

## Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking in English Language Classrooms in Higher Education: A Case of EFL Teachers

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**ABSTRACT:** *Language teachers are usually proficient in teaching language skills but may not always receive training in fostering critical thinking abilities that guide effective learning. Existing literature underscores the pivotal role of teacher behaviours in shaping students' critical thinking development. However, educators can effectively incorporate critical thinking into their instructional methods only when they possess a clear conception of what critical thinking entails. This study aims to investigate the perceptions of critical thinking among Algerian university teachers and the strategies they employ to integrate critical thinking into their courses. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving structured interviews with Algerian English lecturers from various higher education institutions, including educators from the Higher Training Teacher's College of Oran, the University of Mostaganem Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, and the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed. A total of fifteen teachers participated in the interviews. The findings indicate that while a majority of teachers exhibit sound knowledge of critical thinking, they often lack the necessary support for its effective implementation, leading them to primarily focus on subject matter comprehension. Moreover, these educators encounter various challenges in teaching critical thinking and express the need for additional support in this aspect. Consequently, the study underscores the demand for tailored professional development programs aimed at integrating critical thinking into the English language curriculum, materials development, and pedagogical practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** critical thinking, English language teaching, teacher perceptions, teaching practices, teaching strategies

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of a dynamically changing global landscape, the significance of critical thinking cannot be overstated, particularly in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and teaching. The 21st century's rapid advances in science and technology have reshaped societies, necessitating a corresponding evolution in the educational systems of nations. This shift, marked by the transition from the industrial age to the information age, has transformed societal priorities. The conventional emphasis on conformity and uniformity has given way to a new focus on open-mindedness and adaptability (Bencze, Halwany, and Zouda, 2020). The ability to "fit in", think within established boundaries, and perform prescriptive tasks has been supplanted by the demand for creative thinking and problem-solving (Norris, 2014).

Critical thinking (hereafter CT), particularly within the context of EFL learning and teaching, is an indispensable skill. It encompasses the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information effectively, fostering the ability to make sound decisions and solve complex problems in a language that is not one's native tongue. Within the realm of EFL, critical thinking is about the active engagement of students in deciphering and comprehending the nuances of a foreign language while developing the skills to question, assess, and apply their language proficiency in diverse situations.

In this context, CT emerges as an indispensable skill essential for students to thrive as informed global citizens and effective language learners. The dynamic nature of the contemporary world underscores the urgency of nurturing critical thinking, as employers increasingly seek employees with well-honed critical thinking abilities (Biggs and Tang, 2011, 10). In light of these developments, it is imperative to position critical thinking as a central educational objective, particularly in the domain of EFL learning and teaching.

As Connor-Greene and Greene (2002, 324) assert, "critical thinking is not an academic fad; it is an essential skill for living in the information age". Consequently, the cultivation of rational and critical thinking skills, especially within the specific context of EFL learning and teaching, represents a cornerstone of educational reform in diverse settings worldwide. Previous research has underscored the centrality of critical thinking in higher education (Dunne, 2015; Facione, 1990). It has been consistently recognized as one of the foremost outcomes of higher education. Critical thinking is defined as the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions (Halpern, 1999, 70). Robust critical thinking skills are not only vital for academic achievement but are also paramount within personal and professional domains (Butler, 2012). Therefore, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in higher education emerges as a specific arena where the development of critical thinking skills can yield substantial benefits, offering students not only language proficiency but also the ability to navigate the complexities of global communication effectively.

However, instructing CT skills within the realm of EFL learning and teaching necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the concept. Teachers can effectively instill critical thinking in their EFL students when they possess a firm grasp of its essence. Indeed, it is argued that educators may struggle to incorporate critical thinking into their EFL lessons unless they comprehend the fundamental underpinnings of critical thinking (Lauer, 2005).

Within this context, this study explores the perceptions of Algerian English language teachers regarding critical thinking and how they practically integrate this concept into their teaching. The research narrows its focus to the Algerian higher education landscape, emphasizing the specific discipline of English language teaching. The investigation seeks to address a critical gap in the existing literature, exploring the depth of Algerian teachers' understanding of CT and the practical application of this skill in their EFL classrooms. Consequently, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Algerian English Foreign Language teachers in higher education perceive critical thinking within the context of EFL learning and teaching?
2. What strategies do these teachers employ to incorporate critical thinking skills into their EFL lessons?
3. What challenges and barriers do teachers encounter when attempting to emphasize critical thinking in their EFL classrooms?

