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Examining the impact of critical thinking on Beninese EFL beginners' classes

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Abstract
This research work tackles the impact of critical thinking on EFL beginners' classes. The aim of this study is to show the advantages learners could benefit from the effective teaching of critical thinking in beginners' classes. The methodology adopted during the investigation consists in collecting information from EFL teachers and learners through the means of classroom observation and questionnaires. The data obtained from questionnaires have been analyzed and discussed in order to draw out relevant conclusions. The results found show that learners are unaware of the impact of critical thinking and teachers do not sacrifice most of their time to teach this skill. EFL Teachers should reconsider this skill and search for ways to implement it.

Keywords: critical thinking, impact, classes, results, advantages

1. Introduction

Everyone is endowed with the ability to think critically since younger age. This ability is developed depending upon how it has been taught to solve problems, to react promptly and to have insightful judgments towards situations. This act of thinking does not only consist of thinking simply but think in a logical and rational way in order to draw out thoughtful reasoning. That nature of thinking participates in society problems-resolution in the way that, individuals could be able to make informed decision on incomplete information. Considering this aspect of critical thinking it represents the most important contemporary and promise skill intended to help learners in education today, Butler et al. (2012:112) [2] argue: *"it is probably not surprising that critical thinking is one of the most frequently discussed skills in education, believed to play a central role in logical thinking, decision-making, argumentation and problem-solving".*

Teaching critical thinking in secondary schools, particularly in EFL beginners' classes will much more help to construct people of creativity ready to challenges of advanced studies, workplace and life circumstances Lai (2011:5) [6] says: *"More recently, the partnership for 21st century skills has identified critical thinking as one of the several learning and innovation skills necessary to prepare students for post-secondary education and workplace."*

Despite its great importance in teaching field, teachers focalize more on the four known skills that are listening, speaking, reading and writing. They hold an unimportant regard towards critical thinking skill. The effects of this little importance are often noticed on learners. They are unable to think logically and less make a pertinent judgment on matters, experiences, observations or situations noticed by them. The reason is that they are neither prepared to nor taught to do such a thing.

Lots of teachers considered "Critical Thinking" like a task which demands time and great amount of effort before being implemented. Moreover, it is not a very easy work to appeal to learners' critical thinking; it requires complete concentration and engagement. It is also frequent to notice that activities that could help fostering and developing critical thinking in beginners' classes are few and it favors the weak level learners get while entering higher classes. Clearly while advancing, students do not get an acceptant level in critical thinking, they have difficulties to figure out problems and fail. They emphasize themselves on many facts but little conceptualize them. They memorize much and think too little, however CT does not require lecture and rote memorization, it is more than a simple engagement.

The main goal of this study is to show the importance of critical thinking mainly to EFL teachers and to school authorities in order to draw their attention on enhancing and promoting this skill in EFL beginners' classes in Benin. As regards the research questions to be answered through this study, they are three in number:

- What strategies are to be used to lead learners think critically?,
- Which condition or atmosphere do learners need to really take advantages in this skill?
- What are the advantages the well implementation of critical thinking could generate to learners?

This paper *"Examining the Impact of Critical Thinking on EFL beginners' Classes in Benin"* will help EFL teachers to obtain techniques or ways through which they could develop learners' critical thinking ability. This paper turns around six sections. Back to the introductory part, I provide the literature review that is the report of some researchers who have got to deal with the topic. The third section is about the target population and the sampling, the research instruments, the data collection procedures and the methods of data analysis. The fourth section shows the presentation and interpretation of the results, the fifth one is devoted to the discussions and suggestions and the last section is concerned with the conclusion.

