



Iranian EFL Academics' and PhD Candidates' Perceptions toward the Infusion of Critical Thinking into EFL Curriculum

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Abstract

Critical thinking (CT) abilities have failed to receive the necessary consideration in applied linguistics. Thus, this study was intended to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academics and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidates' perceptions of embedding CT into the EFL curricula in Iran. Moreover, it aimed to identify the primary obstacles teachers may have while employing CT skills, and suggest some necessary strategies to strengthen students' CT abilities. To do so, a total of 50 male and female EFL academics as well as 50 male and female PhD candidates specializing in Applied Linguistics, Linguistics and Literature, as well as Translation at different universities in Iran participated in this study. The present investigation employed a mixed-methods design. To this end, an adapted version of Stapleton's (2011) CT questionnaire was used. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a cohort of 5 EFL academics and 5 PhD candidates. The outcomes underscore the need for educational policymakers and curriculum developers to recognize the significance of CT in language learning and to infuse more systematic and explicit approaches to teaching CT in Iranian EFL context. The pedagogical implications of the study were accordingly discussed.

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Introduction

The age of technology reveals novel challenges on a daily basis, necessitating the exploration of innovative methods in order to attain effective pedagogy. These evolving circumstances drive the educational system to foster Critical Thinking (CT) as a higher-order cognitive skill (Heydarnejad, Fatemi, & Ghonsooly, 2021). The notion of critical thinking was originally introduced by Socrates more than two millennia ago; however, it is widely acknowledged that modern critical thinking tradition was established by the American philosopher, John Dewey (1909, cited in Fisher, 2001). Dewey (1933) elucidated CT as a form of reflective thinking that involves considering an opinion actively and persistently. D'Alessio, Avolio, and Charles (2019) declare that enhancing CT skills is a crucial component of the educational process, which has been the objective of numerous educators, given the belief in its potential to improve academic achievement.

Critical thinking is widely regarded as a fundamental skill and a crucial determinant of an individual's accomplishments in the contemporary era (Luk & Lin 2015; Van, Li, & Wan, 2022). Instructing critical thinking is a central aspect of higher education as it aligns with one of the primary objectives of higher education, which is to cultivate the learners' critical thinking abilities (Wilson, 2016). As Bezanilla, Fernández-Nogueira, Poblete, and Galindo-Domnguez (2019) state, critical thinking is a skill that is increasingly demanded from learners in both their personal and professional lives. As a result, universities have a responsibility to prioritize its integration into their curriculum and courses. Moreover, innovative teaching methods must be optimized to foster its cultivation. Nevertheless, there has been a dearth of scholarly investigations pertaining to efficacious techniques for enhancing the critical thinking capabilities of undergraduate and postgraduate learners (Harrell & Wetzel, 2015; Zhang & Yuan, 2022). Additionally, the advancement of empirical investigation has not maintained a commensurate speed with regards to exploring the implementation of CT, wherein certain inquiries remain incompletely addressed. For example, there exists a documented insufficiency of scholarly exploration pertaining to the EFL teachers' genuine comprehension of the term, as well as the efficacy with which it is being instructed within the university context (Huber & Kuncel, 2016). In addition, the inclusion of critical thinking in EFL teaching necessitates a thorough understanding of the EFL educators' perspectives (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, this study attempts to explore the Iranian EFL university instructors' and PhD students' perspectives regarding the incorporation of CT into the EFL program.

1. Literature Review

Critical thinking is an essential element of instruction as well as learning across various fields of study in higher education (Golden, 2023). Smith (2003) refers to CT as a kind of high-level thinking. Simply put, CT enables students to go beyond their own perspectives and engage in a thorough analysis of the data (Celuch, Black, & Warthan, 2009). According to Bandyopadhyay and Szostek (2019), critical thinkers are capable of assessing the reliability and accuracy of what they read and hear. In addition, they are open-minded and analytical, that is, they can interpret and analyze information effectively (Bandyopadhyay & Szostek, 2019).

Moon (2007) asserts that the acquisition of CT abilities can be facilitated through explicit instruction and emphasis within educational settings. According to Emir (2009), any educational setting should strive to help the students accomplish higher levels of thinking and become reflective thinkers.