This research is significant in its ability to provide insights into a specific educational context and discipline, examining the nuances of critical thinking within the Algerian higher education system, and exploring the unique challenges and opportunities faced by educators, particularly within the domain of EFL learning and teaching. This study aims to offer a novel perspective on the cultivation of CT in a specific cultural and linguistic context, contributing to the global discourse on the importance of critical thinking within EFL education.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

The conventional approach to teaching at universities often relies heavily on lectures as the primary mode of delivering course content, with a predominant focus on rote memorization and lower-level cognitive skills (Duron et al., 2006). Many educators recognize the need to instil CT skills in their students. Regrettably, a significant number of students do not acquire these skills effectively (Fisher, 2007).

Paul & Elder (2006) revealed that most teachers possess a vague understanding of CT and only limited knowledge on how to foster CT abilities in students. While 89% of the surveyed educators identified critical thinking as a primary educational objective, only a mere 9% regularly incorporated specific tasks into their lessons designed to promote critical thinking. Several studies have identified a significant gap in teachers' foundational knowledge of CT. Some educators lack a clear roadmap for integrating critical thinking into their lesson plans, which hinders the development of critical thinking skills in students (Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009).

Alwehaibi (2012) affirmed that adopting and integrating strategies and techniques known to facilitate critical thinking into various courses could enhance both critical thinking and student success. Additionally, research demonstrated that educators who received specialized training in methods for teaching critical thinking were more effective in cultivating critical thinking skills in students compared to those without such training (Abrami, 2008).

### **2.1. Definition of Critical Thinking**

CT incorporates how learners develop and apply thought to understand how thinking can be improved. The word critical for this paper is not intended to denote a negative approach to thinking. Critical implies evaluation of thoughts, ideas or judgments with awareness, creativity and refinement of these processes as needed. It is prudent to remember that to think critically is not to criticize in a negative manner but rather to "think deeply or to question." The goal of critical thinking is to learn a way to think more deeply, solve problems better, communicate, collaborate and innovate more effectively in our personal as well as organizational lives.

Despite the emphasis on critical thinking in recent years, critical thinking has its roots back to ancient times. Greek scholar Socrates (470-399 BC) is the first philosopher to establish a form of philosophical enquiry through probing questioning (Rule, 2015). Socratic questioning as it is known is based on the importance of asking deep questions. In 1605, Francis Bacon, wrote the first book on critical thinking, *The Advancement of Learning*, in which he documented the need to form new habits of thought through education. Dewey (1933) in the 20th century promoted reflective thinking and declares that teaching

students how to think is the purpose of education. According to Dewey (1916), students did not arrive at school as blank slates. By the time the learner entered the classroom, he was already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction. Often regarded as a pioneer in CT, in 1956 Bloom developed a Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which outlined the following categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as levels of thinking (Duron, Limbach, & Waugh, 2006).

CT has been called “the art of thinking about thinking” (Ruggiero, 2012) with the intent to improve one’s thinking. As CT is linked to several different disciplines, we reviewed a wide array of definitions of critical thinking to see what researchers understand under this concept. There is no one consistent definition of CT, but the one insightful definition commonly accepted by experts was provided by Dwee, Anthony, Mohd & Robijah (2016, 633) who described CT “as an ability of learners to grasp ideas through self-reflection upon how one learns and the discovery of solutions to an issue based on viewpoints from various angles”. This definition of CT relates to our context as many ongoing and assessment tasks at university require students to use critical thinking skills such as analytical reading, argumentative writing, focused discussions, comprehension, questioning and inferencing.

The definition made by Jones (2012) describes most of the aspects crucial to CT: “Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”. The definitions above indicate that CT is not merely thinking, it consists of reflecting upon, questioning and analysing. They suggest that critical thinking has complex nature, and this strengthens our support of the argument that critical thinking needs learning and teachers can lead students to improve their CT. Most of the definitions project critical thinking as representations of cognitive processes and strategies used while making decisions or solving problems and the terms such as “higher-order thinking”, “logical thinking”, “complex thinking”, “reflective thinking” are used interchangeably to refer to critical thinking.

## **2.2. Critical Thinking in Higher Education**

One of the desired outcomes of education is the ability to think critically and thus it fosters the basic human capabilities (Pavlidis, 2010). It also depends on the individual’s disposition to reflect on the internal questions and answers that follows and at the same time make alternative possibilities in a given situation (Celuch & Slama, 1999). In today’s higher education in Algeria, many teachers complain that Algerian university students do not use their CT skills appropriately when they are doing assignments. Students are often found to lack interest to exchange ideas critically and tend to accept ideas without analysing them. Again, this is probably because some of them previously studied at secondary schools which typically did not apply learner-centred approach and did not develop students’ critical thinking skills. Cromwell (1992) argues that the main purpose of advanced education is the enhancement of student thinking. This is in line with today’s concern that most graduates at all education levels do not perform higher level of thinking abilities.

