Perceptions of EFL Teachers about Promoting Critical Thinking in Libyan Primary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study

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تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية حول تنمية مهارات التفكير النقدي في المدارس الابتدائية الليبية: دراسة حالة نوعية

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة النوعية حالة معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في **مدرسة بندر الشمالية الابتدائية** في ليبيا، وتركّز على آرائهم حول تعزيز مهارات **التفكير النقدي**. ففي الوقت الذي يشهد فيه التعليم العالمي اهتمامًا متزايدًا بتنمية مهارات التفكير العليا، لا يزال السياق الليبي يتميز بالاعتماد على الأساليب التقليدية التي يهيمن عليها المعلم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى سد الفجوة بين الأهداف المعلنة لسياسات تطوير التفكير النقدي والتطبيق العملي داخل الفصول الدراسية، من خلال تحليل تجارب المعلمين المباشرة وآرائهم حول تنفيذ هذه المهارات.

تم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه منظمة مع **أربعة معلمين** للغة الإنجليزية في المدرسة، وتم تفريغ المقابلات وتحليلها موضوعيًا لاستخلاص الأنماط والقضايا الرئيسة. أظهرت النتائج وجود فجوة واضحة بين الفهم النظري للمعلمين لمفهوم التفكير النقدي والصعوبات الواقعية التي يواجهونها أثناء تطبيقه. كما عبّر المعلمون عن حاجتهم إلى دعم عملي يتناسب مع بيئتهم التعليمية، مثل خطط دروس قائمة على مواقف واقعية، وورش عمل تعاونية، ومواد تعليمية تتماشى مع المناهج الدراسية المعتمدة.

خلصت الدراسة إلى أن نجاح تنمية التفكير النقدي في هذا السياق لا يرتبط فقط بالممارسات التدريسية، بل أيضًا بالبنية النظامية للتعليم. وأوصت بضرورة اتباع نهج مزدوج يجمع بين **التطوير المهني العملي والمستند إلى السياق المحلي** وبين **إصلاحات هيكلية** على مستوى النظام التعليمي. تؤكد هذه النتائج على أهمية مواءمة الدعم المقدم للمعلمين مع الإصلاحات النظامية، من أجل جعل تنمية التفكير النقدي هدفًا واقعيًا ومستدامًا في المدارس الابتدائية الليبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفكير النقدي، تصورات المعلمين، دراسة حالة نوعية، التعليم الليبي، المدرسة الابتدائية.

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the views of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Bandar Alshamalia Primary School in Libya concerning the enhancement of critical thinking (CT) skills. In a global educational environment that increasingly emphasises higher-order thinking skills, the Libyan context continues to be defined by conventional, teacher-centered approaches. This study sought to reconcile the disparity between policy objectives for CT and actual classroom experiences by examining the direct experiences and perspectives of the teachers responsible for its implementation. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with four EFL teachers at the institution. We wrote down what was said in the interviews and then used thematic analysis to find important patterns and themes. The results show that there is a big gap between teachers' theoretical understanding of CT and the real-world problems they have to deal with. The teachers made it clear that they

wanted help that was useful in their own situations rather than just learning theory. They were asked for lesson plans that were based on real-life examples, workshops where they could work together, and teaching materials that fit with what they were already teaching. The study found that the successful use of critical thinking in this setting is not just a teaching issue, but a systemic one as well. A dual approach was necessary, offering teachers tangible, contextualised professional development while concurrently tackling the structural limitations of the educational system. This study emphasises the essential need to synchronise teacher support with systemic reform to establish the advancement of critical thinking as a feasible and enduring objective in Libyan primary schools.

Introduction

The global educational landscape is increasingly prioritising the development of critical thinking (CT) as a fundamental skill for the 21st century, transitioning from traditional models of rote memorisation to cultivating analytical, independent, and creative thinkers. This change is especially important in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because learning a language is not just about getting the grammar right; it's also about being able to communicate, understand, and share reasoned opinions. The interplay between language acquisition and critical thinking indicates that students who develop critical thinking skills are more adept at utilising language effectively, and conversely, employing language for critical analysis enhances cognitive engagement and proficiency. Nevertheless, the effective incorporation of critical thinking into classroom practice is not universally guaranteed; it is significantly influenced by particular national contexts, cultural norms, and, most crucially, the perceptions of the educators who serve as the primary implementers.

In Libya, the educational system has traditionally been defined by a centralised, teacher-centric model, wherein the educator is regarded as the supreme authority, and knowledge is frequently conveyed primarily to achieve success in standardised assessments. This situation makes it hard for new teaching methods like critical thinking to work, since they need a classroom that is more focused on students and based on questions. Even though changes to the curriculum may call for the development of higher-order thinking skills, there is often a big gap between what policymakers want and what actually happens in schools. This gap is likely based on what teachers believe, how they understand things, and the limits they face in their work. Their perceptions are the most important factor in whether CT is seen as a useful tool or rejected as an impractical or culturally foreign idea.