The ability to engage in critical analysis is generally regarded as an indispensable life skill (Galinsky, 2010). Many psychologists and educators believe that it is regarded as one of the most striking thinking abilities that learners should acquire and is one of the major goals of any educational setting (Morra & Camba, 2009). Additionally, teaching CT is complicated for many teachers since a broad array of approaches offered for its instruction (Schmaltz, Jansen, & Wenckowski, 2017). According to Mendelman (2007), due to the prevalence of passive activities including video games, internet, and TV in children's lives, teaching CT skills remains a fundamental practice in the classroom. Therefore, educators need to prioritize the development of CT skills in their teaching practices. They should go beyond content delivery and actively engage students in activities that promote critical analysis, reasoning, and problem-solving. Teachers need to be aware of the various approaches available for teaching CT and select strategies that align with the needs and characteristics of their students. Educators should design learning experiences that challenge students to think critically, evaluate information, and make informed judgments. This can involve activities like debates, case studies, analyzing real-world issues, and fostering open-ended discussions. Correspondingly, the dominant objective of any pedagogy needs to be enhancing learners' critical thinking skills to achieve autonomy and independence (Barzegar & Rahimi, 2012). Likewise, Weiler (2005) emphasizes the significance of CT in the learners' learning and cognitive development. Thus, developing strong CT skills equips learners with the ability to analyze and evaluate information critically, make reasoned decisions, and solve complex problems. These skills are not only valuable for academic success but also for navigating real-life situations and becoming active, informed citizens. Learners can develop their CT skills through exposure to diverse perspectives, opportunities for reflection, and practice in applying critical thinking strategies.

Choy and Cheah (2009) conducted an inquiry to examine the attitudes of thirty university educators from various academic fields in Malaysia regarding the concept of CT and its impact on the realm of higher education. The outcomes demonstrated that even though the teachers perceived themselves to be incorporating CT into their instructional practices, they were, in reality, solely emphasizing the understanding of the course content. In their investigation, Pithers and Soden (2010) conducted a thorough examination of the existing body of literature and delineated the approaches that have the potential to hinder or foster the improvement of CT skills, as well as the requisites for enhancing learners' cognitive abilities. The literature review put forth the notion that certain instructional strategies may impede the cultivation of critical thinking, such as those that incentivize passive thinkers, adhere to a singular instructional approach, and place excessive emphasis on the right answer. In the research conducted by Stapleton (2011), a total of 72 educators at the secondary education level were surveyed regarding their perspectives on the meaning of CT. The findings demonstrated that although teachers possessed certain notions of CT, their comprehension tended to be limited in scope.

Chen (2017) investigated the conceptualization of critical thinking among 46 Chinese college students. The findings of this study suggest that Chinese pupils perceive critical thinking as a complex concept with multiple dimensions. The study highlights the importance of considering the unique characteristics of Chinese students' conceptualizations of critical thinking within the sociocultural context of China. In a similar vein, Winch (2019) investigated the potential similarities or differences between critical thinking and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from various cultural perspectives. The conclusion drawn from this inquiry was that CLT plays a pivotal role in fostering the advancement of learners' CT abilities.

Sadeghi, Adel, Zareian, and Davoudi (2020) conducted an investigation into the attitudes of EFL instructors and students in public, private, and seminary schools regarding the principles of CT, the main attributes of a critical thinker, and strategies for enhancing CT skills. The outcomes unveiled various practical implications for teachers to assist their students in improving CT skills. Additionally, the study highlighted the significance of engaging in deeper thinking, improving problem-solving abilities, enhancing communication and collaboration skills for learners and emphasized the need for curriculum developers and syllabus designers to incorporate CT activities into textbooks and provide support through in-service classes for educators. Furthermore, Zhang, Yuan, and He (2020) employed a survey and subsequent interviews to assess the perspectives of Chinese university EFL teachers regarding critical thinking and its pedagogy. The outcomes divulged that EFL educators within China overwhelmingly concurred that the infusion of CT into the EFL syllabus and classroom teaching is indispensable.

Zhang and Yuan (2022) investigated the methodologies employed by two Chinese university EFL educators to incorporate CT into their reading classrooms. The results revealed that the teachers integrated CT into their reading instruction through the infusion approach, which entails explicitly highlighting CT during the initial phase of their reading courses, while also augmenting students' CT skills and language proficiency through reflective as well as collaborative writing activities utilizing reading journals. Zhang and Yuheng (2023) examined how two Chinese EFL instructors taught CT through the application of lesson study in the university context. The findings brought to light that the utilization of lesson study acted as a catalyst for the improvement of the pedagogical methodologies employed by the teachers in the instruction of critical thinking.

