The Significance of Integrating Critical Thinking Perspectives in EFL Programs

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Abstract

Various comprehensive language education programs have been employed by educational institutions to advance their curricula in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). However, the focus of most of these EFL programs was to improve students' vocabulary and grammar without improving their awareness of the English language. The focus was on rote learning which depends on the memorization of rules and vocabulary without using the target language effectively. With conservation learning, students, as well as instructors, have been exposed to looking at the target language critically and how this language functions effectively within social, cultural, and ideological contexts. This study investigates the thoughts on integrating critical approaches, critical language awareness (CLA), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) into EFL programs to equip students with cognitive and analytical to communicate in the target language effectively. In this study, 20 participants from a higher education institution consented to conduct a semi-structured interview to measure the students' inclination to include critical thinking courses in English language teaching. It has been shown that most students believe in the importance of critical thinking courses to be familiar with contextual awareness, assumption analysis, and imaginative speculation.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, EFL Programs, Language Awareness, Critical Discourse Analysis, Language Competency.*

Introduction

Critical and analytical skills are necessarily required to assess and process the learned facts and real-world challenges in a way that makes sense of the information received (Wilson,2017). Critical thinking skills are intellectual abilities that incorporate cognitive, reflective and self-regulatory thinking that relies mainly on well-reasoned judgments based on evidence drawn from logical and impartial connections. For a long time, critical thinking has been a well-established subject and a contentious study field across disciplines. Since its invention by Socrates' teaching practice 2500 years ago, critical thinking has been utilized and gained a substantial, important necessity throughout history as a soft discernible skill and a cornerstone for innovation, success, and development in every field. The concept of critical thinking in education is indebted to John Dewey (1933), a prominent figure in the study of thinking, who stated that the objective of education is not to teach students only the subject matter but more importantly to teach students to think or use reflective thinking. It is the active, persistent, and meticulously structured thoughts or assumed forms of information that are rationally reviewed, reflected, and cognitively analyzed to gap bridged to achieve well-established conclusions.

In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), critical and reflective thinking skills can bring positive results and noticeable impacts on the learning process and English proficiency (Yang, Gamble, and Jeffrey 2013). These intellectual skills enable students to promote a liberal method of looking at various issues in the learning process and provide them with multiple options and a wider space of freedom and choices to explore learning (Marin & Halpern 2011). The

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functionality of these skills can enable students recognizing areas of strength to boost and areas of weakness to improve in the learning process to evaluate their activities and achievements (Rafi, M. S.2021). This inductive/deductive-backed mode of thinking that relies on analysis, synthesize and evaluation elicits drawing insightful judgments to solve a problem or resolve difficulties (Bailin et al.,1999). To be competent in a foreign language, EFL learners are required to be fully involved in L2 socializing process and its different content-based areas to breed a level of intercultural communicative competence that is necessary to familiarize with the second language complications. This exposure is essential to avoid culture shock that might complicate the process of learning a foreign language. However, in a multiculturalism environment and linguistic diversity, changes in language structure, and cross-cultural exchanges, the traditional accounts of language teaching are not fully adequate when confronted with actual language use. Knowledge of words, grammar, and basic receptive and productive skills are insufficient to have inclusive and comprehensive language awareness. Accordingly, researchers have argued that critical thinking activities should be infused in EFL classrooms to normalize EFL students with the intercultural, sociocultural, educational, and political contexts of the L2 to deal with the it critically (Pennycook, 2001). Looking at the epistemic knowledge of the language and its formal setting without employing analytical reasoning and examining the social and cultural contexts of the L2 can be misleading and manipulative. The cognitive understanding of how language discussions are coded to convey full meaning is valuable if not vital in achieving English competency.

