

Evaluating Critical Thinking Skills in an EFL Writing Classroom of Saudi Female Students

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Abstract

Application of critical thinking skills is a growing trend in EFL teaching – learning profession. EFL teachers are being demanded to develop not only knowledge and comprehension skills but also skills of critical thinking such as analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and researching. Focus in the profession is to make these skills a part of advanced communicative abilities envisioned in the outcomes of a learning program. This research paper evaluates ability of critical thinking with reference to English language proficiency among Saudi female undergraduates. The research is conducted in Intensive English course 011 at the Community College (Female), King Khalid University (KKU), Abha, Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Critical thinking, language proficiency, Saudi undergraduates

Introduction

Literature Review

Origin of critical thinking lies in Greek scholarship. Originally, the term "critical" is related to the Greek word "ideal", or standard to judge. The main object of critical thinking is to determine the quality and value of your beliefs. It is mainly concerned with how someone thinks and how he builds his conviction on solid reason through using a whole set of criteria in the techniques, attitudes, and principles. Michael Scriven argued that "critical thinking is an academic competency akin to reading and writing. He defines that critical thinking is a skilled activity required for active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation. Siegel has defined critical thinking as an "education in knowledge of rationality (Vero & Puka, 2018).

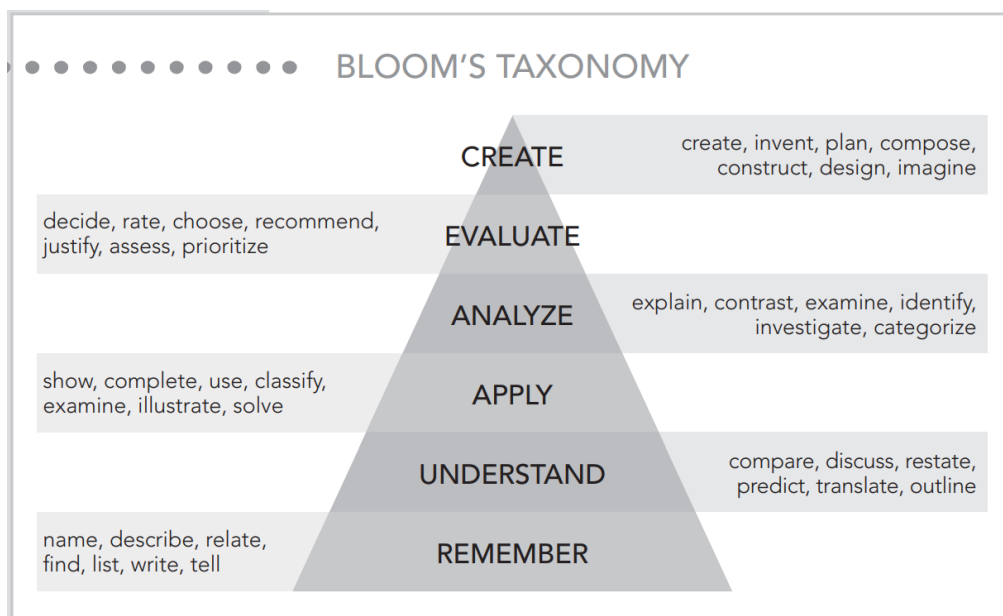
Critical thinking is an active and cognitive process that involves learners in curiosity to learn something in organized way and to confirm through evidences. It is applicable from

classroom learning to life situation through using reasoning, reflection, responsiveness, and thinking ability. It is expected from language teachers to design such learning activities that can enable learners to use skills of critical thinking as the basis for more learning and learning independently. The similar view has been shared by communicative language teaching (CLT) aims to enables learners to express values and judgment about oneself and others. (Richards & Rodgers: 1994)

EFL teachers are supposed to develop communicative competence among the learners so they can meet their daily needs successfully. Developing skills of critical thinking among the learners is also a significant aspect in English language education. The aim is to make the learners proficient in language use as well as in expressing intellectual perspectives on all contemporary topics of global significance. Critical thinking shapes academic aptitude of the students and enables them to defend their perspectives in globalized industry of knowledge and learning. To make such an effective learning, EFL teachers need to raise the level of teaching from knowledge and comprehension to inculcating researching, reflecting and evaluation abilities. It makes learners competent to share on issues such as value conflicts, cultural differences, local and global problems & their solutions, taking judgments with all intellectual seriousness based on well-grounded reflective thinking (Browne & Keeley, 2007).

