



English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Practice of Critical Thinking in Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper discovers English language teachers' perspectives and practice of critical thinking in classrooms. Information was gathered through four English language teachers' semi-structured interviews exposed purposively selected from four community schools in the Rupandehi, Nepal. The findings indicate that while teachers possess a positive perception of CT and have relevant classroom experiences, several barriers hinder the full integration of critical thinking into their pedagogical practices. These challenges include devotion to conventional teaching methods, students' limited linguistic proficiency, a rigid curriculum, insufficient resources and lack of institutional support, deep-rooted beliefs and teaching experiences, and a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers. The study's implications can offer valuable insights into the perspectives and practices of secondary English language educators about the development of critical thinking in language instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking (CT) is a 21st-century cognitive skill that enhances the likelihood of achieving a favourable result and is intentional, logical, and aimed at a specific goal. Critical thinking involves gathering, deconstructing, and creating new knowledge. Paul and Elder (2006) define CT as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking which enhances overall thinking." A good critical thinker uses these skills across language abilities, applying mental and cognitive skills, valuing good thinking, and being motivated to make better decisions (Ku, 2009). Critical thinking skills and attitudes are crucial for logical problem-solving (Dwyer et al., 2014). They prepare students for real-world decision-making and involve inquiry-based learning, where teachers incorporate CT into English language teaching (ELT) through classroom activities. In these activities, students freely answer questions and share their thoughts, developing the habit of making convincing, sensible arguments. To foster ELT, teachers can transform lessons into thinking classes with various engaging activities.

The critical literacy approach to cultivating critical thinking involves students analyzing texts to understand how language addresses issues of power, access, disparity, desire, and resistance in society (Pennycook, 2001). This method employs

problem-posing dialogical teaching, engaging students in understanding and discussing social issues such as power relations, class struggle, poverty, and oppression, prompting them to think critically and propose transformative solutions. CT is essential in modern education to equip students with the cognitive skills necessary for adapting to a globalized world, processing information, innovating, and enhancing human capital and economic productivity (Hanushek & Woßmann, 2010). It also fosters innovation and critical citizenship, preparing students for the demands of a global economy and improving employability (Davies & Barnett, 2015). As a result, CT has gained significant attention in contemporary educational discourse.

Critical thinking is a central objective in twenty-first-century English language education (Bedir & Petek, 2018; Li, 2023). It enhances academic learning, individual growth, and community relations when integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction (Li, 2016). Recognized as essential for both academic success and navigating the digital age, critical thinking skills enable students to differentiate between fake news and misinformation (Chau & Cunningham, 2021). Moreover, there exists a strong correlation between critical thinking and language proficiency, where proficiency supports the development of critical thinking abilities (Grosser & Nel, 2013). CT plays a pivotal role in academic achievement, personal development, information analysis, job market readiness, discerning biases and manipulation, evaluating information reliability, problem-solving, and decision-making. It encourages learners to question and explore truths critically, promoting reliance on rational thinking over unquestioned beliefs or dogmas.

Promoting critical thinking (CT) in education faces challenges such as teachers' insufficient understanding, skills, and support to integrate CT in language classrooms (Li, 2023). Cultural perceptions of teachers as authoritative knowledge transmitters can hinder open questioning and discussion, essential for CT (Davies & Barnett, 2015). Studies highlight teachers' perspectives on these challenges and their efforts to embed CT within their social and cultural contexts (Yuan & Stapleton, 2020). Despite mentions in educational policies and curriculum reforms in Nepal emphasizing the need for a critical and transformative education system, practical implementation remains limited. The current emphasis on exam-focused learning in Nepalese education limits opportunities for CT practices, despite efforts in secondary English curriculum reforms to integrate critical thinking through diverse texts and activities (Grade XI & XII English Curriculum, 2019). Therefore, secondary English language teachers' perceptions and experiences with critical thinking in Nepal is crucial for addressing these challenges and fostering a more critical thinking-oriented educational environment. This research study has answered these research questions.

Literature Review

This section introduces the concept of critical thinking (CT) and the literature related to it. I also discuss the sociocultural theory that links CT to construct knowledge.