The Algerian government has implemented the Competency-Based Approach at the university level throughout Algeria. This curriculum has been welcomed, as it is claimed that this new curriculum will be more effective in improving students’ academic thinking skills. Although the curriculum has been changed, English teachers’ ways of teaching have not changed significantly. Consequently, students are not given adequate opportunities to do meaningful collaborative tasks in which they should discuss, and challenge ideas communicatively and critically (Gelder, 2005; Masduqi, 2008).

The facts above show that there is an inconsistency between the principles of the curriculum and the actual implementation in classrooms which is still dominated by teacher-centeredness. No wonder Algerian university students still have difficulties in revealing ideas in English communicatively and critically. In

order to activate students' critical thinking skills, English teachers need to present different ways of interpreting texts and different conceptions of the world. The importance of thinking in today's education requires the main concept of CT in which there is always more than one way to see things and that it is always up to the individual to judge just where the truth lies on any given issue (Mason and Washington, 1992).

One of the ongoing debates in education research is whether students can learn to think critically through their own exploration or whether they need to be formally taught the skill as part of the curriculum. Sternberg and Williams (2002) noted that students may not need to be taught CT as thinking is a natural process carried by everyone. But Duron, Limbach and Waugh (2006) argued that thinking is a natural process, but when left to itself, can often be biased, distorted, partial, uninformed and potentially prejudiced; excellence in thought must be cultivated. Black (2005) also found that students are able to improve their thinking skills if they were taught how to think. Furthermore, Nickerson (1994) noted that students need to be taught how to think more effectively, that is more critically, coherently, and creatively. For example, teachers could provide students with the criteria for judging information and taught the terms and strategies used for critical thinking (Black, 2005). Therefore, although students have a natural ability to think critically, it is important for teachers to guide them in order to refine their skills.

The importance of CT as an educational goal has been widely acknowledged by educators. Piaget (1958, cited in Fischer, 2001) emphasizes the importance of the development of students' CT in his identification of the goal of education: "To create men who are capable of doing new things rather than repeating what the previous generations have already done, and to form minds which can think critically, and verify rather than passively accepting everything offered" (22). In the literature about teaching critical thinking, it is emphasized that teacher behaviours are vital variables influencing the development of critical thinking in students (Innabi, 2003). It seems clear that it is difficult to cultivate critical-minded individuals unless teacher behaviours support CT in classroom environment. In this context, it is necessary to evaluate teachers in terms of their understanding and supporting behaviours of CT.

### **2.3. The Role of CT in Teaching English at the Tertiary Level**

CT in teaching English at the tertiary level involves creating a classroom environment that fosters evaluation, awareness, creativity, and refinement of thought. These practices empower students to become more effective communicators, problem solvers, and critical thinkers, both in their academic pursuits and their personal lives. We will explore the components of CT and how they can be effectively employed in teaching English at the tertiary level. We will delve into each aspect of CT and illustrate its relevance and application in the context of English language education.

#### **1. Evaluation of Thoughts, Ideas, and Judgments:**

CT begins with the evaluation of thoughts, ideas, and judgments. In the context of teaching English at the tertiary level, this involves encouraging students to critically assess the material they encounter, including texts, arguments, and information. For example, students can evaluate the credibility of sources, analyse the strengths and weaknesses of arguments in academic papers, and question assumptions underlying various linguistic theories.

#### **2. Awareness:**

Awareness is a crucial component of CT. In the English classroom, it is essential to foster students' awareness of language usage, cultural nuances, and communication strategies. Educators should encourage students to reflect on their language choices, consider how language can impact perception and understanding, and recognize the importance of context in language interpretation.

#### **3. Creativity:**

Creativity in CT involves thinking outside the box and generating innovative solutions. In teaching English, this can be applied when students are tasked with creating original literary analyses, composing persuasive essays, or developing unique language learning strategies. Encouraging creative expression allows students to explore language in fresh and meaningful ways.

4. Refinement of Thought:

The refinement of thought is a continuous process in CT. In the context of teaching English, students should be encouraged to revise their writing, refine their arguments, and improve their language skills. Peer feedback, self-editing, and constructive criticism play a vital role in helping students refine their thoughts and ideas.

5. Deep Thinking and Questioning:

CT emphasizes deep thinking and questioning. In English education, students should be taught to delve beyond the surface level of texts, asking why an author chose certain words, exploring the motivations of characters, and scrutinizing the impact of language on various literary works. These skills help students to gain a deeper understanding of literature and language.

6. Socratic Questioning:

The concept of Socratic questioning, which involves asking deep and probing questions, can be applied in the English classroom to stimulate critical thinking. Teachers can encourage students to engage in discussions, debates, and dialogues about literary texts, language usage, and linguistic topics. This approach fosters analytical thinking and helps students develop their own perspectives.

