
The Role of Critical Thinking in Exploring of Intercultural Awareness in an EFL Context



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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the Integrating Critical Thinking into Exploration of Intercultural Awareness in an EFL Context. The study aims to find out the role of critical thinking skill in improving university students' intercultural awareness competencies. The population of the study represented in English language teaching staff in Sudanese universities as well as students. The study sample is represented in a randomly chosen group of (240) English language teachers and students. Data will be processed via Statistical Packages of Social Sciences (SPSS). The study makes use of descriptive analytical method. The study has arrived to a number of findings, the most important which are the integration of critical thinking skill is significant in English language context as a foreign language along with an insignificant and limited capacity of the textbooks to develop students' critical thinking. The study recommends involving EFL learners in critical thinking skills to enhance their intercultural.

KEYWORDS: Critical Thinking, Intercultural Awareness.

OVERVIEW:

Critical thinking is different from merely thinking. It is an important competence which play a central role in shaping the method through which students learn and think in today's information age. Learning to think critically and creatively is a lifelong skill with widespread applications both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, Fisher (2007) and Fisher and Scriven (1997) argue that critical thinking should be seen as a basic academic competency, akin to reading and writing, which needs to be taught. Beyer (2001a) claims that teaching thinking skills is worth considering for the crucial role it plays in teaching, learning, and everyday life. While Ennis (2001) roughly defines it as reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do, Nosich (2009) sees it as more than making such decisions; it is a metacognitive, reasonable, and authentic process that involves high standards and such concerns as accuracy, relevance, and depth. Paul and Elder (2006) interpret critical thinking as "thinking explicitly aimed at well-founded judgment, utilizing appropriate evaluative standards in an attempt to determine the true worth, merit or value of something". Such a definition implies that it has three components: analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Similarly, Fisher (2007) defines it as "a kind of evaluative thinking—which involves both criticism and creative thinking and which is particularly concerned with the quality of reasoning or argument which is presented in support of a belief or a course of action".

Development of thinking skills addresses many complex issues in teaching and learning. Swartz (2001) believes that teaching skillful thinking not only enhances students' thinking abilities and learning in the content areas but also greatly improves the quality of their lives, including their professional work, after they leave school. His saying 'improves the quality of their lives' clearly includes the skills of cross-cultural awareness, which in turn leads to a better understanding of languages.

Such thinking also improves their self-image and their motivation to learn. Beyer (2001) indicates that mastery of at least four thinking skills—comparing, classifying, sequencing, and predicting—is essential for students to become effective readers, writers, and learners. Paul and Elder (2006) claim that critical thinking provides the tools for the mind that people generally need to think things through for both studying and daily life. As thinking skills develop, students gain instruments that can be used effectively to reason better through the thinking tasks implicit in their future goals. Brookhart (2010) concluded, after reviewing a number of studies on the impact of critical thinking on teaching and learning, that using assignments and assessments that require intellectual work and critical thinking is associated with increased student achievement. I believe that the study of a second language does not cease to know the culture of the speakers of that language, and that the skill of critical thinking has a great role in promoting intercultural awareness

BACKGROUND

There are various remarkable changes that are taking place in human life, these changes can be attributed to the valued advancements in terms of Science and Technology, the educational field is experiencing very interesting advancements particularly in high education in terms of EFL teaching and learning. The real essence of education is to learn to think (Dewey,

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1933). In this respect, critical thinking as a very essential, crucial, and needed cognitive skill helps the individuals to act and to perform in the most effective and appropriate ways. In fact, the integration of this important and valued skill into classrooms enhance learners ability in terms of analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating their surrounding environments in both their learning process and their personal lives. Gieve (1998) stated that students as good critical thinkers should have ability to “examine the reasons for their actions, their beliefs, and their knowledge claims, requiring them to defend themselves and question themselves, their peers, their teachers, experts, and authoritative texts” (p. 126). ” (Zare & Othman, 2015, p.159).

