

## Teacher Education | Full Research Article

# Contextual Teaching Intervention to Improve ESL Students' Critical Thinking Skills

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### Abstract

Contextual teaching and learning (CTL) supports students' learning by associating the content with real-world situations, encouraging them to think critically to generate new ideas. Yet, little is known about the impacts of CTL on students' learning pressure and how CTL promotes critical thinking, especially in Afghanistan. Through purposive sampling, five female student teachers are interviewed. The results accentuated the importance of contextual teaching intervention in improving students' critical thinking skills. The participants suggested several strategies, including using scenarios and examples related to the lesson, asking significant questions, engaging students in the team works and group discussions, and using visual aids to create a meaningful context for effective learning. Furthermore, the results revealed that contextual teaching makes learning fun since it relates the lesson to real-world situations where students can figure out the importance and usefulness in their personal and professional lives; it, in turn, motivates them to participate in the classrooms actively. In addition, the study showed that the CTL method encourages an anxiety-free atmosphere and helps students feel confident and independent. Finally, CTL supports them in exercising critical thinking, instilling in them a sense of being heard and valued.

**Keywords:** Teaching, Learning, CTL, Creativity, Critical thinking,

## Introduction

In many languages, learning centers, and institutions, the common problems teachers encounter are the students' lack of in-class participation or their incompetence in utilizing new structures and thinking in novel ways. The teachers have to teach and review the forms, yet making the students learn and use them in daily conversations seems complicated. The missing part is that instructors do not realize that teaching materials do not suffice to support students' learning. Instead, they have to get students to relate the lesson to real-world situations. The contextual

teaching and learning approach aims to connect what students study to their daily life; therefore, they would be able to understand the concepts effectively.

For most students, learning a language feels like a duty. They have to be physically present in the class, carry the learning materials, take notes, and be prepared for the exam. However, they often could not understand the concepts well. Some students may learn ideas, yet they have to review and repeat the concepts several times to stick to their brains. However, other students struggle to understand a term and finally give up or pretend to have learned it.

A burgeoning body of research discussed the importance of the CTL approach in students' understanding ( Danis et al., 2017; Fadillah et al., 2017). The core problem is the image students have in mind about how they could learn things in an ideal way. Realizing this educational issue, teachers examined the CTL approach in their classrooms. Yet, the real concerns are how this method works effectively and what affordances it could offer.

Many studies have been conducted about the effectiveness of contextual teaching intervention in improving ESL students' critical thinking skills. Fadillah et al. (2017) stated that CLT is the concept of teaching and learning that helps teachers relate subject matter content to real-world situations and motivates students to connect knowledge and its application to their daily life. CLT approach through REACT (Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating, and Transferring) strategies effectively improved students' critical thinking (Nawaz, 2018). However, most of these studies do not respond to how contextual teaching reduces learning pressure and how it influences critical thinking.

The results of this study are beneficial for English teachers since it explains why contextual teaching makes learning fun for the students and provides essential strategies for the teachers to improve quality education. This study also makes students aware of why they could not keep a term or concept in their long-term memory. Ultimately, the findings help educational development in society by supporting teachers to realize the CTL potential and encouraging students to exercise critical thinking and have a higher achievement rate.

This qualitative study aims to examine how contextual teaching and learning develop ESL learners' critical thinking skills. This study also focuses on how CTL could reduce the burden students experience when trying to understand a new concept and what strategies the approach entails to minimize learning pressure.

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How does contextual teaching support students' critical thinking skills?
  - a. How does contextual teaching reduce the pressure on students in the classroom (What strategies can make it possible)?
  - b. How does contextual teaching encourage students to exercise critical thinking?

## Literature Review

### Contextual Teaching and Critical Thinking

Sarwinda et al. (2020) stated that using CTL (Contextual teaching and learning) approach-based audiovisual media in learning chemistry has made students more enthusiastic, interested, and happier. They have become motivated to engage in the learning process, and such a high

motivation can improve students' critical thinking skills, which results in learning achievement. Critical thinking is the decision-making process that encourages self-regulation to solve problems and make the right decision (Gurcay & Ferah, 2018). Husruddin et al. (2015) explained how contextual teaching inspired the students to exercise critical thinking. The reason was that contextual learning offers a stimulus to the brain for processing materials meaningfully, which supports students in applying the materials in the context of their daily lives. The study concluded that students' critical thinking skills were improved to a greater extent after using contextual learning and accentuated the usefulness of this method. Bustami et al. (2018) asserted that the Critical thinking skills of those students who learned through CTL significantly differed from those who learned through other methods.

