

EFL Teachers' Practices and Challenges Towards Implementing Critical Thinking Skills Online During Covid-19 Pandemic

Nasser Alasmari

Department of English & Translation, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This study examined the extent to which EFL teachers at the University of Jeddah are aware of the importance of implementing critical thinking skills. It also investigated their practices of such skills while teaching remotely and discussed the current impediments that distract the effective application and acquisition of such skills by the Saudi learners. Data came from a teacher's questionnaire and semi-structured interviews carried out online. The results found were congruent with other topic-related researches in some aspects and incongruent in some other aspects. As a matter of fact, the EFL teachers in this work believed in the importance of teaching critical thinking to their learners, however, their teaching practices do not reflect this belief. One of the important variables that distract the effective development of critical thinking is the learners' disengagement. More and more researches need to be conducted to investigate the relationship between the aforementioned variables.

Index Terms—online learning, critical thinking skills, English as a foreign language (EFL), Covid19 pandemic, challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has brought about changes in the global economy as well as booms in technology which makes the acquisition of learning strategies, technological skills and career competence a primordial demand that should be met by students all over the world irrespective of the discipline they are specialized in. In fact, these requirements have put much stress on schools which are the primary actors whose function is to reshape the educational picture, when need be, in a way that helps professional development, boosts e-learning innovation and promotes digital literacy (cited in Fandino, 2013). Learners, worldwide, are expected to acquire certain skills in order to function successfully in a rapidly evolving digital society. These skills, also defined as competencies are different from the traditional academic ones as they are not basically emphasizing "content". This shift from content-based approaches to process-based ones is justified by the fact that we are living in an era where information is very much more easily accessed than at any previous time therefore skills, not facts, are highly imparted. The way "how" information is gained becomes more important than the information itself. In more particular terms, in education, "teaching skills" or "teaching knowledge" has always been a debatable issue that was based on an assumption that the latter will detract from the former. However, new educational trends and reforms have foregrounded the importance of equipping learners with particular skills that would enable them to thrive in their future jobs. Such skills are particularly termed 21st century skills and derive their importance from the results the students will reap when developing and effectively practice them later in the marketplace. These skills are said to enable learners to "*meet the challenges brought about by technological advancements and changes in the global economic structure, and therefore play a more central part in sustaining the development of their society*" (Reynolds et al., 2016, p.6). Accordingly, the acquisition of these skills becomes a necessity. A common classification of these skills encompasses three main sets:

1. Learning and innovation skills: critical thinking and problem solving, communications and collaboration, creativity and innovation.
2. Digital literacy skills: information literacy, media literacy, Information and communication technologies (ICT) literacy
3. Career and life skills: flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability.

No literature is available on whether one of the above-mentioned skills overtakes another. By contrast, each of these skills is identified as a key quality of progressive education that stresses the learner-centered approach, the current form of pedagogy. However, providing insights on the applicability of every single skill goes beyond the scope of this work which emphasizes the critical thinking skills. In fact, this emphasis is based on the claim of Rotherham and Willingham (2009) who foregrounded problem solving and critical thinking as the two skills mostly required in the 21st century.

A. Rationale

The effectiveness and advantages of learning and developing 21st century skills are evident nowadays. However, in Saudi Arabia, few researches, if any, were conducted on these skills in general and on critical thinking in particular. Hence, this work would potentially add to the critical thinking skills literature, their implementations, development, and the challenges associated with their online application as it provides insights on such skills in a relatively unexplored educational setting namely; University of Jeddah which is a newly founded establishment. This, in turn, would pave the way for more researches to be carried out in this field.

In more particular terms and when it comes to the critical thinking skills, many authors claimed that they are “hard to teach” which implies that they are hard to learn as well. Saavedra and Opfer (2012), for example, argued that it is difficult to teach these skills and owed this to their complex nature and the challenge they pose when being taught or assessed. They added that modern educational system is criticized in that it doesn’t do “enough” to teach such skills. The resort to distant learning in the recent years due to the covid- 19 pandemic doubled the challenge. To quote Tathahira (2020) “bringing critical thinking into online-based learning at the same time challenges educational practitioners, in particular the teachers” (p.84). This urges the conduct of this paper which will give the answer to the question if this holds true in a Saudi higher education setting namely; the University of Jeddah.

B. Objectives

The current work aims to examine the extent to which EFL teachers at the University of Jeddah are aware of the importance of implementing critical thinking skills, it also investigates their practices of such skills while teaching remotely and discusses the current impediments that distract the effective application and acquisition of such skills. Pedagogical implications and guidelines on the effective online deployment of critical thinking skills make up the last objective of this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Critical Thinking Defined

To begin with, it is crucial to maintain that a commonly agreed on definition of critical thinking does not exist but it varies according to the motivation behind applying it. In general terms, this skill refers to the ability to think in an organized and rational way so as to grasp connections between different ideas and facts. To quote Scriven & Paul (2007), critical thinking is “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (p. 1).