7. Bloom's Taxonomy:

Bloom's Taxonomy, with its levels of thinking, offers a structured framework for promoting critical thinking in English education. Teachers can use it to design assessments and activities that guide students through various cognitive processes, such as analysing literary texts, synthesizing information, and evaluating arguments.

8. Diverse Viewpoints:

CT, as defined by Dwee, Anthony, Mohd & Robijah (2016), involves considering viewpoints from various angles. In an English class, this means encouraging students to engage with diverse literature and explore multiple interpretations. Discussing literature from different cultures and perspectives can enhance critical thinking by exposing students to a wide range of ideas and experiences.

CT is an invaluable skill that enhances students' ability to understand and analyse English language and literature. By embracing the components of CT and applying them in the classroom, teachers can equip their students with the tools necessary to excel in their academic and personal lives, making English education at the tertiary level not just about learning a language but also about developing a deeper and more profound understanding of the world through language.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach which enables the researcher to identify the underlying themes and patterns in the data. The purpose of employing this design is to understand Algerian English language teachers' views and practices in integrating CT in their teaching practice. Data was collected through a structured interview conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. Qualitative research was particularly relevant to the current research study, as we used it to interpret and organize the accounts and experiences of the participants in order to apply it to existing literature and findings.

### 3.1. Participants

The study sample comprised 15 Algerian English language lecturers who taught at various institutions of higher education. These educators were selected from different academic backgrounds to ensure diversity within the sample. Specifically, the sample included four (4) teachers from the Higher Training Teacher's College of Oran, also known as ENS Oran. Additionally, six (6) teachers were selected from the University of Mostaganem Abdelhamid Ibn Badis. Lastly, two (2) teachers were chosen from the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed.

It is important to note that all the participants in this study hold teaching positions within the English department of their respective institutions. This shared departmental affiliation provides a common thread among the participants and ensures that their experiences and perspectives are closely related to the field of English language education and instruction. By selecting participants from different institutions and academic backgrounds, the study aimed to capture a broader spectrum of insights and practices related to the integration of critical thinking into English language teaching. This diverse representation within the sample enhances comprehensiveness of the research findings.

The participants in the study all possess a PhD degree in three distinct fields: Didactics, American and British Civilisation, and Sociolinguistics. These academic specializations reflect a diverse range of expertise, spanning various aspects of language, culture, and education. The participants in this study fall within a specific age range, which ranges from 35 to 49 years old. This age bracket suggests that the participants have reached a certain level of professional experience and likely have some years of teaching or research experience.

Regarding their teaching experience, the participants' tenure in the field of education spans between 8 and 20 years. This means that they have accumulated a significant amount of experience as educators. Such experience is invaluable when it comes to understanding teaching practices and the nuances of pedagogy, as it allows them to draw upon a wealth of practical knowledge and insights from their years in the classroom. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of their individual profiles, including their specific academic backgrounds, ages, and years of teaching experience.

Teachers	Major	Age	Teaching Experience
T1, T2	PhD in Didactics	42	14
T3	PhD in Didactics	40	12
T4	PhD in Didactics	38	10
T5	PhD in Didactics	39	13
T6	PhD in Didactics	49	20
T7	PhD in Didactics	45	16
T8	PhD in Civilisation	37	12
T9	PhD in Civilisation	44	15
T10	PhD in Civilisation	35	8
T11	PhD in Sociolinguistics	43	14
T12	PhD in Sociolinguistics	40	11
T13, T14	PhD in Sociolinguistics	41	13
T15	PhD in Sociolinguistics	42	15

**Table1. Information about the Participants**

### 3.2. Instruments

In this study, each participant was individually interviewed in English. These interviews were carefully recorded using audio recording equipment. When the interviews were conducted on the university premises, they typically spanned a duration ranging from 30 to 40 minutes. This format allowed for in-depth conversations with each participant, providing ample time to explore their perspectives on the subject

matter. The choice of using ethnographic interviews in the study was deliberate. Ethnographic interviews are a qualitative research method often employed to gain a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of participants' views and experiences. In this case, these interviews were particularly aimed at capturing the participants' insights into the concept of critical thinking and how they applied its principles in their teaching practices.

To make sense of the wealth of information gathered through these interviews, content analysis was employed as a data analysis technique. Content analysis involves systematically examining and interpreting the textual data to identify recurring patterns, themes, or elements, such as specific words or phrases. The purpose of this analysis was to extract meaningful insights and themes from the participants' responses. The coding categories, used for organizing and categorizing the data, were not predefined but were instead derived inductively directly from the data itself. This inductive approach allowed for a more flexible and data-driven analysis, ensuring that the coding categories emerged from the participants' own perspectives and responses. The results of this content analysis were then presented in the order of the research questions, aligning with the structure and objectives of the study. This presentation method ensured that the findings were logically organized and linked back to the specific research questions being addressed in the study.

