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Creative Teaching and Students' Critical Thinking Skills: Afghan EFL Teachers' Voices

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Abstract

This research investigates the perception of five Afghan English teachers on creative teaching and its effects on students' critical thinking skills. Qualitative research was used to gather the data to understand what Afghan teachers think of creative teaching, how they define it, and how they try to enhance students' critical thinking skills through creative teaching and design a class that is more productive than a traditional class. The data was collected through interviews, and the teachers were randomly selected to get in-depth data. This study revealed the importance of creative teaching in developing students' critical thinking skills. The results of the study suggest that creative thinking is highly effective in improving the critical thinking skills of Afghan learners. The findings benefit those who would like to improve and enrich their practice to facilitate educational involvement and engage students according to effective methods in teaching. Curriculum developers will benefit from this research since the paper provides information about the current situation of creative teaching in Afghanistan, the importance of learners' development based on Bloom's taxonomy, and how designing teaching-learning materials can affect students to develop critical thinking in language classrooms.

Keywords: critical thinking, creative teaching, English language, Bloom's taxonomy

Introduction

Critical thinking, considered essential in education and everyday life, is one of the skills that has recently gained everyone's attention. Critical thinking is necessary for all aspects of one's life as one of the practical skills for searching, connecting, and finding answers to a given problem. Critical thinking, the core of every educational system, allows students to analyze, synthesize, criticize, and evaluate the information they receive, which is especially important in today's fast-growing science. One of the famous quotes from Albert Einstein, "Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the minds to think," suggests how thinking is essential in the education realm (Khoshgouwar and Pandey, 2021).

Critical thinking skill is crucial at an educational level where students can progress in education, science, creativity, or other facets of life. "Critical thinking (CT) is the ability that

enables individuals to establish a clear and logical connection between beginning premise, relevant facts, warranted conclusions” (Philip, 2015). Critical thinking is a phenomenon that many learners and even some educators assume as an unachievable skill that is intrinsic (Gelder, 2005). On the other hand, creative teaching lets individuals understand what critical thinking skill is and how it is learnable. One way to enhance students’ critical thinking skills may involve creative classroom teaching. Teaching creatively is also a vital specialty of every teacher, and without creativity, the classroom environment might be boring and not dynamic, so students will not enjoy such classrooms. If a teacher is creative, it may lead to students’ motivation, and this motivation may enhance critical thinking skills among students (Graesser & Olde, 2003).

Recent studies such as Khoshgowar and Pandey (2021) revealed that most Afghan teachers merely run their classes based on a traditional teaching method. They just tend to fulfill their course syllabus that lacks creative teaching and diminishes the students’ interest in studying. Accordingly, Khoshgowar and Pandey state that “Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education strongly believes that education becomes meaningful when students’ ability for critical thinking is cultivated and nurtured, as it is the core of education” (P.1, 2021). Therefore, critical students will play an important role in having creative teachers someday.

Even though critical thinking skill is considered a crucial issue for students, it is ignored in most schools and educational centers. “Critical thinking (CT) is an important issue which is of utmost significance in modern education, and nowadays many teachers are interested in developing and encouraging critical thought in their classes” (Asgharheidari and Tahriri, 2015). Several facets have essential roles in developing CT. Some scholars found that education systems are influential in promoting CT: “It is possible to improve critical thinking skills among college students through classroom teaching.” (Oliver, 2002). Researchers in different contexts around the world have done lots of studies with varying results on this topic; in Afghanistan, there is a lack of the body of literature about the effects and relationship of creative teaching on students’ critical thinking skills, so there is a need to investigate the subject and compare its result with other countries. Besides, CT is a crucial concern because Afghanistan must develop human resources to achieve Vision 2030: no country has ever developed without at least 90% of its population being literate.

This qualitative study explores Afghan English teachers’ attitudes towards the effects and relationship of creative teaching on Afghan EFL students’ critical thinking skills. The paper presents some of the methods and approaches Afghan teachers to undertake to make teaching creative and learning more effective in English language classes. The results lead to assist in developing strategies to improve creative teaching in English classrooms or other disciplines for affecting and enhancing students’ critical thinking skills. This is to say that the teaching method has an essential role in creating critical thinking skills for students. At the same time, they are neglected in many educational centers for various reasons. This study aims to recognize those reasons and propose effective teaching methods to enhance students’ critical thinking skills. As a result, it would benefit and inform deans of all higher educational institutions, English instructors, and undergraduate students about creative teaching methods that lead them to acquire critical thinking skills. Therefore, the present study seeks to find answer to the following questions:

What attributes of proper creative teaching increase English students’ critical thinking skills?

- How do English language teachers bring creative teaching into their classroom setting to promote English students’ critical thinking?

Literature Review

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to the students' thinking skills involving various perspectives toward observing and solving things with different and new solutions. Eragamreddy (2013) considers creative thinking skills as the innovative way of thinking which leads to new perceptions, visions, new means, and all-new ways of realizing. CT skills are acquisitive skills that can be learned and taught, and educators are the ones who can foster students' critical thinking in the educational institution (Sternberg 1986, Ennis 1989, & Lempman 1988).