Historically speaking, the roots of critical thinking date back to Socrates’ time who defended the technique of asking deep questions that probe profoundly into thinking before accepting ideas dogmatically. However, the critical thinking term was first introduced by Dewey (1910) as an educational goal to refer to “scientific attitude of mind”. He suggested such different terminologies to the same term as ‘reflective thought’, ‘reflective thinking’, ‘reflection’, or just ‘thought’ or ‘thinking’. Within educational boundaries, critical thinking is based on the idea of helping learners sense a problem and think critically and reflectively to find a solution. Thus, their work in the classroom becomes to solve a problem rather than merely learn a lesson. The Commission on the Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association (1943) defined this skill as the “*quality of thought operating in an effort to solve the problem and to reach a tentative conclusion which is supported by all available data. It is really a process of problem solving requiring the use of creative insight, intellectual honesty, and sound judgment*” (745–746).

Al-Mubaid (2014) explained that critical thinking is a process of mental activity that involves high quality and high level of thinking and triggers the active and skillful conceptualization, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of facts and information in order to come up with conclusions about or solutions to a certain problem.

B. Elements and Steps to Think Critically

The elements that make up critical thinking are strongly interrelated with its definition. Because critical thinking refers to the act of generating and processing information and contrast with the mere act of simple “retention” of such information, the major elements are identified as components that are sternly connected such skill namely;

- evaluating information
- creative thinking
- learning and problem solving
- communication

As a matter of fact, learners are said to think critically if they successfully:

- identify the problem or question: learners tend to be precise as they go straightforward to the issue. They find it easy to give solutions or answers.
- collect data, arguments and points of view: learners become able to use different sources of information with different ideas from different perspectives.
- analyze and evaluate information: learners are able to distinguish reliable information from those which are not. They come to provide enough information to support their hypotheses.
- identify assumptions: learners should make sure that they are unbiased when looking for answers.

- give meaning and establish significance: learners become skilled in identifying the most important information, provide appropriate sample size, and give opinions and arguments that are relevant to the raised issue.
- make decisions and come up with conclusions: at this stage, learners are able to come up with different conclusions and decide the ones that are sufficiently supported. They are also able to assume the strengths and limitations of each possible conclusion.
- present or communicate learners are now able to communicate and present the conclusion (s) they come up with.

C. The Need to Teach CT

Critical thinking is depicted by Reynolds et al. (2016), among other skills under the umbrella of the same set, as “indispensable” for the students to develop in order to be prepared to overcome the pressures of the competitive global market in the future. Snyder and Snyder (2008), on the other hand, asserted that critical thinking skills enable learners to think effectively of and hence find solutions to all kinds of problems be they social, practical or scientific. They added that those who possess such skills can easily come up with feasible and particular solutions to both common and outlandish issues. Within similar lines of thought, Murawski (2014) confirmed that, when learning and developing critical thinking skills, not only do learners take charge of their learning, ask deeper questions that lead to more thoughtful approach to the learning process, but also get prepared to potentially invade the market place in a more effective way. At early stages of learning pupils may not need to develop their critical thinking skills. Rote learning is enough to help them acquire the basic knowledge by listening, watching, repeating and doing. In contrast, mature students need critical thinking because at higher education levels, they have to experience personalization, investigation and problem-solving (Hughes, 2014).