Critical Thinking and English Language Teaching

The term 'critical thinking' emerged in the mid-twentieth century, referring to a reasoning process aimed at reaching sound decisions or judgments (Vardi, 2013). It has become essential for both students and teachers due to its applied nature, helping discern deeper meanings and biases in language (Pescatore, 2007). Teachers hold a vital responsibility in cultivating and enhancing students' critical thinking skills, serving as key facilitators in their intellectual development yet many of them may not have understanding and effective methods to integrate them into language teaching (Sa-U & Abdurrahman, 2008). Research, such as Alwadai (2014), highlights challenges like teachers' limited knowledge and preconceptions about students' abilities hindering critical thinking promotion. In Nepal, secondary-level teachers

face similar challenges, including an emphasis on exam preparation over critical thinking development (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). Studies from other countries, like Sri Lanka (Gunawardena, 2020) and Oman (Tuzlukova et al., 2018), echo these findings, showing educators' struggles with national curriculum and testing pressures. Critical thinking in EFL encompasses various skills like creativity and problem-solving (Pava & Marin, 2017), yet there remains a need for more focused research and clearer implementation strategies for educators in the field.

The research underscores a substantial gap in integrating critical thinking into EFL education, particularly in exam-driven settings like Nepal. Teachers, while key to cultivating these skills, frequently lack sufficient training and resources, reflecting a limited grasp of critical thinking methods. The focus on exam preparation and curricular demands further restricts opportunities for fostering critical thinking. Moreover, there is a pressing need for context-specific, culturally attuned studies to develop practical instructional strategies. Teachers' perceptions of both student abilities and their own preparedness also pose barriers, highlighting the need for research to address these attitudinal challenges and strengthen support systems for educators. The reviews reveal a research gap in effectively integrating critical thinking into EFL education, with challenges in providing teachers the strategies, understanding, and support needed, especially in high-pressure academic settings. Therefore this study intends to explore the research gap.

METHODS

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to examine secondary English language instructors' perspectives and experiences regarding critical thinking. The participants consisted of four English teachers from community schools in Rupandehi, Nepal selected through purposive sampling for their extensive expertise in the field (Cohen et al., 2007). The group comprised two female and two male instructors. Data collection involved conducting one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014) in Nepali, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences in detail. The collected data were processed and categorized into two main themes. To ensure ethical standards, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. The credibility and validity of the data were confirmed through member checks (Cohen et al., 2018), and the data were subsequently analyzed and interpreted using descriptive methods.

Constructivism as a Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in social constructivism theory, which emphasizes active engagement, inquiry, and problem-solving as central to the learning process. Social constructivism asserts that individuals develop their comprehension and knowledge of the world through experiential learning and consequent reflection on those experiences. It asserts that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed through interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, learners are seen as active agents who generate knowledge through collaboration with peers and teachers, as opposed to passively receiving information. The theory highlights the importance of language-mediated interactions, wherein learning is facilitated through dialogue, negotiation, and discussion (Wang, 2008) scaffolding, grounded in Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), plays a significant role by supporting learners as they engage in tasks, they would be unable to accomplish independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach fosters collaborative learning environments that nurture critical thinking skills, encouraging students to question, debate, and create new perspectives (Richhart, 2015). Moreover, social constructivism emphasizes the significant role of social interaction and cultural context in the formation of knowledge. By fostering interactive, supportive learning environments, educators can enhance students' comprehension and equip them with

the skills necessary for lifelong learning and adaptability in a complex, evolving world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis, discussion, and interpretation of the data collected through participants' interviews. The responses were carefully examined to identify recurring patterns and insights that shed light on how instructors perceive and integrate critical thinking in their teaching practice. By organizing the findings thematically, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the perspectives shared by the respondents. The results are discussed under two main topics, each of which reflects a distinct yet interconnected aspect of instructors' experiences. These themes capture not only their opinions about the importance of fostering critical thinking but also the strategies they employ in classroom practice. Such organization allows the voices of the participants to be represented in a structured way, while also highlighting the practical dimensions of their teaching approaches.

Through this approach, the section aims to bridge individual experiences with broader pedagogical concerns. The discussion does not simply summarize what instructors have said but interprets their accounts in light of existing educational theories and research. In this way, the analysis demonstrates how the instructors' reflections can inform more effective strategies for embedding critical thinking into teaching and learning at different levels of education.

Teachers' Perception of Critical Thinking

The participant teachers emphasized that they gained more practical insights about critical thinking from professional learning opportunities such as conferences, workshops, and university courses. Manju reflected on this experience, stating,

"I attended several conferences and workshops which helped me realize the significance of critical thinking."

Her description explains how exposure to these types of platforms did not only enhance her knowledge, but it also influenced her awareness of critical thinking as a pedagogical objective, and not as an abstraction.