Some researchers defined critical thinking in different contexts Nurlaela (2015) believed that in a psychological context, creativity refers to creating a new idea or product which was previously unknown and is original. Other scholars define it more specific. For instance, Birgili (2015) asserted that creative thinking includes all perceptive activities people utilize for particular phenomena and want to solve them based on their capacity. According to Pakizer (2016), critical thinking and problem solving are crucial for success. Critical thinkers develop good "habits of mind." These habits are analysis, interpretation, accuracy, problem-solving, and reasoning. Students must be good communicators, critical thinkers, creators, and collaborators—the 4 Cs (Pakizer, 2016). First, creative thinking needs imagination and creativity. Next, communication requires analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Finally, collaboration involves teamwork and cooperation.

Creative Teaching

In the dictionary of Merriam-Webster, the word 'creative' means "showing an ability to make new things or think of new ideas." In the Oxford English Dictionary, creative means "involving the use of skill and imagination to produce something new or a work of art" generally. Creative teaching involves utilizing novel methods of teaching, by Oxford English Dictionary. Researchers defined creative teaching variously: creativity is not an innate talent but can be developed through practice (Doron, 2016). According to Sale (2015), creative teaching is a process in which instructive and effective strategies are used to develop students' attention and participation in classrooms. In a study by Soleymanpur (2014), the results showed that creative teaching enhances students' motivation level and affects their academic achievements. Many researchers have reported that creativity is defined by flexible, dynamic, unique, and out-of-the-box thinking in various situations. (Turkmen & Sertkahya, 2015, p.74). Similarly, "we can presume that the term 'creativity' or 'creative thinking' reveals the kind of thinking that leads to new insights, novel approaches, fresh perspectives, whole new ways of understanding and conceiving of things." (Eragamreddy, 2013, p. 127).

Kizlik (2018) argues that one of the teachers' responsibilities in creative teaching is to design a creative lesson. Such lessons should focus on learning outcomes or learning objectives. They describe the things that learners can do as a result of teaching. They serve as the basis for the instructional design of a task, lesson, sequence of lessons, or entire course. Kizlik (2018) also presents a "backward design" for creative teaching in which teachers first have to think about the result or end of the lesson they wish to achieve. This design includes a definition of the behaviour, what students have to do, and how to assess that and plan or deliver the instruction for such behaviour.

Creative Teaching and Critical Thinking

For several reasons, the purpose of education has changed. This is due to globalization and technology. Reading, writing, and arithmetic was enough 50 years ago. These were the skills needed to enter the workforce or university. Today, this is not enough; students need a different skill set. Educators call this skill set “21st Century Skills.” Students now need to learn to work with technology and globalization. They need to be researchers, creators, and innovators and work with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Creative teaching and critical thinking are linked in the way creative teaching presents novel strategies and methods for students in the classrooms, and critical thinking involves resolving problems variously from the past. Considering this, scholars investigated the relation between creative teaching and critical thinking: Guzdial et al. (2018) encouraged students to be more curious and solve problems by producing new notions while working as pairs in the classrooms. According to Ferrari et al., (2009), innovative teaching enables students to participate actively in the class and demonstrate their creativity during learning. Accordingly, to achieve academic goals and enhance students’ critical thinking, creative teaching has an important role.

Sobral (2021) suggests considering Bloom’s Taxonomy classification if teachers plan to have creativity in the class and enhance students’ critical thinking skills. Bloom's Taxonomy is a classification (or grouping) of educational learning objectives. Some learning activities have students do simple things like memorizing, listing, or matching. Other learning activities are more challenging and cause them to think deeply, analyse, or create. When students do activities that cause them to think deeply, they do “higher-order thinking.” Bloom's Taxonomy groups learning activities from low order thinking (like memorizing) to high order thinking (like creating or analysing).