Review of Literature

Background of the Study

In the second part of the twentieth century, feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the position of English language teaching had widely spread among academics and language educators (Stenhouse 1975, 1978). Some applied linguists advocated for a multidimensional curriculum that is multifaceted to redefine English language education. Consequently, new urgent demand and interest for language awareness (LA) emerged as a pedagogy in language education. The concept of language awareness is basically related to cognitive abilities required to conduct an organized thinking process to reach a logical conclusion. The term was first adopted and used in the United Kingdom education system in the early 1980s by linguist Eric Hawkins who wanted to implement language awareness in language education. The concern in this term was reflected in several published language resources that dealt with language awareness as a concept that is closely connected to a sensitive and conscious knowledge of the social, cognitive, and cultural aspects of language and its significance to human existence (Hawkins, 1984; Donmall, 1985). The main concern of language awareness concept was not only about a clear scientific description of language and linguistic features but also about understanding the intertwined relationship between a language and its social, political, and cultural dimensions. The focus on language awareness in language teaching was to broaden language teachers' practical knowledge about language and its functionality in various contexts and environments with diverse linguistic backgrounds. It was about developing teachers' subject matter knowledge to enforce methods of language teaching in diverse instructional settings and to assist learners understand language functionally toward a higher level of independent learning. Toward the mid of 1986, the term language awareness became a pedagogical approach and a movement in the academic field of language education. It has become as a canonical field of study designed to teach and use language naturally, functionally and effectively.

Some modern linguists and educators wanted to give language awareness a further dimension by coining Critical Language Awareness (CLA) to give language teaching and learning a deeper and dialectical focus. CLA was developed as a possible method for critically analyzing, reasoning, assessing, and making conclusions about various facets and implications of language. It is a pedagogy that appeared to upgrade English and foreign language teaching in English public schools to boost students' abilities to examine a text critically (Clark, R., Fairclough, N., Ivanič, R., & Martin-Jones, M., 1991). Because of recent developments influencing the function of language in social life, critical approaches to language awareness and language education are becoming more convincing (Fairclough, 1992). This is due to the functionality of this approach to foster the students' analytical skills when confronted with a foreign language and thus become fully aware of the forms of the targeted language (Leow, 1997). In language programs and education, critical language awareness is a key factor in assisting and promoting students in developing not just operational and descriptive knowledge of the language practices, but also promoting a critical understanding of how these practices are molded and how social interactions are affected.

Critical language awareness paved the way for the emergence of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to enhance deeper understanding of language depending on how languages functions and builds relationships and power in everyday social interactions to convey genuine concepts and ideologies (Fairclough,1989,1992; Clark and Ivanic, 1997; Wallace, 1999; Van Dijk, 2001; Olshtain, E.; Celce-Murcia, M, 2001; Cots, 2006, Vacca et al., 2011; Flowerdew, 2013; Taylor, Despagne, & Faez, 2017; Paltridge, B, 2018). This approach specifically focuses on discovering the opaque and unseen relationship between practice and socio-cultural structure exists in communications. It links languages to contexts in various fields, including linguistics, sociology, and psychology. One of the critical discourse analysis advantages is the adoption of a critical viewpoint when dealing with foreign languages to expose representations, effective social interaction, and mindsets to disclose certain issues like ideology, concepts, and power contained in language. Both CLA and CDA rely on analyzing texts and spoken language not only to disclose and understand language and the linguistic implications and inequalities often hidden in everyday language but also to change cultural and social conditions that keep such inequality in existence.

CLA and CDA provide a well-defined frame for language teaching and learning. This frame provides authentic contexts of real-life interactions among communicators to widen and deepen linguistic practices and experiences to create communicative perspectives that work in developing and enhancing language education. With CLA and CDA, language teaching and learning can achieve two points. The first point is related to the meaning transmitted by the conveyed context of the lexes whereas the second point is related to the disclosed interpretation that is decoded by the linguistic structure and the social and cultural interactions. Language is not any more looked at just for its lexical and linguistic meanings but also for the power of its social, political, and cultural implications. This productive combination of language knowledge and its functionality works well with the goal of EFL programs designed mainly to produce learners to use English effectively and productively in various situations. It aims at producing effective language teaching and competent learners capable of choosing how to use language in real-life situations. However, there are several obstacles to integrating and fostering critical language awareness and discourse analysis in language education, including those related to curricula, student proficiency, and teacher preparation. The promotion of CLA and CDA as a curricular objective in schools did not continue, and instructors were unable to include this course in their curricula for a variety of reasons, including curriculum changes and time constraints.

