Critical Thinking in the Algerian Secondary School EFL Class

Abstract

The present study investigates the teaching of critical thinking (CT) in the Algerian secondary school EFL class. The study included 76 EFL teachers from different schools in the Wilaya of Oum El Bouaghi. They were handed in a questionnaire that investigated whether they think that they teach CT or not. On the other hand, a classroom observation of eleven (11) teachers was conducted for the purpose of comparing their beliefs to their in-class practices. The results displayed a clear absence of the teaching of CT although the teachers believed that they teach it.

Keywords: Critical thinking; Language teaching; EFL class.

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Résumé

La présente étude vise à étudier l'enseignement de la pensée critique dans la classe d'anglais langue étrangère (ELE) au lycée algérien. Elle comprenait 76 ELE enseignants de différentes écoles de la Wilaya d'Oum El Bouaghi. On leur a remis un questionnaire qui leur a permis de déterminer s'ils pensaient enseigner la pensée critique ou non. D'autre part, une observation en classe de 11 enseignants a été menée dans le but de comparer leurs croyances à leurs pratiques en classe. Les résultats ont montré une nette absence d'enseignement de la pensée critique, bien que les enseignants aient cru l'enseigner.

Mots clés: La pensée critique; Enseignement des langues; Classe d'ELE.

ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في مكانة تدريس التفكير النقدي في صف اللغة الانجليزية بالمدرسة الثانوية الجزائرية ؛ وقد شملت 76 مدرسا بمختلف الثانويات بولاية أم البواقي، حيث تم تسليمهم استبيان لمعرفة ما إن كانوا يعتقدون بأنهم يقومون بتدريس التفكير النقدي للتلاميذ أم لا. من جهة أخرى، تم إجراء ملاحظة صفية لـ 11 أستاذا وذلك لمقارنة معتقدات المدرسين بتدريسهم الفعلي داخل الصف. أظهرت النتائج غيابا كليا لتدريس التفكير النقدي على الرغم من اعتقادهم بأنهم يقومون بذلك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تفكير نقدي؛ تدريس اللغة؛ قسم اللغة الانجليزية.

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I- Introduction :

The need for effective education which is life-lasting has recently been the concern of language schools and classrooms. To live is to interact with people of different ethnic, cultural and religious grounds. It is to involve the person in active social engagements which require effective communication. Thus, schools in different parts of the world are now teaching language learners to listen and speak critically, to be alert to incomplete thoughts, half-truths and manipulated speech. Learners are taught to give evidence for what they believe to be true and live a reasoned life. They are taught not only to write for the sake of writing or to read for the sake of reading; instead, they are trained to do so with a point of view, to answer valid questions and to achieve realistic purposes. They are taught to live meaningful life which is guided by principles of setting knowledge into the service of human beings in most objective, ethical, honest and humble way. The results of the old educational systems which have limited the human intellectual capacities to just being able to read and write and which, in other cases, developed towards selfish ends, was the start of thinking about cultivating CT concepts, principles and values in today's learners.

Despite how important its cultivation is claimed to be, Curry (1999) has once raised an important point in relation to the teaching of CT in the language classroom. She explains in very specific words that in second and/ or foreign language classrooms, CT is usually "appended" to the lessons without enough planning or consideration. This is common because teachers lend more focus to the teaching of the linguistic skills believing that learners' lack of these resources renders them unable to think critically. Contrary to this view, the bulk of research on the teaching of CT advocates the idea that learners can think critically with the few linguistic resources that they have.

Since language learners learn to make use of one of the strongest means of living which is language, it is believed that a language classroom can be the place where CT has the opportunity to thrive in its strongest sense. Many schools have already started building this intellectual spirit in its learners so as to guarantee that their nations will be able to compete and hire respected positions in the world. Therefore, this research aims to find out whether the Algerian secondary school EFL class has followed a similar path or not.

I.1. Literature Review:
I.1.1. A Short-cut about the Origins of CT

During the time when people realized that education is more of quality than quantity (Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano, & Kreklau, 1989), immediate calls for quality teaching and learning began and teaching learners to use their reasoning skills became of primary interest to nearly every educational institution (Siegel, 2010). Saying this, however, does not mean that teaching CT is a new trend. Its roots go back to the old days of Socrates who was named to be the founder of its first traces: deep questioning and reasoned judgment (Pasch & Norsworthy, 2001). The term CT, as it is named today, was not used until the modern time to refer to the same idea and concepts. By contrast, framing the teaching of CT skills and abilities into a systematic, organized field of teaching and learning and to support it with theoretical and applied grounds are all of a fairly recent interest.