The questions were organized into two sections that aimed to elicit a specific dialogue between myself and the interviewee. The first section of questions began with a number of questions pertinent to their beliefs and perspectives of what it means to foster CT in their students. Subsequently, the following section related to the pedagogical strategies these teachers have used to promote CT, in addition to the obstacles that prevent teachers from focusing on CT in their classes.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

This section of the research study delves into the findings obtained from the data collected to address the research questions. The primary focus of these research questions was to gain insights into the perspectives of teachers regarding the concept of CT and how they practically incorporated their understanding of CT into their instructional practices within the classroom setting. In essence, the purpose of this section is to explore and present what the participating teachers had to say about CT and how they translated their conceptualizations of this important skill into the way they taught in their classrooms. This exploration aims to provide a comprehensive view of their views, practices, and strategies concerning CT within the context of education.

##### **Research Question 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking**

The primary aim of the first research question in this study was to gauge the extent of awareness among Algerian English language teachers regarding CT and its principles. To delve into teachers' conceptualizations of CT, they were asked to articulate their understanding of the term "critical thinking". After analysing the responses gathered during the interviews, it became evident that teachers commonly used specific descriptors to define the concept. Table 2 shows some common codes, which teachers referred to while explaining the meaning of the term.



Codes	Definitions
Higher order thinking	Cognitive processes that go beyond simple recall and comprehension of information
Self Reflection	The process of looking inward to examine one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
Creativity	Generating novel ideas and solutions.
Logical Reasoning	The ability to think in a structured manner, making use of well-founded arguments to arrive at conclusions or solutions.
Evaluation	Assessing the value or quality of information, ideas, or arguments.
Analysis	Breaking down complex information into its constituent parts for better understanding.
Synthesis	Combining various elements or ideas to form a coherent whole.
Problem-solving	The process of finding solutions to challenging or complex issues.
Multiple perspectives	Looking beyond one's own point of view to gain a more comprehensive understanding.
Rational thinking	Making decisions and drawing conclusions based on reason and evidence and free from emotional biases.
Questioning	Asking thoughtful questions to gain deeper insights and challenge assumptions.

**Table 2. Definitions of critical thinking by the participants**

The majority of the participants, 12 out of 15, emphasized that CT entails the ability to question, critique, and elucidate issues from multiple perspectives. They noted that this skill fosters students' self-awareness and objectivity, highlighting its role in encouraging personal interpretations. According to their viewpoints, CT involves the rigorous examination of one's own assumptions. For instance, T2 articulated that

*“Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyse objectively a situation or a set of information. I see that it can also lead to self-reflection and creativity”.* (T2)

Many respondents stressed the importance of nurturing students' creativity, as it is a crucial aspect of CT that encourages them to generate original ideas. T1 expressed,

*“I feel it is important for me to encourage students to be creative in their thinking so that they can produce original ideas. However, I feel that that this process could be enhanced if we could get students to choose the topics they like to learn and explore”.* (T1)

Additionally, CT was characterized as:

*“The students' ability to think logically and reasonably. It is the skill to evaluate, reflect, judge, analyse and synthesize. thinking should be free from any boxes or boundaries, prompting creativity.”* (T15)

Other teachers elucidated further:

*“To have a critical mind is to accept the other opinion even if one does not share it, it is to disagree and argument and to be able to solve problems”* (T4)

*“Critical thinking is to think in a rational way to identify and analyse ideas and facts. It is to be able to examine an issue from multiple perspectives”.* (T7)

*“Critical thinking is not directly accepting an idea, issue or event but questioning it objectively and drawing reasonable conclusions”* (T12)

Other teachers implied that possessing a set of abilities such as the ability to analyse, inquire, comprehend, and evaluate was not enough for students to be considered as critical thinkers. Rather, students should also

possess a set of dispositions such as being open-minded, motivated and inquisitive, and feeling sympathy and empathy. As remarked by T6:

*“I wish I had more time to make all my students think critically, I could make them speak more and understand their thoughts and opinions. As far as I’m concerned critical thinking is the ability to think rationally (without value judgments), identify and establish connections between ideas, phenomena, to understand better or to uncover latent or hidden assumptions and beliefs. It is to reflect on matters of great significance (hunger, racism, environment) and to look at problems and issues from different perspectives. It is to decipher subtle, implied meanings or implicatures, to go beyond the apparent reasons and circumstances. It is to empathise with disadvantaged individuals and find ways to help”.* (T6)

In summary, it is noteworthy that the respondents frequently employed terms like reflection, creativity, questioning, criticism, objectivity, and multiple perspectives when elucidating their perceptions of CT. As noted by Dwee et al. (2016), these terms constitute crucial components of CT, complementing the capacity to analyse and reason. While the acquisition of knowledge and the development of reasoning and evaluation skills are vital, they should not overshadow the importance of higher-order cognitive thinking -critical thinking- which encompasses analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, as outlined in Bloom’s definition of critical thinking.