Cda and Efl Teaching Mindsets

CDA has made its way into EFL studies throughout the last three decades. Previously, EFL students' interaction with the written texts from the target language was based only on concentrating on propositional content conveyed by the sentences rather than the text and its relatedness to the social and culture settings. The concern of CDA in L2 education is the infusion of micro, macro and meso levels in which the text, the socio-cultural and the practices are collaboratively intertwined to conduct effective interactions (Thompson, 2002b). This way of thinking can boost EFL students' critical thinking skills and encourage the spirit of inquiry and curiosity to expose the covert meaning, and ideologies deposited in the target language. In a world of global linguistics inequalities and implications, deciphering a text requires employing a mental and cognitive process of language assessment and analysis not only what meets the eyes and the ears. Academic courses integrated with CDA courses can empower and motivate students to express their ideas in L2 and to compare and reflect on their circumstances. Thus, CDA courses are inextricably congruent with power. Though it is difficult to agree on a specific definition of power yet, starting from a general perspective, power is a term that refers to the ability to do something. Power might be ideological, commonsensical, or symbolic, and within these boundaries, it can work at a variety of levels: social, political, and economic. The study of language may go much beyond the study of the text in isolation because language holds immense power, allowing one not only to express what he/she means but also to conduct other social and cultural acts that influence audiences to achieve some goals (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Discourse-based methods in EFL education are becoming increasingly important in preparing students to build abilities and intellectual reasoning to operate in interpersonal relationships. These abilities can help EFL students pay attention to discourse, power, cultural, and social issues that they may be wholly unfamiliar with while learning another language.

Based on Fairclough's CDA research (1999, 1995, 1992) and Van Dijk's, 1993, 2001), most of the researchers created a checklist and exercises to include CDA abilities in English education as a teaching strategy and approach that is innovative and creative. It turns students from passive into active, critical, and creative thinkers who not only use the foreign language effectively but also understand the ideological assumptions embedded in the target language. Critical field raises students' knowledge of social, cultural, and political circumstances in the society from which the work is drawn. Knowledge of CDA skills also helps students feel more confident and more motivated in expressing their opinions as critics and speakers with a strong sense of self-efficacy that works in promoting their enthusiasm and academic performance (Phan, 2012). Introducing CDA to EFL programs will enable students to argue for their assertions by pointing to crucial language cues and meanings or types of grammatical structures. Many additional academics have employed CDA to instruct EFL students in reading comprehension using resources from news articles and social media (Marashi H.; Chizari, 2016; Hazaea, 2020).

Methodology

Participants

The current study is qualitative. It studies the significance of incorporating critical thinking and language awareness courses in English Language learning and its impact on improving EFL students' skills and abilities. Purposive sampling was used on 20 EFL female students from The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) who are enrolled in the foundation program. This program is designed to help students improve the required English proficiency to prepare them to obtain an undergraduate degree. For triangulation and data collecting, a semi-structured interview with 10 open-ended questions was employed. Each question was given to two different students with varying degrees of English proficiency to collect feedback based on the student's levels. The questions focused on critical thinking abilities and their relatedness in foreign language improvement. To obtain detailed information, the researcher questioned each participant individually. The participants were given enough time to properly answer the questions as well as allowed to seek help from the researcher in case there were any ambiguous or unclear questions. The findings and outcomes of the research have been validated by the students' replies and feedback. These replies shed light on the need to add critical thinking courses in the EFL curriculum to increase and improve students' L2 fluency and competency.

Results and Discussion

The goal of this study was to look at the influence of critical thinking abilities on improving English language skills. The interview questions received favorable responses from the participants. They stated that critical thinking abilities and language awareness were acceptable and effective for learning English. Furthermore, their attitude toward the learning circumstance has a direct influence on overall language acquisition. They suggested a wide range of instructional techniques, exercises, and assignments to include CLA in EFL classrooms. A need for a more socially contextualized learning experience that makes use of CDA, and critical thinking abilities was another major theme that emerged from the interviews. The frequent topics in the interviews are described and analyzed in the following paragraphs about the pertinent literature. According to the conclusions and findings of this study, critical thinking is the capacity to assess a situation and make sound judgments. The below list includes the questions and students' responses to the interview questions:

Q1: How would you define a critical thinking course?