I.1.2. Defining CT

CT has been defined differently due to its inter-connectedness with many disciplines and depending on the advocating standpoint. Nonetheless, most of the pioneering works on CT have been more philosophical. For instance, Dewey gives one of the very first credits to the concept with pure philosophical orientations. He labels it "reflective thinking" (Fisher, 2001). He uses this term to include some characteristics which differentiate it from ordinary thinking. As such, reflective thinking is "active" and "persistent" thinking as opposed to "passive", "unreflective" and superficial thinking that takes beliefs and ideas at its face value without deeply considering its reasons and consequences (Fisher,

2005; Lipman, 2003). Ennis is another figure who gives another philosophical account to the same concept but with different wordings. He indicates that "[CT] is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1996, p. 166). This definition highlights the use of reasons and arguments as means to reach creativity; the by-product of sound and thoughtful decisions and hypothesis testing processes.

Apart from the philosophical view, Schnell (2011) explains the concept from a cognitive dimension. He identifies CT as the process of ameliorating the human thinking by moving it from its naturally unconscious and incompetent state of mind to the consciously competent state of mind. This is usually referred to as metacognition. This view does not differ too much from that of Paul (2012) who claims that CT is in essence the process of "thinking about your thinking while you are thinking" (p. 7). The purpose from doing so is to enhance the human thinking by lifting it from its first level of an imperfect state to a second more developed and more refined state of mind. The supporters of this definition believe that human thinking is naturally quick and unexamined that it is easily trapped into its own subjectivity and delusion which keeps it far from seeing reality in its most objective way. Thus, they advocate training the human mind to acquire and internalise the CT skills, the dispositions and the traits that render everyone able to self-assess and self-correct his/ her own thinking. Even though there is no definition which researchers and educators seem to agree on, Ennis (1997) indicates that all of them build on each other and that they serve in the making of the whole picture of the concept.

I.1.3. CT in the Language Classroom

Developing learners' ability to think critically has come to be recognised among the chief characteristics of modern education and so it has been for a language teaching classroom (Lipman, 2003). An ideal language classroom has as its main aim improving learners' CT skills along with the teaching of the linguistic skills (Paul & Elder, 2002).They claim that language should be learned for stronger use not for superficial communication. They explain further that this strength emanates from learning to take "command" of the language. Learners should be trained to critically read or listen to what people state by asking deep questions while interacting. This can include identifying and analysing the different points of view and the reasons on which their arguments stand, testing them for correctness and truthfulness against other possible hypotheses or beliefs and then ending up with a synthesis which builds one's own argument and state of mind (Facione, 2015). Furthermore, Paul (2012) believes that a good programme for teaching CT is an integration of "communication skills", "problem solving", "collaborative learning" and every fundamental intellectual skill or teaching aspect to education (p. 9).

Learning to be critical exclude all forms of route memorization. Being able to speak or read a language counts little knowing that more learners today are trained in listening, speaking, reading and writing at higher levels of thinking and to make well-fit decisions so as to live better civic, social, educational and professional lives (Paul & Elder, 2002). A good language speaker can be shut up immediately by a good reason or argument. It is due to such claims that many schools, universities and educational systems in the world have adopted the teaching of aspects of CT.

An ideal CT classroom is achieved only if an environment which is conductive to thinking critically is provided. This environment can simply be created when activities, lessons and programmes are well designed to meet CT objectives. It is constructed if enough learning and practice in the CT skills and dispositions are made available and if teachers show a real determination and constant motivation to teach it (Fashion, 2015).Teachers should give due care to the type of instruction they present to their learners and the pattern of interaction desired in order to invoke reasoning skills and to trigger their intellectual curiosity. A classroom under such an active and

intellectual environment is described by Paul, Binker, Martine and Adamson (1989) to be a "mini-critical society" or as Lipman (2003) calls it "a community of inquiry". In an environment where CT is of main interest, both teachers and learners "share the stage" in the making of knowledge (Potts, 1994).

II– Methods and Materials :

The objectives of the research are two-fold. This demanded two means of data collection. The details related to the major and minor objectives, the instruments and the procedure are in the following sub-sections.

II.1. Research Objectives and Question

The present research paper aims to investigate whether CT is taught in the Algerian secondary school EFL class. This general objective is brought about by achieving the following two sub-objectives:

- To investigate teachers' views about whether they teach CT or not.
- To investigate teachers' in-class teaching and whether it targets the teaching of CT or not.

The research aims to answer the following question:

- Is CT taught in the Algerian secondary school EFL classes?

