

EFL Learners' Hindrances in Developing Critical Thinking Skills Teachers' reflections

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Abstract:

Neglection of training EFL learners at university on developing basic and integrated critical thinking skills triggered this investigation. Though the development of such skills is a major aim of the new reforms and curricula and an integral part of English language learning, it is often unattainable in the department of English language. The following investigation is an attempt to determine the factors that are preventing learners of English from fostering their critical thinking abilities. Through a questionnaire that was administered to teachers at the department of English Language at our university, we have attempted to draw conclusive insights from teachers' responses that are thoroughly analyzed, discussed and followed up by certain recommendations that are thought to be key for the enhancement of both English language learning and critical thinking skills of English language learners.

Key words: Critical thinking, factors, skills.

Résumé:

Entraîner les étudiants de l'anglais, comme langue étrangère à l'université, à promouvoir des compétences fondamentales et intégrer la pensée critique est souvent attribué peut d'importance et c'est dans ce cadre que cette investigation a été initié. Malgré que le développement de ces compétences est un objectif majeur visé par les nouvelles réformes et programme d'études qui font une partie intégrale de l'apprentissage de langue anglaise, cet objectif est souvent loin d'être concrétisé. La présente étude tente à déterminer les facteurs qui empêchent les apprenants de la langue Anglaise de notre département de développer leurs potentiels en pensée critique. C'est à partir d'un questionnaire distribué aux enseignants que nous avons tenté de formuler une vision conclusive tirées de données réelles qui seront minutieusement analysées, discutées et suivies par certaines recommandations estimées de grande importance pour promouvoir l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise et la pensée critique chez nos étudiants.

Mots Clés : pensée critique, facteurs, compétences.

ملخص:

إن ترقية المهارات الفكرية النقدية لدى طالب الإنجليزية كلغة إنجليزية هو أحد أهم الأهداف التي رسمتها الإصلاحات و المناهج و البرامج الأخيرة. إلا إن الملاحظ للعملية التعليمية يدرك أن تدريب الطلبة على ترقية مهاراتهم الفكرية النقدية لا يحض بالاهتمام اللازم.

من هذا خلال البحث الميداني حاولنا تحديد العوامل التي حالت دون بلوغ هذا الهدف. من خلال استبيان تم توزيعه على أساتذة قسم الانجليزية و بعد دراسة وتحليل ومناقشة المعطيات المتحصل عليها حاولنا بلورة رؤية شاملة للظاهرة المدروسة مع اقتراح توصيات بيداغوجية قد تساهم في ترقية تعلم الانجليزية و المهارات الفكرية النقدية لدى متعلمي الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالمستوى الجامعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التفكير النقدي , العوامل , المهارات

Introduction

The Algerian recent reforms redirect the higher education achievements towards being outcome-based and according to these guidelines, teachers and managing staff are required to focus both their attention and efforts on the fulfillment of the goals of the education policy and ensure that learners not only gain the skills, knowledge and values that contribute not only to their own success, but also to that of their country.

These outcomes are broad and interdisciplinary and establish the foundation of the broad number of outcomes of the different learning areas and English language learning amongst. The specific outcomes for learning English language involve the implementation of a process approach that leads to the development of learning and thinking skills. Students need to develop the necessary skills to equip themselves for their life-long learning, to solve problems and to think critically.

English language teaching should not only concentrate on factual information, but extends to the ways through which this knowledge can be obtained. Through practice, learners can develop basic and integrated skills. It is often easy said theoretically; however it requires very perseverant efforts from teachers and learners both to encourage the successful implementation of such a process in foreign language learning and to step beyond the hindrances that prevent the implementation and the development of a knowledge process outcome and critical thinking skills development. The mostly challenging factors are:

- The extensive and time consuming syllabus.
- The difficulty to implement the approach with large classes.
- Lack of appropriate material resources.
- The issue of assessing learner progress.
- The limited contribution of teachers as regards innovative teaching and curriculum development.
- Teachers' inability to implement the approach due to lack of qualifications or professionalism or lack of associated competencies.
- Mixed ability- learners

Moreover, some teachers are not familiar with the concept of critical thinking skills and ignore strategies that might help in its development while others may be developing these skills without realizing that they are doing so, but what does the process approach of developing critical thinking skills entail?

Process Approach

A process-based approach has been described as the procedures used to enhance the learners' critical thinking ability to enable them to solve problems. Such an approach entails an implementation of strategies and techniques that help learners develop their intellectual skills to manage information and apply it to real life situations rather than mere knowledge outcomes. Learners as critical thinkers raise vital questions and problems, formulate them clearly, gather and assess relevant information, use abstract ideas, think open-mindedly, and communicate effectively with others (Limbach & Wendy. 2006).