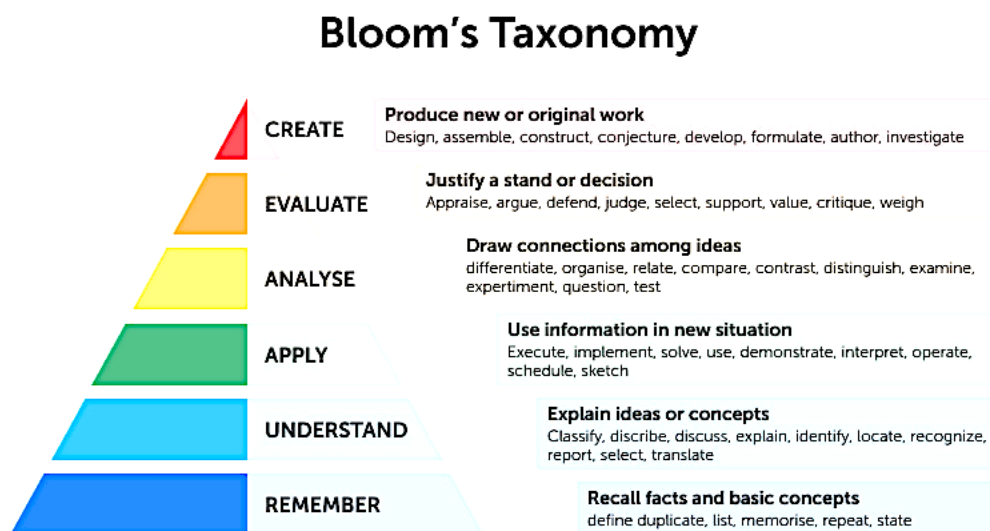


Figure 1. Bloom’s Taxonomy

According to Sobral (2021), teachers should be aware of their students’ levels which should be aligned with the level of their learning activities. The higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy describe learning objectives that use deep or complex thinking. This kind of thinking is higher-order thinking. To help students develop critical thinking skills, teachers need to give them activities and tasks that would challenge them to gain better outcomes. According to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), learners can achieve more when working with

more capable peers and adults' guidance. Thus, because teachers want their students to become critical thinkers, they need to encourage higher-order thinking skills from the beginning and write learning outcomes using the verbs from the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Approaches to Enhance Critical Thinking in Classrooms

Based on some research findings about the attributes of critical thinking among students, it can be taught and learned by effort and through schools and instructors; "General school education and specific instructional interventions are frequently seen as important ways to improve students' critical thinking abilities" (Niu et al., 2013, p??). Taking this into consideration, researchers found various approaches to acquiring critical thinking. For example, Niu et al. (2013) asserted that learning critical thinking depends on the individuals who aim to acquire it, and the students' characteristics are more important to be considered than the types of approaches applied in classrooms. Similarly, Asgharheidari and Tahriri (2015) claimed that critical thinkers have identical characteristics such as (a) they seek a clear statement of the thesis or questions, (b) looking for reasons, (c) trying to be well informed, (d) use the mentioned credible sources, (e) take into account the actual situation, (f) try to remain relevant to the main point, (g) keep in mind the initial or primary concern, (h) look for alternatives, (i) are open-minded, (j) take a position when the evidence and reasons are sufficient to do so, (k) seek as much precision as the subject permits, (l) deal in an orderly manner with the parts of a complex whole, (m) use critical thinking abilities, and (n) are sensitive to the feelings, level of knowledge, and degree of sophistication of others.

Other researchers investigated other methods to foster critical thinking in students by teachers, who make students courageous to attempt to improve their critical thinking (Nurlaela, 2015; Eragamreddy, 2013; and Birgili, 2015). Alrubail (2015) introduces peer feedback as one of the best activities in an EFL classroom to activate students' critical thinking: "Peer feedback is the activity of giving a fellow student or colleague your thoughts, impressions, and feelings about what they write, say, or do." When students write, they usually think of the teacher as their audience. Peer feedback has the benefit of having students think of their fellow students as the audience. Peer review (or the process of peer feedback) is a metacognitive process of learning. It helps students think about their learning because they receive feedback.

According to Conway (2018), one way to check if creative teaching has affected critical thinking among the students is through formative assessment. "Formative assessment is an ongoing look to see how well students are doing. It occurs during the learning process." Formative assessment gives feedback to both teachers and students. Teachers receive feedback on what students have successfully learned and what they have not understood. Teachers use this feedback to revise their lessons so students can master the skills they need to learn. Formative assessment gives students feedback on how they are doing. They use the feedback to focus on strengthening weak areas. Examples of formative assessment include periodic quizzes, multiple drafts of essays, diagnostic tests, and in-class or homework assignments. Observation is one of the most common forms of formative assessment. It is informal and quick. Teachers can intervene when students are having difficulty. Formative assessments are not always graded. However, they contain comments and feedback so students can judge how they are doing and improve their learning.

Zimmerman (2015) suggests that different discussion activities enhance students' creativity and critical thinking. He stated that "discussion questions are a good example of a critical thinking activity." The purpose of discussion questions is to guide and stimulate thinking. One example is to ask advanced students to work in small groups to create open-ended questions. Each group will exchange the questions with another group and then criticize them if they are suitable for creating discussions. Alber (2013) also suggests questions to enhance critical thinking in the class. She states that teachers can improve the quality of their questions. This does not need to be complicated; even simple questions can be practical. Teachers can help their students think better and more creatively by asking questions such as "what do you think? Why do you think that? How do you know this? Can you tell me more?"

Teachers' and Students' attitudes toward Critical Thinking

Understanding students' and instructors' attitudes toward learning and teaching critical thinking is essential in developing the best avenues of teaching CT. Some researchers, such as Janssen et al. (2019), asserted that teachers are more willing to acquire CT skills since they have the central role in conveying it to the students and are more influential in fostering it. Some other ones proposed somewhat similar beliefs. Stapleton (2011) said that the curriculum of higher education should be adopted to increase students' CT. The old and traditional teaching system must be changed into a modern one, including subjects or methods that promote CT. Accordingly, Stapleton (2011) listed three critical documents that are essential parts of an influential education curriculum: (1) unpack the multifaceted nature of CT into clearly defined components across a range of subjects; (2) provide training in how to give CT a more prominent role in individual subjects; (3) set out learning benchmarks specifically focused on both CT and disposition. Therefore, this notion of Stapleton (2011) covers both crucial sides of the teaching system: teachers and the higher education curriculum.