N the light of these objectives and question, the present study is guided by the following hypothesis:

- Due to the availability of information about the different teaching practices in the modern world; and because critical thinking is a buzz word today, it is hypothesized that Algerian secondary school EFL teachers are well informed about the teaching of critical thinking. However, their in-class teaching lacks its inclusion because the teaching approach that is followed does not really encourage them to do so.

II.2. Methodology

Two qualitative methods were used in order to answer the above research question and to arrive at the objectives mentioned. The first is a questionnaire through which teachers' views about whether they teach CT or not were investigated. The second is a classroom observation that could allow for comparing teachers' answers to their actual in-class teaching. Both of the questionnaire and the classroom observation grid are parts of a longer questionnaire and a longer checklist of CT elements and criteria that were used in a doctoral research. The other parts of the questionnaire and of the observational grid were not included in this paper since they deal with objectives other than those mentioned above. Thus, tackling them would not render the present work limited to the scope intended. The CT criteria focused on in Table 2 below relate to the type of questioning that the learners receive since asking questions is the prominent distinguishing criterion that characterizes a CT classroom.

II.2.1. Participants

76 Algerian secondary school EFL teachers have answered the questionnaire. They were males and females from the different secondary schools of Oum El Bouaghi. 158 teachers received the questionnaire; however, only 79 returned it. Three questionnaires were not completely answered and thus were not included. So, the sample of the study comprised only the teachers who had completely filled in all the parts of the questionnaire; i.e., 76 teachers.

Among the same sample, eleven (11) teachers were observed inside their classrooms for a time period of one month. This was the time range given by the academic facility of the district of Oum El Bouaghi to conduct the observation; thus, it was not possible to go beyond it. Only the schools of the city center were concerned

because the other schools were distant and assisting them was impractical by looking at the time allotted and the sessions scheduled. Teachers' acceptance and refusal of undertaking this type of research was another factor that had affected the sampling of the classroom observation. Three to eight sessions were attended with each of the teachers. The total number of the sessions observed was 61 session.

II.2.2. Instruments

A five-item Likert-type scale was used to investigate teachers' attitudes towards their beliefs of teaching CT. They responded to six statements by ticking boxes from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The items were coded as the following: strongly agree= 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2 and strongly disagree = 1.

To conduct the classroom observation, a numbered grid (in the Appendix) from 1 to 6 was designed (from "(1) Always Observed" to "(6) = Never Observed"). Conducting a classroom observation for research purposes is a type of qualitative work that can run the risk of subjective evaluation. For this reason, we tried to make our observation objective and measureable in most possible ways. So, a six-item scale was attributed for each criterion investigated in the grid. The observer can circle the number representing the item s/he thinks that it best describes the frequency of item-occurrence during each session. The grid was coded as the following: (1) always observed = 6, (2) almost always observed = 5, (3) sometimes observed = 4, (4) rarely observed = 3, (5) almost never observed = 2 and (6) never observed = 1. Therefore, the whole grid is improvised by combining two different research tools: a checklist and a Likert-scale.

II.2.3. Procedure

Before setting on the real administration of the questionnaire and the application of the classroom observation, both of the instruments were piloted with teachers who have in common most of the characteristics of the sample targeted (Algerian secondary school EFL teachers with teaching experiences of 2 to 8 years). Not too many changes were suggested. Confidentiality and anonymity were both guaranteed especially for the teachers with whom the observation was made. As such, a coding system was carried out in the following way: A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, C1, C2, D1, D2, D3 and E1 (where each letter represents a school and the number represents a teacher). For instance, in school A, we attended with four teachers A1, A2 A3 and A4; in school B, we attended with one teacher B1 and so on. To analyze the results, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used.

III- Results and discussion :

This research is based on the findings of both the questionnaire and the classroom observation. Thus, a brief analysis and discussion of their findings are given in the following two sub-sections.

III.1. Analysis of Questionnaire Findings

This sub-section presents the statistical results of an attitudinal questionnaire to Algerian secondary school EFL teachers. The mean and the standard deviations (SDs) of the answers made by the 76 teachers were calculated and are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' Beliefs about their Teaching of CT

Statements	Mean	SD	N
1. The main focus of my teaching is to develop the learners' basic skills of language such as listening and reading to find main ideas and specific details.	3.92	1.068	76
2. Learners' real-life experiences constitute a major part in choosing the teaching contents of my lessons.	4.11	0.988	76
3. I devise tasks and activities which help learners state and defend their views.	4.04	0.840	76
4. The main objective of my teaching is to develop	3.66	1.001	76

	learners' critical thinking.			
5.	At their age, it is better to teach learners to think about topics of high controversial views such as political, ethnic, religious and cultural topics.	3.42	1.099	76
6.	The teacher is the main authority in the classroom because learners cannot be as knowledgeable as the teacher.	2.61	1.297	76
Total mean = 4.293 / Total SD = .151				

The findings show that the total mean of the six statements is 4.293 and the standard deviation (SD) is 0.151. Looking at the two results, one can see that teachers' attitudes towards the statements were not diverse (a very low SD). The total mean result shows that teachers' answers set mostly on the "agree" option in the scale (coded 4). This indicates that the answers were not very spread and that teachers' attitudes were not heterogeneous. In other words, most of the teachers agreed with the statements in the table believing that they teach CT in their classes.