Consequently, the participants conveyed that CT necessitates questioning, criticism, and the ability to consider issues from various angles. They emphasized that this skill cultivates self-awareness and objectivity, enabling students to form personal interpretations. Moreover, critical thinking was portrayed as a versatile skill applicable in various facets of life.

## **Research Question 2. Implementation of critical thinking skills**

In this section, the teachers were tasked with explaining how they put CT into practice in their classrooms. Specifically, they were asked to describe the strategies they employ and the instructional materials they prepare to foster critical thinking among their students. An analysis of their responses revealed that teachers were enthusiastic about integrating CT into their lessons. Teachers emphasized that they utilize various techniques to nurture critical thinking. For example, in the context of reading activities, they aim to delve beyond the surface and encourage students to analyse the text critically. Furthermore, they strive to guide students in the art of thinking, questioning, and establishing connections within the provided information. T5 pointed out

*“Students could be given specific tasks to allow them to think creatively such as role playing where students are required to solve problems using their own approaches. We could also conduct group discussions that require students to air their views and come up with solutions. They could also be given texts to read and then answer questions which require them to think out of the box”.* (T5)

Notably, ten of the respondents highlighted the pivotal role of the classroom environment in promoting CT among students. They emphasized that teachers have a significant responsibility in creating a conducive learning atmosphere. T1 emphasized,

*“The teacher should foster a classroom environment that encourages students to voice their perspectives and propose creative solutions. However, students often expect comprehensive notes from their instructors, containing all the necessary information to address their assessments.”* (T1)

Most teachers recognized the importance of thoughtfully selecting materials that serve as both guides for teachers and catalysts for student engagement. They believe that choosing interesting materials, topics, and

relating them with students' own experiences trigger curiosity and in the end students feel motivated. For example, T14 noted,

*"As teachers we give our students the opportunity to express themselves freely, we give them voice and space, we select adequate teaching materials (books, theories, courses...). We provide them with tools and techniques (discourse analysis/techniques of analysing workings of ideology, analysing the process of naturalization of ideas and beliefs...). we have to teach them how to adopt a critical standpoint to write about different/ conflicting ideas/ views or opinions..."(T14)*

T13 added,

*"Students could be given specific tasks to allow them to think creatively such as role playing where students are required to solve problems using their own approaches. We could also conduct group discussions that require students to air their views and come up with solutions. They could also be given texts to read and then answer questions which require them to think out of the box".(T13)*

T4 who held similar views explained,

*"Critical thinking can be integrated in the courses in different ways, students can have projects for example in which they have to summarize a whole unit; or to prepare a project in which they have to synthesize different theories...In the classroom I think I have to push students to enhance their critical thinking first by classroom discussions, presenting their projects to be explained and discussed with their classmates, and above all to reflect upon any topic according to their own experiences". (T4)*

They also indicated that they try to direct students to think, to question and to find the relationships in the given information. For example, T12 noted

*"Language teachers can integrate critical thinking through many teaching strategies such as involving more their learners in the learning process, giving them opportunities to ask questions, express their opinions, deal with problem-solving situations, etc. Thus, they can become more aware of their own learning and develop critical thinking skills".(T12)*

T11 argues

*"To get my students to think critically, I ask several questions about a certain subject to keep them thinking, allow them time to think, listen to their hypotheses, listen to their answers and discuss. Most of the time I do not show the answer and keep it for the coming session in order to motivate and encourage them to look for the answer". (T11)*

Four (4) of the respondents further expressed concern that teachers themselves may not have mastered CT causing the students to not develop this form of thinking well. For example, T3 stated,

*"As a teacher, one needs to go through critical thinking in one's job before transmit it to the learners. I know it is important to help students think critically but I do not know if it really takes place because the teachers themselves may not be able to think critically. You cannot have someone who does not know how to think critically to teach critical thinking".(T3)*

T10 who shared the same view explained:

*"Unless teachers are familiar with different components of critical thinking and approaches to teach it, they will not be able to equip students with this precious ability. There is a lack of training on the part of the teachers as well. I suggest that specific courses be designed for teachers to equip them with different techniques, books and materials on teaching critical thinking" (T10)*

The findings of the study indicate that a significant number of the respondents expressed confidence in their ability to incorporate critical thinking (CT) into their classrooms. They believed that they possessed the skills and knowledge required to provide students with the necessary materials, topics, and theoretical frameworks that would facilitate the development of CT abilities. In essence, they felt well-prepared to encourage their students to engage in critical thinking practices and believed that they could make a positive impact on their students' cognitive development.