On the one hand, Stapleton (2011) focused on teachers' vital role in improving CT, which is designing, applying, and assessing activities that enhance students' critical thinking. On the other hand, Stapleton (2011) believed the teaching method through which CT is delivered is as crucial as teachers' roles. Similarly, Giancarlo and Facione (2001) said, "If we want our students to be both willing and able to engage in CT, and we do, then we have to include both in school and professional development curricula, in our instructional assignments, and our educational outcomes assessments" (p. 81).

Critical thinking has become a significant concern in higher education, so it attracts researchers to investigate CT thoroughly from various perspectives and its different aspects. Considering this principle, Niu et al. (2013), Asgharheidari and Tahriri (2015), Nurlala (2015), Eragamreddy (2013), and Birgili (2015) conducted studies on the necessary attributes of CT for students. Other scholars like Janssen et al. (2019), Stapleton (2011), and many other researchers studied and discussed the learner's attitudes toward CT and its importance. CT is an incontrovertible element of the teaching system to achieve academic goals for the learners, but it is important to examine how teachers who have used it consider it effective.

Research Method

This qualitative study explores the effects of creative teaching on English students' critical thinking skills and how Afghan teachers bring creativity into classrooms. This study also reveals

how English teachers can enhance students' critical thinking skills through creativity in teaching. Since the literature provided little or no information about the effects of creative teaching on students' critical thinking skills, the researchers attempted to find in-depth information from the participants' experiences. The research questions explore the attributes of proper creative teaching and how creative teaching is applicable in the Afghan context to enhance students' critical thinking skills.

Research Design

The current study is a qualitative design and used the semi-structured interview to collect data from the participants. First, a qualitative approach is flexible in structure by which complex and complicated issues can be easily understood. Second, since the literature review presented very limited and little information about attributes of effective creative teaching to promote students' critical thinking in the Afghan higher educational context, this approach can investigate deeper information and present a more comprehensive and applicable result. Third, qualitative approaches value the experiences of participants of the study and tend to focus on how individuals can have different perspectives about the phenomena. As a result, this study helps educators develop a deeper comprehension of the topic acquired through a qualitative research design. The current study findings would benefit all educational institutions, particularly English teachers in higher education.

Participants and Sampling Criteria

The participants of the current study are five English instructors, the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of two universities in the western part of Afghanistan, and one public and one private university in the same city. The researchers used convenience sampling to choose the participants of this study. Three participants (one female and two male) were teaching at a public university, and two (one male and one female) were teaching at a private university. In order to satisfy the criteria for this study, participants had to: A) be English teachers at university, B) have different experience ranges (five to ten years) in teaching the English language, and C) have the willingness to participate in the research study.

The following table presents the participants' information, such as gender, teaching experience, and degree.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

No.	Setting	Participants (Pseudonym)	Gender	Qualifications	Teaching Experience
1	Public University	Ali	Male	MA in TESOL	10 years
2	Public University	Hamed	Male	Ph.D. candidate in EFT	10 years
3	Public University	Mina	Female	MA in Literature	6 years
4	Private University	Reza	Male	Bachelor	8 years
5	Private University	Mahsa	Female	Bachelor	7 years

Data Collection and Data Analysis

For this study, interview was the primary source of data collection. The interview is beneficial to gain the story behind a specific experience and become aware of others' ideas about what researchers are investigating. Five steps are required for collecting data in a qualitative research design, such as participants and sites that help researchers design research questions, gaining access to these participants and sites through obtaining permissions, identifying information types, and designing protocols (Creswell, 2021). Data analysis in qualitative approaches is the process of systematically selecting and searching the transcribed interviews, non-textual material, and observations gathered by the researcher who wants to enhance cognition of phenomena. Moreover, subdividing massive and huge information into various categories is possible by coding them (Dey & Astin?, 1993). To allocate identified themes, the researcher can label them by tags and codes to sort the data and information. In data analysis, the data is inspected, clarified, transformed, and modeled to draw practical information (William Newman, 1994, John, Tukey, 1961). Despite the explanatory method being used for data analysis in this study, the researchers followed various steps:

(a) recorded the interviewees on a voice recording device, (b) the researchers transcribed the interviews, (c) the transcriptions were reviewed many times to be sure if the participants' answers covered the research questions, and (d) the information was categorized based on the topics discussed in the interview questions, (e) Finally, some important codes and themes emerged from the data which are as follow:

1. Creative teaching applicability to different subjects
2. Effects of creative teaching on students
3. Proposed approaches to enhance creative teaching in classrooms
4. Influential factors in teaching creatively
5. Differences between a creative teaching class versus a traditional class
6. Specific methods to evaluate students' critical thinking through teaching creatively

Results

The data analysis process involves the six categories and stages, which the researchers distinguished through data coding and mainly presented all these categories from each participant's viewpoint. Therefore, to fulfill this purpose, participants' summary responses are presented in detail in the following table with an explanation of their responses to attain a cross-description analysis of the findings.

