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Developing EFL Students' Critical Thinking Skills through Writing Activities: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

The current qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges of developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities from the perspectives of five Afghan English language instructors of the English Department of Faculty of Languages and Literature, Herat University. Further, this study attempted to investigate the English language instructors' strategies towards promoting EFL students' critical thinking skills. The data collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were analyzed and interpreted thematically. The findings indicated that English language teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge, students' weak general information background, lack of reading activities among students, and large classes were the challenges that the Afghan English language instructors encounter in their classes while attempting to develop students' critical thinking skills. Further, promoting students' reasoning skills, integrating technologies into writing classrooms, problem-based learning, implementing interactive-based and student-centered approaches, encouraging students to do reading, as well as teaching students to provide feedback to their peers help develop EFL students' critical thinking skills.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical pedagogy, communicative-based teaching, writing activities

Introduction

Teaching and learning are not and should not be limited to covering a specific amount of content and/or memorizing the data, but it is about developing students' creativity and activating their critical thinking skills (Kakar et al., 2020). Lecture-based and teacher-centered approaches to teaching are the dominant approaches in Afghan academic context, where a specific amount of content is covered in a semester, and students mainly memorize to pass the exams (Sarwari, 2018; Kakar et al., 2020). As Snyder (2008)

discussed, students better avoid remembering and/or admitting the information they receive, but instead, they should critically think and analyze the data they gain from different sources. Further, there are few or no publications on developing students' critical thinking in an Afghan context from the perspectives of Afghan English language instructors. The purpose of the current study was to explore the challenges and strategies of developing EFL learners' critical thinking skills through writing activities from the perspectives of five Afghan English language instructors of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Herat University. This study mainly focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Afghan English Language instructors (ELI) towards the challenges of developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities?
2. What are the ELIs' effective strategies to develop students' critical thinking skills through writing activities?

Since students are treated as the recipients of knowledge and the classes are dominated by the grammar-translation approach, students are rarely engaged in critical thinking activities. Further, in an Afghan context, writing is not considered an essential and significantly important skill through which critical pedagogies can be developed. According to Liu (2018), one of the effective ways to build students' critical thinking skills is through writing activities that are interesting and enjoyable for the students; further, writing requires thinking critically to produce useful compositions. Moreover, writing combines reading, argument and debate which helps to develop college students' critical thinking skills. Therefore, the current study emphasizes the importance of developing students' critical thinking skills seeking the ELIs' reported experiences on both the challenges and strategies to activating and enhancing EFL learners critical thinking skills. Moreover, it greatly contributes to the body of literature not only in an Afghan context but in similar contexts where developing EFL learners' critical thinking skills have not been well explored.

Literature Review

Critical Thinking

While implementing the grammar-translation method, where the teacher is at the center of the class, the instructors realize that to offer quality and life-long learning, students need to think critically (Mall & Sheikhy, 2014). Therefore, education systems globally attempt to incorporate activities into their curriculums to help students rely on receiving and accepting the knowledge and data and critically think about different aspects of the issues they face (Liu, 2018). According to Pithers and Soden (2001), the term critical takes its origin from *Kriticos* and *criterion*, which implies discerning judgment based on specific standards. In a similar vein, Paul and Elder (2005) define critical thinking as self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking (p. 1). Critical thinkers raise questions and issues crucial in an explicit order and try to assemble and evaluate

important, relevant information, utilize unique thoughts, think intellectually and connect with others successfully (Duron et al., 2006).

Writing and Critical Thinking Skills

There is no doubt that writing and critical thinking are two unseparated components. Reading someone's compositions, one can understand the writer's thoughts and perspectives, leading to expository and critical thinking (Smyth, 2004). Writing is considered a tool for college students to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. A well-written and well-debated composition reflects the students' necessary thinking skills (Dixon et al., 2005). In a similar vein, Al-Hazmi (2006) stated that to develop and activate students' critical thinking skills, writing is essential; because, in writing, students reflect, adjust, and rewrite their ideas. According to Quitadamo and Kurtz (2007), writing requires students to arrange their thoughts, data, and sentiments logically, which results in enhancing their critical thinking skills.