Precisely, we can define critical thinking as an approach to a subject in which a learner applies a number of skills such as collecting information from different sources, analyzing and synthesizing information from different perspectives and a range of sources, supporting information with references, participating constructively in debate / discussions to support a judgment, engaging in cross-cultural collaboration, developing evidence-based personal responses, and to communicate effectively and appropriately inside and outside the classroom' (Browne & Keeley, 2007).

Most of the public universities in Saudi Arabia have included the acquisition of skills of critical thinking in their all English undergraduate courses. In the case of this research, Intensive English program at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia has adopted inculcation of skills of critical thinking as an integral part of the curriculum. Recommended text books i.e. Unlock Listening and Speaking Skills and Unlock Reading and Writing series have exclusive activities and tasks to inculcate skills of critical thinking like brainstorming, categorizing, evaluative and analytical. The critical thinking activities and tasks and projects in Unlock are based on Benjamin Bloom's classification of learning objectives. The Unlock series aims to develop lower- and higher-order thinking skills, ranging from demonstrating knowledge and understanding to in-depth evaluation.



(Day, 2014)

This research is based on the same classroom context where students are given treatment in skills of critical thinking. The research paper shows how students responded in lower order thinking skills and higher order thinking skills. Lower order thinking skills consist of knowledge and understanding while higher order thinking skills include evaluation.

Research Design

This research paper evaluates critical thinking skills in Saudi female learners' EFL writing at Community College (Female), King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. It is investigative research in which subjects of the study are Saudi female students who are enrolled in Intensive English program taking English as a compulsory course for their professional diploma courses in computer sciences and business administration. It is an investigative research moves that evaluates contribution of students in response to a writing skill activity with reference to the low order skills and high order skills given in Benjamin Bloom's classification. The researcher gave a statement 'Everybody loves money...' and asked 50 students to add 2 to 3 premises to support the statement. The researcher evaluated three first classifications (knowledge, comprehension and application) as communicative competence while three others (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) as critical thinking skills. To rate the performance of the learners and the concerned cognitive abilities, the researcher used a scale consisting of three components. (Kennedy: 2006).

Scale Chart

Components of scale	Communicative competence	Skills of critical thinking
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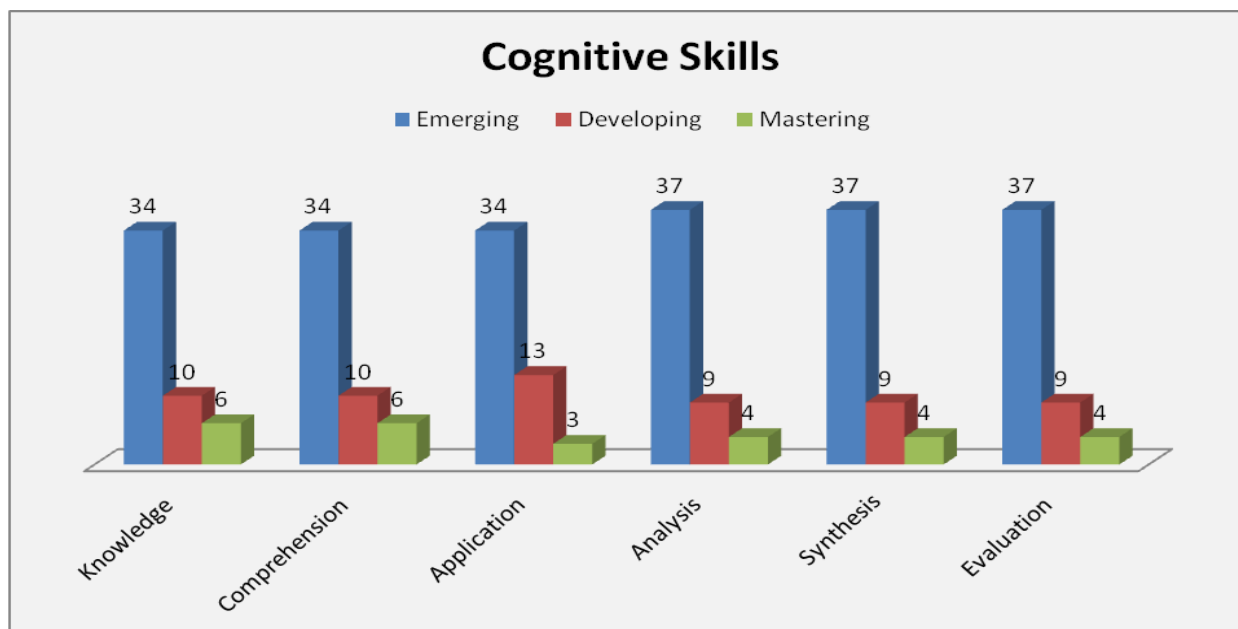
Emerging	low proficiency of language	minimal critical thinking
Developing	average proficiency of language	average critical thinking
Mastering	advanced Proficiency of Language	high critical thinking