However, alongside this confidence, there was a notable sense of uncertainty among the respondents regarding their own CT abilities as educators. They questioned whether they themselves had the capacity to think critically. This uncertainty was rooted in the realization that promoting CT in students required the educators to possess strong CT skills as well. The respondents acknowledged that they might not fully understand how to stimulate their students to think critically because they themselves might not have a comprehensive grasp of CT concepts and practices.

In essence, the findings shed light on the complex nature of teaching critical thinking. While educators may feel equipped to introduce CT to their students, they also recognize the challenges in mastering this skill themselves. This recognition highlights the difficulties and complexities associated with teaching and fostering CT in an educational context. As pointed out in Wade (1995), there is no magical formula for developing CT. Instead, it requires ongoing efforts, continuous learning, and a commitment to improving one's own CT abilities as well as those of their students.

### **Research Question 3. Obstacles to focusing on critical thinking**

Although it is widely accepted that improving student thinking is an important goal of education, there appears to be many problems in achieving this goal. Accordingly, this study is an attempt to find out the constraints on improving student-thinking skills in the Algerian educational context. Thus, teachers were also asked to reflect on the obstacles that prevent them from fully integrating critical thinking to their teaching. Even though teachers reflected enthusiasm for integrating CT into their lessons, they also expressed their concerns, mainly the obstacles that hinder their practices. A very prominent obstacle is the education system. Cromwell (1992) argues that the main purpose of advanced education is the enhancement of student thinking. This is in line with today's concern that most graduates at all education levels do not perform higher level of thinking abilities. The comments below show that there is an inconsistency between the principles of the curriculum and the actual implementation in classrooms which is still dominated by teacher-centeredness. For example, T15 commented,

*"In today's higher education in Algeria, many teachers complain that university students do not use their critical thinking skills sufficiently when they are doing both oral and written assignments. Teachers often find students unenthusiastic to exchange ideas critically and tend to accept experts' ideas without analysing them. Again, this is probably because some of them previously studied at secondary schools which typically did not apply learner-centred approach and did not develop students' critical thinking skills". (T15)*

On a similar note, T8 explained,

*"Although the curriculum has been changed, English teachers' ways of teaching have not changed significantly. Consequently, students are not given adequate opportunities to do meaningful collaborative tasks in which they should discuss, share, and challenge ideas communicatively and critically. Algerian university students still have difficulties in revealing ideas in English communicatively and critically. Thus, in order to activate students' critical thinking skills, English*

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*teachers need to present alternatives, different ways of interpreting texts and different conceptions of the world". (T8)*

Many respondents perceived that students lack the skills to practice critical thinking. The students are also unaware of CT as a skill as they were never exposed to it or trained to do it in their early education. For instance, T9 noted,

*"Students are very passive as they were not taught how to think critically from young. It is difficult for them to discern what critical thinking is and applying critical thinking into the task at hand".(T9)*

T1 expressed a similar perception with the comment:

*"I think students will have to be aware of critical thinking to start with. This is because the students were trained in schools to memorize the information, and not to ask questions. This has caused them to rely on their teachers to provide them with the information. Consequently, this stunts their ability to analyse".(T1)*

Besides that, among the respondents who felt that their students could not think critically, three (03) respondents expressed their concern that the students have a passive behaviour in the classroom. They felt that their students were too examination-oriented. For instance, T5 explained,

*"I have tried to encourage more guided group discussions so that they may be able to think more critically without accepting answers from me alone but the students do not seem to enjoy these discussions as much as I hoped. They keep quiet and do not participate. Sometimes I do see a few students thinking critically but they don't seem to realize that and they get confused easily. Added to this many of them are also examination oriented".(T5)*

Some teachers agreed that they were not sure of their abilities to teach CT skills. In addition, they expressed the need for further professional development and additional education in the area of teaching which indicated that the participants were open to using innovative teaching strategies in CT development. For example, T10 stated

*"Teachers' lack of knowledge of what critical thinking is and lack of knowledge of how to promote critical thinking can be perceived as the major barriers to their use of critical thinking strategies in the classroom. In other words, teachers play an influential role in improving critical thinking among students in educational settings and teaching critical thinking skills to the students requires competent teachers in using higher order thinking skills."(T10)*

T11 added that:

*"Many teachers may think they are helping students think critically, but they could be focusing on their comprehension of the subject matter instead. It would also be important for teachers to give consideration to their current instructional methods and their personal beliefs before attempting to incorporate critical thinking in their lessons".(T11)*

The results of the study highlight the pressing need to enhance teachers' comprehension of the concept of critical thinking (CT). This enhanced understanding is essential to enable teachers to effectively instruct and foster critical thinking skills in their students. Despite the evident enthusiasm among teachers to promote critical thinking in their classrooms, several factors hinder their ability to focus on CT. One of the primary obstacles, as recognized by teachers themselves, is the lack of knowledge about CT and how to effectively cultivate critical thinking skills in students. This deficit in understanding the principles and methods of CT becomes a significant barrier in the effort to integrate it into teaching practices.

Another noteworthy challenge is the resistance among teachers to implement innovative teaching strategies. Incorporating CT into the curriculum often involves introducing new and non-traditional pedagogical methods. Teachers may find these innovative approaches challenging to apply, which can impede their adoption of new teaching practices. Breaking away from established teaching methods and embracing new strategies can be a daunting task for educators.

Furthermore, the study reveals that students' ability to think critically, despite their level of education, is a concern. It is expected that students should be capable of making judgments and arguments from an early age, even at the primary school level. This lack of readiness for critical thinking at the student level indicates a gap in the educational system's ability to nurture critical thinking skills from the early stages of learning. For students to successfully tackle higher-order cognitive challenges, they require not only in-depth knowledge but also intellectual skills and a disposition for thoughtfulness. This implies that the development of CT abilities should commence well before formal schooling, as indicated by Newmann (1990). Critical thinking should be cultivated from an early age to ensure that students have a strong foundation in this crucial skill (Bailin, Case, Coombs & Daniels, 1999).

Hence, the results underscore the importance of improving teachers' understanding of CT and addresses the obstacles that hinder the effective implementation of CT in educational settings. It emphasizes the necessity of integrating CT into the core curriculum to harness the potential of all students to think critically and to prepare them for the intellectual challenges of higher education and beyond (Alston, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The results indicate that teachers in this study have adequate knowledge and understanding about CT and that they are teaching it to their students. They view CT as a systematic process that involves questioning an issue objectively from multiple perspectives. It reflects how they interact in society and their ability to apply critical thinking skills. From this point of view, their definition corroborates with the definition proposed by Beyer (1995) who defines CT as the ability to make reasoned judgments. The respondents' insistence on the importance of questioning echoes the vital role of asking the right questions to foster students' critical thinking skills (Haynes & Bailey, 2003). Yet, when compared to other definitions of critical thinking in the literature an important factor is missing in their definitions. The teachers did not mention synthesizing, applying information and making appraisal, which are important components of CT.

Development in learning can be sought through teaching strategies whereby students think critically and go through natural learning as methods that facilitate learning. The teachers reported that they use a variety of techniques to support the development of CT in students. They can guide students in order to facilitate learning and it becomes a reciprocal experience for both the students and teacher. As we can see in this study, the use of CT enhanced learning and students become independent learners who play an active role in the development of their learning. Another way to foster critical thinking is through Collaborative strategy which provides students with the opportunity to work together on subject related activities in order to enhance their understanding and to apply the knowledge which has been acquired. Moreover, CT promotes effective learning when students share ideas among themselves and construction of mutual understanding.

Despite the respondents' enthusiasm, their ability to focus on CT is inhibited by several factors. The most prominent obstacle as most teachers agreed is the curriculum itself, which is again connected with the education system that aims at preparing students for exams. The other obstacle that prevents teachers from integrating CT is that critical thinking can only be taught by teachers who have in depth knowledge of CT skills and understanding of how to incorporate this into their lessons so that it is easier for students to adapt to this type of thinking. The results would imply a need to improve the understanding of the concept of CT among teachers to enable them to effectively teach student to think in this manner. Thus, CT development depends on many factors, and teachers have an important role in achieving these goals.

In summary, the study highlights the importance of critical thinking in education and acknowledges the efforts of teachers in Algeria to integrate CT into their teaching practices. It also identifies significant challenges and the need for further research and support to enhance CT development in the educational system.

### Limitations and Suggestions

Further research is clearly needed to explore teachers' views in other higher education institutions of Algeria, as well as problems faced by teachers in using CT skills. We have noted that the small size of the participating teachers limits the generalizability of the results. It is not possible to generalize the findings to all language teachers working in higher institutions. In addition, data reported are constrained by teachers' responses to interview questions. Other studies with larger sample sizes are necessary to obtain additional evidence to make stronger claims about Algerian English language teachers' conceptualizations and practices of CT.

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