The above-mentioned studies revealed that instructors from diverse disciplines realize the significance of CT; nonetheless, they may still lack a clear understanding of the true essence of critical thinking and how to integrate it into their instructional methods. Additionally, investigations (e.g., Chen, 2017; Choy & Cheah, 2009; Zhang & Yuan, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhang & Yuheng, 2023) have been carried out on university teachers from Malaysia and China, albeit with limited participants and spanning across various academic fields. Studies conducted in these contexts can provide valuable insights that are relevant to the Iranian EFL context. While certain aspects of CT are universal, there can also be variations influenced by cultural and educational factors. Universal aspects of CT include skills such as logical reasoning, analysis, evaluation of information, problem-solving, and decision-making. These skills are essential for individuals regardless of their cultural or educational background.

Studies conducted in different contexts can provide insights into effective instructional strategies, assessment methods, and approaches to foster these universal CT skills. However, it is important to acknowledge that cultural and educational contexts can influence the manifestation and application of CT. Different cultures may have distinct perspectives, values, and ways of thinking that may shape the expression and emphasis of critical thinking skills. Educational contexts also play a role in shaping the teaching and learning of CT. The existing curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment practices in a particular educational system can influence the integration and development of CT skills. Studies conducted in different educational contexts can provide insights into the challenges, strategies, and adaptations needed to effectively incorporate CT into the Iranian EFL context. By examining studies conducted in diverse contexts, educators in the Iranian EFL context can gain a broader perspective on effective CT instruction. They can learn from successful practices and adapt them to suit the Iranian cultural and educational context. Additionally, they can identify specific cultural or contextual factors that may influence the teaching and learning of CT in Iran and develop strategies that address these unique considerations.

However, the role of critical thinking in the university curricula is a rarely touched topic in Iranian EFL context. Thus, studies that touch upon such issue, especially in the Iranian EFL context seem required. It is noteworthy to mention that this paper studies Iranian EFL academics and PhD candidates not previously accounted for in CT literature. Thereby, this inquiry endeavors to tackle the subsequent research queries:

RQ₁: What are Iranian EFL academics' perceptions toward the concept of CT and integrating CT into EFL curriculum?

RQ₂: What are Iranian PhD candidates' perceptions toward the concept of CT and integrating CT into EFL curriculum?

RQ₃: How can teachers reinforce critical thinking in students?

RQ₄: What are the key challenges faced by teachers in promoting and integrating CT skills?

2. Method

2.1 Design of the Study

The present investigation employed a mixed-methods design, a methodology utilized to evaluate both quantitative and qualitative data within a singular study, thereby facilitating researchers to triangulate data and enhance construct validity. Consequently, interviews were administered to university EFL instructors and PhD candidates to identify their perceptions on the integration of CT within the EFL curriculum. Additionally, questionnaires pertaining to CT were employed to collect data in order to achieve the aforementioned objectives.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this investigation were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of a total of 50 male and female EFL academics held positions such as Associate Professors, Assistant Professors, and Lecturers teaching at various Iranian universities. Their selection was carried out through convenience sampling, taking into consideration their willingness and

accessibility. It is also important to note that all of these individuals had successfully completed their PhD degrees in the fields of Applied Linguistics, Linguistics and Literature, as well as Translation. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that their teaching experiences ranged from a minimum of 5 years to a maximum of 30 years. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the age range of these participants fell between 30 to 55 years old. The second group comprised 50 male and female PhD candidates specializing in Applied Linguistics, Linguistics and Literature, as well as Translation at different universities in Iran. Moreover, the study involved candidates from various stages of their PhD program, including those in their first, second, third, and fourth years. The individuals in their second year had successfully completed the mandatory theory-based courses and were currently preparing for their comprehensive exam. The third- and fourth-year learners had already completed the comprehensive examination and were focusing on formulating their research proposal and thesis respectively. Moreover, their teaching experiences ranged from a minimum of 2 years to a maximum of 15 years. In addition, their age range fell between 25 to 45 years old.

2.3 Instruments

To accomplish the expected objectives of the study, the following instruments were utilized in the present research.