This research focusses on this pivotal moment by performing a qualitative case study at Bandar alshamalia Primary School. The research seeks to attain a profound, contextualised comprehension of the factors that facilitate the promotion of critical thinking by concentrating on the EFL teachers at this particular Libyan primary school.

The Objective of the Research

The main goal of this study is to thoroughly investigate how EFL teachers at Bandar alshamalia Primary School feel about including critical thinking skills in their lessons. To reach this goal, we will carefully look into how well they understand the idea, what problems they see that make it hard to put into action, and what kinds of help they think they need to succeed. The main goal is to get detailed information that can help create focused professional development programs and strategies that take into account the specific needs of the Libyan primary EFL context in order to close the gap between policy and practice.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of EFL teachers at Bandar alshamalia Primary School regarding the challenges and possibilities of promoting critical thinking skills in their classrooms?

Review of the Literature

The idea of critical thinking CT has been a topic of academic discourse for decades, transitioning from a philosophical concept to a concrete educational goal. John Dewey's early work (1910) defined it as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it," laying the groundwork for the idea of reflective inquiry. Subsequent theorists delineated this expansive concept into specific skills and dispositions. Robert Ennis (1987) offered a significant pragmatic definition, characterising critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do," and delineated specific skills such as evaluating the credibility of sources, recognising assumptions, and drawing inferences.

Facione (1990) improved this skills-based approach by using the Delphi Report consensus to find core cognitive skills like analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as affective dispositions like being open-minded

and curious. In an educational context, especially in the West, critical thinking (CT) is regarded as a fundamental objective, vital for fostering independent, analytical, and responsible citizens equipped to navigate the complexities of contemporary society (Paul & Elder, 2006).

However, putting these theoretical frameworks into practice in the classroom is not easy or universal. Cultural and contextual factors that affect how teachers interpret and value these skills have a big impact on how they are used.

Critical Thinking in Language Teaching (CTLT)

Critical Thinking in Language Teaching (CTLT) is a big change from the old way of teaching languages, which was based on passing on information. For a significant portion of the 20th century, foreign language pedagogy, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL), was primarily governed by methodologies such as the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method, which emphasised rote memorisation of grammatical rules and vocabulary, along with precise repetition of structural patterns (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) signified a fundamental transformation, prioritizing meaningful communication as the principal objective of language acquisition. This emphasis on communication inherently cultivates an environment conducive to critical thinking, as meaningful interaction necessitates that learners not only generate linguistically accurate statements but also interpret meaning, negotiate understanding, and articulate personal perspectives—all of which are cognitive processes intricately connected to critical thinking (Liaw, 2007).

Davidson (1998) posits that language and cognition are fundamentally interconnected; the advancement of higher-order thinking skills necessitates linguistic capabilities for articulating intricate concepts, while employing language for critical analysis enhances linguistic proficiency. Task-Based Learning (TBL), where students use language to finish meaningful tasks that require problem-solving and decision-making, and using real materials that show different points of view and encourage analysis and evaluation (McGrath, 2006) are two methods that promote CTLT.

In the particular realm of primary education, promoting critical thinking does not necessitate the introduction of intricate philosophical discussions; rather, it can be incorporated through activities that stimulate young learners to anticipate story conclusions, juxtapose characters, categories vocabulary in personally significant manners, and engage in enquiries of "why" and "how" that transcend mere factual recollection (Puchta, 2012).

To comprehend the perspectives of Libyan EFL teachers, it is essential to contextualize them within the overarching socio-cultural and historical framework of Libya's educational system. Historically, education in Libya, akin to numerous other Arab nations, has been defined by a highly centralized, transmission-focused paradigm wherein the teacher serves as the supreme authority and knowledge is regarded as a static corpus of information to be imparted to students (Assalahi, 2013). This model is based on cultural norms that value respect for authority and hierarchical relationships. This can sometimes make critical questioning seem like a sign of disrespect or a challenge to authority (Orafi, 2008).

The Grammar-Translation Method has been the most common way to teach, with a lot of emphasis on reading, writing, and teaching grammatical rules directly. Assessment systems have mostly been set up to test memorization and factual recall for high-stakes tests (Abukhattala, 2016).

Even though the government has tried to modernize the curriculum and make it more communicative from time to time, these changes have often been top-down, poorly funded, and lacking in long-term professional development. This has caused a big gap between what the government says and what happens in the classroom (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

As a result, Libyan teachers, including those who teach English as a foreign language to primary school students, work in a system that doesn't give them many reasons to use student-centered, critical thinking-based teaching methods and may even discourage them from doing so. This entrenched system fundamentally shapes their beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching and learning.