2. Theoretical keystones

2.1 Critical Thinking

Generally speaking, "critical thinking" is the ability to think clearly and rationally about what to do or what to believe. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. Moreover, it means making reasoned judgments that are logical and well thought out. It is a way of thinking in which you do not simply accept all arguments and conclusions you are exposed to but rather have an attitude involving questioning such arguments and conclusions. It requires wanting to see what evidence is involved to support a particular argument or conclusion. Brown and Keely (2007:2) [1] define "Critical Thinking" as *"an awareness of a set of interrelated questions, an ability to pose and answer questions at appropriate time and a desire to actively use the critical questions".*

Scriven and Paul (2014) [7] define it as: *"the mental active process and subtle perception, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information collected or derived from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or the communication leading to conviction".*

As I am talking about impact of critical thinking, the definition of impact is necessary. The term "impact" refers to the effect or influence that is noticed on somebody or something. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (New 8th Edition) is *"the powerful effect that something has on somebody or something"*

2.2 General Approaches to Teaching Critical Thinking

Teaching critical thinking requires an entire engagement on learners' side as well as teachers' side. Here are some approaches that are used to teach critical thinking.

- **General:** This approach to teaching critical thinking is usually typified by separate, stand-alone critical thinking courses that are divorced from any particular discipline or domain and that explicitly teach CT principles outside of any particular subject-matter content.
- **Infusion:** This approach involves explicitly teaching principles of critical thinking embedded in specific subject-matter content within a discipline.
- **Immersion:** This approach does not explicitly teach CT skills, rather, there is an assumption that students will naturally develop CT as a result of exposure to high-quality instruction in the discipline.
- **Mixed:** A hybrid approach, combining elements of both the general approach and either the infusion or immersion approach. Students receive explicit instruction in CT as a separate thread of a larger course or program in the discipline or domain.

2.3 The Approach of Bloom's Taxonomy on Critical Thinking

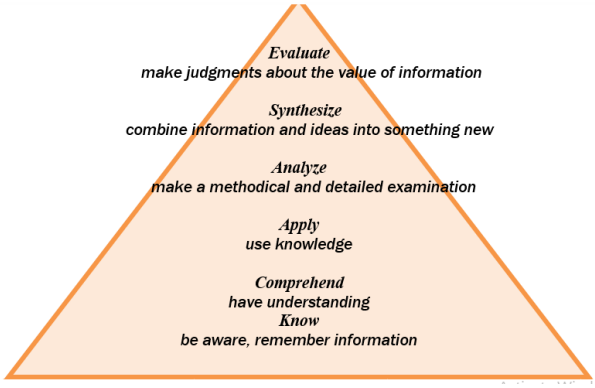
In order to promote higher order thinking skills such as analyzing and evaluating in education, Benjamin Bloom and educational psychologists created in 1956 the taxonomy of educational objectives. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, *the questions teachers ask every day can be divided into six types: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.*

Seen from the functions of each type of questions, knowledge refers to remembering previously learned material. Comprehension demonstrates understanding of facts and ideas. Application is the use of principles, formulas, theories, concepts or procedure in a new context to solve problem. Analysis consists of breaking a piece of material or concepts into consequent parts and interpreting their interrelated relationship. Synthesis is to build a structure of pattern from diverse elements, putting parts together to form a new whole with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure. Evaluation is to make reasoned judgments about the value of ideas or materials.

Bloom's Taxonomy is hierarchical with "knowledge, comprehension and application" at the bottom and with "analysis, synthesis and evaluation" at the top. Since, Bloom's Taxonomy for information processing skill has been one of the most widely cited sources when educational practitioners assess higher order thinking skills.

The three highest levels of skill (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) regarding their importance represent the higher order thinking skills. More specifically speaking, Bloom's Taxonomy is stratified from lower to higher levels. Lower level questions refer to those at the knowledge, comprehension and simple application levels of taxonomy, while higher level questions are those requiring complex application skills that are analysis, synthesis and evaluation. This simple classification of questions is both useful and accessible for EFL teachers. When the teaching is on the development of students' critical thinking, higher-level questions are employed in classroom teaching. In a single class period, effective teachers vary the level of questions as needed. It is widely recognized that different types of teachers' questions prompt different types of cognitive thinking processes, and not all questions can achieve the purpose of teaching higher order thinking to students.

Having a better understanding of the types of lower and higher level cognitive questions in the actual process of teaching thinking is vital and necessary for EFL teachers. However, knowing how to help students to grow in critical thinking ability is another issue. To best achieve the latter, EFL teachers need a solid repertoire of "how" questioning strategies, because teaching thinking is a great challenge to both new and experienced teachers. The following figure illustrates Bloom Taxonomy's higher order thinking skills.