Looking back at her teaching experience when she was starting the career of a teacher, Manju confessed that she mainly concentrated on the content of the text. One example she remembered was that she frequently gave content explanations and ended the lesson without any follow-up. This memory illustrates a typical trajectory of a first-year teacher, in which there is a tendency towards a more content-oriented approach in instruction that does not emphasize the student. However, with time, her pedagogical approach has changed, and she started applying critical thinking to her classroom activities, whereby she stops using textbooks to explain various concepts and started using interactive learning methods.

Sanju's perspective further reinforces this shift. She explained,

"I rarely provide my students with a summary of the text; rather, I try to make them come up with their ideas instead of imposing my ideas on them."

Although she recognized the significance of content, she focused on how it must form a base to come up with several ideas and views. Her method is an indication of a purposeful attempt to re-brand content not as a goal in itself, but as a launching pad to sustain student inquiry, dialogue, and independent thinking. This change in practice demonstrates how teachers, over experience and professional growth, come to appreciate critical thinking as a dynamic process that helps them to tie classroom learning to real-life contexts. Regarding this, Himad expressed,

“In the past, in the early phase of my teaching, I was not familiar with the concept of critical thinking. Instead of collaborative teaching, I only delivered lectures and provided summaries to my students and thought I completed my job. I never taught that skill to my students.”

Himal acknowledged that in his initial stages of teaching career he was unaware of the concept of critical thinking. Consequently, he did not actively incorporate such skills in his classes but rather depended on delivering lectures and giving summaries of the text. His reflection reminds us of how little knowledge of critical thinking can force teachers to focus on more traditional, teacher-centered approaches, which focus on imparting content rather than on student inquiry and student involvement. The early use of Himal echoes the results provided by Rana and Rana (2022), who suggested that traditional approaches to teaching, along with insufficient knowledge of cooperative learning among teachers, are likely to contribute to collective instruction in the classroom. Peer support, group work and open discussion are other strategies that are hardly applied in such environments. However, it is still a teacher centered dynamic in the classroom where students are given very little room to question, challenge and offer their own view on things.

The outcome of such narrow thinking is that students are deprived of effective interaction, group work, and idea exploration. In the absence of these opportunities, the growth of creative and critical thinking processes is stunted, and students begin to have superficial knowledge of the matter instead of deep thinking. The case of Himal demonstrates how a lack of explicit preparation in critical thinking and learning to work together at the beginning of a teaching career can influence instructional practice in ways that limit rather than enrich the intellectual development of students. Himal added,

“Later years, I got the opportunity to learn about CT in seminars and workshops on student-centred teaching, I started teaching the text to my students to improve criticality in them encouraging them to be involved in role play and speaking activities.”

The teacher looked backward at his practice on the secondary level and explained that his key focus was to develop student interest. Instead of just using the conventional lecture techniques, he saw the need to provide the learner with a chance to contribute to what is taking place in the classroom. His engagement emphasis is another way of acknowledging that meaningful learning takes place when students are actively engaged in building knowledge instead of passively being taught it.

To do this, he specifically created the activities, including the role play and simulation, basing on his own interest in drama. These strategies allowed the students to represent life situations, role negotiate, and collaboratively problem-solve. These and similar techniques not only attracted the attention of learners but also promoted making them think in various ways to enhance the competencies of empathy and communication. In this regard, his application of drama-based pedagogy demonstrates how passions in teachers can be used to build a better instructional practice.

The combination of role play and simulation also contributed to the development of critical thinking students had to analyse the situation, decide and explain their choice within the context of the performance. The activities left the entertainment aspect behind to enable more profound insights and thinking with the right scaffolding by the teacher. His methodology thus illustrates how drama-based learning can facilitate higher-order thinking, as well as increase interaction and teamwork among secondary students.

Teachers' Practices of Critical Thinking

Experience is said to be one of the greatest teachers because it focuses on learning through practice and reflection, in real life. The ways in which language teachers develop professionally are not only determined by instructional practices, but also by individual identities and different contexts within which they operate (OECD, 2009). It is these lived experiences that create a baseline of how teachers go about their classrooms, how they shape their beliefs regarding learning, and eventually the way they influence their teaching practices.