Furthermore, Danis et al. (2017) declared that the learning model of CTL is a concept of learning that supports students to relate the materials taught to their natural world and encourages students to make connections between the knowledge it possesses with its application in their daily lives. In addition, Tari and Rosana (2019) proposed that the development of critical thinking and practical skills can be done by compiling learning with the CTL approach. Hasani (2016) argued that students' argumentative writing skills are supported by their critical thinking abilities. The author suggested that students' critical thinking could develop if teachers provided opportunities for students to learn via CTL. This study further stated that students with high critical thinking abilities functioned better in a contextual teaching environment than in a non-contextual one. It indicated that the CTL method not only instilled critical thinking skills in the students but also helped them develop them to the next level.

Furthermore, Samanik (2018) stated that the CTL method could help the students improve their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and develop their critical thinking. In addition, Umami (2015) suggests REACT (Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating, and Transferring) as an effective tool in applying in CTL method. The author argued that the experiment in a project called "magazine writing" resulted in training the students to complete the task on time, increased students' ability to produce standard sentences in the written language, and collaboratively work to establish commitment and accountability toward teamwork when completing the task. It also motivated students' creativity and critical thinking in producing effective sentences and expressing thoughts. Through an experimental study, Nawas (2018) found a significant difference between the students' writing pre-test and post-test. The study concluded that the CTL approach through REACT strategies could be implemented in teaching English, specifically writing and developing students' critical thinking skills. The author defined critical thinking as one of the fundamental skills for the 21st century that support the learners to prepare for their education today and the workforce in the future.

### **Contextual teaching helps students to relate the lessons to the real-world situations**

Teles and Tomimatsu (2014) stated that contextual learning is a concept whereby teachers present real-world situations in the classroom and motivate students to make connections between their knowledge and then apply it in their lives. Wishler (2013) explained that contextual learning is an active learning design that provides a way to introduce the learning context with the variation of active learning to help students connect with their learning world. Moreover, Kosassy et al. (2019)

mentioned that the contextual teaching and learning model allows learners to relate learning content to the real situations found in everyday life. In addition, Lotulung et al. (2018) defined the CTL strategy as an educational process that aims to help students see meaning in the academic material they learn by connecting academic subjects in their daily lives with the context of their personal social and cultural circumstances. In a similar vein, Khoiron and Sutadji (2016) defined CTL as a learning process that helps teachers associate the teaching materials with real situations and encourage the students to organize a scientific approach and apply it in daily life.

Muliani and Sumarsono (2019) discussed the effectiveness of the CTL approach as it improves the students' self-confidence and results in relating the topic of discussion to the real world. They accentuated Dewey's perspective in Nydia (2018), who argued that students could learn better when they connect learning material with their knowledge and environment.

### **REACT (Relate, Experience, Apply, Cooperate, and Transfer) strategies**

Wahyuni (2013) mentioned the benefits of using contextual teaching and learning through REACT strategies. He argued that the approach engages students in writing activities, helps them to solve their problems, and provides ways for students to discuss or interact with their friends. The technique of using REACT strategy improves the speaking ability of the students. Ozbay and Kayaoglu (2015) stated the REACT strategy's effectiveness in teaching English to STEM students. They claim that incorporating REACT strategy in teaching English was helpful as the students could learn way better with the help of adding and relating, experiencing, applying, cooperating, and transferring the knowledge than they used to acquire in the traditional teaching methods. Umami (2015) discussed the usefulness of the REACT strategies in project-based and cooperative learning. The author also concluded that CTL, through REACT strategy, helps improve students' motivation and achievement.

Fensham (2009) stated the learning process based on the REACT strategy has a positive effect on students' attitudes and their learning outcomes. Utay and Calik (2011) argued that using the REACT strategy, the teacher functions as a facilitator, and students actively play a role in learning as they construct knowledge, apply knowledge, express opinions, and implement concepts to solve complex problems. In addition, Asmahasanah (2018) concluded that students who learn to use the teaching materials developed by REACT strategy could bring a novel atmosphere to the classroom. Students will be motivated to enrich the learning experience. As a result, the learning outcomes are enhanced. Bilgin (2017) also stated that REACT strategy is highly effective in improving students' conceptual understanding. Latir (2013) elucidated that REACT as the part of contextual learning occurs more naturally where students work and experience.