Though skills are sometimes referred to as processes, they are not synonymous. Processes are the ways of thinking, solving problems and using thoughts. According to Hawkins (1988), a process is a 'series of actions or operations used in making, or achieving something'. Skills are described as the ability to think and reason when required to do so. They are problem solving skills that result in reliable knowledge Schafersman (1991). According to Wellington (1989) a skill is a specific activity that a learner learns to do. A characteristic of a skill is that it can be a visible action and that it can be assessed. It is not

always easy to distinguish between a skill and a process and henceforth scholars tend to combine both words and refer to 'process skills'.

While using process approach, learners should get accustomed to a number of process skills to develop critical thinking abilities. At a university level, a learner of English as a foreign language should have already mastered those basic and integrated skills through his/her former experiences with language learning.

Implementation

When using a process approach that targets critical thinking development both teachers and learners can experience not only educational and pragmatic benefits, but also other teaching/ learning behaviors that are key to modern pedagogy:

- Learners can actively participate in inquiry activities.
- Co-operative learning will be encouraged, and learners will be empowered by making them responsible for the acquisition of information, to solve problems and to complete specific tasks.
- The opportunity will be created for learners to freely communicate ideas and thoughts.
- Learners will be able to holistically develop higher order process skills when open-ended inquiry activities are used and therefore learners do not necessarily have to be taught these skills.
- Learning experiences will be designed so that learners can proceed at their own pace.
- Learners will be able to use several strategies to explore material, question events and facts and predict the outcome of their learning.
- Learners can provide sound reasons for their answers, suggestions and conclusions while thinking critically.

With the implementation of such an approach learners become partners in the progress of their own development. Learners can acquire knowledge through enquiry activities and would be able to apply knowledge and critical behavior outside their classroom. Hence teachers' role would be assigned another perspective; combining teaching, monitoring, guiding, and assessing learners' achievements with an influencing motivating mode that would impact learners' motivation, learning and judgments. Still such an approach is not totally positive.

It is more demanding from the teacher in terms of planning and a social recognition of the teacher's personal and professional development. Not all teachers do share the same positive opinion on the process or they have thorough knowledge about it or they can challenge their reluctance to using it. Furthermore, teachers who acknowledge the usefulness and the effectiveness of the process approach need to be continuously guided and provided with innovative ideas.

Towards developing critical thinking skills

Since there's no ideal teaching method, teachers of English as a foreign language should cater for different methods that may better help them develop learners' critical thinking skills. Active learning, effective learning environments, problem solving and the use of inquiry methods are highly suggested to develop learners' skills. Studies conducted so far on the development of process skills indicate that inquiry methods are the ideal methods that foster such skills. Such methods as questioning and co-operative learning all contribute to the development of these skills (Mossom.1989). The persistent issue is whether we should introduce such an approach and forget about other approaches or diverting emphasis on

content to learners' skill development and probably we might hamper learners' development from another side.

Method

A questionnaire was circulated among teachers to determine whether the learners' critical thinking skills are given attention and priority at our department. The questionnaire expresses (27) statements that are thought to describe the most affecting factors that hinder both the implementation and the development of critical thinking skills among Master two learners of English. Nine statements were intended to check if there was any teachers' responsibility in the issue itself, twelve others were pointing to the educational environment and six other statements were related to learners. The teachers were invited to indicate the ratio of agreement and disagreement with the statements suggested. A final draft was prepared from the data collected and analyzed.

The subjects

The questionnaire was distributed to 16 out of the 20 permanent teachers all ranked assistant teachers, seven of them are of (A) category and their experience with teaching English extends from 05 to 25 years at intermediate or secondary level out of which (05 to 08 years) at university level and have already experienced relative teaching of different subjects. The other nine teachers have at least an experience of 03 years of teaching at university level, however (03) of them have never taught at lower levels. The other six teachers have taught formerly at least for (03) years. The distinction is made with regard to their experience with English language teaching, because it is a very influencing factor in terms of vision for teaching, learning and teachers' responsibility and awareness of the factors that are crucial to the development of language learning and critical thinking skills.

Results of the survey:

Analysis of the questionnaire revealed that teachers have different perceptions on the factors that hamper learners from developing critical thinking skills while learning English at university level. These perceptions are set in Table 1. Teachers were invited to express rates of agreement or disagreement to the statements thought to determine these negative factors.

Discussion

The survey revealed striking responses with different rates that might help us develop a theory on the causes related to learners' low achievements in critical thinking. The first (09) statements were intended to investigate teachers' involvement in the hindrances. Teachers disagreed and even strongly with higher percentages with statements (2, 3, 4, 7, 8). From the data collected, we noticed that 'attitudes of teachers', 'group work is neglected' and 'teachers' lack knowledge of teaching and learning strategies to promote the development of thinking skills' are not considered as factors hampering learners' in developing critical thinking skills. For certain statements some teachers were neutral and expressed no choice.