D. The EFL Teachers Practices of Critical Thinking

Masadeh (2021) argued that teachers are the first actors who should be in charge of improving the critical thinking skills of their students and complained that most of them misunderstand this task. He stressed the need to focus on the teaching methods and beliefs of these teachers because “deep and meaningful learning that requires critical understanding of the learning material yields critical thinking” (p.186). In the same vein, Kavanoz & Akbaş (2017) stipulated that teachers will only be able to help their learners develop their critical thinking skills if they themselves have the appropriate understanding and knowledge of the skill. They should depict such skills as the cognitive process that involves raising the same issue from different perspectives. Other teachers’ practices should include training the learners to make appraisals, apply information and judge reasonably. Smetanová et al. (2015) insisted that one of the teachers’ responsibilities is to help their learners develop their critical skills. This can be achieved if they train them to focus on details in order to realize that there is always more than one way to look at the same issue. The same authors explained that such practices should be preceded by providing the learners with a theoretical overview of what critical thinking is. Ennis (2013), on the other hand, foregrounded the teacher’s understanding, interest and awareness of the importance of the critical thinking skill as primordial factors that guarantee the effective development of such skills. He reported that teachers’ role, in this respect, is “vital”. Concomitantly, Tosuncuoglu (2018) carried out a research in Turkey in order to examine the learners’ awareness and perception of critical thinking. He concluded that teachers should start by themselves and be trained to be critical thinkers in order to effectively play their roles as facilitators. Once done, they become more able to promote their students critical thinking abilities and practice them in classrooms. Additionally, Meiramova (2017) provided an example of how teachers can integrate critical thinking in their classrooms and suggested some helpful strategies to do so. She emphasized the fact that it is the instructor’s task to foster their learners’ critical thinking skills by motivating them to think autonomously. To this end, these instructors should “reevaluate and reconsider their ways of teaching”. She also added that their lesson plans need to incorporate “well-defined learning goals and objectives” where the aforementioned skills are considered. In practical terms, this author utilized a lesson designed for upper-intermediate level Kazakhstani learners. It contained such questions as what do you mean by...?, others for assumptions like: what are you assuming by that? and for reasoning like: how do you know? Which had as purpose to direct learners to construct knowledge? Results showed that learners were highly motivated to talk to each other, participate in the running discussion and thus think critically. This researcher stated that there is a way to integrate critical thinking in EFL by engaging students in well-planned tasks.

According to Snyder and Snyder (2008), critical thinking is a skill that can be acquired through instruction and practice. This implies the important role of teachers to help their learners develop such skills. To this end, they suggested few helpful steps such as the use of instructional strategies that would dynamically help learners engage in the learning process rather than focusing on memorizing content. This can be done when performing tasks that trigger their intellectual challenge rather mere memory recall. Instructors, according to the same authors, can also sensitize their learners of the importance of critical thinking skills by explaining the need to shift focus from lecture- based rote learning to process- based learning. Tathahira (2020) recommended that “the higher educational practitioners including teachers and institutions are challenged to design and choose the proper methods and techniques in teaching critical thinking supported by online activity” (p.85).

E. Challenges to Applying Critical Thinking Remotely

Despite the evidenced importance of and need for critical thinking skills, their applicability in classrooms is still lagging behind. The situation is even more issuable when teaching remotely. As a matter of fact and with the spread out and evolution of the corona virus disease 19 (Covid-19), educators worldwide are left with no choice but using the virtual environment to support students education. As articulated by Rosalina et al. (2020), this transition from face- to-face to online learning would spawn more challenges to both teachers and students. The fact that teachers suddenly move to distant learning and still are required to incorporate critical thinking skills is a challenge itself. This implies that the implementation of critical thinking skills in online classes would not be an “easy” task as conveyed by Tathahira (2020). In another respect, Snyder and Snyder (2008) complained that instructors still “struggle” to incorporate critical thinking activities into the curriculum, and if done, learners do not engage in such activities, they rarely use such skills to solve authentic or complex problems. The same authors attributed these difficulties to the instructional methods used in academic settings.

(a). Technology- Related Challenges

Tathahira (2020) argued that the development of the students’ critical thinking skills is one of the criteria that measure the effectiveness of distant learning. She added that teaching critical thinking skills through an online based process would attract the learners’ interest and therefore help them reach a higher level of knowledge. As a matter of fact, the mastery of technology, nowadays, becomes a must for the teachers however some of them still lack this knowledge. Arend (2009), for example, complained that some EFL instructors ignore the way how to design and thus decide the best method through the online-based activity to foster critical thinking. Indeed, this issue of incorporating critical thinking skills has always been critical and becomes more complicated when combined with the lack of online instructional techniques mastery (Mandernach et al., 2009).

(b). Learner- Related Challenges

Becirovic et al. (2019) conducted a research in many schools in both Turkey and Bosnia and argued that the learners’ grade level correlates significantly to their critical thinking abilities. They argued that learners with a higher competency level outperformed their counterparts whose level is lower. Abdul Hafedh (2021), on the other hand, summarized the different barriers that may hamper the effective integration of the critical thinking skills and concern the learners in demotivation, the absence of interest and more importantly the “lack of information background”. He explained that learners found it difficult to relate the materials taught to their own lives. The same learners, as he claimed, do not use the internet as a source of information to bridge this gap and owed this defect to the old- fashioned educational system that focuses on memorization. Samanhudi and Sampurna (2010) carried out a research whose subjects were Indonesian university students and found that learners with no prior knowledge of the subject are less likely to develop critical thinking skills. They believe that a topic that does not raise the students’ interest or satisfy their desire for learning would not trigger their reasoning skill, a skill that mirrors critical thinking behavior. Lorencov á et al. (2019) added that apart from the lack of motivation from the part of students, some of the latter are not prepared to use technology or certain methods such as “debate” to develop their critical thinking skills. Similarly, Kim and Pollard (2017) raised the issue of the learners’ disengagement in performing certain tasks as an impediment that distracts the incorporation of critical thinking skills, especially in case of remote learning where the teachers’ control is very limited. They complained that the learners showed a reluctance to perform tasks that trigger their critical thinking abilities or voice their views about topics discussed in online classes.