2.3.1 Critical Thinking Questionnaires

The questionnaires consisted of three sections, namely an introductory section, a section on demographic characteristics, as well as the main section. Explicit clarification was provided regarding the issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation within the introduction. Subsequently, the participants' features such as gender, age, and teaching experience were explored in the second section. Finally, the third section was adapted from Stapleton's (2011) questionnaire and encompassed eight close-ended items. These items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, extending from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The internal consistency reliability of the EFL academics' and PhD candidates' questionnaires, as indicated by α -Cronbach, was 0.81 and 0.80, respectively. The questionnaires were examined by several EFL professors to ensure their content validity. They also enjoyed convergent validity of .73 and .66, respectively.

2.3.2 The Semi-structured Interviews

semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 EFL academics and 5 PhD candidates. The interview inquiries were adapted from Stapleton's (2011) study. The objective of these interviews was to delve comprehensively into the perspectives of the participants regarding the incorporation of CT into their pedagogical approaches. It is worth mentioning that the interviews were conducted separately for EFL academics and PhD candidates.

2.4 Procedure

The data for the study was collected in two distinct phases, namely, pilot study and the present study. To ensure the reliability of the instruments and to investigate the applicability of the data collection techniques with regards to the time allocated for participants to answer the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted at the onset of the study. The questionnaires were

piloted with a group of English academics and PhD candidates who were representative of the main participants. After ascertaining that the questionnaires possess appropriate attributes for utilization in the investigation, the researchers administered them in this study. The interviews were carried out following the analysis of the data gathered through the questionnaire. The interviews were carried out online through video conference to expedite accessibility to participants from various regions of the country at any given moment. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and the interviewers meticulously took comprehensive notes during the course of the interview. The duration of each interview typically fell within the range of 15 to 30 minutes. Preceding the actual implementation of the interview, the interview questions underwent a comprehensive review process by two specialists, as well as a pilot test involving three academics and three PhD candidates, in order to ascertain the appropriateness of the questions for the research. Subsequently, following the transcription of the recorded interviews, the data underwent manual coding.

2.5 Data Analysis

To address the research of the study, the researchers carried out quantitative data analyses. The researchers examined the items of the questionnaires in terms of their percentages to pinpoint what the participants' perceptions toward integrating critical thinking into the EFL curriculum were. However, the outcomes of the interviews were reported qualitatively to come to a final conclusion. That is, after being transcribed, the interview data were subjected to a deductive analysis. In a deductive analysis, the researchers begin with a set of predetermined categories or themes based on existing theories or prior knowledge. The purpose is to examine the data and determine whether the responses align with these pre-established themes. First, the themes or categories for analysis were predetermined based on the research objectives, existing theories, or prior knowledge. These themes serve as a framework for analyzing the data. The researchers identify relevant themes by reviewing the research questions, objectives, and theoretical frameworks. Once the themes were identified, the researchers go through each question's responses and assign them to the appropriate theme. This process involves reading and understanding the content of each response and relating it to the predetermined themes. After coding the responses to themes, the researchers count the number of responses associated with each theme. This step helps in determining the prevalence of opinions or perspectives within the dataset. Prevailing opinions are determined by examining the themes with the highest frequency or the most common responses. These themes represent the dominant perspectives or prevalent opinions within the dataset.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis for the Research Question 1

With respect to EFL academics' attitudes toward CT, the educators possessed a lucid comprehension of the idea of "critical thinking" (100%) and, as an EFL instructor, they affirmed that teaching CT skills constituted an essential component within the scope of their occupation (80%). Moreover, the teachers declared that they integrate explanations and exercises centered on critical thinking into the majority of their English lessons (73%).

However, they disagreed that critical thinking is generally high among Iranian EFL learners (90%). Most of them disagreed that CT is not required to be included into the ELT programs (97%) and believed that the significance of critical thinking in the English language classrooms is particularly noteworthy (92%). They disagreed with the statement that teaching critical thinking skills to students is not the teacher's responsibility within the classroom context (90%) and they agreed with the statements that it is essential that language instructors receive comprehensive training on the pedagogical strategies for teaching critical thinking skills (100%). In a nutshell, the prevailing sentiment among academics leaned towards a favorable outlook on CT. The outcomes of this study are in line with Sadeghi et al.'s (2020) study and Zhang et al.'s (2020) study which emphasize the significance of CT in language learning and teaching as well as highlight the need for comprehensive training for EFL teachers on CT skills and promote the integration of CT activities into EFL textbooks, syllabus and classroom teaching.