The highest percentage was (31.25%) for statement (8) 'teachers' qualification inadequate and lack of professionalism'. With the exception of statement (4) 'group work is neglected' where the ratio is (06.25%), the percentage of neutrality for the rest of the statements (1.2.3.5.6.8.) ranged from (12.50% to 18.75%).

For the next twelve statements of the survey intended to investigate the extent of the learning/ teaching environment and their impact on learners' development, more than a half of the teachers agreed and even strongly with statements (11) 'the burden of traditional modes of management that are persistent in decision makers' behavior' and (16) 'The administration fails to provide a supportive climate to encourage development of process skills', (62.50%) of the teachers agreed and even strongly with the statement. Additionally,

teachers agreed that statements (15) 'Additional demands on teachers such as increased work load lesson preparation and supervision', (16) 'Inadequate resource material', (17) 'Outcomes of process skill development are not clearly stated by curriculum developers', describe are major hindrances in enhancing critical thinking abilities among learners.

Though the higher education directives and curriculum designers plainly address the critical thinking skills that are to be developed among learners where all possible resources should be appropriately selected, some teachers have not yet been convinced that the teachers' role is to select by himself /herself the material to introduce to his/her learners in the light of the institution guidelines and perhaps teachers have grown field dependent and hence, they expect to receive a top-down content of the courses. Academic freedom is strongly required for preparing innovative material and probably this is the task that makes the teachers feel the additional demands and work load.

Moreover, percentages for statements: (12) 'large classes', (13) 'A lengthy syllabus', (20) 'Mixed ability students', and (21) 'Irrelevant content/ not related to all learners' background' came in second position in negatively impacting critical thinking attainments according to the teachers' response. It is obvious that large classes were always a barrier to effective teaching and learning, a lengthy syllabus will always push the teachers to battle to fulfill it, however, the designed syllabus is always taking into account the amount of knowledge input, time for assessment and even for remedial works.

Logically and pedagogically speaking it is impossible to have learners' of the same abilities and the teachers' role is to excel in managing efforts to make learning successful despite learners' different abilities. For statement (12) large groups is not a problem to point to entirely. In our department, groups of first year are made up of (22) students, those of second year less than (20), the only ones that are a bit crowded are those of third year, however, the number does not exceed (28) students. More or less the number is closer to the ideal.

For statement (20) 'Lack of opportunities for teachers to attend workshops, seminars, conferences and symposia' the percentage of teachers who neutrally responded was (43.75%) and (37.50%) disagreed. It is quite obvious that so far no teacher was prevented from attending any seminar or colloquium whether in Algeria or abroad and hence teachers by no means can claim being deprived of encouragement for academic advancement. Moreover, teachers' response for statement (20) seems to contradict the response for statement (17) 'The administration fails to provide a supportive climate to encourage development of process skills'.

The administration is always doing its best to provide all possible means to maintain a very motivating environment that would facilitate both teaching and learning. It is in a way puzzling to claim that the administration encourages teachers' advancement and forgets about learners' education.

If we consider teacher's responses for the second part of the survey, we notice that the percentages of agreement contrasts those of disagreement in the first nine statements. Probably, it is due to the number of novice teachers that have not yet grasped the essence of teaching at an advanced level and to multiply their efforts to be self-reliant, creative and independent teachers, or to the number of those who are not yet ready to be innovative, reflective and perseverant.

The survey also revealed that percentages of agreement and strong agreement were so high for statements that address learners' behaviour, discipline, perseverance and interest in examination results rather in learning outcomes. The highest percentage of strong agreement with 'the lack of students' perseverance'; (37.50% strong agreement) and (25.00% agreement), however, there were always divergent responses that ranged from (06.25 to 25.00%) of agreement and (12.50% to 18.75%) of strong disagreement with the same statements.

The records of the department includes no reports of cases of discipline that were sanctioned and contradictorily the same teachers always tended to praise learners' motivation and perseverance to work to deadline. Moreover, it is quite logical that learners' would show interests in producing good examination results. It is the learners' objective by the end of any course. Teachers have to maintain learners' resultive motivation and implement strategic learning to help students better their knowledge outcomes, and have better scores at examinations. Table 1 provides very detailed and succinct data on teachers' reflections that can be used to determine what factors are hampering the development of critical thinking .

Recommendations and implications

The goal of the department is to provide the necessary pedagogical elements, all language material at its disposal and the guidelines of the designed curriculum to make the objectives and the goals of the educational policy and TEFL very clear to encourage the development of critical thinking skills if the related learning outcomes are mastered.