### **Contextual Teaching Makes Students Active**

Damanik et al. (2020) explained the contextual teaching process in their study. They believed that contextual learning is a process that functions by linking the learning material with something students have experienced in daily life. The learners were prone to play an active role in learning activities. The authors also further expatiated that multimedia like texts, graphics, animations, audios, videos, etc. could involve students in a broader sense to learn the concepts. In such a way,

the learning process takes place more naturally. They also suggested that the CTL method highly supports students to get knowledge through their activities, using their own experiences rather than exclusive knowledge transfer.

Moreover, Trianto (2014) argued that contextual teaching and learning possess strategies that could involve the students fully in the learning process, and students are motivated to do activities to study subject matter. The author added that learning and the context of CTL are not just limited to listening to the teacher and taking notes. Instead, learning is the process of direct experience. Sanjaya (2013) reckoned the five essential characteristics in the learning process utilizing the CTL strategy. Teachers could address the topic to make students active and activate their existing knowledge, make students realize that what is learned cannot be separated from the knowledge they acquire, and finally, practice it. Ariani and Haryanto (2010) mentioned the benefits of using multimedia in applying the CTL method to improve the quality of students' learning. Using multimedia makes learning more enjoyable and interactive and minimizes teaching time.

The above literature emphasized the effectiveness of contextual teaching intervention in the improvement of students' thinking skills as well as the effectiveness of the REACT strategies. Little is known about how contextual learning reduces students' learning pressure and encourages critical thinking.

## Research Method

This study utilized a qualitative approach for a number of reasons. First, the aim of the current research could be achieved by collecting in-depth data through interviews because the authors could delve deeper into the participants' thoughts and ideas. Second, "qualitative research design is an inquiry that employs different philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and methods of data collection analysis and interpretation" (Creswell, 2009, P.173). The participants' ideas could be interpreted more effectively if they were given chances to provide more explanations when responding to the prompts (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, Alase (2017) stated that a qualitative inquiry is a practical approach for understanding, interpreting, and accentuating the participants' lived experiences.

## Context and Participants

This research was conducted in Afghanistan, where English education has undergone considerable changes since 2001. Due to existing market demand and Global connectivity, the education system has been affected by novel teaching approaches and insights (Nazari et al., 2021). Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has been re-envisioned, and educational curricula experienced modifications to meet the needs. MoHE planned to redefine its objectives and policies to ensure high-quality education and gender equity (Coleman, 2019).

More specifically, Herat University is chosen as a research site to collect the data. This university host more than 15000 students, has more than 500 faculty members, and 80 educational programs.

Through purposive sampling, the authors selected five Afghan English language student teachers at the English Department, College of languages and Literature, Herat University.

To satisfy the criteria for this study, the participants need to:

- (a) Be current EL learners in the English Department;
- (b) Have had the experience of English teaching.
- (c) Have the desire and willingness to participate in this research study.

The following table describes the participants in detail with their background variables such as gender, grades, etc.

All the names used below are pseudonyms, and the participants have chosen them.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographic Information*

No	Participants' Names (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Year of Schooling
1	Setare	Female	23	Fourth-year
2	Madina	Female	24	Fourth-year
3	Soraya	Female	23	Fourth-year
4	Homaira	Female	22	Fourth-year
5	Hamede	Female	21	Fourth-year

### Data Collection and Procedures

The study utilized a semi-structured interview to investigate how the CTL approach develops ESL learners' critical thinking skills, alleviates the tensions in the learning process, and proposes relevant strategies to minimize the stresses and encourage learners to use critical thinking. The interview includes three primary constructs: the prompts about how CLT improves students' critical thinking, 2) the questions about how CTL minimizes students' burden in learning the concepts, and 3) the inquiries about effective strategies to curtail the burdens and inspire students to employ critical thinking skills (See Appendix I).