3.2 Quantitative Data Analysis for the Research Question 2

Concerning PhD candidates' perceptions toward CT, the students confirmed that the professors have a well-defined comprehension of the notion of "critical thinking" (90%). Most of them concurred that instructing critical thinking abilities is an absolute necessity within the realm of the EFL academics' professional responsibilities (100%). They deemed academics incorporate elucidations and activities that foster critical thinking into most of their instructional sessions in English (80%). However, they disagreed with the statement that, as a whole, Iranian EFL learners exhibit a commendable aptitude for critical thinking skills (91%). Moreover, they disagreed that instructing critical thinking in the educational setting is not the duty of the professor (85%). Additionally, they disagreed that the infusion of CT in the ELT courses is not a mandatory requirement (100%). Further, they confirmed that additional instruction is required for EFL teachers to instruct critical thinking techniques (98%). They declared that particular emphasis should be placed on CT in English language instructional settings (100%). In summary, the vast majority of the PhD candidates exhibited a favorable disposition towards CT.

3.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

The second set of data is interviews conducted with 5 EFL academics and 5 PhD candidates which form the base line of the qualitative data.

3.3.1 The Meaning of the Notion of CT

Regarding the meaning of the concept of CT, the participants believed that critical thinking was a kind of reflective thinking and a cornerstone of higher-level cognitive thinking in which individuals analyze every point in-depth and they try to find a reason or logic before accepting or rejecting an idea. For instance, two respondents emphasized that:

Critical Thinking is a higher order thinking skill and a prominent concept in Applied Linguistics and its significance is readily apparent in teaching and learning processes since it encourages pupils to have reflection on learning experiences and arrive to conclusion.

Developing reflective thinking is considered to be imperative for achieving academic goals in any discipline since it assists students to analyze how pieces of a whole have interaction with each other. It also encourages learners to do effective reasoning.

The findings are in congruence with the argument made by Golden (2023) that critical thinking is taken into account as a crucial component of teaching and learning in higher education across diverse fields of study. Additionally, according to Kincheloe and Weil (2004), individuals who possess critical thinking skills do not accept anything as given and instead analyze every matter from various viewpoints. Moon (2007) posited that critical thinking necessitates the examination of phenomena from multiple vantage points.

3.3.2 The absence of CT Skills in Iranian EFL Learners

All the academic staff believed that critical thinking skills were lacking in Iranian EFL students since they merely desired to commit the answers from the textbooks to memory. In addition, they believed that linguistic knowledge was the foundation of critical thinking. Below are two extracts from academics' and PhD candidates' interviews:

I think the students are passive receivers of information, and that their minds are overloaded with information. They are similar to compact disks that receive and save information in their minds, and never ask for or criticize the received information. Their mere duty is to retrieve the received information correctly. This is maybe because of their poor language proficiency level that makes them afraid of asking questions or expressing their ideas freely.

The findings suggest that the EFL learners' and instructors' understandings regarding the learning processes occurring in the classroom are markedly dissimilar. Therefore, the way instructors perceive their students affects the teaching and learning processes happening in the classroom (Choy & Cheah, 2009). As Sadeghi et al. (2020) state, critical thinkers are the pupils who attempt to get involved in meaningful learning rather than rote learning. Nonetheless, as Golden (2023) declares, encouraging learners to develop CT skills can be challenging since their previous education may have focused on rote learning. Additionally, inadequate language proficiency makes it difficult for students to think critically in English (Luk, 2012). Language proficiency is closely tied to vocabulary knowledge. A student with limited vocabulary may struggle to find the right words to articulate their thoughts precisely. This can impede critical thinking as they may fail to convey their ideas accurately or struggle to understand complex texts, which are often rich in specialized vocabulary. Without a strong vocabulary foundation, students may find it challenging to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information effectively. Moreover, proficiency in grammar and syntax is crucial for communicating complex ideas and constructing coherent arguments. Inadequate language proficiency can result in grammatical errors, awkward sentence structures, and ambiguity, making it difficult for others to understand the intended meaning. This can hinder critical thinking as it creates a barrier to effective communication and can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of information. Finally, language proficiency affects reading comprehension, which is a fundamental aspect of critical thinking. When students have difficulty understanding written texts in English, their

ability to extract key information, identify main ideas, and evaluate arguments becomes compromised. This limitation can hinder their capacity to engage in critical analysis and draw connections between ideas.