Challenges and Strategies to Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking Skills

There are some challenges associated with developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities. According to Yanning (2017), instructors' lack of knowledge of critical pedagogy is one of the significant issues constraining the process of enhancing students' critical thinking. In other words, instructors are not familiar with strategies and techniques to help their students think critically and/or the instructors believe that writing and critical thinking are separate from one another. Further, students do not consider their instructors' feedback, and they keep repeating the same mistakes. According to Alidmat and Ayassrah (2017), selecting level-appropriate tasks is essential to develop students' critical thinking. In other words, students should choose writing tasks that require them to compare and contrast ideas, argue, and defend opinions to develop their critical thinking skills. Son and Song (2012) explored six main challenges that constrain developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities: 1. Students' weak interpretation skills; 2. Lack of analytical skills which prevent students' from proving their claims; 3. Inability to explain, demonstrate and create thoughts; 4. Inability to evaluate and validate other's ideas and perspectives; 5. Inability to draw clear conclusions; 6. Dearth of self-clarifications.

Fisher (2003) argues that critical thinking skills need to be instructed since students' thinking capacities are insufficient to confront the challenges and issues in both their academic and their lives. Socratic questions, a method to teach and learn through questions, are practical approaches to structure students to realize their weaknesses, absence of information, and distinguishing wrong theories. Duron et al. (2006) mention that there are numerous strategies to developing students' critical thinking skills, among which instructors are inquiring questions from students could be the most beneficial way. In a similar vein, Chen (2019) stated that teachers' pre-designed questions are instruments to improve students' critical thinking and writing skills. Cavdar and Doe (2012) introduced a two-stage writing assignment to enhance students' critical thinking abilities, namely, teachers' feedback and revised paper. These stages aimed to reevaluate thinking and assessing self-corrections. First, students compose the first draft and submit it to the

teacher where upon receiving feedback from the teacher, the student revises the paper and adds exterior sources. At this stage, students are required to quote, paraphrase, summarize and cite outside sources where students need to think critically to be clear, exact and connected. According to Mulnix (2010), writing portfolio also helps to develop students' critical thinking skills. In other words, the portfolio project is considered as a nine staged assignment which includes expressing opinions, putting opinions into argument form, rewriting an essay, cooperative critical thinking, refining the argument, incorporating outside sources, putting together, peer review and final paper.

Reflective writing is another strategy through which students' writing and critical thinking activities are enhanced (Nurwanti et al., 2017). Moreover, reflective writing helps students progress and explore ideas and expository aptitude around their claims, beliefs, and experiments (Moon, 2006). Kamin (2001) presents a problem-based learning strategy to enhance students' critical thinking skills. Problem-based learning technique makes students think critically and explore solutions to the encountered issues and challenges. Beckelhimer (2007) implemented problem-based learning in their writing classrooms, making students think critically, solve problems, and experience student-centered classes. Argumentative writing is another approach to developing students' critical thinking skills. In other words, argumentative writing requires students to confront opposing ideas, defend their claims, and persuade their readers (Hillocks, 2011).

Moreover, technological innovations, advanced media, and web-based programs have fundamentally changed the teaching and learning environment; particularly, teaching languages. Developing students' writing through web-based programs is one of the strategies that ELTs utilize in their classes. Further, enhancing students' critical thinking through writing using technological tools is considered significantly beneficial (Mohammadi & Talebinejad, 2015). Students can access different teaching and learning materials through online platforms, their peers' writings and compare and reflect on one another's essays and critique papers (Lin et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The researchers utilized the constructivist perspectives through which learners' make meanings out of their previous knowledge, background, and experiences (Hill, 2014) as a theoretical framework to analyze and interpret the collected data. As long as the current study attempted to explore the English language instructors' perspectives towards developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities, the researchers found the constructivists perspectives appropriate to answer their research questions.

Research Method

The current study follows the qualitative research design. According to Galletta (2013), "Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., nonnumerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest" (p. 7). Since the current study attempted to explore the ELLs' perspectives

towards developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities as well as their strategies to cope with the existing challenges, a qualitative research design helps to seek more profound answers to the current study's research questions.