Concept of Thinking

Thinking is an activity that is done by entire human beings in their lives. In other words, one of the most important behaviors that human beings do in their daily lives to keep them alive is thinking. The latter is one the most brilliant and noticeable characteristics that makes humans different from animals. In fact, it is worth to highlight the undeniable fact that a human being is born to think, as the philosopher Descartes says, "I think, therefore I am". Thinking by its side is a flawless, continuous, and mental process by which the individuals make their life meaningful and significant.

Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. The emphasis is on reasonableness, reflection, and the process of making decisions” (Ennis, 1987, p. 166). That is to say, critical thinking as an intellectual disciplined process is an active, clear, rational, logical, skillful, purposeful, and goal-directed thinking. Therefore, “critical thinking provides a vehicle for educating the mind” (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 88). In simpler words, critical thinking is the objective analysis and evaluation of a situation, task, problem, and/or an issue aiming at forming a judgment without allowing feelings, opinions, perspectives, society or anything to affect the vision of how things really are.

Characteristics of a Good and a Skillful Critical Thinker:

A good critical thinker should have a number of specific characteristics that distinguishes him/her from the others. They also enable him/her to have a reflective thinking and a rational justification of what he/she agrees on. A wise critical thinker has a positive attitude and willingness to understand in a very respectful manner how the same thing can be seen and interpreted in different ways. Critical thinkers are characterized by having flexible thinking, curiosity and openness to other people’s perceptions. As a matter of fact, they are peaceful, quiet, and calm especially when it comes to encountering totally different views. It is also of great importance to highlight the fact that they accept criticism and they never feel ashamed if they are convinced with a particular rational view or idea, but rather they are ready to adopt them. Ennis (1985) sums up the range of the most brilliant characteristics of a good and a skillful critical thinker in the following words: “critical thinkers are more likely to be: open-minded, take or change position based on evidence, take the entire situation into account, seek information, seek precise information, deal in an orderly manner with parts of a complex whole, look for options, search for reasons, seek14:02a clear statement of issue, keep the original problem in mind, use credible sources, stick to the point, and exhibit sensitivity to others’ feelings and knowledge level”(P.46.)

Standards of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is based on the following universal intellectual characteristics:

Clarity: Clarity as a threshold standard enables a learner to have full understanding to what is said. It has an important part to play at the both levels, language and thought. Simply, a successful and effective transmission of a particular message is based on how good is the speaker in terms of choosing and selecting the most simple and appropriate words and items and how best he/she can do to make the intended ideas understood. In fact, it is worth mentioning that the successful communicator have perfect ability to represent his/her thoughts via using and the integration of examples and illustrations, putting into consideration the crucial role to be played by paralinguistic features and non-verbal aspects of communication.

Precision: The precision of a communication is considered to be one of the central aspects of critical thinking. The latter, in fact, is free and totally far from any kind of bias. In other words, it has nothing to do with ambiguity, confusion, uncertainty, and/or any preconceived opinions that have nothing to do with reason and logic. Therefore, being precise and exact in expressing and giving intelligible ideas and information reflects to what extent that person is wise, skillful, and cautious.

Accuracy: Another crucial standard of critical thinking is accuracy. It is represented in utilization of correct information. In numerous cases people unintentionally have tendency to describe or speak about something in a manner that is not accordingly similar to the way it really is. Therefore, accuracy is the actual and the correct representation of an event, an action, or anything else, just the way it is.

Relevance: Relevance is very important that is associated with building connections between ideas under the umbrella of critical thought. That is to say, the relevance of a particular argument to a specific meaning is extremely important when it comes to communicating thoughts. As a matter of fact, the concept of relevance is not restricted only to the correspondence of ideas and arguments but also to the language used. Thus, the use of the appropriate connectors and the basic features of coherence and cohesion would reflect a highly valued logical speech.

Consistency :Consistency is considered to be one of the important intellectual values of critical thinking. The success of critical thinkers is based on consistency as the most artful and skillful speakers. It deals with the curiosity in seeking the truth. The latter

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is perfectly represented by the concept of consistency. Application of a rule to similar contexts is highly needed when taking into account consistency. Thus, it is worth noting that it reflects the highest degree of rationality and logic.