I suppose that education in the Iranian EFL context doesn't pay attention to producing critical thinkers as the students are not exposed to CT from the beginning stages of their education.

This outcome supports Ghanizadeh, Al-Hoorie, and Jahedizadeh's (2020) claim that critical thinking is undoubtedly at the core of education; however, language instruction often fails to give it the credit it deserves. Moreover, students have the capacity to enhance their thinking skills through instruction; therefore, it is imperative for educators to provide them with proper guidance to develop their capabilities (Black, 2005).

3.3.3 Integration of CT into ELT Curriculum

The interviewees indicated that critical thinking should be infused into ELT programs, indicating the conviction that Iranian EFL teachers require substantial training in the application of critical thinking principles.

I feel CT must be taught and incorporated into the educational system to assist students perform well in the class and to produce educated intellectual students with analytical abilities. It is essential that language instructors receive comprehensive training on pedagogical strategies for teaching critical thinking skills.

I think the principles of CT are rarely the center of attention in TTC programs. Teacher trainers prefer EFL instructors to act according to their taste and what is written and dictated in the teacher guides; however, teachers sometimes apply the principles of CT in their classes challenging students in the class.

Moreover, the outcomes indicate that the instruction of critical thinking is necessary to enhance students' academic performance. These findings corroborate the arguments made by Duron, Limbach, and Waugh (2006) and Black (2005) that students must be educated in critical thinking to facilitate their cognitive and educational development. The results reveal that although principals and leaders do not take CT principles seriously, teachers sometimes deviate from the rules and feel the need to act according to their own classes' atmosphere. This discovery provides sufficient support for the assertion put forth by Pishghadam, Zabihi, and Norouz Kermanshahi (2012) that ELT instructors ought to transform into "Educational Language Teachers" (p. 893) who possess expertise in a variety of other fields like psychology in addition to teaching English. Moreover, the results are in congruence with the previous study, which indicated substantial support for the addition of CT to the curriculum and expressed a need for teacher training (Stapleton, 2011).

4.3.4 Strategies Used to Promote Critical Thinking

With regard to the strategies and approaches used by Iranian EFL academics to promote CT in their educational settings, the teachers mentioned that they support the learners to discern the main idea, pose questions, interpret diverse subject matters, take into account the alternative methods of addressing a question, display an open-minded attitude, critically assess other individuals' works, think about their own cognitive processes, and draw logical conclusions. Below are three extracts from academics' and PhD candidates' interviews:

I reinforce critical thinking in my classes by giving a chance to the students to ask their questions and to express their thoughts and ideas in the discussions. I also ask compelling and open-ended questions from my students to engage them in deep thinking processes.

To foster critical thinking, I allow students to engage in discussions, analyze different perspectives, and defend their own arguments.

According to Zhang -et al. (2020), educators have the responsibility to guide pupils in posing more challenging and thought-provoking inquiries, and foster inquisitiveness as well as critical thinking. Furthermore, critical thinking pertains to a broad spectrum of knowledge practices that encompass in-depth inquiry and scholarly discussions (Danvers, 2018). In addition, CT can be promoted in academic writing classes when the learners get a chance to write about the topics which have been discussed in the class (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015).

The teachers ask the students to concentrate on the details of a subject, interpret a subject and talk about their understanding.

To fortify critical thinking ability in students, I encourage learners to evaluate a subject, think about other possible answers, and conclude about the subject.

Moreover, Ennis (1991) declared that the foremost and paramount ability of a critical thinker is the capacity to discern the main focal points. Furthermore, another characteristic of a critical thinker is the interpretation skill (Facione, 1990). In the same vein, taking into account the various options for responding to an inquiry and possessing the capacity to evaluate critically are noteworthy attributes of an individual who engages in critical thinking (Sadeghi, et al., 2020).

3.3.5 Factors that Facilitate Critical Thinking Instruction in ELT Classes

Regarding the factors that facilitate teaching critical thinking in ELT classes, both academics and PhD candidates believed that using authentic tasks and group works can assist the pupils to be successful critical thinkers.