***Source*:** adapted from Bloom, 1956

Fig 1: Levels of intellectual skill: the thinking triangle of Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy. (1956).

2.4 Characteristics of Productive Teaching of Critical Thinking

- Challenge Students to Know, Not Memorize
- Question, Examine, Create, Solve, Interpret, Debate
- Active Classes are Purposeful and Well Organized
- Students THINK About What They Learn

- Apply Material to Real Situations (e.g. Case Studies)
- Students Continue to Learn Independently...

3. Method

To collect data I have considered two methods: the quantitative and qualitative method. The quantitative method has helped me to deal with teachers and learners questionnaires whereas the qualitative method deals with classroom observation that I have undertaken. Throughout this section I have talked about the target population, the sample, the instruments, the data collection procedures and the method of analysis.

3.1 Target Population and Sampling

A sample of ten (10) teachers and one hundred and ten (110) learners was chosen to fulfill my objective. Among the secondary schools in Ouémé Region, I have chosen CEG Malanhoui where I have dispatched my questionnaires to collect information. I have taken into consideration the first cycle principally beginners' classes (6eme and 5eme)

Table 1: Sampling

Target	Teachers	Learners
Sample	10	110

3.1.1 Teachers

Teachers represent the main actors in teaching. Their role as guide and facilitator would help learners, since dealing with critical thinking requires concentration and relax atmosphere to make flow learners' brain. They have provided me with information about critical thinking skill.

3.1.2 Learners

Learners' reactions are not to be overlooked. Their contribution in my investigation has been very useful because their point of views about critical thinking have been necessary to testify the veracity of my topic.

3.2 Research Instruments

Throughout my research work I have used questionnaires and classroom observation to collect data. Questionnaires are intended for teachers and learners, and the classroom observation has to do with what I have done during my internship.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

3.2.1.1 Questionnaires for Teachers and Learners

Questionnaires are addressed both to EFL teachers and learners.

- six (06) questions to teachers about the impact of critical thinking
- five (05) to learners about the impact of critical thinking

3.2.2 Classroom Observation

This instrument is regarded as very trustful because it permits to eyewitness what is going on in classes. The aim of this instrument is to see whether teachers implement critical thinking skill in classroom situation. Through it concrete and reliable information were collected.

3.2.3 Procedures of Data Collection and Methods of Data Analysis

Data were collected from EFL teachers and learners. Learners' questionnaire is both made in French and English version. To distribute learners' questionnaires I have chosen Monday and Friday because of the strike that took place during the academic year (2017-2018). I have waited one week for taking back the questionnaires. I have addressed one hundred and ten (110) questionnaires to learners and ten (10) to teachers. Teachers have returned the questionnaires, with a returned rate of one hundred percent (100%). Not all learners have given back theirs, due to the strike some were missing. I have got back one hundred and five (105) from the one hundred and ten (110) distributed with a returned rate of ninety-five point forty-five percent (95.45%).To expose data that I got from the questionnaires, I have used tables, figures, percentage mode method to analyze collected data. Tables and figures have been entitled with questions addressed to teachers and learners. Comments have been given to explain the responses under tables and figures.

4. Results

Findings are displayed according to the questions of the questionnaire addressed to teachers and learners.

4.1 Teachers' Opinion about Critical Thinking

The results in the above table display the opinion of teachers about critical thinking. According to forty percent (40%) of teachers critical thinking is a skill allowing the learners to acquire their own knowledge, thirty percent (30%) viewed it as a skill of innovation and creativity. Thirty percent (30%) again thought that it is a skill allowing learners to solve life problems. Thus according to all of them CT is an essential skill.