Prior to conducting the study, the researchers obtained the participants' approval and consent. They also ensured that the information would be kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used instead of the participants' real names. The student teachers were asked about the above constructs. It was accompanied by several follow-up questions to understand how CTL influences students' critical thinking skills, reduces the burden, and pertinent strategies to reduce tensions and improve critical thinking skills. Interview sessions were audio recorded, and each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes.

### Data Analysis

To analyze the interviews' data, the researchers used thematic analysis, which is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The data were first transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, they were frequently read to understand

their nature to a greater extent. This process was followed by identifying initial codes and constantly comparing them to find significant relationships between each. Afterward, the codes were put against the data to cross-examine and categorize them into themes. To ensure validity, researchers separately analyzed the data and had several joint discussions to reach a consensus over emergent themes and resolve any mismatches. Moreover, they persistently tried to avoid including their subjectivity and biases when analyzing the data.

## Results

After analyzing data, the following themes emerged: teaching English without creating a context, strategies for teaching contextually, contextual teaching improves students' critical thinking, contextual teaching encourages students to do critical thinking, contextual teaching makes learning fun, and improvements after teaching contextually (See table 2).

Table 2

### Summary of the Themes

Topic	The Response summary
1. Teaching English without creating a context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Little learning happens</li> <li>● Not effective and not useful</li> <li>● Not being able to concentrate and understand the concepts</li> <li>● Cannot generate new ideas</li> <li>● Cannot relate the lesson to the real-world situations</li> </ul>
2. Strategies for teaching contextually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Creating scenarios</li> <li>● Asking relative questions</li> <li>● Drawing connections between the previous lessons with the new ones</li> <li>● Using REACT strategies</li> <li>● Comparing real situations to the lesson</li> <li>● Providing examples</li> <li>● Asking and answering methods</li> <li>● Pair work</li> <li>● Group discussion/Group work</li> <li>● Relating the lesson to the real world situations.</li> <li>● Showing pictures</li> <li>● Using graphs</li> </ul>
3. Contextual teaching improves students' critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Observing the concepts in a new way</li> <li>● Getting confidence</li> <li>● Relating the lesson to the real-world experiences</li> <li>● Finding similar examples to the lesson's examples.</li> <li>● Learning the language easily</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining a positive perception</li> <li>• Increase in knowledge gaining</li> <li>• Anxiety-free atmosphere</li> </ul>
4. Contextual teaching encourages students to do critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acquiring problem-solving skills</li> <li>• considering a concept from various perspectives</li> <li>• Making students confident</li> <li>• Making students think and make connections between the lesson and real-world situations.</li> <li>• Making students motivated to share their opinions</li> <li>• Making students interested in learning.</li> <li>• Feeling independent in sharing their ideas.</li> </ul>
5. Contextual teaching makes learning fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting lessons to the real-world situations</li> <li>• Understanding, satisfaction</li> <li>• Sharing different and unique ideas</li> <li>• Interesting activities</li> <li>• Taking part in the lesson</li> <li>• Sharing fun experiences</li> <li>• Clearer lessons</li> </ul>
6. Improvements after teaching contextually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancement of critical thinking</li> <li>• Increase in knowledge gaining</li> <li>• Grasping the concepts better</li> <li>• Visualizing the lesson mentally</li> <li>• More practical than theoretical</li> <li>• Activates students' creativity</li> <li>• Better remembrance</li> <li>• Building confidence</li> <li>• Taking part in the study</li> </ul>

The participants shared their responses based on the experiences they had while teaching the English language. They provided various responses. Some offered complete detailed answers along with examples and clarifications, while others went for the brief responses stating only the main points they had. The following themes are selected from the participants' views on the topic regarding different parts of it.

### Teaching English without creating a context

All the participants shared their points of view about non-contextual teaching methods and their effects on students' learning, which they had experienced in their classes. One of the main problems they asserted was that little knowledge happens when there is no context provided while teaching because students cannot learn well or deeply because they cannot relate the study to real life, so it is not understandable.



The other problem they pinpointed was the ineffectiveness of the lesson on the students because, with a non-contextual teaching method, it is hard to catch the class and focus enough as it seems monotonous or as something that requires one to pay full attention to get it. After all, there are no other alternative ways to get it as the only things available for the students' understanding are the teacher's voice and the text. This way of learning makes students focus less and makes them lose their attention from time to time as it gets distracted easily due to the uninteresting situation they face. It makes students unable to generate new ideas as new ideas come when one can connect something to what they are already familiar with, making them curious to know more about it as the learning process seems effortless to the students. So, studying is not helpful with a non-contextual teaching method.