(c). Challenges Related to Teachers and Their Teaching Method

Teachers are complaining about the lack of time to explicitly teach critical thinking skills said to develop cognitive flexibility when the pacing guide of the course is mainly content- based rather than skill- based. The focus on “teaching to the test”, as revealed by Landsman & Gorski (2007), also undermines the learning process as it emphasizes the content. This makes the students less prepared or trained to practice and acquire such skills. As a matter of fact, building critical thinking abilities requires time. Time to support learners to explore, evaluate and discuss new ideas from different perspectives. However, time is devoted to rote learning and memorization which seems useless with the unlimited content available online.

Within the same lines of thought, Abrami et al. (2015) argued that despite the negative feedback the traditional mode of teaching receives, most English teachers still instruct their students to use rote memorization in classes that are mainly lecture- based. Active- targeted training through an inquiry- based instruction can improve the students’ critical thinking abilities. They maintained that the learners’ critical thinking skills develop when instructors focus on teaching such skills in an explicit purposeful way. Indeed, teaching methods that use intentional pedagogical instructions of critical thinking prove to be more effective than the implicit inclusion of such skills. In the same respect, Tosuncuoglu (2018) confirmed that the EFL teachers devote most of their teaching time to “transfer knowledge” thus ignoring, intentionally or unintentionally, their role to orient learners to think critically through interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluation. This only leads, according to the same author, to an “extensive coverage of content and mindless drill...”, which is no longer the ultimate end of modern education.

F. Research Questions

On the light of the objectives mentioned above, the present paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the EFL teachers at the University of Jeddah aware of the importance of critical thinking skills?
2. How do the EFL teachers at the University of Jeddah help their learners develop their critical thinking skills online?
3. What impediments may distract the effective deployment and thus development of critical thinking skills in EFL online classrooms?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

The current work is based on data collected from a group of 26 non- native English language teachers who are currently working at the English Language Institute (ELI), a branch of Jeddah University, Saudi Arabia. These participants come from different countries and have a varying teaching experience ranging from 8 to 17 years. They are either holders of master or PhD degrees in applied linguistics or literature and teach the different English language skills namely; speaking, listening, reading and writing. All of them are practicing the online teaching as a part of their duties due to the sudden interruption of face- to- face mode of teaching.

B. Instruments

The first instrument used to gather data needed for the conduct of this research was a teacher’s questionnaire (Appendix I) which was developed by the researcher himself and sent via email to the concerned subjects to complete. It includes three main parts. The first part aims to explore the extent to which EFL teachers are aware of the importance of implementing critical thinking skills especially online. The second part, on the other hand, investigates their practices of such skills while teaching online. Still, the third part focuses on the challenges they face while doing so. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1= Not really – 2= No – 3= No idea – 4= True- 5= Definitely true).

The second instrument for data collection used in this work was a phone semi-structured interview (appendix II), whose aims were to measure the extent to which the EFL instructors are aware of the importance of critical thinking skills and their incorporation in the curriculum, to spot their practices when implementing these skills and to identify the difficulties that distract them from effectively doing so. The teachers’ responses were thematically analyzed according to the goals to be met. As revealed by Dunn (2005), the semi-structured interview has some degree of predetermined order but still guarantee some degree of flexibility in the way issues are dealt with by the respondents. In effect, the interviewer follows the guide, but is still able to follow topical trajectories in the dialogue that could be different from the guide if necessary.

IV. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

TABLE 1
RESULTS RELATED TO EFL TEACHERS AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

	Statement	NR (%)	N (%)	NI (%)	T (%)	DT (%)
1	I have a clear understanding of what critical thinking is and what it actually involves.	0	11	13	43	33
2	Critical thinking skills should be regarded as important as other components of the teaching process.	0	7	10	26	57
3	Development of these skills should take place from primary education and extends to higher education for the sake of developing students' problem-solving abilities.	19	31	3	26	21
4	It is necessary to integrate critical thinking into the ELT course.	2	0	0	88	10
5	Critical thinking is even more important for English language teaching classes than other subjects	3	4	4	65	24
6	It is the primary job of the EFL teacher to teach critical thinking	10	12	7	39	32
7	Training should be devoted to EFL teachers on how to incorporate critical thinking skills in the curriculum.	8	9	10	41	32