Logical correctness: It is true to say that the backbone of a critical thought is represented in logical correctness. It is an indicative to the correct reasoning and the rational justification of an adopted view. Thus, both depth and breadth are very important in dealing with critical thinking as the most reasonable thinking. In this respect, rational critical thinkers should put into account not only the surface information but also they should go in depth in providing an inclusive conclusion. A wide range of information, concepts, meanings, perspectives, and arguments should be put into consideration as well.

Fairness: It is crucial to pay attention to the fact that the fairness is the core or kernel of critical thinking. In fact, the concept of fairness involves the main qualities of a good and skillful critical thinker. Therefore, the meaning of a fair thinker involves the ability of handling on a neutral and equal base the endless points of view.14:02

Therefore, fairness is the honest and real reflection of thoughts with necessity of shunning any kind of favoritism.

Intercultural Awareness

According to Halliday (2019) "Intercultural awareness is a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication"

To explain this definition a clear understanding is required what this 'awareness' entails, particularly as regards the role of culture and language and the relationship between them in intercultural communication. It should be noted that as with earlier conceptions of cultural/intercultural awareness, awareness here is expanded somewhat beyond its normal definition to include behavior and skills as well.

Indeed, Holliday (2010; 2011) underscores the pervasiveness of nation and culture correlations in much intercultural communication writing as well as in people's experiences. Its presence must then be part of a comprehensive model of intercultural communication, even if we attempt to move beyond it.

The above mentioned definitions reveal that there are overlapping between CT and IC skills. Therefore, students in a FL context who aims at developing their ICA should be engaged in using CT on a regular basis, since CT "entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p.4). Competent critical thinkers approach IC should have readiness to reduce bias, partiality and prejudices which may hinder such contacts, and, thus, they have a good opportunities for succeeding in cross-cultural interactions are high. Deardorff (2009), one of the few researchers who analyzed the link between CT and ICA, maintains that ICA "promotes effective and appropriate decision making, but within contexts that are culturally complex". By referring to decision-making which requires the application of CT, the author points in her definition indirectly to the relationship between CT and ICA. In addition, in her earlier research aimed at identifying the requisite skills and processes necessary for competent intercultural relations, Deardorff (2006) mentioned two of the six CT skills included in Facione's work: analysis and interpretation.

Similarly, for Milton Bennett (2013), developed CT is an asset in IC encounters; he claims that the cognitive skills significant for CT and ICC overlap and are integral to effective cross-cultural communication. In his opinion, developing ICC "parallels the development of critical thinking" (p. 109). References to the skill can also be found in Janet Bennett's (2009) tripartite framework of ICA made up of mindset (knowledge), skillset (skills), and heartset (attitude) (p. 97).

In his investigating ICA, Stier (2006) stressing its dynamic importance and interactional context, clarifying that it helps recognizing and understanding cultural peculiarities, situational conditions and factors involved. In the same vein, Bennett, made a skill of dealing with problems originating in IC encounters an important element of intrapersonal competencies constitutive of his ICA definition. Another component he mentioned is interpersonal competencies, which refer to interactive skills and help detect and accurately interpret variations in non-verbal cues, subtle signals and emotional responses, acquire verbal and non-verbal language, and suitable turn taking. Moreover, they make the person more aware of his own interaction style and help him to respond appropriately depending on the context. Scholars underscore the importance of ICA education in enhancing CT, enabling students "to analyze intercultural encounters, processes and scrutinize culture-influences on one's view of the world" (Stier, 2006, p. 8).14:02

Therefore, CT skills are very important in promoting students' ability to understand and critically analyze biases in ICA encounters or in public discourse and their own views of reality. These skills help recognize the relative, non-transparent and contextual nature of cultural knowledge. Stier's conviction about the importance of CT for developing ICA can be noticed in his definition of the concept. The researcher defines ICA as "the ability to reflect over, problematize, understand, learn from, cope emotionally with and operate efficiently in intercultural interaction-situations". Thus, the cognitive skills of analysis, interpretation, inference, evaluation, explanation and self-regulation, and the dispositions described earlier, seem to be helpful, if not indispensable, in gaining this multifaceted ability.