Answer 1: "Critical thinking is a teaching approach or method for modifying and resolving learning issues. It is a thinking-about-thinking method that enhances student work to be of high quality by making judgments, using evaluation forms, and dealing with knowledge constructs." (Students 1).

Answer 2: "Critical thinking is a helpful teaching course to teach students to think of the dimensions of making correct answers. It is knowledge about how and why things are so and so, not about how much knowledge the students have." (Students 11).

Q2: How would you interpret the concept of critical reading of a text?

Answer 1: "Critical reading means using certain procedures, questions, and analytical processes to improve clarity and understanding. It requires more effort and comprehension than a simple skimming and scanning" of the text" (student 2).

Answers 2: "Critical reading means understanding the text and its important linguistic and ideological points." (Student 12)

Q3: Why critical thinking courses are significant in teaching the English language to non- native students?

Answer 1: "By employing critical thinking abilities, students will have a better concept of how to create their knowledge on the issue at hand. Students will have a wider and better opportunity to practice and have deeper discussions in the target language." (Student 3).

Answer 2: "Critical thinking courses are important because they help students to express their thoughts effectively." (Student 13).

Q4: Do you agree to include a critical reading course in EFL curricula and why?

Answer 1: "Absolutely, because having such courses will provide students with a deeper insight into language techniques and usage, and thus students are more confident and motivated." (Student 4).

Answer 2: "Though it is difficult and requires more skills, however, I agree to include this course in EFL curricula." (Student 14).

Q5: How do you think academic institutions could adopt a critical language teaching approach?

Answer 1: "Critical Language teaching necessitates lesson planning and serious effort by the institutions. The language background of students should be enhanced and improved by exposing students to various practices, activities, discussions, debates, and scenarios from real- life circumstances and experiences to be analyzed by the students and obtain their reflections on." (Students 5).

Answer 2: "Academic institutions should encourage and facilitate incorporating critical thinking courses in the curricula by offering many courses and making one of them a core course to be chosen by the students in the third or fourth semester. This can build the students' analytical skills and abilities in other courses." (Students 15).

Q6: How critical thinking is taught to students with different levels of English language proficiency?

Answer 1: "The best way to teach critical thinking is to divide students into groups to work as a team. A written task is given to each team which includes students with different levels of English proficiency to work on it. Each student is required to provide his/her interpretation and analysis of the text." (Student 6).

Answer 2: "An effective strategy to teach critical thinking courses is represented by dividing the students according to their English proficiency. Different tasks with different levels of complexity are given to each group according to its level in English. (Students 16).

Q7: In your opinion, what are the negative impacts of not incorporating Critical Thinking education courses?

Answer 1: "Graduates who lack critical thinking abilities are typically unsuccessful in exchanging ideas and have no skills for assessing, analyzing, and evaluating the language's text and contexts critically. They tend to embrace viewpoints, particularly on political, socio- cultural, and educational concepts, without properly assessing them." (Student 7).

Answer 2: "I think there will be some negative impacts in not including critical thinking courses in the curriculum. One of the most important ones is students will be passive readers and learners, not active ones. "(Students 17).

Q8: Do you think that there is a relationship between critical thinking skills and self- confidence?

Answer 1: "With critical thinking skills, students will be able to discuss, infer, and analyze a language to reflect it to ideological self-controlled thinking. By so doing, students will have a more positive self-concept, more self-confidence, and higher self-efficacy in decision- making." (Student 8).

Answer 2: "I think any course that motivates and encourages the students to be engaged in discussion, analyzing, and expressing their personal views in the class will participate in building the students' self-confidence. "(Student 18).

Q9: Do you think that enhancing the student's critical thinking skills will participate to enhance students' engagement in the class?

Answer 1: "Critical thinking skills motivate students to be an effective part of any discussion. With the ability to think differently, students will be enthusiastic to engage in discussion and reflections. "(Student 9).