The successful implementation of educational innovations, such as the promotion of critical thinking, is significantly influenced by the perceptions and beliefs of the teachers responsible for their execution in the

classroom. Research consistently shows that teachers' beliefs shape how they understand new ideas and that these beliefs often have a bigger effect on how teachers teach than official policies or curricula (Borg, 2003).

A teacher who thinks their main job is to teach students and get them ready for grammar-based tests is not likely to spend class time on open-ended discussions or problem-solving activities, even if the rules say they should. Research in contexts analogous to Libya has elucidated prevalent perceptual impediments.

For instance, research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has shown that teachers may see CT as a Western idea that doesn't fit with local values, or they may not fully understand what it means and think of it as "being critical" in a bad way or as higher-level logic that has nothing to do with learning a language (Al-Mohammadi & Derbel, 2021). Moreover, educators frequently identify significant practical challenges, such as substantial class sizes, insufficient resources, inadequate training, and the pressures imposed by examination systems, which bolster their belief that fostering critical thinking is an impractical indulgence (Borg, 2011). Consequently, examining the perceptions of Libyan primary school EFL teachers is not a marginal issue but is fundamental to comprehending the potential for, and obstacles to, the effective incorporation of critical thinking into their classrooms. Their perceptions will elucidate the intricate dynamics among their individual beliefs, their comprehension of critical thinking, and the formidable contextual limitations of the Libyan educational system.

Methodology
Research Design
A qualitative case study design was used in this study. This approach is selected as it facilitates a comprehensive, exploratory examination of a real-world phenomenon within its defined, constrained context—in this instance, the enhancement of critical thinking by EFL teachers at Bandar Alshamalia Primary School. A qualitative design is best for answering the "what" and "how" questions about complicated human thoughts and experiences because it focusses on rich, detailed data instead of numbers. The case study methodology will facilitate a comprehensive description of the teachers' perspectives, yielding profound insights into the particular challenges and opportunities they perceive within their distinct educational context.

Research Participants
This study included four (4) EFL teachers from Bandar alshamalia Primary School as participants. A purposive sampling method was used to choose the people who would take part. This non-random sampling method was perfect for qualitative research because it carefully picks people who have a lot of information and direct experience with the main thing being studied, which is teaching EFL in this particular school.

The selection aimed for the most diversity in terms of teaching experience (for example, including both new teachers with 1–5 years of experience and veteran teachers with 10+ years of experience) and gender, if the teaching staff composition allows. Before they took part, they were told that their identities would be kept secret and that they could leave the study at any time without any consequences.

Data Collection Method
The main way to collect data was through semi-structured interviews with each of the four teachers. This method was chosen because it gives a structured way to explore while also letting us follow up on participants' unique responses and new ideas.

An interview protocol was created containing a series of open-ended questions that corresponded with the primary research question. These questions were made to get long stories and thoughts.

The interviews took place in a quiet, private room at the school at a time that worked for the teacher. They lasted about 20 minutes and were done in Arabic to make sure the students were comfortable and understood everything. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to guarantee accuracy and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. During the interviews, field notes were also taken to record non-verbal cues and first thoughts.

Ethical Considerations
This research adhered to stringent ethical standards. Everyone who took part got an information sheet that explained what the study was about and how it would be done. Before the interviews, we got written permission from the people who would be interviewed. Using fake names for the school, the teachers, and any other identifying information made sure that no one knew who they were. There was a password-protected computer where all of the digital recordings and transcripts were kept safe.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers at Bandar alshamalia Primary School concerning the enhancement of critical thinking. The results, derived from comprehensive interviews with four educators, indicate a nuanced interaction between authentic professional ambition and considerable contextual limitations. The analysis shows that teachers' willingness to promote CT is greatly affected by how they understand the term, how much control they feel they have in a strict school system, and the real problems they face in their daily teaching. The teachers' own words made a strong story that brought these abstract ideas to life.

A primary conclusion of this study was the significant ambiguity surrounding teachers' definitions of critical thinking. All of the participants agreed that it was important, but their definitions were often not as specific as those found in established frameworks (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 1987). For some, CT meant basic cognitive engagement or linguistic accuracy instead of higher-order evaluation or analysis.

The idea of CT is more about grammar and staying on task than about judging arguments or making your own decisions. Teacher D (novice, 3 years of experience), on the other hand, had a slightly broader but still new understanding:

"I think it is more than just grammar. It is when they can give their opinion, but... but with a reason. Why do you like this character? Not just ' I like him.' But to say 'because he is brave.' This is a start, I think".

