. There are different factors intertwined to complicate the integration of this 21st century skill. Although most of the participant instructors reported different experiences about their implementation of this skill in their teaching, they all agree about the existence of serious challenges that hinder this implementation. Previous research also confirmed this result (Qing, 2013; Aliakbaria & Sadeghdaghighib, 2013; Kim & Pollard, 2017).

Seventeen of the participants' definitions of critical thinking reflect their different understandings of this concept. Believing that actions and behaviors are constructed according to conceptions and understanding (Kennedy, 2010; Ur, 2012), these instructors' implementation of critical thinking should vary from one classroom to another. This variation was reflected in their reference to the aspects of teaching in which they integrated critical thinking. These participants shared the belief about the possibility of integrating this kind of thinking in teaching all language skills. This finding has been confirmed by the results of similar studies conducted in other FL contexts (Savu, et al. 2014; Cox, 2014; Fandiño, 2013; Kanokpermpoo, 2012; Uehara, 2016; Black, 2009; Khatib et al., 2012).

Regarding the fundamental principles of critical thinking, most of the participants implied these principles in their definitions. Relevant notions such as reflection, problem-solving, raising questions, constructive learning, thinking about thinking, decision-making, self-assessment, rationality and ideas generation were either clearly stated or implied in the participants' definitions. The same principles were emphasized in the definitions of this concept in the literature (Brown & Keeley, 2007; Rezaei, et al. 2011; Hughes, 2014; Kim & Pollard, 2017). However, misconception of this notion was noted in the definitions provided by six instructors. These instructors admitted their lack of understanding of this concept and they questioned its relevance and usefulness for language teaching and learning. They believed that EFL instructors should focus more on developing students' communication skills which represents the main goal of language learning. Similar misconceptions were also identified among the participant university instructors of Marin and Pava (2017).

The integration of critical thinking in language teaching and learning can be manifested in different aspects including methods of instruction, learning materials and assessment strategies. The participants reported examples of their implementation of critical thinking in teaching reading, writing and grammar. Encouraging students to question all information they read was emphasized by the instructors. Critical thinking-promoted activities such as problem solving, group discussion, self and peer reflection were also reported as common practices by seventeen of the participants. Many researchers consider the language classroom as an appropriate context for introducing and implementing critical thinking (Savu, et al., 2014; Cox, 2014; Fandiño, 2013; Kanokpermpoo, 2012; Uehara, 2016; Black, 2009; Khatib et al., 2012). Rezanejad (2014) and Hughes (2014) urged language teachers to integrate this kind of thinking in their teaching and emphasized the need for developing language materials that offer the opportunity for engaging students in tasks and activities that require deep thinking and reflection. The EFL university instructors in Libya enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy as they are always the decision-makers about managing the teaching/learning process. This offers them the chance for choosing their approaches of instructions, learning materials and assessment strategies which provides good conditions for integrating critical thinking. They still need to implement more tasks and activities that challenge students' cognitive abilities in order to engage them in deep thinking. For example, project activities have been reported as useful for enhancing critical thinking by 220 teachers who participated in a study conducted by (Papak, et al. 2017) in Croatia.

However, the instructors still need to promote their understanding of critical thinking as a cognitive activity and to develop their skills about its effective enhancement among students. It was not a sudden that six instructors of the participants clearly expressed their unfamiliarity with this concept and considered it as irrelevant to language teaching and learning. The negative attitudes of these instructors towards critical thinking will not encourage them to integrate it in their teaching as happened with the participant teachers in the study of Shahrehabaki and Notash (2015).

Therefore, the universities should offer their instructors training courses and workshops about the appropriate integration of critical thinking in language education. It is also important to focus on promoting the instructors' positive attitudes towards this notion. The training framework which was developed by Duron, et al. (2006) covers the most important areas for developing this kind of thinking among the instructors. This makes it a good choice for any training programme aiming at the development of critical thinking.

There are serious challenges and barriers to the implementation of critical thinking in language teaching and learning. All the participants emphasized this issue and reported about their own experiences with some of these challenges. They attributed these challenges to different reasons including home, school, student and teacher.