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SUMMARY

The literature review provides brief introduction to the topic under study, some definitions for two concepts Critical Thinking (CT) and Intercultural Awareness (ICA), characteristics of a good and a skillful critical thinker,

This chapter concluded that integration of critical thinking skills into exploration of intercultural awareness help learners develop intercultural awareness and contribute to more appropriate and effective understanding across cultures. Thus, developing knowledge of other cultures and communicative practices in EFL context has to be parallel fostering the ability to critically reflect on and adapt knowledge by means of reasoning.

The researcher believes that incorporating critical thinking into exploration of intercultural awareness helps EFL learners in understanding foreign cultures through exploring the differences between one's own culture and another.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows the descriptive method, employing a questionnaire as a tool of primary data collection; secondary data collection is sought in software and hardware resources. The population of the study is English language teachers in Sudanese universities as well as students. The study sample is represented in a randomly chosen group of (240) English language teachers and students. Data is processed via Statistical Packages of Social Sciences (SPSS).

In this study the population composed of Sudanese faculty members as well as students, from the accessible population, total number of (240) faculty members and students participated in the study. The instruments of the study are questionnaire offered to English faculty members and students. I have chosen random sample to investigate the Integrating Critical Thinking into Exploration of Intercultural Awareness in an EFL Context. After collecting data, the scores of all participants were tabulated and analyzed to provide answers to the research questions formulated earlier in the study.

Data Analysis:

The current study concerned with the investigation Integrating Critical Thinking into Exploration of Intercultural Awareness in an EFL Context. To analyze the data, the researcher used Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS).

Reliability of the Research Tool:

Scorer reliability is especially important in the case of subjectively scored tests (i.e. tests of writing skill), because they cannot be assessed on a right or wrong basis, assessment requires a judgment on the part of the scorers. In this case the researcher used the inter-rater reliability in which the degree of consistency of scores was given by two scorers to the same written text (i.e. the researcher and an assistant professor from the department of English, Faculty of Education, and Omdurman Islamic University). The reliability of the test was quantified in the form of a reliability coefficient using SPSS statistics. The test was split into two equivalent halves and given separate scores for the two halves, then correlating the scores (split half method) and its reliability coefficient was reported.

Test Validity

The test and questionnaire were validated by Dr. Mohamed Suleiman; the Head of English Department at Omdurman Islamic University- Faculty of Arts in addition to prof. Abderaheim Mugdum, Jouf University

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Test

Hypothesis (I) **Integration of critical thinking skills is significant in English language context as a foreign language.** To prove the validity of the hypothesis, the researcher has used (t) test for One Sample that results in these following:

Table (1) shows (t) test for one sample

Variable	No	Mean	S.D.	Theoretical Mean	Degree of Freedom	(t) test value	Level of Significance	Deduction
Total Level of C.T	120	51.6500	6.06360	34.5	119	93.310	0.000	Positive

The table above shows that (t) test value amounts to (93.310) at significance level (0.000), it is statistically significant. This indicates the validity of the hypothesis. Therefore, the integration of critical thinking skill is significant in English language context as a foreign language.

This study agrees with the previous study (1) both have positive significant correlation.

The researcher believes that the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness is important in EFL learning and teaching context since they promote learners language competencies.

Hypothesis (II): **Critical thinking skill improves cultural awareness competencies among university students.** To prove the validity of the hypothesis, the researcher has used (t) test for one sample that reveals these findings:

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Table (2) shows using (t) test for one sample:

Variable	No	Mean	S.D.	Theoretical Mean	Degree of Freedom	(t) test value	Level of Significance	Deduction
Total Level of C.T	120	38.0167	3.57861	24	119	116.373	0.000	Positive

The table above shows that (t) test value amounts to (116.8373) at significance level (0.000), it is statistically significant. This indicates the validity of the hypothesis; therefore, critical thinking skill improves cultural awareness competencies among university students.

This study agrees with the previous study (1) both have positive significant correlation.

The researcher stresses that the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness is highly necessary in EFL learning and teaching context since they sharpen learners language skills.