Table 2

Teachers reported experiences with implementing creative teaching and critical thinking

Topic	Summary of Responses
1. Creative teaching applicability to different subjects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on teacher's methods • Depending on teachers' dedication, can be applied in all course
2. Effects of creative teaching on students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes students more active • Learning the concepts more deeply

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful relationship between what learned with the outside world • Find solution to problems at a community level • Personally and mentally grow up • Creates a sense of competition
3. Proposed approaches to enhance creative teaching in classrooms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin by community building • Teachers' knowledge of creative teaching methods • Teachers not limiting themselves to certain methods
4. Influential factors in teaching creatively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' and teachers' perceptions of the creative lesson • Technology in classes • Well-prepared lesson plan • Teaching environment, number of students, and their level • Teacher-student relationship
5. A creative teaching class versus traditional class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classes with creative teaching are more productive and flexible. • Lessons are taught analytically, not theoretically • Classes are student-centered • Students are more active • Enhances students' critical thinking skills • Deep understanding of concepts among students • Increases students' participation • Better grades • Enjoyable learning environment
6. Specific methods to evaluate students' critical thinking through teaching creatively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment by asking indirect questions • Discussing an issue from various perspectives • Motivating students' productions and behaviors • Receive students' feedback on the lesson • Research-based small projects

Ali, the first participant of the study, began explaining his teaching methods, which involve creative strategies, and believed that creative teaching is influential in evoking critical thinking in students. A critical teaching method in which when a teacher wants to teach a concept must be tailored to the needs of the students. It is a process in which the teacher considers the needs of students from the ground up and adjusts and designs their teaching materials. After that, students are given many opportunities to discuss what is being taught. And the question of why? It is asked a lot. It also discusses power relations, challenges them, and explains why they exist. For example, why is there injustice? Why is there so much class conflict? What solutions should we create for social problems? In the literature classes I teach, there is a discussion about the nature of the debate. So, based on what I teach, I try to ask more questions that the students ask me, why is this or why has it happened? That is, why should a student come to me and ask other students why a concept or category comes? This causes the person or student to look at a subject from different perspectives and not just focus on one subject from his / her mentality and see that subject from several angles to suggest different solutions.

Mina, another English instructor at the public university, highly believes that creative teaching is a must to enhance the critical thinking skill of students. All the study participants

agreed that no particular subject is excluded in creative teaching, so it applies to all subjects and depends on the teacher's ability to implement it. According to Mina's perception of creative teaching, the teachers are the ones who can activate students' CT skills by teaching creatively.

According to Mahsa, creativity can be present in all aspects of life and university subjects, "to be a creative teacher, specific subjects do not matter, but teachers' knowledge and talents matter." Sometimes a teacher has the required knowledge and high level of education but cannot transfer it into classrooms and cannot use it effectively, so the ability to utilize creative teaching is much more critical for teachers, according to Mahsa's claim. This ability usually originates from the teachers' interest in their teaching job and relevant field of study.

Ali discussed the effects of creative teaching on students and stated, "Naturally, when students can contribute more to the lesson, and ask about the concept and why of a concept, they feel better engaged with the material and the lesson given by the teacher. This makes them more active and also learn the concept deeply". Moreover, he mentioned, "it is very important that the student tries to find a meaningful relationship between what he has learned and with the outside world and his real life, and to find a solution to each of these problems, which are, for example, at the community level."

Hamed, the second participant of the study, discussed the effects of creative teaching on students. He said, "Students need to be made aware that critical thinking is a skill they can acquire. Once students understand this, they can do things to raise their critical thinking". He also emphasized the direct connection between critical thinking skills and creative teaching. "For example, in some cases, there is no right answer; in some cases, if we listen to the opinions of other students, we learn from them, and it causes our critical thinking to rise." Furthermore, he believed that if students are aware of what creative teaching is and how it affects their critical thinking skill, they willingly will work on it.

Mina fostered her ideas on the way of beginning a class. She believed that the way that classes are started is the key to creative teaching and declared, "when I start the class with a lead, even the weaker students try to take part and give answers. Alternatively, when I divide the class into groups or pairs, the whole class participates actively and tries to share ideas". Students' eagerness to participate in lessons and competitive environment, as Mina reported, reveals the positive and effectiveness of creative teaching.

According to the participants, creative teaching methods stimulate students' critical thinking skills. Accordingly, Ali suggested that teachers should enhance their knowledge of the concepts of creative teaching and up-to-date their strategies regarding creativity. He specially named community building the best technique that worked for him and may be effective for other teachers. Hamed recommended, "We should not say there is the best method, and it is the one I am using. We limit ourselves when we look at the class, students, and objectives and choose one method as the best way to teach. So, the first suggestion is that the teachers should not limit themselves to one teaching method".