Table 1 above reflects the results concerning question one of the current research namely; the extent to which the EFL teachers are aware of the importance of the critical thinking skills. As a matter of fact, the responses towards the different statements did not have wide variations as the average response value almost reached 5. As such, the EFL teachers informing this research are evidently conscious of the importance of critical thinking skills for students to

master. Thus, perceive its integration in the curriculum as “necessary”. They find it especially important for higher education learners and it is even more needed in English language teaching classes. The interview’s findings supported those of the questionnaire as the informants confirmed the substantial role of critical thinking skills for the 21st century learners so as they become able to solve problems, take effective decisions and become efficient in their workplace at later stages. This goes in line with the findings of Al-Mubaid (2014) who asserted that “critical thinking is very crucial for delivering quality learning in any subject and content area” (p.34).

TABLE 2
RESULTS RELATED TO EFL TEACHERS PRACTICES OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS WHILE TEACHING ONLINE

	Statement	NR (%)	N (%)	NI (%)	T (%)	DT (%)
8	I design a course content that sensitize my students of the importance of the critical thinking skills when learning online.	30	42	0	18	10
9	I always teach critical thinking explicitly to my students when learning online.	56	30	0	7	7
10	I guide my students to raise questions and issues in a clearly and precisely formulated way when learning online.	40	32	0	17	11
11	I help my students gather and assess relevant information when learning online.	62	33	0	3	2
12	I instruct my students to interpret abstract ideas to come up with reasonable solutions when learning online.	57	29	0	4	10
13	I instruct my students to use their previous knowledge to create new situations when learning online.	49	38	0	8	5
14	I build critical thinking explanations and exercises into most of my English online classes.	69	28	0	1	2

With reference to table 2 which aims to answer the second question of this paper, no noticeable variation in the informants’ responses was spotted. Indeed, the average response value did not go beyond 2. This entails that the teachers rarely incorporate critical thinking skills when teaching online. As the table shows, most of the respondents (86%) do not teach critical thinking explicitly. Most of their answers to such statements as “I instruct my students to use their previous knowledge to create new situations when learning online” (87%) and “I build critical thinking explanations and exercises into most of my English online classes” (97%), range between “not really” and “no”. This reflects that the EFL teachers do not use strategies or methods that help learners think critically or at least as frequently as they are supposed to do. This, in turn, could be attributed to the different challenges these instructors might have faced. Similarly, the informants’ answers to the different questions on the interview indicate that these teachers are not satisfactorily practicing such skills as they are not doing so on a regular basis. The same findings were come up with by Noula (2018) who argued that the language instructors refuse to teach strategies that enhance their learners’ critical thinking skills and owed this behavior to their total reliance on traditional teaching methods which are mainly “content-based”.

TABLE 3
RESULTS RELATED TO CHALLENGES THAT EFL TEACHERS FACE WHILE PRACTICING OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS WHILE TEACHING ONLINE

	Statement	NR (%)	N (%)	NI (%)	T (%)	DT (%)
15	Technology proficiency level of the teacher is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.	85	10	0	0	5
16	Technology proficiency level of the learner is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.	78	12	1	9	0
17	Language proficiency level of the learner is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.	23	52	2	6	7
18	The content of the digital book does not facilitate the incorporation of the critical thinking skills in online classes.	15	15	14	30	26
19	The students are neither motivated to nor engaged in doing tasks that boost critical thinking skills.	0	15	1	66	18
20	Teachers do not have enough time to provide tasks that develop critical thinking skills.	20	10	3	31	36
21	The teaching method used online does not help develop the students critical thinking.	10	9	4	56	21

As Table 3 above indicates, technology proficiency level does not stand as a strong impediment that hinders the practicing of the critical thinking skills neither from the part of the teachers nor the learners. This contrasts with the claims of Tathahira (2020) who insisted that some of the teachers still lack technology knowledge. As a matter of fact,

the smooth and successful transition to the online mode of learning proved the effectively established digital network in Saudi Arabia in general. Before the pandemic hit, information and communication technologies (ICT) in Saudi Arabia were available which asserted the continuity of instruction and learning when face- to- face teaching was interrupted during the pandemic (Mann et al., 2020).

Interestingly, most of the teachers asserted that the students' language proficiency level, despite its importance, does not stand as strong impediment that distracts the development of the critical thinking skills because most of them resort to their native language to express their ideas. This goes in line with the findings of Abdul Hafedh (2021) who found no significant relationship between the two variables namely; language proficiency and critical thinking development. As stated by his informants in the research, the language proficiency is not a huge barrier or at least not a basic one as learners can convey their ideas in their own language. To quote him "Of course, proficiency plays a role, but it cannot be the main barrier to teaching critical thinking in EFL classes." (p.3). Thematic analysis of the interview indicates that the use of the native language is very frequent among the Saudi learners and thus "their English level cannot be considered as one of the challenges that hampers the development of their critical thinking skills," as claimed by one of the teachers informing this study.