I think using authentic tasks and putting students in groups and asking them to discuss the subject matter in groups and interacting with each other as well as with the teacher facilitates teaching critical thinking in ELT classes.

I suppose learner-centered classes in which the learners have the opportunity to collaborate and interact with each other facilitate teaching critical thinking in ELT classes.

The results align with the research conducted by Heydarnejad et al. (2021), which demonstrated that in a teacher-centered pedagogy, students assume a passive role and are not provided with the opportunity to cultivate higher-order thinking skills and critical thinking abilities. Nevertheless, in a learner-centered pedagogy, the main objective is to foster autonomous and accountable students -that can be accomplished through the acquisition and application of critical thinking (Heydarnejad et al., 2021). Moreover, authentic tasks enable students to establish associations with actual dilemmas in the real world (Ronis, 2008). Within the context of these authentic tasks, students engage in the practical implementation of their knowledge in real-life scenarios that extend beyond the confines of the classroom. Collaboration, a noteworthy attribute of authentic tasks, necessitates the utilization of critical reasoning, higher- order thinking skills, and problem-solving approaches (Cash, 2017).

3.3.6 Factors that Impede Critical Thinking Instruction in ELT Classes

Regarding the factors that hinder the instruction of critical thinking in ELT classes, the participants believed that rewarding quiet students, concentrating on the single correct answer, having insufficient linguistic knowledge and emphasis on summative assessment can impede critical thinking.

When teachers reward students solely for being quiet or complying with instructions, it can inhibit the development of CT skills. This approach may discourage students from expressing their thoughts and engaging in meaningful discussions.

Focusing solely on finding the correct answer or providing solutions without sufficient emphasis on the reasoning process can hinder critical thinking. Critical thinking involves evaluating information, considering multiple perspectives, and generating well-reasoned arguments. Overemphasis on the final answer may discourage students from exploring different possibilities and reflecting on their own thinking.

The findings are in line with the review study conducted by Pithers and Soden (2010) which indicated particular teaching methods may hinder the improvement of critical thinking, such as the rewarding of quiet non-thinkers, the idea that there is only one method to teach CT, as well as emphasis on the right answer. For instance, CLT often involves interactive and communicative activities, which may require more time compared to traditional teaching methods focused on explicit instruction. This time constraint can limit the depth of critical thinking development if not adequately addressed. Moreover, CLT places a significant emphasis on authentic communication, which requires a certain level of language proficiency. If learners have limited language skills, they may struggle to engage in complex critical thinking tasks within a communicative framework. Furthermore, traditional assessment methods that rely heavily on discrete-point testing may not adequately capture the depth of critical thinking developed through CLT. However, CLT provides learners with opportunities

to engage in real-life communicative situations, which can enhance critical thinking by promoting the application of language skills to meaningful contexts. Learners can develop problem-solving abilities and analytical skills through authentic language use. Furthermore, CLT often involves collaborative activities that encourage learners to work together to achieve communicative goals. This collaborative aspect can foster critical thinking by promoting interaction, negotiation, and perspective-taking among learners. By using CLT, learners are exposed to tasks that require analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity. These higher-order thinking skills are essential components of critical thinking and can be developed through communicative activities such as debates, discussions, and problem-solving tasks.

According to Kincheloe and Weil (2004), individuals with critical thinking skills don't simply accept information or ideas without scrutiny. Instead, they engage in a process of analysis, questioning, and evaluating various viewpoints before forming their own judgments or conclusions. Moon (2007) also emphasizes the importance of examining phenomena from different perspectives.

When students have limited English proficiency, they may struggle with understanding and expressing complex ideas or following instructions in English. This can make it difficult for them to fully participate in CT activities that involve problem-solving and logical reasoning.

Furthermore, when there is a strong emphasis on summative assessment, teachers may face pressure to prioritize improving students' examination scores over integrating CT into their instruction. This pressure can discourage teachers from dedicating time and resources to CT pedagogies.

According to Luk (2012), insufficient language proficiency presents a challenge for students to engage in critical thinking tasks in English classes. The students' restricted language proficiency may impede their capacity to actively participate in cognitively challenging activities. Consequently, educators may be compelled to simultaneously manage the instruction of both language acquisition and critical thinking in their educational settings (Yuan & Stapleton 2020). In certain educational settings where summative evaluation is prevalent, educators might find themselves under pressure from various stakeholders to disregard the cultivation of CT and instead prioritize the enhancement of students' performance in examinations (Yuan, 2017).