The skills, attitudes and pedagogical capacity of the teacher can be decisive in facilitating classroom interactions in a learning setting where critical thinking (CT) is a central objective. The way they conceptualize CT has a direct impact on the way they can integrate it into lesson design and delivery. Because teacher awareness of CT may improve student engagement and improve the use of higher-order thinking skills, Yuan and Stapleton (2020) argue that teacher awareness of CT, in particular, the use of questioning strategies to teach language, can improve student engagement and higher-order thinking skills. Therefore, the consideration of the experiences of teachers and how they incorporate CT in their teaching is critical in understanding its real effects in teaching English language.

Sanju offered a clear example of this practice, stating,

"When I teach a reading text, I always tell my students to read the text and ask questions themselves. I think the student who makes questions is the best thinker."

Her practice demonstrates how asking students to come up with their own questions turns the learning process into an active one rather than a passive one. Taking student questioning as a sign of critical work, Sanju is not only advocating understanding but also the ability to analyze, reflect, and think on his/her own- the key elements of critical thinking development. Milan had a critical experience in this regard, he mentioned,

"Due to rigid curriculum and exam-oriented teaching, I cannot foster critical thinking in my students but I make them think and question what the writer is saying in a particular text before I explain the text whether the ideas are valid and justifiable or not."

Milan claimed that he is unable to incorporate CT activities due to exam-oriented teaching which mostly leads his students by asking lower-order questions to higher-order questions (Anderson, 2000) which would require students to synthesize, and evaluate ideas or opinions and create their text, both oral and written. Manju also builds her class around questions. She stated, *"I ask a lot of questions and provide my students a chance to ask me questions and keep on interacting with them."* Her lived experience indicates both teachers and students ask questions to each other. Regarding this, Sanju asserted,

"Asking a wide range of questions such as open and close-ended to empower my students with the power of analyzing. I never give them readymade answers rather I ask them a lot of questions to analyze the context of an issue and encourage them to defend their perspectives."

By asking both types of questions, she provided a chance to express their perceptions to be more interactive and motivating. This is in contrast to lower-level questions that "place the students in a passive position by depriving them of opportunities to think independently and critically" (Tan, 2007, p. 100). Manju asserted,

"My focus is always assigning them a lot of problem-based tasks, the tasks of comparing and contrasting the texts by asking questions. These types of tasks

engage students in discussion, enable reflection, self-learning and solving the problems.”

Manju reported she uses reflective writing of students as part of critical thinking. They prepared writing supported by reflective thinking. She recalled,

“In the past, most often I used to ask my students to think and reflect on what we do in our classrooms.”

They were asked to write a reflection, on what they liked most about the classroom, and what they did not like. Himat expressed,

“I divide students as per their levels, to encourage them to think in groups. I assign different tasks, simplifying them with worksheets.”

Giving various tasks in groups, he inspired them to develop ideas to be autonomous in learning and decision-making. In this line, Milan stated,

“I encourage my students to develop their ideas putting them in groups and pairs, rather than asking them to think individually. I also give them a situation and ask them to come up with a solution.”

Milan inspired his students to bring the solution of a problem and develop their ideas putting them in groups and pairs. Regarding this, Vygotsky’s idea of zone of proximal development also emphasizes on interaction. When more capable and less capable learners work in pairs and groups, they can come with a solution of a problem. Milan further added,

“All the stakeholders attempt to recognize the critical ability of students Due to the present written examination system; students memorize the ready-made materials. Without changing the exam system, and question pattern and giving training to the teachers, we cannot bring about the change and foster critical thinking in students.”

Milan's experience shows that neither teachers, administrators nor other stakeholders recognize the critical ability of their students. In his view, the existing assessment system which focuses on the written exam hinders in fostering of critical thinking skills in students. Teachers need to modify their pedagogy and question pattern. He replied that a week of training inspired him to start nurturing CT. So, he suggested that they should train teachers if they want to enhance critical thinking in students. Phyak and Sharma (2017) suggested a teaching approach that equips educators with instructional strategies aimed at enhancing critical thinking skills in both teachers and students.

Regarding the practice of CT, Sanju stated,

“My students usually do not raise open-ended questions as they are habituated to get ready-made materials from the teachers.”

This indicates that students are still not motivated to ask questions to their teachers. Sanju had bitter experiences in terms of her efforts to promote critical thinking in her language class. Furthermore, teachers believed that students' poor language and cognitive levels prevented them from using CT. She added,

“I cannot use CT in my class due to my students' poor language competency. When I was a student, I did not get the idea to integrate CT in language classrooms.”