As seen in Table 3, the students demotivation and disengagement are considered as strong impeding factors that distract the implementation and incorporation of critical thinking skills as most of the answers ranged between "true" and "definitely true". As a matter of fact, the informants' responses in the interview highlighted this issue and insisted that it is not only related to critical thinking. They complained that despite their students advanced level in the use of technology, teaching online couldn't help engage them in the learning process in general which implies the difficulty to develop any skills including critical thinking. In effect, these results contrast with those found by Rizk and Davies (2021) who tried to answer the question if digital technology can bridge the classroom engagement Gap. These authors revealed that learners "engaged easily and enthusiastically with digital technology" (p.1). Given that this was not the Saudi case, more research is needed to identify the reasons why Saudi learners do not show signs of engagement even with the use of technology.

A. Pedagogical Recommendations

Even though they are conscious of the importance of the e critical thinking skills and the substantial role play in improving the performance of their learners, the current research participants still lack deep indulge in incorporating such skills in the teaching process. This is owed somehow to the different challenges these participants face but more researches are needed to profoundly investigate the reasons behind such gap and thus suggest more practical solutions to bridge it. For instance, training the teachers/ instructors on how to teach skills and helping them move from teaching knowledge to teaching skill will lead to improve their learners' critical thinking metrics.

As elucidated by Itmeizeh and Hassan (2020), the educational methods used to English language as a foreign language have a great influence on critical skills learning. As a matter of fact, the adoption of new educational practices in addition to the strong emphasis on the learner's self- regulation and autonomy that stems from the learner- centered orientation would promote the critical skills of the learner. To quote Clement (1979) stated that "we should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think" (p. 1).

The relatively advanced level in terms of technology mastery both instructors and students in the Saudi educational establishment display can stand as a strong pillar that help in engaging the learners in the learning process in general and in enhancing their critical thinking in particular. Instructors, in this very respect, should find ways how to develop digitally formulated tasks that can meet such goals.

Undeniably, teachers make up an integral part in the educational process, their stand as a support for the learners would yield to better achievements regardless of the point in focus. Their practices count. Such practices could include, clear instructions and appropriate guidance of the students to use critical thinking skills appropriately, the provision of relevant and life- related knowledge to avoid any confusion. Teachers can also be models for their learners and put critical thinking into action and support to help them acquire and develop these skills.

B. Limitations

Before moving on to concluding points, it seems worthy to note that the results of the current work might be confounded and thus limited by a number of issues, namely; the relatively short time taken to carry out this research. Hence the need for more studies that would focus on the application of the critical thinking skills over a considerable amount of time are very much higher recommended for the sake of reliability as suggested by Zhao (2003). Furthermore, the conclusions drawn through this research are mainly based on the opinions of a restricted number of teachers and despite their undeniable importance, attitudes alone cannot be reliable to measure the effective incorporation of skills in teaching. Thus, the use of classroom observation as a third data collection instrument would have added more reliability on the work. One more limitation has to do with the exclusion of students. According to Pelgrum and Plomp (1996), students are an important element in the teaching/ learning process, thus, their views about what helps to improve their learning is substantial. In this respect, an exploration of the students' views and practices of the critical thinking skills seem to be significant if a better understanding of these skills is to be achieved.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite the substantial role critical thinking skills play in developing the learners which the instructors, in this paper, strongly believe in and are conscious about, a lack of practice for such skills predominantly exists in the Saudi online classrooms. Accordingly, a particular focus on such gap is highly required. Teacher training, for instance can help bridge this gap. In addition, the technological advancement and expertise both teachers and students enjoy in Saudi Arabia could help develop the students' skills in general and their critical thinking ones in particular. The use of digital devices would boost the learners' engagement which, in turn, would help them think critically. Future research may focus on such factor as student engagement and the different ways how to boost it in order to help learners master the critical thinking skills. In other words, research is needed to give a better understanding of the relationship between student engagement and critical thinking.

APPENDICES

A. A Teacher's Questionnaire

Dear colleagues, this questionnaire has as aims to explore the extent to which you are aware of the importance of incorporating critical thinking skills while teaching online. It also investigates your practices as well as the potential difficulties you could have faced while trying to implement such skills online. Please complete all items even if you feel that some are redundant. This may take 30-40 minutes of your time. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Instructions: Please read each statement and then tick the number which best reflects your answer.