Teachers' highest positive attitude was reported toward the second statement: "Learners' real-life experiences constitute a major part in choosing the teaching contents of my lessons" (mean = 4.11). By contrast, their lowest positive attitude was recorded for the last statement which investigated their views about the idea that "The teacher is the main authority in the classroom because the learners cannot be as knowledgeable as the teacher" (mean = 2.61). By comparing the SDs of both statements, it is noticed that the teachers displayed different views and attitudes to the two statements 2 and 6 (SD for statement 2 = 0.988 vs. SD for statement 6 = 1.297). So, the teachers believe they center their teaching on what relates to learners' real life events and that authority does not determine how knowledgeable a person is.

The second mean rank which recorded another high attitude is that of the statement which investigated the type of tasks and activities teachers include in their lessons. 4.04 represents the mean of the third statement "I devise tasks and activities which help learners state and defend their views", followed by the mean value of the first statement (mean = 3.92), the forth (mean = 3.66) then the fifth statement (mean = 3.42). For these last three mean ranks, teachers' views and attitudes displayed a slight diversity among themselves (SD for statement 1 = 1.068; SD for statement 4 = 1.001 and SD for statement 5 = 1.099). This means that not all teachers agreed with what these three statements state; therefore, most of the answers were between being neutral and agreeing. This is not the case of the third statement in which little diversity appeared since most of them answered with the agree option.

In short, most of the teachers exhibited an agreement with most statements. Most of them reported that they include learners' real-life experiences in their teaching. They believed that they encourage the learners to state their views and defend them through tasks and activities. Moreover, teachers claimed their focus to be on developing the linguistic skills in addition to the CT skills (means = 3.92 and 3.66 respectively for statements 1 and 4). Besides, they manifested a positive attitude toward including the teaching of topics which do not set on just one viewpoint or those which contradict with their own beliefs and ideas (mean = 3.42 for statement 5). The only low mean rank which represented teachers' low or negative attitude was reported for the last statement which examined their attitudes to learners' and teachers' states of knowledge. So, this part of the study has revealed a positive result about teachers' teaching practices and has shown that most of them claim to teach CT in their EFL classes.

III.2. Analysis of Classroom Observation Findings

This sub-section comprises the results of the classroom observation conducted for purposes of comparing teachers' real classroom practices to the results of the questionnaire. The Appendix illustrates the part of the grid focused on in the present paper.

Eleven (11) criteria were set as measures to evaluate teachers' teaching. The grid may not be comprehensive regarding the vast number of CT skills and dispositions

existing; nevertheless, it is designed to include the frequently recommended and reoccurring criteria in the literature. Thus, most of them reflect the basic skills and are developed according to Ennis' (2011) and Facione's (2015) taxonomies of CT skills and dispositions. The statistical analysis of the results is given below.

Table 2. Classroom Observation Results

Item Analysis / Elements and Criteria	Mode	%	Total Mean	Total SD
I/- Teacher's questions encourage learners to:				
1. clarify their ideas.	6.00	36.1	3.918	1.994
2. take a clear position.	1.00	88.5	1.278	0.933
3. state their points of view.	1.00	31.1	3.229	2.003
4. make decisions.	1.00	88.5	1.180	0.619
5. justify their opinions by reasons and arguments.	1.00	62.3	2.000	1.581
6. state opposing views.	1.00	86.9	1.393	1.187
7. think objectively and fair-mindedly.	1.00	80.3	1.721	1.582
8. pay attention to their selfish appeals.	1.00	91.8	1.180	0.695
9. pay attention to their socio-ethnic appeals.	1.00	96.7	1.032	0.179
10. identify similarities and differences.	1.00	90.2	1.229	0.863
11. identify reasons and arguments.	1.00	96.7	1.032	0.179

One can see through this table that mode "1" is the frequently occurring result in most of the criteria observed. It represents the code of item (6) "never observed" in the grid. According to the table, the highly absent criteria in teachers' questions to the learners are: to "pay attention to their socio-ethnic appeals", to "identify reasons and arguments", to "pay attention to their selfish appeals" and to "identify similarities and differences". The low SD for each of them denotes how these results are shared by most of the teachers. Thus, little variety in including these criteria exists between them. By contrast, only the first criterion "teacher's questions encourage learners to clarify their ideas" is recorded to be observed but with a little percentage (36.1%). In other words, this criterion appears in most sessions but not so frequently in the session itself.