Mahsa also believes that teachers should be aware of using creative teaching to influence and promote students' critical thinking skills. She listed a few categories that would effectively evoke students' CT skills: well-prepared lesson plans, a constructive learning environment, and connecting what students learn and what they face in the community. She elaborated that if English teachers have prior plans, they can include new methods and implement creative teaching in classrooms. Then she emphasized that whatever the teachers teach, if they connect the lesson to the real life of students, the lessons would be easy to understand.

Ali named a few influential factors which intervene in being a creative teacher, such as teachers' and students' perceptions of creative teaching and critical thinking skill, using technology in the class, and having specific lesson plans. He believes that first, teachers must explain to students the importance of the activity, how to do it, and how it will affect them. According to Mina and Mahsa, teachers who decide to use creative teaching should consider students' needs while planning their lessons. Mahsa said that "sometimes, I opt for a new and creative teaching method, but when I implement it in my class, I find out that it is not suitable for the students and results negatively rather than positively." Therefore, teachers should plan accordingly and consider the lesson's goals, students' needs, and levels before applying creative teaching in their class.

Hamed mentioned a few tips in choosing a creative teaching method, such as considering the number of students, the learning environment, class objectives, and the student's background knowledge. Moreover, he precisely emphasized the most important feature that all the teachers should remember. "Teachers should realize that all our students can be creative and have critical thinking skills because CT is a skill, and they can improve and build it. It is wrong to say that only a genuine has CT skill and is born with it."

In proposing solutions to bring creativity into classrooms, Mina suggested some techniques that worked in her classes. "I would rather say that they (teachers) should always have a picture of their classes in their minds and always have lesson plans according to the class level. They should create ways to allow the entire class to participate and become active". She also mentioned several features of creative teaching methods that can promote it, such as the teacher and students' relationship, classroom facilities, teachers' knowledge level, and technology in classrooms.

Mahsa and Reza also emphasized the relationship between teachers and students since they view this factor as the foremost one that leads the other factors to occur well or wrong. It means that if the teachers create such an environment in classrooms where students feel free to share their opinion and even object to the teachers' teaching method, it automatically sets the scene for a better learning environment. Then classrooms' facilities like projectors, computers, and internet would be other affective factors which aid to progress besides the teachers' high level of knowledge.

Ali presented a clear picture of a class in which creative teaching is used with the one which involves traditional teaching methods. He pointed out four differences of a creative class which are: 1) reproductive, 2) deep understanding of lessons, 3) student-centered oriented class, and 4) finally results in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Hamed says creative classes will be more productive in terms of students getting better grades, a deep understanding of the lesson, more participation, and improved CT skill. To have these consequences, there need to be suitable assessment methods in classrooms, such as individual and group projects. Mina also explained a clear picture of classes involving creative teaching methods and their consequences. Based on her responses, better grades, fully productive classes in terms of grade and level enhancement, and achieved CT skills are the apparent results of creative teaching methods.

Reza also talked about a few differences between a class in which creative teaching is implemented with other classes. He stated, "in a creative class, the teacher will bring different methods to enhance students' thinking and challenge them to look for different solutions; this may ask the teacher to have more flexibility in choosing those activities." According to Reza, the results would be students' better grades, active participation, and a more productive, enjoyable learning environment.

According to Ali's perspective, evoking critical thinking skills through creative teaching, only being creative is not the effective terminal action, but it needs to be assured if the students acquire CT skills or not. To fulfill this aim, he mentioned, "Asking a question in class, and seeing that most students take part in it, and answer a problem from different angles, well, I certainly conclude that creative teaching has influenced students' critical thinking." Ali believes that critical thinking is not being critical and finding fault but rather finding other aspects while looking at a problem or issue. On the other hand, Hamed stated, "Indirectly what I do is that when I see a student gives the floor to another classmate so that student can share his opinion without insulting him, his voice, his attitude, and behavior, all these indicate that the student's critical thinking has increased."

Moreover, Mina and Mahsa talked about their assessments, usually by the end of the lesson. "For instance, once I taught past perfect tense, I asked the learners to write comments and feedback on a piece of paper without mentioning their name." Therefore, Mina's evaluation technique indirectly asks for students' opinions of the lessons. She also evaluates students' level of critical thinking skills by asking them to seek peer feedback from their classmates. "The aim of the activity is not to judge each other's work, but it is about helping each other improve," said Mina. In addition, Mahsa tries to rely on other forms of assessments such as group projects in which each member has a specific role or individual response papers in which students share their understanding of the lesson.

Reza also pointed out that the teacher can start a creative lesson with any warm-up or ice-breaker. For example, by asking a question, students can relate to their real-life, easily teachers can engage students in the topic, which may also result in helping them get rid of the stress they may have. The class might start with any activity that creates a sense of positive competition among students, which prepares them to enhance critical thinking; there are many options, such as jigsaw and think-pair-share. He also talked about other ways of assessing a creative class, such as assigning a research-based project in which his students have to conduct a little research and integrate their findings from various sources. He added that he tries to bring creativity into his teaching; this requires teachers to move from more traditional assessments, such as quizzes and tests, to more open-ended assessment approaches, such as student portfolios. "The goal in using portfolios is to encourage students to use the target language in context, rather than by testing knowledge of just grammar or vocabulary," he said.