1= Not Really 2= No 3= No Idea 4= True 5= Definitely True

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
Your awareness of the importance of critical thinking skills					
1. I have a clear understanding of what critical thinking is and what it actually involves.					
2. critical thinking skills should be regarded as important as other components of the teaching process.					
3. Development of these skills should take place from primary education and extends to higher education for the sake of developing students' problem-solving abilities					
4. It is necessary to integrate critical thinking into the ELT course					
5. Critical thinking is even more important for English language teaching classes than other subjects					
6. It is the primary job of the EFL teacher to teach critical thinking					
7. Training should be devoted to EFL teachers on how to incorporate critical thinking skills in the curriculum.					
Your practices of critical thinking online					
8. I design a course content that sensitize my students of the importance of the critical thinking skills when learning online.					
9. I always teach critical thinking explicitly to my students when learning online.					
10. I guide my students to raise questions and issues in a clearly and precisely formulated way when learning online.					
11. I help my students gather and assess relevant information when learning online.					
12. I instruct my students to interpret abstract ideas to come up with reasonable solutions when learning online.					
13. I instruct my students to use their previous knowledge to create new situations when learning online.					
14. I build critical thinking explanations and exercises into most of my English online classes.					
The challenges that distract the implementation of critical thinking					
15. Technology proficiency level of the teacher is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.					
16. Technology proficiency level of the learner is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.					
17. Language proficiency level of the learner is one of the impediments that distracts the effective integration of critical thinking skills when teaching online.					
18. The content of the digital book does not facilitate the incorporation of the critical thinking skills in online classes					
19. The students are neither motivated to nor engaged in doing tasks that boost critical thinking skills					
20. Teachers do not have enough time to provide tasks that develop critical thinking skills					
21. The teaching method used online does not help develop the students critical thinking.					

B. Teacher Semi-Structured Interview

1. What is critical thinking?
2. What does "critical thinking skills" refer to?
3. How important is it to incorporate critical thinking skills in teaching your course?

4. How frequently do you apply critical thinking skills in your classroom?
5. What are the differences between incorporating critical thinking activities in regular classes and online?
6. What activities do you design to help your students promote their critical thinking skills?
7. What student- related challenges do you face when applying critical thinking activities raise online?
8. What teacher- related challenges do you face when applying critical thinking activities raise online?
9. What content- related challenges do you face when applying critical thinking activities raise online?
10. What technology- related challenges do you face when applying critical thinking activities raise online?
11. What other challenges do you face when applying critical thinking activities online?
12. Are the challenges you face when teaching online the same as the ones you confront when you deliver your course in regular classrooms?