## **Strategies for teaching contextually**

The participants shared some of the most valuable strategies they have used in their classes to make students learn better and have found them effective. They also talked about their thoughts on how those strategies work and provided a context for learning.

One of the strategies they all mentioned was connecting the lesson to real-world situations in a way that seems practical and understandable to the students. They believe that if the teacher attempts to join the class by addressing a topic helpful for students, they would pay more attention and learn better as they can imagine the lesson's usefulness. However, such learning generally does not happen when the teacher goes on with the study theoretically and does not provide a proper context in which the students would get to know the advantages of the lesson and its actual purpose.

As sub-strategies of the primary strategy, which they stated is connecting the lesson to real-world situations, they mentioned some ways to achieve this strategy's purpose. In their opinion, providing relatable examples is one of the techniques to make students familiar with the lesson assuring them of their recognition of the themes and making them understand the points better.

Another technique they stated is the ask-and-answer method, where the teacher asks several questions before starting the lesson to get a general idea of how much students know about the concept. Or the teacher responds to the student's questions and concerns about the lesson with clear and relatable answers, explanations, and examples.

To make a scenario and try to fit the lesson in it is another method according to the participants' reported experiences. It helps the students get the very usage of the concept along with its importance of it in real-world situations. Pair and group work are other possible strategies that are helpful to teach for better understanding. Sometimes a person learns something better than another one. By pairing or grouping, students can learn from each other and have different opinions and view on one topic from different students, which will help them to understand a phenomenon from different angles and learn the various possible meanings it can have.

Another strategy teachers can use to create a context, draw attention and make learning better is the use of visual aids. Sometimes showing a picture or video can make learning easy and fun and can dig very deep into students' minds, allowing them to remember it for a long time and store it in their long-term memory. Moreover, visual ads show the usefulness and practicality of the terms students learn and connect them to real-world situations. The participants of this study believe

that visual ads like pictures, video clips, handouts, graphs, posters, etcetera make the lesson look familiar to students and make the learning process effortless and fun.

### **Contextual teaching improves students' critical thinking**

The participants' responses about this theme reflect its significance. They believe that contextual teaching lets students observe something in a new way different than how they used to study by mechanically observing everything, being passive students, pretending to have learned something, and forgetting it later. Instead, the CTL method changes the very meaning of studying from a monotonous experience, where students passively listen and can hardly relate to and learn to a whole new learning method, where they relate to the questions, apply critical thinking, generate new ideas, share their thoughts, enjoy and use concepts in daily life and the real-world situations.

Another reason for improving critical thinking through contextual teaching the participants have provided is that students feel confident when provided with a context to which they can relate and have something to say and take part in the lesson. It leads them to critical thinking. Once they believe their opinion is valued, they will make one that results in critical thinking. When the teacher uses the CTL method and provides examples, this makes the task of critical thinking easy and achievable for the students as they can think of similar examples with slight differences in the concept.

Furthermore, most participants feel that contextual teaching makes students feel relaxed and calm because it eliminates any extra pressures or worries, which are always there with trying to understand something. It makes the understanding so natural and easy. This relaxation and calmness improve the possibility of students doing critical thinking.

### **Contextual teaching encourages students to do critical thinking**

From the responses gathered in this part, it is clear that the participants have figured out some of the profound features of the CTL method that encourage students to do critical thinking. One of the participants states that by contextual teaching, students acquire problem-solving skills and consider concepts from various perspectives.

Pair works and group works enable students to learn better as they get the chance to share their opinions with others and have them correct or learn from others' views. It improves their problem-solving skill, which encourages students to do critical thinking.

Feeling confident encourages students to do critical thinking too. As previously stated by the participants, contextual teaching makes students feel relaxed as they learn things quickly. They can relate the lesson to what they already know. It makes them feel confident and do more critical thinking to generate thoughts and opinions and let the class know there is something the student can offer to the study.

Feeling independence is another possible attitude students can acquire through contextual teaching. As they get a chance to have their thoughts on the topic, and their point of view is heard and valued, they would feel independent to generate more ideas, resulting in critical thinking.