During the same time, a clear absence of questions which encourage learners to "take a clear position", to "make decisions" and to "state opposing views" were noticed. The statistical findings illustrate that item (6) "never observed" (coded 1) is also occurring so often (mean = 1.278). The low SDs for each of them give evidence that this is common with most teachers. Little variety is recorded.

Looking at these statistical results, one can see that the item "never observed" is the most recorded among the teachers. It makes a percentage of 72.72%. This is a very high percentage when compared to the other items such as "almost never observed", "rarely observed" and "sometimes observed". They all appeared just one time making by that a percentage of 9.09% for each of them. What is important is that the positive items of "always observed" and "almost always observed" did not occur at all.

Having these results can be due to some reasons. First, CT was not the main focus of teaching in the classes attended. Most lessons exhibited a clear focus on the teaching of language forms like the conditional with its different types, teaching vocabulary through tasks that included games, worksheets or directly listing them on the board. Also, the questions posed encouraged more recall of some grammatical rules or previously discussed ideas in addition to some comprehension questions in response to a listening script or a reading passage. Furthermore, most of the topics which drove discussion did not stimulate different and opposing views, arguing or most of the skills that are fundamental to CT.

Classroom observation findings do not go in support for what the teachers believe themselves to be teaching. Through the discussion of the questionnaire results, it has appeared that most of them believe that they teach CT in their classes. However, the criteria investigated revealed that its aspects were "never observed" during most of the sessions and in all the lessons. It is true that they derive heavily on learners' real-life experiences; however, the purpose from teaching them does not involve reflecting on the reasons that led the learners to act in that particular way but not in another. The teachers also do not invite them to say what was right or wrong about the decisions they made and/or how to act so as to eliminate their drawbacks and increase chances of their positive consequences. Having this observed, a lot of questions come into mind as to what CT means to the teachers and to what extent they are informed about it and trained in its teaching.

Moon (2008) concedes through a research work that most teachers think that they know what CT is and how to teach it although in reality they do not do so. This finding is also supported by a study conducted by Paul, Elder and Bartell (1997) which has interviewed teachers about the meaning of CT and about its teaching with some focus on instruction. Paul and his fellow educators state that because of its value, teachers feel compelled to claim their "familiarity" with it and with its teaching while few of them actually do understand what it is. The present research paper reveals similar results through a different research methodology and gives more support to the conclusion that most Algerian secondary school EFL teachers think that they teach CT while in fact they do not do so.

IV- Conclusion:

In this paper, the findings of a study that explored the situation of teaching CT in the Algerian secondary school EFL class have been analysed. The study investigated, in the first place, whether the teachers believe that they teach CT to their learners. Besides, it explored whether they really teach it in their classes. This necessitated comparing the results of both the questionnaire and the classroom observation. Accordingly, part of the hypothesis have been confirmed (that CT is not taught in the Algerian EFL class); however, the first part have been denied and teachers have been found to be less informed about what CT is and how to teach it.

The findings of this study add to the existing research evidence that the teaching of CT is still "appended" to, if not, absent in the Algerian EFL class. Even though most teachers think that they are teaching it, the majority of them exhibit little or no familiarity with its fundamental characteristics. The Algerian EFL classes have unfortunately been a learning space where little reasoning is heard and where arguing is not held appropriately so that to test the different beliefs against each other. Saying this, nevertheless, does not deny the teachers' efforts to make the learners communicate in the English language. These efforts and motivation to teach should better be tuned to enable them make greater gains by having the learners not only learn to understand the language but also to use it effectively. What teachers need now is to be trained under programmes designed specifically for teacher development in the field of teaching CT. We cannot aspire to see good future critical learners without good critical teachers. Teachers alone cannot take this responsibility since it is shared by every member of the educational community.

- **Appendix :** Classroom Observation Grid

Teacher's questions encourage learners to:						
1. clarify their ideas.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. take a clear position.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. state their points of view.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. make decisions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. justify their opinions by reasons and arguments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. state opposing views.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. think objectively and fair-mindedly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. pay attention to their selfish appeals.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. pay attention to their socio-ethnic appeals.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. identify similarities and differences.						
11. identify reasons and arguments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6

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