The study participants were five Afghan ELIs of the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Herat University. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1. They are current instructors at the English Department; 2. They have the experience of teaching writing courses; 3. They have at least five years of teaching experience at the English Department of Herat University; 4. They are willing to share their thoughts connected to developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities. The following table includes some vital information about the participants of the current study.

Table 1.

Participants' Demographic Information

Interviewee	Gender	Teaching Experience	Degree	Teaching Writing Experience
Shakiba	Female	8 Years	M.A. TESOL	2 courses
Sahar	Female	10 Years	M.A. TESOL	4 courses
Shokran	Male	8 Years	M.A. TESOL	4 courses
Shakib	Male	7 Years	M.A. TESOL	3 courses
Yasir	Male	8 Years	M.A. TESOL	4 courses

The data collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the participants were analyzed thematically. The data were divided into main themes and subthemes, keeping the research questions as well as the theoretical framework and the review of literature in mind. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed upon the completion of each interview. The researchers listened to each interview over and over to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Furthermore, the themes were shared with the interviewees to ensure the data were analyzed and interpreted accurately. The researchers used pseudonyms and kept the recordings on their laptops using a password-protected folder. Moreover, participants signed consent forms and agreed to the researchers' terms and regulations.

Results

The data collected through interviews were analyzed and interpreted thematically. The following table includes the major findings of the current study.

Table 1

Study's Major Findings

Topic	Summary of the Responses
Definition of critical thinking	Looking at issues from different perspectives Going behind surface level Differentiating facts from opinions Seeking a solution to issues Thinking clearly and logically
Strategies to developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities	Brainstorming Teaching giving feedback In-class writing and in-class feedback Using communicative activities Playing video Raising problems and questions Creating comfortable environment Explaining the advantages of critical thinking to students
Challenges of developing critical thinking through writing activities	Number of students in classes Lack of resources Students and teachers with a bit of background in critical thinking skills Low reading
Recommendations and suggestions	Needing critical thinking skills in their life Teachers learn asking questions skills Incorporating critical thinking activities into the curriculum

Definition of Critical Thinking

The interviewed participants defined critical thinking in different ways. Looking at the issues from different perspectives to going beyond the surface level of the problems are among the definitions presented by the participants. Shakib stated that critical thinking means looking at the issues, challenges and obstacles from different angles and perspectives and finding solutions to the existing problems. In a similar way, Sahar mentioned, "going behind the surface level of the issues and going deeply into what is going on, where the problem is and how the problem can be solved is called critical thinking." Furthermore, differentiating facts from opinions is one of the definitions presented by Shokran. As stated by Shokran, "critical thinking means differentiating and distinguishing facts from opinions, what is the reality and what is simply an idea. Critical thinkers are able to distinguish facts from opinions." One of the significant points stated by the participants is the ability to find solutions to the existing issues. Exploring, seeking and finding solutions and coping strategies to the existing obstacles and challenges are

called critical thinking, according to the interviewed participants. For example, Yasir stated, "critical thinking means finding solutions to the problems, evaluating the issues, looking at the issues for the purpose of solving the problems and/or offering coping strategies." Thinking clearly and logically is another definition presented by the participants as an appropriate definition for critical thinking. Overall, The participants agreed that critical thinking means looking at the issues from different perspectives, going beyond the surface level of the issues, thinking and evaluating logically as well as clearly and finding solutions to the existing challenges.

Strategies to developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities

The participants presented several activities, strategies, and techniques that help students develop their critical thinking skills through writing activities. Shakiba stated brainstorming is an effective strategy to develop students' critical thinking skills in writing classes. In a similar vein, Sahar also mentioned that giving and/or asking students to come up with their favorite topics and do brainstorming help them to think deeply and critically. Sahar noted, "I do not limit my students to specific topics, but instead I ask them to choose their favorite topics and do brainstorming through which I believe I help them to enhance their critical thinking skills." Furthermore, teaching students to provide one another with constructive feedback also, in the long term, enhances students' critical thinking skills. Reviewing their peers' papers and comparing them with their documents provide ample opportunities for utilizing critical thoughts. Shokran stated that he usually asks his students to offer one another feedback upon going through their papers. He believes this activity activates students' sense of judgment and critiquing, which in the long term enhances their vision of looking at the issues from broader perspectives.