Teacher D's perspective addresses the inclination towards justification, a fundamental component of Critical Thinking. The emphasis, however, remained on basic opinion expression rather than on more advanced skills such as inference or analysis. These varying interpretations underscore the need for professional development that moves beyond jargon to provide concrete, exemplar-based definitions of what CT looks like in a primary EFL setting (Puchta, 2012).

A strong and consistent theme was the big difference between how teachers saw the value of CT and how they saw how easy it would be to use. People talked about this "rhetoric-reality gap" (Borg, 2011) with a sense of frustration, pointing to systemic barriers that stop innovation from happening. The teachers thought that the centralised curriculum and testing system were the main problems.

Surely , critical thinking is good for the future. But my first duty was to finish the textbook. The exam was come from the book only the book. If I spend time on open discussions or projects, we were not finish Unit 10. Then, my students will fail, and the principal will ask me why I did not cover the material. So, what choice do I have?".

This feeling shows how the assessment system controls teaching decisions, which supports a transmission model of teaching. The need to "cover the material" is at odds with how long and process-oriented CT activities are. Teacher C (a new teacher with four years of experience) made things even harder by adding the classroom itself as a challenge.

"Try to have a discussion with 45 children in one class. It is chaos. They are young, their English is weak. How can they discuss? Maybe I can manage it with 20 students, but 45? It becomes just noise. I cannot control it, and no learning happens".

This practical limitation of large class sizes posed a significant challenge to the interactive, student-centered methodologies that are fundamental to CT promotion. The teachers' views were confirmed that any effort to promote CT was seen as an impractical imposition rather than a viable pedagogical goal unless these structural problems were fixed, such as making the curriculum more flexible and keeping class sizes small.
Teacher A's request was straightforward:

"Don't just tell us 'promote critical thinking.' Show me. Give me one lesson plan for Unit 5, and show me exactly where and how I can add a critical thinking question. I need an example, not a theory."

This request for models and examples was very important. It was suggested that training that works must be hands-on and part of the curriculum they were already required to teach. Teacher D said the same thing, but they added an important part about working together:

"It would be so helpful if we, the English teachers, could have workshops where we work together to design these activities. We know our students, we know the book. If we can create something together, we will use it."

These points show how important it is to have collaborative, bottom-up professional development that sees teachers as agents of change instead of just following rules. Any initiative would be more culturally and contextually appropriate if the people who will use the materials were involved in making them. This would make it more likely that the initiative would work.

In conclusion, the teachers' views at Bandar alshamalia Primary School show that they are professionals who are stuck between a modern educational ideal and a system that doesn't change. Their voices make it clear that in this case, promoting critical thinking is not just a matter of changing how teachers think. It needs a complete overhaul that includes clear concepts, aligning the curriculum and assessments, providing practical resources, and, most importantly, a system that helps teachers become facilitators of thinking instead of just information transmitters.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study aimed to comprehend the perceptions of EFL teachers at Bandar Alshamalia Primary School concerning the enhancement of critical thinking skills. The findings, articulated through the teachers' own perspectives, demonstrate that the challenge of integrating critical thinking is not merely a matter of teacher willingness or capability, but a multifaceted issue grounded in three interrelated dimensions: conceptual, practical, and systemic.

At the conceptual level, the study identified a notable ambiguity in teachers' definitions of critical thinking. Although esteemed in theory, critical thinking was frequently construed narrowly as grammatical precision, task-oriented conduct, or mere expression of opinion. This absence of a distinct, collective comprehension of CT as a compilation of analytical, evaluative, and inferential skills constitutes a primary obstacle to its uniform application. Teachers cannot effectively cultivate what they cannot distinctly articulate.

There is a big difference between how teachers see the value of CT and how they think it can be used in practice. People often say that the strict, exam-focused curriculum and the large, unruly class sizes are too much to handle. Teachers feel a professional obligation to cover required textbook material so that their students do well on high-stakes tests. This goal seems to be directly opposed to the open-ended, time-consuming nature of CT activities. Their reality, as they put it, is one of limited agency, where systemic demands dictate pedagogical choices.

The study also found a clear way to move forward, though. The teachers said they really wanted help that was relevant to their situation and useful, not just lectures on theory. Their requests for modelled lesson plans, collaborative workshops, and resources tailored to their specific curriculum and challenges show that they are ready to work with CT, as long as they have the right tools and strategies that take into account their real-world limitations.

The fundamental conclusion of this research is that fostering critical thinking in this context cannot be accomplished by concentrating solely on teachers. It needs a synergistic approach. Teacher development must offer explicit, pragmatic models of critical thinking integrated into the current curriculum. At the same time, systemic reform needs to deal with the structural problems, like the way national tests are set up and the size of classes, that make student-centered teaching seem more like a professional liability than an asset. The teachers at Bandar alshamalia Primary School are not opposed to change; rather, they are limited by a system that has not yet fully embraced the pedagogical transformation it claims to seek.

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