Answer 2: "I think what hinders the students from engaging in the class discussion results from the feeling of shyness due to their fear of making a mistake or not knowing how to provide feedback. Once all students are encouraged to participate in the class discussion and no one is exempted, all students will be happy to engage themselves in the class discussion." (Students 19).

Q10: In your opinion, what is the relationship between incorporating CLA courses and the level of English proficiency?

Answer 1: "Understanding the linguistic features of the foreign language will assist students in understanding language function and how language operates. Immersing in intercultural communications, students will be able to express different ideas and concepts and consequently, they will be able to be in command of the target language." (Student 10).

Answer 2: "The more students will use the target language in different topics, the better their English proficiency will be. "(Student 20).

In EFL contexts, the participants described reasons to account for the urgency of critical thinking skills to improve students' language competency: to help students and learners go beyond the teaching materials, develop their critical stance, and improve their language skills. It was revealed that the participants were aware of the priority of critical language teaching and recognized the areas that should be considered for improvement. It appeared that there was a prevalent belief among the respondents that the current teaching strategies do not foster critical attitudes among learners. Students in their discussions arguably noted that though thinking as a process is a natural and spontaneous mental ability, yet it requires to be taught, fostered, and directed as well. This is crucially important to create ideal critical flexible thinkers capable of expressing their opinions and judgment not only clearly and honestly but also acknowledging others' points of view sensitively and without misinformation, bias, and prejudice. The emphasis on helping EFL students form critical perspectives does not imply that language proficiency will suffer but rather it will facilitate students' receptive and productive skills.

Rethinking instructional strategies is necessary considering the participants' recognition of the relatedness and significance of CLA and CDA in EFL curricula. With an emphasis on practical elements like exercises, activities, debates, and individual and group projects, students advocated integrating CDA and critical thinking abilities into the EFL curriculum to help EFL students develop independent viewpoints and inquiry-based judgments.

A critical language perspective should be developed among EFL students for two additional reasons, which are related to the teaching/learning context and the social context. EFL students should be encouraged to explore their preferred learning style, express their opinions on teaching methods and practices, and evaluate the curriculum to reflect on and challenge their learning setting. The educational environment is a favorable setting for the development of critical viewpoints because students are probably more eager to react to how they are spoken to, addressed, and evaluated in this setting. The social environment, on the other hand, is extensive and includes a variety of issues and topics to be discussed and questioned by using language. Examining the participants' justifications for incorporating and developing critical views among EFL students reveals that they are in line with the characteristics of language awareness in the social dimension to sustain strong social ties in a variety of linguistic contexts. Understanding linguistic contexts requires activating the cognitive abilities expressed by the language. Although they overlap, these dimensions contend that language is a potent tool for cultivating critical awareness.

Social life is full of ongoing activities that touch on a variety of topics that EFL students might not be familiar with. Gaining critical viewpoints on such occurrences brings out a strong command of the L2 Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) introduced by (Cummins, 1981a). Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) refer to the level of conversational fluency in a language that can be developed through social interaction and everyday communication. Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) on the other hand refers to students' capacity to grasp and articulate concepts and ideas crucial to academic performance in both oral and written media. learners' CALPS and BICS can be developed and improved as they advance in their academic pursuits and careers.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the participants are aware of how crucial and significant incorporating critical thinking courses in EFL classrooms. Integrating critical thinking practices and activities in EFL classrooms with different levels of language proficiency will not only promote students' productive/receptive language abilities but also increase their level of thinking thus enhancing their language awareness and judgmental power in authentic and real-world interaction (Worrell and Profetto-McGrath, 2007). Critical thinking practices elicit reflective and well-reasoned and self-regulatory judgment based on logical and impartial evidence. Cognitive reasoning encourages students to arrange their thoughts succinctly and guide them reach conclusions in various real-life situations. Promoting a higher degree of intellectual involvement and engagement with the target language can be increased by combining critical thinking and discourse analysis courses as analytical tools necessary for EFL students to comprehend the socio-cultural contexts of the intended language. Thinking creatively and critically is highly indebted to effective and sustainable communications in which interactors are fully aware of the language various contexts in a language.

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