According to the participants, collaborative learning also helps develop students' critical thinking skills. Assigning students to work in groups and do specific writing tasks, exchanging ideas, looking at each other's opinions from different perspectives, critique and learn from one another help them become lifelong learners and enhance their critical thinking skills. Moreover, implementing student-centered and communicative-based approaches in writing classes greatly help to provide ample opportunities for learners to communicate their ideas, critique, and solve the issues.

One of the strategies mentioned by the interviewed participants is raising questions and challenges where students are supposed to confront them and explore answers and solutions to them. For example, Sahar stated that whenever she entered her classroom, she has some questions for her students with no specific answers to those questions. It makes students think critically, evaluate the questions, go beyond the surface, and provide solutions. The interviewed participants believe that raising questions and/or addressing the existing issues and challenges of the natural world and asking students to write about a specific genre significantly help students develop their critical thinking skills.

The participants believe that little or no attention has been paid to developing students critical thinking skills in an Afghan context. In other words, since the grammar-translation approach is the dominant method in the Afghanistan education system, most teachers rely on lectures and ask students to memorize a specific amount of teaching materials to pass the examinations. Further, students are not provided opportunities to

raise their voices, interact with one another, and exchange ideas. With that said, both students and, in most cases, teachers are not familiar with critical pedagogy, particularly in writing courses. Thus, developing students' critical thinking skills are ignored. The findings of the current study indicated that students need to be trained on the importance of critical thinking skills in their life. In a similar vein, the instructors also need to develop their knowledge of the critical pedagogy and the importance of critical thinking in their academic life.

Challenges of Developing Critical Thinking through Writing Activities

The findings indicated that teaching large classes in an Afghan context are significant obstacles towards developing students' critical thinking skills. In other words, there are classes with more than 50 students where implementing communicative-based approaches is challenging. According to the participants, collaborative learning/teaching, implementing various activities, providing students with different resources are essential to developing their critical thinking skills. Still, large, under-resourced classes make it a challenge. Shakib stated, "to implement a variety of activities inside the classroom; the teacher needs to provide resources such as handout as well as more space to be able to form groups, which in large under-resourced classes is impossible."

As stated earlier, the data also indicated that both instructors and students are not that familiar with the critical pedagogy, approaches to enhance students' critical thinking skills, and enough attention paid to this vital area in Afghanistan's higher education curriculums across different disciplines. With that said, grammar-translation is the dominant approach across various fields, and the instructors demand students to pass the exams where students mainly rely on memorization. Therefore, according to the participants, the central issue which constrains the process of enhancing students' critical thinking skills is both instructors' and students' lack of familiarity and lack of attention paid to this vital area in Afghanistan's curriculums. The data also showed that low reading performance among students is another issue that prevents students from developing their critical thinking skills. According to the participants, students need to do readings to think and write effectively, but unfortunately, in an Afghan context, students are not used to reading for different purposes; therefore, their critical thinking skills are weak.

Instructors' Recommendations and Suggestions

The participants believe that one of the main factors that help implement students' critical thinking skills is to consider this vital area in the curriculums across different disciplines. Therefore, paying attention to and realizing the importance of essential thoughts in real life and providing space for this skill in the curriculum across various fields need to be taken seriously. Furthermore, instructors need to become familiar with critical pedagogy and be trained on the strategies and approaches to helping students enhance their critical thinking skills. Moreover, students need to be informed about the importance of critical thinking skills in real life and how it benefits them to become lifelong and successful learners.

To conclude this section, the interviewed participants shared their definitions of critical thinking skills, their strategies for developing students' critical thinking skills, the challenges they encounter while attempting to incorporate critical thinking activities into

their classrooms. They also presented some suggestions and recommendations to better enhance learners' critical thinking skills through writing activities in EFL classrooms.

Conclusion

When the teacher participants were asked about their definitions of critical thinking skills, they presented different definitions. Going deeply into an issue, looking at the problems from different angles and perspectives, thinking logically and judging others, distinguishing facts from the opinions, and most importantly, exploring solutions to the challenges and the problems were some of the definitions shared by the interviewed participants. This is remarkably in line with Duron et al.'s (2006) that critical thinkers are people who raise crucial questions in an explicit order and try to assemble and evaluate important, relevant information, utilize unique thoughts, think intellectually and connect with others successfully.