## **Contextual teaching makes learning fun**

One of the best things the CTL method offers is that it makes learning fun. The participants have shared their views on this. They believe that when students relate to the study and connect it to real-world situations or what they already know, it makes it fun to study. Because they can share their life experiences or previous knowledge about the lesson, which makes it interesting to follow the learning process, the other reason is that it makes the understanding happens. When students understand, they feel good and are motivated to go on with the lesson and learn more as they find it so easy to understand. One of the participants stated that the teacher and the students actively participated in the class in the CTL method. One of the problems students face when studying, which makes it tedious and tiring, is that most of the time, only the teacher speaks and tries to conclude the lesson making it hard for the students to follow the study willingly. Still, in the CTL method, as it provides context and students can easily participate in the lesson, the learning seems fun and appreciable.

## **Improvements after teaching contextually**

As the participants mention, contextual teaching can improve critical thinking in various ways. From all the explanations given in the participants' responses, they believe that the CTL method results in critical thinking by students as it makes learning fun and provides students a chance to relate to it and talk. One of the participants asserts that after she applied the CTL method within one year of teaching this way, she noticed that her students' knowledge was increased about the English language. They functioned better in many language skills like speaking, vocabulary, writing, making different sentences, and learning other structures.

Another improvement the participants noticed after teaching contextually was that their students had started to take the lessons practically and were more active in participating in the class than before. They have also noticed that their students can learn things quickly as this method has activated their minds, and they are better at remembering and storing them in their long-term memory.

The participants share that their students are more eager to talk in class than they used to be. They raise their hands to get a chance to share their opinions, they connect the lessons to what they have studied previously in any relative way, and they are more confident in making sentences, sharing their thoughts, and answering questions.

## **Discussion**

The current study investigated the contextual teaching intervention to improve students' critical thinking skills. The study's findings highlighted some significant effects the CTL method can have on improving students' critical thinking.

Samanik (2018) asserted that the CTL method could help the students improve their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and develop their critical thinking. The responses collected from the participants clarify this concept. In the CTL method, many activities help students develop critical thinking. When students find the lesson familiar and relatable, nothing stops them from

taking part in it significantly. They feel more confident in sharing their ideas and thoughts and contribute to the lesson's purpose. Such an attitude and inclination leads to exercising critical thinking because they connect prior knowledge to the concept and ultimately create something new. CTL method provides a wide range of strategies and benefits for the students and thus motivates them to implement critical thinking (Sarwinda, Rohaeti & Fatharani, 2020; Husruddin, Nasution & Rezeqi, 2015; Bustami, Syafruddin & Afriani, 2018; Tari & Rosana, 2019).

The study's findings also revealed that the CTL method, through its impactful strategies, motivates learners to connect the lesson to real situations in life. Kosassy et al. (2019) claimed that the CTL method helps students relate learning content to the real problems found in everyday life. It would be unpractical if the teacher introduced some new vocabulary and then taught the students how to use it, for example, when ordering food in a restaurant. The students will not be able to relate to a similar situation they have never encountered. Therefore, they cannot connect the case to the actual problem they face every day and cannot exercise critical thinking. Suppose the teacher explains the usage of the vocabulary in giving an interview. In that case, it will be more practical and relatable for the students because they might have the experiences before, or they may know the importance of using academic vocabulary in the interview to gain more attention and appreciation when they apply for jobs in the future (Wishler, 2013; Kosassy et al., 2019; Lotulung, Ibrahim & Tumurang, 2018; Khoiron & Sutadji, 2016).

The CTL method has several effective strategies that enable students to fulfill the learning objectives by connecting the lesson to real-world situations, relating to the content, viewing the concepts from different perspectives, and reaching sound decisions. One of the effective strategies used in this teaching method is the REACT strategy which stands for *Relating*: students relate the new information to daily situations they experience in the real world. *Experiencing*: students explore, discover, invent and share activities directly related to real-life situations. *Applying*: Students apply information in a helpful context through projects, activities, texts, etc. *Cooperating*: students share, respond, and communicate with other learners via group activities such as projects, problem-solving exercises, etc. *Transferring*: students share knowledge from one setting to another.