All the participants believed that Libyan EFL university students are not ready for this kind of thinking and that it will not be easy for them to develop it. They attributed this issue to parents' treatment of their children at home which is based on the fixed principle of 'listen' and 'obey'. Culturally and socially, it is not acceptable for children to question their parents' opinions or decisions or to be engaged in discussions or in solving problems. The negative influence of this factor on implementing innovations in ELT was also reported by (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2013). This negative attitude of the instructors may be related to the democracy element involved in critical thinking as explained by (Portelli, 1994). The majority of the participants reported insufficiency of time as a serious barrier to implementing critical thinking. Although the literature did not refer to time as a barrier for implementing this kind of thinking, the reason for the instructors' consideration of time as a challenge could be explained by referring to the impact of examinations on their teaching. Examination-based teaching puts these instructors under the pressure of the need for covering a pre-determined set of topics in a given number of lectures. Accordingly, the participants referred to the traditional approaches of assessment as another barrier. The same conclusion was reached by Orafi and Borg (2009) and by Shihbah (2011) from the same context. Regarding the assessment of critical thinking, the literature does not provide clear guidelines or effective strategies for this process. Based on his belief that critical thinking is a socially constructed process and contextual in nature, Brookfield (1997) challenged the use of standardized tests for assessing critical thinking and offered locally grounded strategies. Stein, et al. (2003) shared the same belief and suggested an assessment tool and a product for assessing critical thinking skills. Contextually and culturally speaking, assessing critical thinking seems to be a very challenging task for the instructors in Libyan universities. If they are interested in applying this strategy, they need to consider the social and cultural factors before the educational ones.

The participants with these attitudes towards the integration of critical thinking reported some techniques, strategies and activities which helped them in implementing critical thinking in language teaching and learning. Their belief about the usefulness of these techniques, strategies and activities has been based on their own classroom

successful experiences. They suggested encouraging students to look for reasons, to raise questions and to analyze information as effective strategies for enhancing critical thinking. Involving students' in reflecting on their own works and on the works of their peers is another technique reported by the participants. Engaging students in group and project works could also have a positive impact on developing students' critical thinking. The belief about the effectiveness of these techniques and strategies was also shared by (Keeley, 2007; Rezaei, et al. 2011; Huges, 2014; Florea & Hurjui, 2014; Kim & Pollard, 2017). As mentioned earlier about the extent of autonomy and freedom Libyan university instructors enjoy in choosing their methods of instructions and teaching materials, they have the opportunity to apply these strategies, techniques and activities in their teaching for critical thinking. This teacher autonomy can foster learner a autonomy which is a requirement for developing critical thinking (Ok, 2016).

Six of the participants expressed their negative attitudes towards integrating critical thinking in language teaching and learning. This negative attitude did not encourage them to use any strategies or techniques that foster critical thinking or to adapt learning materials that contain activities or tasks which require true engagement of students in solving problems or debating arguments. The relationship between attitudes and actions was strongly emphasized by many researchers (Ajzen, 2005; Azizinezhad, et al., 2013; Shahrehabaki & Notash, 2015). These participants' negative attitudes could be explained by referring to the challenges, they considered as serious barriers to the implementation of critical thinking in language teaching and learning in the Libyan context. Having such negative attitudes, the instructors are not expected to implement critical thinking in their teaching. Therefore, it is very important to start by changing the instructors' attitudes before introducing this concept into schools and universities in Libya and similar FL contexts.

7.1 Useful Implications

The findings of this study have useful implications for promoting EFL learners' critical thinking. Reading this paper can enhance EFL instructors' awareness about the importance of developing this kind of thinking among their students and they can also learn about the strategies and activities they can implement to achieve this goal. Policy makers and course designers can understand their role in this process and identify the kind of support they should offer for universities and instructors.

7.2 Limitations

Adopting a qualitative approach of investigation with a small sample represents an obvious limitation for this study which does not allow for generalizing its results. Despite the useful insights brought by the findings of this study, a better understanding of this issue can be achieved through involving a larger number of instructors through a survey questionnaire. Moreover, there is a need for exploring Libyan EFL university students' conceptions of critical thinking for better understanding of this phenomenon.

8. Conclusion

English language classrooms represent an appropriate context for implementing critical thinking. EFL teachers can integrate it in different aspects of teaching and learning including methods of instructions, strategies of assessment and learning materials. The ideal method for fostering this kind of thinking among students is through providing them with a model of critical thinker instructor and engaging them in tasks and activities that involve analysis, synthesis, reflection and solving problems. However, there are certain social, cultural and administrative barriers which hinder the implementation of critical thinking in English language teaching and learning in FL contexts including Libya. Nevertheless, as a 21st century skill, critical thinking becomes a necessity for 21st century EFL learners, not an option. Providing an appropriate atmosphere for developing this skill is a multidisciplinary process and requires cooperation and mutual understanding among all those who are involved in the teaching/learning process.

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