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdul Hafedh, A. (2021). *Critical Thinking: EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Barriers*. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356419011>
- [2] Abrami, P., Bernard, R.B., Borokhovski, E., and Waddington, D.I. (2015). Strategies for Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(2), 275-314.
- [3] Al-Mubaid, H. (2014). A New Method for Promoting Critical Thinking in Online Education. *iJAC*, 7(4), 34-37. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314551063>
- [4] Arend, B. (2009). Encouraging critical thinking in online thread discussions. *Journal of Educators Online*, 6(1), 1-23.
- [5] Bećirović, S., Hodžić, F., & Brdarević-Čeljo, A. (2019) The Problems of Contemporary Education: Critical Thinking Development in the Milieu of High School Education. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 8(3), 469–482. <http://doi.org/10.13187/ejced.2019.3.469>
- [6] Clement, J. (1979). Introduction to research in cognitive process instruction. In Lochhead, J. and Clement, J. (Eds.), *Cognitive process instruction*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [7] Commission on the Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association. (1943). *Thirty Schools Tell Their Story*, Volume V of *Adventure in American Education*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers.
- [8] Dunn, K. (2005). *Interviewing*. In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*. 2nd ed. ed. Iain Hay. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Dewey, J. (1910). *How We Think*, Boston: D.C. Heath. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7236952M/How_we_think
- [10] Fandino, Y.J. (2013). 21st Century Skills and the English Foreign Language Classroom: A Call for More Awareness in Colombia. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*, 7, 190-208.
- [11] Ennis, R. H. (2013). "Critical thinking across the curriculum (CTAC)". OSSA Conference Archive. 44.
- [12] Hughes, J. (2014a). *Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom*. Recanati (Italy): ELI. Retrieved April, 10, 2022, from: <http://www.elionline.com/eng/teachers-area/critical-thinking>.
- [13] Itmeizeh, M, and Hassan, A. (2020). New Approaches to Teaching Critical Thinking Skills through a New EFL Curriculum. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24 (7), 8864-8885. <http://doi.org/10.37200/IJPR/V24I7/PR270871>
- [14] Kang, N., & Howren, C. (2004). Teaching for conceptual understanding. *Science and Children*, 42(1), 28–32.
- [15] Kavanoz, S., & Akbaş S. (2017). EFL teachers' conceptualizations and instructional practices of critical thinking. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 4(4), 418-433.
- [16] Kim, M.; Pollard, V. (2017). A modest critical pedagogy for English as a foreign language education. *Education as Change*, 21(1), 50–72. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2017/492>
- [17] Landsman, J., & Gorski, P. (2007). Countering standardization. *Educational Leadership*, 64(8), 40–41.
- [18] Lorencová, H., Jarošová, E., Avgitidou, S., and Dimitriadou, C. (2019). Critical Thinking Practices in Teacher Education Programs: A Systematic Review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(5), 844–59.
- [19] Mandernach, B. J., Forrest, K. D., Babutzke, J. L., & Manker, L. R. (2009). The role of instructor interactivity in promoting critical thinking in online and face-to-face classrooms. *Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 5(1), 49-62.
- [20] Mann, A., Schwabe, M., Fraser, P., Fülöp, G., and Ansah, G.A. (2020). *How the Covid-19 Pandemic is Changing Education: A perspective from Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from: <https://www.oecd.org/education/How-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-changing-education-Saudi-Arabia.pdf>
- [21] Masadeh, T.S.Y. (2021). EFL teachers critical thinking behaviors and the challenges facing them in classrooms. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 10 (2): pp. 185-203. <https://doi.org/10.24036/jelt.v10i2.112215>
- [22] Meiramova, S. (2017). Applications of critical thinking research: Foreign language teaching in an intercultural context. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 7(1), 24-36.
- [23] Murawski, L.M. (2014). Critical Thinking in the Classroom...and Beyond. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, 10 (1), 25-30.
- [24] Noula, I. (2018). Critical Thinking and Challenges for Education for Democratic Citizenship: an Ethnographic Study in Primary Schools in Greece. *Educação & Realidade, Porto Alegre*, 43(3), 865-886. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-623674799>
- [25] Pelgrum, W., and Plomp, T. (1991). *The use of computers in education worldwide: Results from a comparative study in 18 countries*. American Educational Research Association. Chicago, IL.
- [26] Reynolds, R., Notari, M., Taveres, N., and Lee, C. (2016). *21st Century Skills Development Through Enquiry Based Learning from Theory to Practice*. Springer Science.
- [27] Rizk, J., and Davies, S. (2021). *Can Digital Technology Bridge the Classroom Engagement Gap? Findings from a Qualitative Study of K-8 Classrooms in 10 Ontario School Boards*. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010012>

- [28] Rosalina, E., Nasrullah, N., and Elyani, E. P. (2020). Teacher's Challenges towards Online Learning in Pandemic Era. *LET: Linguistics, Literature, and English Teaching Journal*, 10 (2), 71-88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18592/let.v10i2.4118>
- [29] Rotherham, A. J., and Willingham, D. (2009). 21st Century skills: The Challenges Ahead. *Teaching For the 21st Century*, 67(1), 16-21.
- [30] Samanhuri, U., & Sampurna, P. (2010). *Researching students' critical thinking in EFL writing class (a case study in English education department, Untirta)*. TEFLIN 57th Revitalizing Professionalism in ELT as a Response to Globalized World. Bandung, Indonesia: Indonesia University of Education.
- [31] Saavedra, A., & Opfer, V. (2012). *Teaching and Learning 21st Century Skills: Lessons from the Learning Sciences*. A Global Cities Education Network Report, New York: Asia Society.
- [32] Scriven, M., & Paul, R. (2007). Defining Critical Thinking. *The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction*, 1-2.
- [33] Snyder, L. G., & Snyder, M. J. (2008). Teaching Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 50, 90-99.
- [34] Tathahira, T. (2020). Promoting Students' Critical Thinking Through Online Learning in Higher Education: Challenges and Strategies. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 8(1), 79-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/ej.v8i1.6636>
- [35] Tosuncuoglu, I. (2018). Place of Critical Thinking in EFL. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(4), 26- 32. : <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n4p26>
- [36] Veronika Smetanová, V., Drbalová, A., and Vitáková, D. (2015). Implicit theories of critical thinking in teachers and future teachers. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 171, 724 – 732. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.184>
- [37] Zhao, Y. (2003). Recent Development in Technology and Language Learning: A Literature Review and Meta-analysis. *The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium*, 21 (1), 7-27.

Nasser Alasmari holds a PhD in Linguistics from UON, New South Wales, Australia. His areas of interest and research are in the cognitive and contrastive analysis and his main research area is cross-cultural perceptions which he formalised in a number of his current research on this subject. He has taught Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and semantics. He has presented papers at conferences both home and abroad, published articles and papers in various journals, and contributed as a reviewer in several language and linguistics conferences.