Many scholars have discussed the usefulness of the REACT strategies and accentuated the essential strategy in the CTL method (Wahyuni, 2013; Ozbay & Kayaoglu, 2015; Umami, 2015; Asmahasanah, 2018; Bilgin, 2017; Latir, 2013). Some other valuable strategies are also used in the CTL method and help students fulfill the purpose of this teaching and learning method, like making scenarios, asking and answering approaches, making relatable examples, pair works, group works, and audiovisual aids.

Overall, the results of the current study uncover the great use of the CTL method in improving students' critical thinking, performance, and learning and emphasize the use of specific strategies to get to the purpose of enabling students to connect the lesson to the real situations in everyday life and to learn better.

## Conclusion

Actual learning occurs when learners are actively involved in the learning process. Some teachers follow the non-contextual teaching method, which seems less effective in involving students. The

teachers make the learning content look unfamiliar, not relatable, and complex because they do not provide a context like a scenario, real-life examples, or visual aids. For real learning to happen, the teacher has to follow the contextual teaching method where students could relate the lesson through the context to the real situations they face in life and hence do critical thinking and take part in the study.

The current study attempted to solve the problem using the CTL method in two areas. First, how does contextual teaching reduce the pressure students feel while trying to learn something (Which strategies help to achieve this purpose)? Second, how does contextual teaching encourage students to do critical thinking? The literature on this topic has been reviewed to find out the answers to these questions. Then, five female students from the English department, faculty of language and humanities, Herat University are interviewed. After collecting the data, analyzing it, and coding it into useful chunks, the researcher came up with some themes which provided answers to the two main questions, along with some other information about the usage and the concept of the CTL method.

The results of the study and review of the literature suggest two main major ideas: First, there are some beneficial strategies for teaching contextually like the REACT (Relate, Experience, Apply, Cooperate, Transfer) strategies where students can relate the lesson to something they already have in mind about it, or they have previously studied that relates to it in some ways, and come up with a better understanding of the lesson. Students experience the study by exploring, discovering, and inventing new ideas. They can apply their knowledge through texts, projects, and other activities. Students can cooperate with others through sharing their thoughts, group work, discussions, and communications. And students can transfer their knowledge from one setting to another. In addition, the participants of this study suggested some strategies like making scenarios, providing relatable examples, asking and answering methods, pair works, team works, group discussion, and visual aids as applicable to make contextual teaching happen.

Second, contextual teaching encourages students to do critical thinking. Through its unique strategies, this method makes students feel confident in generating and sharing ideas and provides a comfortable environment where students can focus on applying critical thinking. Moreover, the CTL method encourages students to participate in the class activities, which requires students to think critically to come up with something to offer to the class.

The current study has undergone several limitations: first, it explored the effectiveness of contextual teaching to improve students' critical thinking with a small number of English learners and teachers. Examining the topic with more English learners and teachers would provide a more precise image of CTL implementation and its impacts on critical thinking skills. Second, the study focused more on exploring teachers' points of view about using the CTL method. Third, it would provide valuable insights if further research included the learners' points of view to uncover the usefulness of the CTL method in depth. Finally, the study was more inclined to disclose the positive aspects of the CTL method, yet negative aspects and flaws also need to be thoroughly examined.

All the participants in this study indicated the usefulness of the CTL method in encouraging students to apply critical thinking and making the learning process effortless. Therefore, the study carries some pedagogical implications for the teachers. They need to use the CTL method in their classrooms to enable students to relate to the learning content and actively take part in decoding it. The study's findings also suggest students exercise critical thinking as it reveals the profound consequences in helping students get the learning content efficiently. The literature review also

justifies the different strategies teachers can use to implement this method in the classrooms. Furthermore, the study highlights effective techniques and proposes to use strategies according to the lesson, level of the students, and requirements inherent to a particular situation.

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## About the Authors

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## Appendix I

Interview Questions:

1. Please, introduce yourself briefly.
2. Have you ever had the experience of teaching English?
3. Do you think teaching English without creating a context is useful?
4. Which strategies do you use for teaching contextually?
5. Have you noticed any improvement in students learning providing a context while teaching?
6. How do you think contextual teaching improves students' critical thinking?
7. Can you give some examples of when you noticed that your students' critical thinking skills were improving?
8. How do you think contextual teaching encourages students to do critical thinking?
9. Do you think that contextual teaching makes learning fun?
10. Would you recommend other teachers to use CTL method? Why?