As the knowledge of teachers regarding the development of the learners 'critical thinking skills and the factors that hamper the development of these skills , the data has provided sufficient insights on teachers' reflections on the issue and have pointed to the spheres of responsibility for the hindrances, it is important to consider the following :

- Teachers have to move from the very traditional instructional methods towards inquiry-based teaching methods to foster learners' attitudes towards critical thinking skills and knowledge outcomes.
- Encouraging learners to get involved in learning through strategic motivation instruction that gradually help learners to be active learners, able to rely on themselves to cater for the necessary knowledge outcomes and the learning skills that would guide them for self-directed learning.
- Encouraging collaborative work among learners and introducing group settings. Sometimes it is more fruitful for learners to learn and interact with peers than with teachers.
- Redirecting teaching modes from one way lecturing to interactive lecturing. Contemporary pedagogic profile urges teachers to be facilitators and guides rather than authoritative resources of knowledge.
- Since outcomes related to critical thinking skills are clearly stated within curriculum and resources, language material and equipments are to be provided by a collaborative administrative staff, it is better and safer for novice and inexperienced teachers to get closer to those experienced ones to maximize their potential.

Conclusion

It is imperative to consider that these factors are the real hindrances that hamper the development of process skills, but the teachers' responses are relatively subjective. Taking extreme position on the issue is sometimes risky unless all positive elements at our disposal are wisely and fully used and then we may claim for other opportunities. If teachers do not challenge certain factors and certain prejudices, EFL learners will lose interest in learning and eventually this will multiply the ineffectiveness of teaching that in turn will make the attainment of knowledge outcomes and critical thinking skills very hard. Teachers' role is to minimize the influence of hindrances and maximize learners' potential in language learning and critical thinking achievements through a professional vision rather than escape from a reality that sometimes he/she is responsible for.

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EFL Learners' hindrances in Developing Critical Thinking Skills**Teachers' reflections**

1- Strongly agree 2- Agree 3- Neutral 4- Disagree 5- Strongly disagree

Statements	N = 16	1	2	3	4	5
1. Teachers avoid inquiry activities		18,75%	18,75%	12,50%	25,00%	25,00%
2. Teacher centred modes		12,50%	12,50%	18,75%	37,50%	18,75%
3. Teachers do not provide opportunities for learners to interact with instructional material		18,75%	12,50%	12,50%	25,00%	31,25%
4. Group work is neglected		12,50%	25,00%	06,25%	31,25%	25,00%
5. Insufficient lesson planning		18,75%	18,75%	12,50%	25,00%	25,00%
6. Attitudes of teachers		18,75%	18,75%	18,75%	25,00%	18,75%
7. Teachers lack knowledge of teaching and learning strategies to promote the development of process skills.		12,50%	06,25%	25,00%	12,50%	43,75%
8. Learners rely on mere memorisation of facts rather than use skills to acquire information		12,50%	31,25%	18,75%	18,75%	18,75%
9. Teachers' qualification inadequate		12,50%	18,75%	31,25%	25,00%	12,50%
10. Lack of co-ordination and interaction among teachers themselves		25,00%	06,25%	12,50%	18,75%	37,50%
11. The burden of the traditional modes of management that are persistent in decision makers' behaviour		31,25%	31,25%	06,25%	18,75%	12,50%
12. Large classes		25,00%	31,25%	06,25%	25,00%	12,50%
13. A lengthy syllabus		25,00%	25,00%	18,75%	12,50%	18,75%
14. Lack of equipment		18,75%	37,50%	06,25%	25,00%	18,75%
15. Inadequate resource material		43,75%	18,75%	06,25%	06,25%	31,25%
16. Additional demands on teachers such as increased work load lesson preparation and supervision		43,75%	12,50%	06,25%	18,75%	18,75%
17. The administration fails to provide a supportive climate to encourage development of process skills		31,25%	31,25%	12,50%	12,50%	12,50%
18. Outcomes of process skill development are not clearly stated by curriculum developers		25,00%	31,25%	06,25%	12,50%	18,75%
19. Inflexible syllabi and lack of time for innovation by teachers		37,50%	12,50%	12,50%	12,50%	25,00%
20. Mixed ability groups/ classes		31,25%	18,75%	00,00%	18,75%	25,00%
21. Lack of opportunities for teachers to attend workshops, seminars, conferences and symposia		06,25%	12,50%	43,75%	18,75%	18,75%
22. Irrelevant content/ not related to all learners' background		18,75%	31,25%	18,75%	12,50%	18,75%
23. The burden of the traditional modes of education that are persistent in learners' behaviour		31,25%	31,25%	12,25%	06,25%	18,75%
24. Learners fail to apply what they have learnt to daily situations		25,00%	37,50%	18,75%	06,25%	12,50%
25. Learners are interested in producing good examination results		25,00%	31,25%	06,25%	18,75%	12,50%
26. The discipline factors		25,00%	25,00%	12,50%	25,00%	12,50%
27. Lack of perseverance from the part of learners'		37,50%	25,00%	06,25%	12,50%	18,75%