Hypothesis (III) There is correlation between critical thinking and intercultural awareness university students. To prove the validity of the hypothesis, I have used Pearson Coefficient as shown below:

Table (3) shows coefficient correlation

Variable	No	Intercultural awareness coefficient value	Level of Significance	Deduction
C.T	120	0.541	0.000	There is direct correlation

From the table above, it is observed that correlation value amounts to (0.541) at significance level (0.000). This indicates statistically significant of the hypothesis validity.

Result: There is correlation between critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness among university students.

The current study has direct correlation with previous study (1) since both studies are statistically significant. This emphasizes the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

Hypothesis (I) **Integration of critical thinking skills is significant in English language context as a foreign language.** To prove the validity of the hypothesis, the researcher has used (t) test for One Sample that results in these findings:

Variable	No	Mean	S.D.	Theoretical Mean	Degree of Freedom	(t) test value	Level of Significance	Deduction
Student	57	51.2632	6.49320	34.5	56	59.605	0.000	Positive
Staff Member	63	52	5.67678	34.5	62	72.706	0.000	Positive
Total Level of C.T	120	51.6500	6.06360	34.5	119	93.310	0.000	Positive

From table above, it is observed that (t) test value for total critical thinking level amounts to (93. 310) at significance level (0.000), therefore, it is statistically significant. This indicates validity of the hypothesis.

Results: thus, the integration of critical thinking skills is significant in English language context as a foreign language.

The present study disagrees with previous study (2) that indicates an insignificant and limited capacity of the textbooks to develop students' critical thinking. I think that the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness should be sequenced in EFL students' textbooks to help learners to acquire such skills gradually and naturally.

Hypothesis (II): **Critical thinking skill improves cultural awareness competencies among university students.** To prove the validity of the hypothesis, the researcher has used (t) test for one sample that reveals these results:

Table (2) shows (t) test for one sample

Variable	No	Mean	S.D.	Theoretic al Mean	Degree of Freedom	(t) test value	Level of Significance	Deduction
Student	57	37.3860	3.75002	24	56	75.268	0.000	Positive
Staff Member	63	38.5873	3.34392	24	62	91.592	0.000	Positive
Total Level of C.T	120	38.0167	3.57861	24	119	116.373	0.000	Positive

From the table, it is shown that (t) test value for total intercultural awareness amount to (116.373) at significance level (0.000), it is statistically significant, that proves the validity of the hypothesis.

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Thus, critical thinking skill improves intercultural awareness competencies among university students.

The current study disagrees with previous study (2) that shows an insignificant and limited capacity of the textbooks to promote students' critical thinking

The researcher believes that the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness should be sequenced in EFL learners textbooks to assist learners to acquire such skills gradually and naturally.

Hypothesis (III): **There is correlation between critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness among university students.** To prove the validity of the hypothesis, the researcher has used Pearson Coefficient Correlation that has shown these findings:

Table (3) shows Coefficient Correlation

Variable	No	Intercultural awareness coefficient value	Level of Significance	Deduction
C.T	120	0.541	0.000	There is direct correlation

From the table, it is recognized that (t) test value of coefficient correlation amounts to (0.541) at significance level (0.000), it is statistically significant. This proves the validity of the hypothesis.

Result: There is correlation between critical thinking skill and intercultural awareness among university students.

The current study disagrees with previous study (2) that shows an insignificant and limited capacity of the textbooks to promote students' critical thinking.

The researcher confirms that the integration of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness should be sequenced in EFL learners syllabus to assist learners to acquire such skills gradually and naturally in foreign English language context.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking is method of thinking that improves the quality of thoughts through analysis, assessment, and reflection. This effective mode of thinking assists EFL learners in raising intercultural awareness among university students ability in problem-solving which can be of much important and helpful in leaning/teaching setting. Intercultural awareness occurs between individuals or groups of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds which is effective tool in learning particularly language learning while a lot of new methods have been designed based on critical thinking and intercultural awareness that can be of great significance in terms of promoting university students language learning skills namely analysis, evaluation and criticism and problem solving techniques. The study aims at examining relationship between critical thinking and intercultural awareness in EFL context in Saudi Arabia universities. The data analysis indicates that there is positive correlation at 0.44 percent correlation at $p < 0.05$ level which presented positive response to research question.

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