Conclusion

Critical thinking skills are widely regarded as one of the most important requirements for success in the modern era. Given the fundamental importance of teachers' and learners' roles in the process of learning and teaching, it is imperative that they possess a deep understanding of the underlying principles and significance of CT. Thereby, the overarching aim of the present investigation was to explore the perceptions of Iranian EFL academics and PhD candidates on integrating CT into the EFL curriculum, to propose some strategies needed to reinforce CT capabilities in students, and to examine the main challenges encountered by the teachers in incorporating CT skills. The findings of the questionnaires highlighted both academics and PhD candidates hold positive attitudes toward integrating CT into the EFL

curriculum. In the same vein, academics and PhD candidates listed questioning, discussion, interpretation, evaluation, expressing ideas, using authentic tasks, meaningful learning, group working and collaboration as the most frequently utilized activities for enhancing CT in their classes. Additionally, the participants perceived that gratifying silent student, focusing on the single right answer, possessing inadequate linguistic competence, and paying attention to summative evaluation can inhibit critical thinking. In addition, the findings demonstrated that in-service programs can provide teachers with practical, successful as well as coherent models and approaches to enable them to foster CT abilities in students.

The current study makes its greatest contribution to education by implying that, since this is a postmodern era, critical thinking principles need to be taken into account and applied in the EFL curriculum. It behooves language instructors to design classroom activities that encourage active student participation, such as reflective thinking, questioning, discussion, and self-evaluation.

Moreover, the importance of CT is so obvious since it gives rise to autonomous learning, and effective autonomy supports life-long learning. Utilization of critical thinking principles would help the learners be autonomous in learning a foreign language. Besides, not only will CT ability improve students' learning process in the educational context, but also in order to function effectively in society; and confront -urgent problems, individuals will be able to think critically and reason effectively. Indeed, our society needs individuals who engage in more profound cognitive analysis, exhibit enhanced problem-solving abilities, effectively communicate and collaborate, both personally and within organizational contexts; in essence, our society necessitates individuals who possess critical thinking capabilities.

The outcomes of the current examination concern trainers in TTC programs, to provide the EFL instructors with the required atmosphere and impetus to guide the class in the right path by employing the most appropriate teaching materials and methods according to the principles of critical thinking since increasing EFL instructors' knowledge regarding the notions of CT will, no doubt, give rise to the improvement in the quality of teaching and consequently accomplishment in successful learning.

Unfortunately, instruction, in Iranian EFL context, is centered upon a traditional teaching paradigm; therefore, learners are not instructed to think critically (Heydarnejad et al., 2021). Similarly, the instructor's duty is just to cover the instructional materials rather than enhancing learners' reflection on learning materials. Hence, it is imperative for educators to assume a significant role in changing the prevailing educational paradigm wherein knowledge is simply imparted from teachers to students. In so doing, they can help passive learners to become active participants and facilitate the cultivation of CT abilities among their pupils. The outcome of this research evinces the necessity of renewing the current syllabi and curricula regarding CT principles by consulting all stake-holders. Consequently, it can be concluded that CT programs should have more room to be applied in the curricula and syllabi in the university context. On the whole, the novelty of the present investigation has opened up opportunities for upcoming scholars to thoroughly examine the congruence of CT in the EFL setting with the aim of refreshing the instructional resources and methodologies, in order to enhance the EFL educational framework for the forthcoming generation.

In a nutshell, the results are hoped to facilitate the functioning of the educational system, resulting in effective consequences for curriculum developers, educators, and learners. This can be achieved by motivating instructors to reevaluate their teaching methods and align their instruction with the principles of CT.

As with any research study, the present exploration entails a number of shortcomings. The most consequential limitation resides in the utilization of a small sample size, potentially compromising the credibility as well as applicability of the outcomes. To obtain more accurate outcomes, further investigations with larger sample sizes are required to validate our findings. Finally, future studies are needed to scrutinize the present issue by employing data collection tools including think-aloud protocols, observations, as well as diaries to guarantee the dependability and authenticity of the results. Catering for these limitations may provide some insights for further research.

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