Results & Discussion

Table 1:

Cognitive Levels		Verb examples that represent intellectual activity	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Communicative Competence	Knowledge	arrange, define, duplicate, label, list, memorize, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce state	34 (68%)	10 (20%)	6 (12%)
	Comprehension	classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, report, restate, review, select, translate,	34 (68%)	10 (20%)	6 (12%)
	Application	choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write	34 (68%)	13 (26%)	3 (6%)
Skills of critical thinking	Analysis	analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test	37 (74%)	9 (18%)	4 (8%)
	Synthesis	arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organize, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write	37 (74%)	9 (18%)	4 (8%)
	Evaluation	appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose compare, defend estimate, judge, predict, rate, core, select, support, value, evaluate	37 (74%)	9 (18%)	4 (8%)

Graph 1:



In the category of communicative competence which includes three cognitive skills (Knowledge, Comprehension and Application), 68% of the learners are in the emerging level that refers to low proficiency of language. In the developing level, percent rate of the learners ranges from 20% to 26%, which signifies average proficiency of language. In the mastering stage, 6% to 12% of the learners exhibit advanced level of proficiency.

In the category of critical thinking which includes three other cognitive skills (Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation) 74% of the learners are in the emerging level that refers to minimal thinking ability. Significantly, percent of students in emerging level in the category of skills of critical thinking are higher than percent of students in the category of communicative competence. In the developing stage, 18% of the learners and in the mastering stage, 8% of the learners demonstrate average and high critical thinking respectively.

The results reveal that more than half of the total population has low proficiency of language. On the other hand, around one third of the population demonstrates minimal critical thinking. This correlation indicates that low proficiency of language results into minimal critical thinking.

The positive aspect of the study is that critical thinking is present at developing and mastering levels. It is possible to develop the scale of critical thinking if effective treatment in language proficiency is given to the learners.

During the observation, the researcher found a strong reason to rely the data shown in table 1 and graph 1. Dominant trends in writing classes move around on selective memorization, restatement and composition. Learners' engagement in writing process is critical and tends more to google-translation and plagiarized composition. Such deficiency of the learners prevents

majority of them from producing self-composed-processed piece of writing with critical thinking.

Conclusion

Low proficiency of language is one of the reasons behind low use of critical thinking. Other reasons include lack of pro-critical thinking environment in the EFL class, and unawareness with learners' use of skills of critical thinking in his mother tongue.

Recommendation

1. Developing linguistic proficiency should be the prime focus of EFL teachers.
2. Specified tasks with critical thinking should be introduced in the classroom.
3. Teachers should be trained to create a pro-critical thinking environment in the classroom.

Limitation

This research is conducted on small group of students and does not represent all Saudi students. Data collected for the research is limited to male learners. Rubric and methods of assessment may be extended.

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