Language instructors' perspectives and practices of CT integration in language classrooms are influenced by their previous experiences as learners, teaching experience, and teacher education (Ma & Liu, 2022). As a result, chances for

instructors to reflect on their experiences, views, and actions may be required in teacher education. Sanju asserted,

“In the early phase of my teaching, I nearly lost my job because the head teacher and guardians blamed me for not controlling the students. This happened because I was not familiar with critical thinking skills and I did not realize how important it is to the students.”

Reflecting on her experience, she mentioned she nearly lost her job because of her ‘noisy’ class where she allowed her students to speak, communicate, debate and argue on several issues as she wished to make her class learner-centred. She further stated,

“My students, head teacher and guardians wanted me to provide ready-made answers to the students so that they could get good marks in the examination.”

Another thing that discouraged him from promoting critical thinking is that even parents and head teachers expected him to provide readymade answers to the students. He said that for him students thinking, their original ideas, and their efforts to find answers were more important than any readymade answers. Thus, the practices of the participants support the idea of Pava and Marin (2017). They resolved that critical thinking in EFL encompasses a combination of communicative competence, originality, argument, problem-solving, decision-making, and independent learning abilities, all of which contribute to the development of essential life skills.

Teachers’ Perceptions and Practices of Critical Thinking

In this research on the perceptions and practices of teaching English language at the secondary level, it can be concluded that the classroom-based teaching of critical thinking is accomplished by predominantly using questioning, discussion, debate, reflective exercises, and making personal connections. These methods prioritize student learning, inquiry, and self-reflection, and are consistent with curriculum recommendations that place critical thinking as an important soft skill in the pursuit of intellectually engaging education (CDC, 2019). However, educators face structural challenges including an unhelpful administration, parent opposition, inflexible assessment tradition, and the lack of professional ethos that embraces critical thinking during seminars and workshops. According to Neupane (2021), critical thinking is frequently misunderstood with regard to other educational priorities. The attempts of teachers to do so are occasionally criticized instead of encouraged as signifying a desire of certain administrators to see schools with quiet, obedient classes instead of lively discussions. According to a social constructivist point of view, however, knowledge is constructed in the social process between teacher and learner and would indicate that such constraints inhibit rather than facilitate effective learning.

Recent research in the field of English language teaching confirms the relevance of critical thinking as part of the curriculum. Both Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) and Tang (2016) claim that the promotion of CT does not only enhance the linguistic competence of students but also provides them with transferable reasoning skills, which they might need outside the classroom. The instructors recorded in this study are cognizant of this dualism and adjust their instructing practice to fit local conditions but still focus on the approaches that support inquiry and involvement. This flexibility echoes the postmethod framework of Kumaravadivelu (2006) that supports socially pertinent, context-specific, and learner-oriented instruction. In this paradigm, critical thinking is more than a pedagogical method, but rather it becomes a curriculum development and classroom philosophy.

These strategies can be observed in the following practices in the Nepali context: the development of communicative competence, the involvement of students in practical and interactive activities, and the encouragement of questioning to facilitate independent thinking. Research conducted by Alemi and Daftarifarifard (2010) and Can (2009) affirms that these strategies improve cultural understanding, encourage self-exploration and establish significant relationships within English language classes. These efforts however are disjointed without coordination among the critical stakeholders, who include teachers, administrators, policymakers and parents. The results reveal the importance of developing a common vision of education that considers critical thinking not just a school subject but a key skill that helps people survive in modern social, academic, and professional life.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that secondary-level English language teachers generally hold positive perceptions of critical thinking (CT) in language classrooms, attributing it to fostering learner responsibility. However, they have very little practice in classrooms as they face challenges in developing CT skills due to students' low language proficiency, rigid curriculum, resource constraints, lack of administrative support, and personal beliefs about language teaching. Additionally, the assessment system and a lack of a conducive thinking culture hinder CT development among students. Teachers adapt through persistent efforts, employing indirect strategies like questioning, communication skills, and interdisciplinary connections to promote CT. The teachers discourage questioning, reflecting an incomplete understanding of CT. The study underscores the need for teacher training in CT understanding and integration strategies during pre-service and in-service education to foster clear teaching philosophies and enhance classroom CT practices.

This study, based on interviews provides grassroots perspective on incorporating critical thinking in English language classrooms. So, English language instructors would benefit from this study. Since this is a small-scale study with only four participants, it has some limitations. As a result, the results of this study cannot be broadly applied and generalized to the entire nation. The study also proposes more in-depth research employing diverse research tools such as questionnaires and observation in combination with mixed research designs, to uncover new and rich information in critical thinking.

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