Table 2: Opinion of Teachers about Critical Thinking

Teachers' opinion about CT	Frequency	Percentage (%)
A skill of innovation and creativity	03	30
A skill allowing the learners to acquire their own knowledge	04	40
A skill allowing the learners to solve life problems	03	30
Total	10	100

4.2 Opinion of Teachers about the Necessity of CT

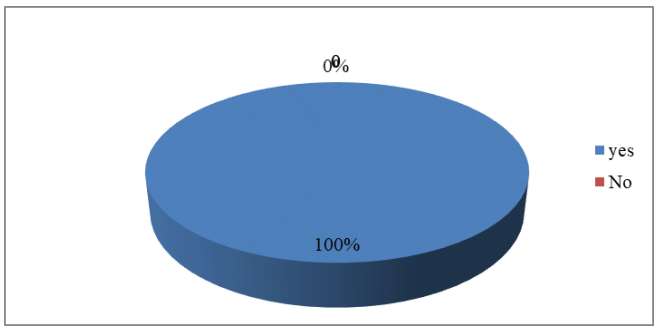


Fig 2: Necessity of CT according to Teachers

This figure clearly exhibits that according to teachers critical thinking is necessary for learners

4.3 Suitable Activities for Developing Learners' CT

Table 3: Suitable Activities for Developing Learners' Critical Thinking according to Teachers

Suitable activities for developing learners' CT	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Higher order instructions	01	10
Games	01	10
Case studies	03	30
Assessments	03	30
Written assignments	02	20
Total	10	100

The results in this table display that sixty percent (30%+30%=60%) of the teachers respectively took case studies and assessments as activities that could help developing learners' critical thinking, whereas twenty percent (20%) chose written assignments. Twenty percent (10%+10%=20%) that is ten percent (10%) prefer games and ten percent (10%) prefer high order instructions. So, as far as results are concerned I can conclude that all the activities are suitable for achieving the aim of developing CT in learners.

4.4 Implementation of those Activities in Classroom

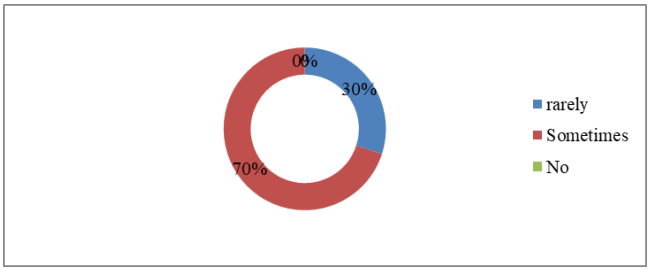


Fig 3: Activities Done in Classroom to Develop Learners' CT

The results displayed in this figure reveal that, all of the teachers do those activities; seventy percent (70%) of the teachers mentioned that they sometimes implement them, while thirty percent (30%) mentioned that they rarely do them.

4.5 Teachers' Suggestions in Improving and Developing CT in Learners

Teachers of English suggest that learners firstly should be put at ease and be advised that English is needed in all fields. They should be told to express their mind freely and be encouraged to speak English freely without paying attention to mistake every time and always. Teachers should motivate and give clear instructions in order to allow learners to react properly. Others suggest that visual aids can be used to motivate them and to retain their attention to think critically.

4.6 The Reason bringing Learners to Think Critically

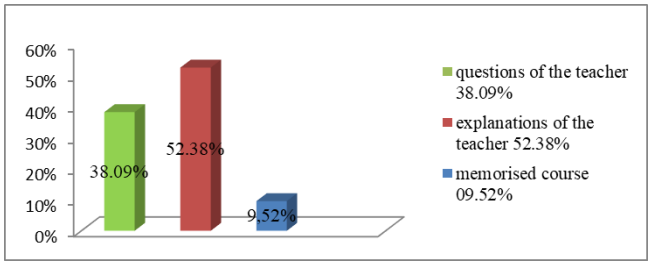


Fig 4: Reason bringing Learners to Think critically face to Problems Posed by their Teachers during a Learning Situation.

The findings of the figure above display that fifty-two point thirty-eight percent (52.38%) of learners said that, teachers' explanations help them to think critically, while thirty-eight point o nine percent (38.09%) confessed that the teachers' questions bring them to think. For nine point fifty-two percent (09.52%) the memorized course helps them to think. Thus, I can conclude that teachers' explanations and questions boost learners' critical thinking.

4.7 Learners' Responses about Activities

Table 4: Learners' Responses about Activities given to them

Activities teachers give to their learners	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	105	100
No	00	00
Total	105	100

This table shows the results that all of the learners are provided by their teachers with activities allowing them to think critically.

4.8 Learners' