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Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom– An Important 21st Century Skill

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Abstract

Developing students' critical thinking is of vital importance in language teaching for various reasons, such as developing abilities that encourage students to think more deeply, conduct in-depth analyses, as well as enhancing their educational experience. Application of critical thinking in language classrooms makes language learning more engaging since this skill is one of the very important skills in the twenty-first century, and it encompasses a wide variety of abilities that students develop through practice. Furthermore, teachers who encourage the development of this skill in the process of teaching prepare their students for the global society which is demanding nowadays. Hence, the purpose of this research is to emphasize the significance of developing this vital skill, to find out about teachers' perspective, and its implementation in the classroom. The data were gathered through a survey which obtained information from 59 English language teachers. As the results from the data gathered show, we can conclude that teachers understand the value of critical thinking in language learning.

Keywords: critical thinking, language teaching, teachers' CT training

Introduction

Critical thinking (CT) as a skill belongs to higher level order thinking skills and demands mental effort which goes beyond memorizing. According to Paul (1988), critical thinking as an ability comes when the student reaches conclusions which are logical and are followed by analysis and evaluation. Therefore, it is the ability to think in-depth, to question, interpret, analyze, and to judge critically what you read, write, and hear. As the authors Bassham, G., Irwin, W., Nardone, H., & Wallace, J. M. (2010) mentioned, critical thinking is the power of disciplined thinking. For this reason, in the language classroom, critical thinking is a directed goal; it is intended to make decisions and solve problems, questions assumptions, and not take something for granted. According to Eales-Reynolds, L. J., Judge, B., McCreery, E., & Jones, P. (2013), critical thinking is a challenging, questioning attitude toward information and conventional thought.

CT makes students independent learners by sharpening their mind, clarifying their thoughts, and for these reasons students become self-directed learners and thinkers. In other words, the tasks and exercises in the classrooms should be organized in that way to foster the in-depth thinking of the students, so they use their mind to its full potential. For this reason, observations, the ability to take information and break it down to pieces, drawing conclusions, evaluating, solving problems are part of this higher-order skill according to Bloom's taxonomy. These skills are implemented in CT as they employ broad intellectual criteria that make language learning comprehendible, more effective as it approaches the learning from different perspectives.

Nevertheless, critical thinking as a skill is to be embedded within the other skills, and not taught separately. Why is thinking critically important in language teaching? Because it forces students to solve problems, analyze tasks during classes on a deeper level, observe and make decisions based on their inner thoughts and knowledge. As the authors Bassham, G., Irwin, W., Nardone, H., & Wallace, J. M. (2010) state, the phrase "critical thinking" refers to a broad set of cognitive abilities required to successfully recognize, assess, and analyze arguments and truth claims; to identify and overcome personal biases and preconceptions; to develop and articulate strong arguments for conclusions; and to make thoughtful, rational choices regarding what to think and do.

On the other side, the world we live in today needs people who employ critical thinking in different situations and in everyday life. Namely, critical thinking

embodies many other skills like social skills, creativity, productivity, collaboration, media literacy, initiative, communication. As Jonathan Heard, Claire Scoular, Daniel Duckworth, Dara Ramalingam & Ian Teo (2020) mentioned in their paper, CT is described as a set of skills that can be applied in the classroom setting, and it is of high significance for the learners as they have control over their own thinking, and they can evaluate their own way of learning as well as their own language learning experience and achievements. According to Buskist and Irons (2008), the students will have logical and reasoned arguments, they will focus on the issues, try to solve them implementing good thinking and evidence, think deeply about their decisions, develop their arguments, seek for alternative actions, and alternative decisions, make clear distinction between opinions and facts, and use multiple relevant sources in making decisions.

All the above-mentioned vital characteristics teachers should practice and develop in the language classes in order to achieve their goals of having learners displaying CT in foreign language usage. Teaching students how to think is one of the most important teacher's responsibilities, therefore the way of not telling them what to think would emphasize the development of higher order thinking skills. Moreover, it can be developed by exposure to certain types of instruction, but it requires endurance and patience. According to Kabilan (2000), without thinking creatively and critically even communicative language teaching does not help students to become proficient speakers of the target language.

Is Critical Thinking Teachable?

Cook (1991) emphasized that evaluating critically what students have read is a process, and students should engage in communication during the classes in order to practice and develop CT. According to Foresman, G. A., Fosl, P. S., & Watson, J. C. (2016), humans have that natural capacity for good reasoning without studying critical thinking in a formal way, but it is very important to master these skills in order to be skilled critical thinkers. Therefore, there are various exercises in language reading, listening, writing and speaking that can engage students in thinking critically. For example, students can finish a given task with their own ending; connect the text / book / story with global issues; ask students to interpret the material they study according to their own views, perspectives, and opinions; or compare the text with another one. "To learn well, one must read well" (Elder & Paul, 2004: 37). In other words, it is important for students to ask questions, to

question everything, and come up with logical conclusions about the activities they have covered and the tasks they have done during their classes.

Critical thinking is teachable; therefore, teachers can help students practice and develop this skill while learning the target language. Additionally, teachers should give students tasks and exercises to practice this skill, enhancing CT in the classroom setting, extending and going beyond students' horizons. Language teachers as practitioners of CT should foster this skill, work on it, challenge the students, and make an atmosphere for such activities, while on the other side, students should be exposed to different critical thinking opportunities, quizzes, games, thought-provoking activities, and tasks, that would help promoting and developing CT in the learners. Moreover, the learners should be motivated to ask questions and participate in class discussions, debates, and forums created by the language teachers offering plenty of opportunities in incorporating this skill into their curriculum.

Purpose of the Study

An objective of this study was to investigate the following research question:

- Are the teachers equipped with the necessary training to develop students' CT in the language classroom?

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study was survey research, and the data was gathered using a questionnaire that was administered and given to participants as a research tool. The participants of this study were 59 EFL teachers, of both genders, from primary and secondary schools from North Macedonia. The survey consisted of four open-ended questions to fulfill the primary goal of the present study. The questions intended to provide the English teachers with the opportunity to express their opinion about this CT skill, its value, implementation, and time they devote in their classes in order to develop it. The survey included the following questions:

Q1: Do teachers believe that fostering students' critical thinking skills is important in English classes?

Q2: Do teachers have material for developing this skill?

Q3: Do teachers have enough time during classes to develop critical thinking skills?

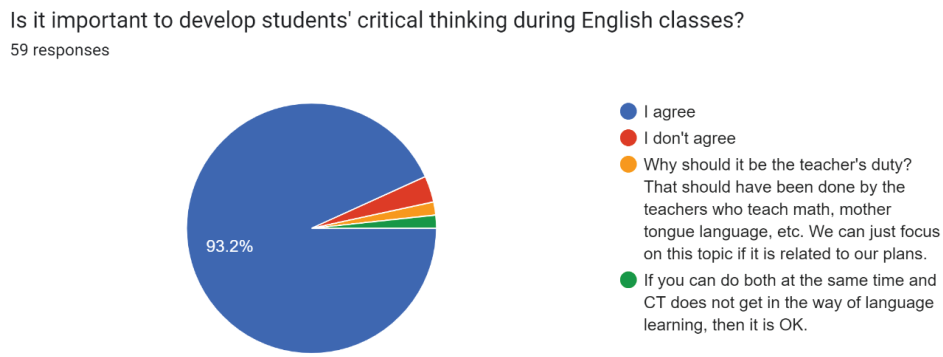
Q4: Do teachers have any specific training to employ these skills?

Results

This section contains the answers from the teachers. Regarding the first question, the survey intended to explore whether English teachers think that developing critical thinking is vital in English teaching (See Figure 1). The majority of the participants, 55 or (93.2%), answered positively, while 4 participants gave different answers. Two of the teachers responded that they did not agree that CT is an important skill, as the Figure 1 below shows.

Figure 1

The value of applying critical thinking in English classes

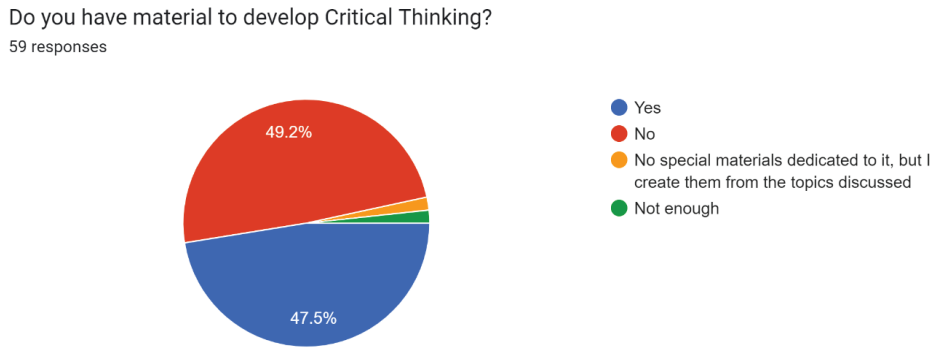


Teaching materials for developing CT

Regarding the teaching material for developing CT in English classes, the Figure 2 below indicates that the majority of the participants, 49.2% of the teachers responded that they lack material for implementing this skill in their teaching. On the other hand, 47.5% answered positively. The rest of the participants, one of them said that he/she creates it, and another one said that there is not enough material for developing CT.

Figure 2

Classroom time devoted for developing CT



As can be seen from Figure 3, most of the teachers surveyed, 72.9% responded positively regarding the time devoted on developing CT. Whereas 11.9% of the teachers believe that they do not have enough time for developing CT. In addition, a very small number of participants gave different reasons for not having enough time during the class to develop this skill. These reasons included students' rejection to participate in CT activities, time limitation of the classes and one of the reasons mentioned was the broad curriculum.

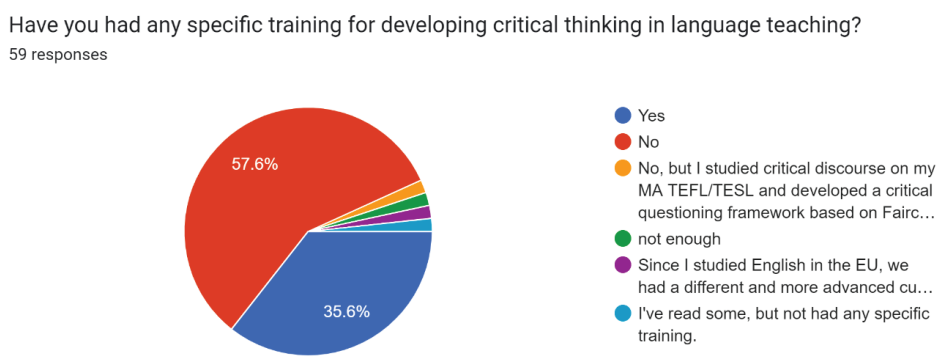
Figure 3

Teachers' specific training for developing CT

As the table below shows, we can see that majority of the surveyed English teachers, 57.6% have not had any specific training for developing CT skill. On the other

side, 35.6 % of the teachers responded positively regarding CT training. On the other side, a small number of teachers responded that they have attended different professional development courses that provided them with the knowledge of implementing this skill in their classes.

Figure 4



Data Analysis and Discussion

The data represented in table 1 reflects how important critical thinking is as the majority of surveyed language teachers, that is 93.2 % of the participants agreed that it is vital to develop this skill. This means that teachers pay attention to developing in-depth reasoning. What is interesting in this data is that 3.4% of the teachers, or two teachers, do not agree that CT is an important skill to be developed during English classes, and it is apparent that one teacher thinks that CT is applicable in subjects likes Math or mother tongue language.

Regarding the material for developing this skill, 47.5%, or 28 of the teachers, answered that they have material for supporting CT skills, and interestingly, the majority, which is 49.2%, or 29 teachers said that they do not have material for developing this CT in the classes. One teacher answered that he / she creates it based on the topics discussed during the class. From this data we can see that most of the language teachers do not have material for practicing and developing this skill, and as a result they create it.

The responses of the third question show that 72.9%, or 43 teachers, answered positively about the time devoted to support CT during the classes. The most

surprising aspect of the data is that language teachers dedicate part of the time to practice and develop this skill which means they are aware of its importance. On the other side, 11.9%, or 7 teachers, answered negatively, and the reasons are different: one of the reasons is that there is not enough time to develop this skill because not every student wants to participate, teachers lose time by explaining and by trying to engage the learners. It affects time management, and the teachers will not be able to finish the material intended for that class. Some of the surveyed teachers think that there is a lot of material to be covered during the classes, so they do not have time for developing CT. What is interesting in this data is that language teachers face issues connected with covering the curriculum, students' participation, or time management. It is not surprising that teachers are obliged to cover the whole material, and therefore they lack time for practicing and developing CT. On the other side, it is expected that students would find the development of this skill a demanding task, therefore they find it difficult to participate in such activities that provoke CT.

When it comes to specific training for developing CT in language teaching, less than half of the surveyed language teachers, which is 35.6%, or 21 English teachers have had CT training, while the majority 57.6% or 34 English teachers have not had such training. Now this raises the question, are the teachers equipped with the necessary training to develop students' CT skill? This result is somewhat interesting as in the first question most of the language teachers answered positively about the importance of developing CT, which means they consider CT to be a vital skill to be developed in language learning. On the other side, most of the surveyed language teachers have not had appropriate training for developing students' CT, which is a significant indicator that even though they have not had such training, they still recognize the importance and value of this skill. Having in mind the data about the time they devote on developing students' CT, it is apparent that although they have not had training for developing CT, they still find time and put effort into employing it in their classes. Regarding other answers, one of the teachers studied critical discourse on their MA TEFL/TESL and developed a critical questioning framework, and one teacher answered that he/she has not had CT training, which does not mean that he/she does not practice this skill.

The primary goal of this study was to determine whether the language teachers are equipped with the necessary training to develop students' CT in the language classroom. Regarding the survey, the teachers recognize the significance of this skill, and they are aware of the importance of the implementation of CT skills in language

classes, but most of the surveyed language teachers have not had any training for developing students' CT skill, which implies that they are not equipped with necessary training for developing students' CT. Moreover, this study has shown that generally English teachers practice CT skills in their classes, and they recognize the importance of these skills, devote time during their classes for practicing CT and even though they lack material, they still practice this considerable skill.

Conclusion

This paper investigates CT as a crucial 21st century skill and its importance of implementing it in the education, especially in English language teaching. It also offers research regarding teachers' attitude about this skill and raises the question of teachers' training in regard to developing students' CT skill in the classes. Furthermore, some classroom activities that foster CT skill in the language classrooms including problem-solving tasks, discussions, reading and writing, are mentioned as suggestions for implementing them when practicing students' CT.

Namely, it is evident that teachers still are used to the traditional way of teaching, and traditional methods in some schools, and therefore students are deprived from the opportunities to develop this very important skills. For this reason, it is of great importance that teachers implement CT activities in the classes, attend professional development workshops, and assist their students to become critical thinkers. And finally, the 21st century 4C skills, including the CT skill prepare students for better and successful academic performances, which is one of the main reasons why this skill is of a great importance in language classrooms.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

This qualitative approach of investigation did not include a very big number of participants, which is an obvious limitation and does not allow generalizing its results. Even though the findings of the study bring useful insights, more participants will provide more insightful results and information. Moreover, future recommendations could include students' participation in the survey, and exploring their perceptions of critical thinking.

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