Regarding developing students' critical thinking skills through writing activities, the participants stated that writing is an appropriate skill to incorporate critical thinking activities effectively. Yasir said that students must read and produce ideas, look at the topic from different angles and perspectives; therefore, writing activities and tasks, if chosen appropriately, can enhance students' critical thinking skills. In a similar vein, Dixon et al. (2005) stated that writing is considered a tool for college students to demonstrate their critical thinking skills. A well-written and well-debated piece of composition reflects the students' critical thinking skills. Further, Al-Hazmi (2006) mentioned that to develop and activate students' critical thinking skills, writing is essential; because, in writing, students reflect, adjust, and rewrite their ideas.

According to the participants, students need to be instructed the critical thinking pedagogies, approaches, and strategies to be able to enhance their skills. The findings of the current study are in line with Fisher (2003) who argues that critical thinking skills need to be instructed since students' thinking capacities are insufficient to confront the challenges and issues in their academic lives.

The teacher participants discussed peer and in-class feedback effective in developing students' critical thinking skills. Yasir stated that teaching students to evaluate and review one another's paper and provide constructive feedback can activate students' critical thinking abilities. Similarly, Sahar also mentioned in-class feedback provided both by peers and the instructors is significantly essential to develop students' critical thinking skills. Cavdar and Doe (2012) introduced a two-stage writing assignment to improve students' critical thinking abilities, namely, teachers' feedback and revised paper. These stages aimed to reevaluate thinking and to assess self-corrections. First, students compose the first draft and submit it to the teacher, whereupon receiving feedback from the teacher, the student revises the paper and adds exterior sources.

According to the interviewed participants, raising questions and asking students to solve problems and find solutions to the existing challenges is another effective approach to enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Further, students should be able to look at the issues from different lenses through the questions raised by the instructors and solve the

problems, the findings indicated. This is in line with Beckelhimer (2007), who implemented problem-based learning in their writing classrooms, making students think critically, solve problems, and experience student-centered classes. In a similar vein, Kamin (2001) presents problem-based learning strategy enhance students' critical thinking skills. Problem-based learning technique makes students think critically and explore solutions to the encountered issues and challenges.

The findings of this study also indicated that the instructors need to enhance their knowledge of the critical pedagogies and approaches to develop students' critical skills. The participants stated the instructors' lack of critical pedagogy knowledge as one factor preventing students from developing their critical thinking skills. According to Yanning (2017), instructors' lack of understanding of critical pedagogy is one of the significant issues constraining the process of enhancing students' critical thinking. In other words, instructors are not familiar with strategies and techniques to help their students think critically and/or they [instructors] believe that writing and critical thinking are separate from one another. Further, students do not consider their instructors' feedback, and they keep repeating the same mistakes.

There is no doubt that critical pedagogy and critical thinking activities need to be incorporated into the curriculum across different disciplines, particularly in the Afghan context, where the grammar-translation method; lecture-based, teacher-centered classes are common. In other words, students are required to memorize a specific amount of content to pass the examinations and they are not provided with opportunities to practice critical thinking activities. With that said, the findings of the current study indicated that incorporating critical thinking activities into the curriculum is essential in order to train critical thinkers and life-long learners. Moreover, the findings indicated some strategies such as brainstorming, peer-feedback, communicative-based activities, problem-based teaching and raising questions from students, to name a few, through which students critical thinking skills can be developed in writing courses.

The findings also imply that both the instructors and students need to be trained on critical pedagogy and critical thinking skills and strategies to train critical thinkers and become critical thinkers-learners. Therefore, the administrators in higher education need to pay more profound attention to this area and provide both the teachers and the students with sufficient materials, remarkably, reduce the number of students in writing classes.

Since the current study took place during the quarantine, face-to-face classes were banned during the COVID-19 pandemic; the researchers were only able to interview five ELIs of the English Department of Herat University where the results cannot be generalized over a more significant population. Further research studies can be conducted exploring students' perspectives towards enhancing critical thinking skills. Moreover, this study followed a qualitative research design where similar research studies can be conducted through quantitative and mixed-method designs.

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