Discussion

After analyzing the data through content analysis, six major themes were emerged:

1. Creative teaching applicability to Afghan EFL classes
2. Perception of EFL teachers towards creative teaching and critical thinking
3. Effects of creative teaching on students' critical thinking
4. Important factors to consider in creative teaching
5. Characteristics of a creative teaching class
6. Assessing students' critical thinking skills

Creative teaching applicability to Afghan EFL classes

As the participants of the study all responded positively; thus, creative teaching is applicable in Afghanistan; however, they implement different methods to achieve this goal; for example, jigsaw, think-pair-share, and discussions which are suggested by Alber (2013) to bring creativity into classroom and improve students' critical thinking. According to one of the participants of this study, to be a creative teacher, we need to study creativity and increase our knowledge of teaching, which includes: teaching knowledge, being familiar with different methods of teaching, understanding learners' needs, designing a well-planned lesson equal to students' levels. Moreover, it is important for teachers to utilize Bloom's taxonomy in setting objective learning outcomes to achieve optimal learning goals (Oiha, 2022). Thus, creative teaching, as participants suggested, is a method of choice in which teachers make more efforts to engage all students and focus on learning.

Perception of EFL Teachers Towards Creative Teaching and Critical Thinking

Doron (2016) defined creative teaching as an adventitious skill that individuals can foster by working on it. The participants of this study presented the exact definition of creative teaching; in their idea and based on their experience, creative teaching stands against traditional teaching, where the teacher is the center of the class. From the teachers' statements, creativity, meaning that things develop or grow in new and unexpected directions, seems to emerge rapidly, given the right conditions (Tanggaard, 2022, p.11). Afghan teachers also try to create a friendly and opinion-free environment in their classes where learners feel safe to share their ideas and accept critique. According to Ferrari et al., (2009), innovative teaching enables students to participate actively in the class and demonstrate their creativity in learning. Thus, to achieve academic goals and enhance students' critical thinking, creative teaching has an important role. From the above-reported conception of creative teaching and critical thinking skill, it is apparent that creative teaching and critical thinking share a co-dependent relationship.

Regarding the participants' reported perception of creative teaching and critical thinking skill, all the participants have similar perceptions; as Turkmen & Sertkahya (2015), Tanggaard (2011), and Ferrari et al., (2009), say creative teaching means implementing new approaches to bring variation opposing to every day's life. Therefore, all the participants believed that being creative teachers deals with having novelty in their actions. However, they did not mention anything about the nature of creativity except for T2, which has a similar idea to Doron (2016), which emphasized that not only a teacher but also everyone can be creative since creativity is a skill that can be acquired through practice. Furthermore, T1 and T2 were the ones who claimed that creative teaching and critical thinking skill are embedded in each other. Critical thinking skills can set the scene to be a creative teacher and to be a creative teacher, promotes students' CT skills. Ferrari et al., (2009) and Guzdial et al. (2018) also claims are similar to T1 and T2. While T3, T4, and T5 stated that creative teaching, they could enhance critical thinking skills and set these two skills apart.

Effects of creative teaching on students' critical thinking

Recent studies indicated that higher education is exceedingly interested in investigating approaches to enhance students' CT skills and promote this aim by their teachers and education curriculum. Janssen et al. (2019) asserted that teachers are willing to acquire CT skills since they are central in conveying CT skills to the students and are more influential in

fostering it. The findings of T1 and T2 of this study are aligned with the Janssen et al. results. T1 and T2 also claimed that to boost effective creative teaching; teachers must focus on their CT skill first, then convey it to the students creatively. It is usually hard to explain something that we do not know enough but expect others to learn. Hence, teachers should first expand their understanding of creativity and think about how to polish it so it affects students' critical thinking.

Important factors to consider in creative teaching

The findings of this study revealed that novelty and creative teaching in classrooms need updated methods along with equipped classrooms. The study's findings also showed that teachers could adapt creative teaching in classrooms by having technology, access to tools for facilitating creative teaching, and a proper teaching environment. These findings are aligned with the findings of a study carried out by (Polard, Hains-Wesson, and Young 2017), which focused on creative teaching in higher education and the necessary factors to apply it. Moreover, the study participants emphasized the relationship between the teachers and students. Since creative teaching might be challenging for some learners, it would be beneficial to have a positive relationship with them; as a result, students may feel free to adapt to the change and be more open to new activities; these activities could be designed with particular learning objectives that could produce optimal outcome if based on the Bloom's Taxonomy.

Characteristics of a creative teaching class

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of the research carried out by (Halpern, 2001; Tanggaard, 2011). According to their research, teachers' perception of creative teaching and considering imposing factors in teaching creatively determine the effectiveness of creative teaching in classrooms. Similarly, reported experiences by participants of this study showed that teachers firstly are required to familiarize themselves with the conception of creative teaching, then they will be able to foster it in classrooms. Based on the findings, teachers can expect a more productive, student-centered class with an enjoyable environment when creative teaching is applied. The study participants reported that in a creative class, they observed their students become better thinkers and more flexible in group work, resulting in better grades that reflect their deep understanding of the topics.

Assessing students' critical thinking skills

The study participants opted for creative methods for assessing the learners' critical thinking skills and checking how creative teaching may affect their learners. They reported techniques such as conducting a research project to demonstrate their understanding of the matter. According to Willingham (2007), "In constructing assessments of critical thinking, educators should use open-ended tasks, real-world or "authentic" problem contexts, and ill-structured problems that require students to go beyond recalling or restating previously learned information" (p. 2). These techniques will allow learners to think critically and produce results based on their reasoning, thus, providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate their logical arguments and their abilities to assert conclusions based on their critical thinking skills. Based on the activities and the teaching knowledge, teachers can implement different

strategies such as peer feedback, discussions, and indirect questions, mentioned by the participants of the study and Alrubail (2015).

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study demonstrated Afghan teachers' positive perceptions toward implementing creative teaching in English classes. Although Afghanistan has suffered a lot because of war, the teachers at the academic level are eager to use new teaching methods and keep their teaching knowledge as updated as possible. Six themes emerged from the data analysis; based on these themes, some recommendations would be beneficial for teaching and administration in higher education in this country. In practical terms, Afghan English language instructors at this stage can integrate creativity in language classes so that they provide their students with more opportunities to participate and learn better. According to the results of this study, learners, with joy through the learning process, will attempt to enhance their learning, and a reflection of this learning would be satisfactory results. On the other hand, teachers are interested in increasing their knowledge of different learning styles, keeping the classroom dynamic, and enhancing the students' CT skills.

It is also exemplary to remind that adapting creative teaching does not require costly equipment; instead, it requires excellent ideas for instructors to think before class and plan with simple tools or use technology to teach creatively. Therefore, it is significant to note that creative teaching should be done purposefully; since it is to do something new, the teacher should create an atmosphere where the students feel comfortable participating and sharing their ideas. In the light of the results of this study, it is possible to use different activities for adapting creative teaching (e.g., asking students questions to activate their curiosity and background, working on practical approaches connected to real life, planning before class, joining online classes). Therefore, English language instructors can apply any activity depending on the subject and context of the lesson.

Every class aims to let students find the purpose and a goal for their learning; this might be inter-connected to the relationship between the teacher and students. Since creative teaching might put learners into a challenging situation, it is recommended that teachers pave the ground first for such challenges. This can originate from teachers' knowledge and experience, their relationship with their students, and the lessons they plan for such classes, which may enhance students' critical thinking.

The traditional classes, as suggested by previous research, cannot prepare learners for a new adventure both in real life or academia; they are teacher-centered, mostly dull, inactive students, and have a strict environment. It would be helpful for both teachers and students to think out of the box through creative teaching and working on students' critical thinking, although it increases the responsibility of the teacher; for example, teachers need to design a task to engage students or use activities in which learners experience and wonder new things. The traditional classes offer the knowledge, but practicality is not for a long time. Training learners to look at issues from different perspectives and examine them by their ideas is essential.

Conclusion

This research aimed to find the Afghan teachers' perceptions of creative teaching and its effects on English students' critical thinking skills. This paper also tried to fill the gap in the body of literature since there is no previous research on this topic in the Afghan context. For doing this research, a semi-structured interview was used to gather the data from five participants who were English instructors at two different universities. The data were analyzed, and the findings showed that a) Afghan teachers can apply creative teaching in different classes, b) they are familiar with the effects of creative teaching and how it enhances critical thinking, and c) they know how to implement creative teaching to make it a different experience than a traditional class, d) consider various factors that affect creative teaching method, e) how to assess such classes with the enhancement of critical thinking as the goal. Thus, it can be concluded that creative thinking skills boost critical thinking skills; interestingly, creative teaching does not require expensive or technologically advanced tools, it can be simply achieved through minimal, fun, and simple materials if used creatively.

Limitation and Recommendations

There were some limitations in the implementation of the study. First, due to the time limitations, this qualitative study only investigated five teachers' perceptions toward implementation of creative teaching, and to have more accurate results, more participants are needed. Second, this study only investigated teachers' perceptions; the results, including the benefits for learners, are from teachers' perspectives. Knowing the students' attitudes in creative classes with critical thinking activities would be helpful. Third, the participants of this study were three male and two female teachers; the issue of gender can be considered among both teachers and students while working on critical thinking to determine which gender might reflect better results. Finally, the findings of this study are only based on the context of one public university and one private university. A qualitative study does not intend to generalize the findings to a large population; the findings are only based on the five participants. Therefore, for applying this data to other contexts, the above limitations should be exercised with caution. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended to conduct additional studies to investigate further the effects of creative teaching on students' critical thinking skill and their performance in English classes. This study identified English teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of using creative teaching in classes, the activities English teachers use when implementing creativity, and the consequences they have on critical thinking. Based on the finding of this study, large classes, lack of classroom facilities, and technology were the main challenges for all the participants; therefore, further researchers can investigate classroom management in large classes for creative teaching.

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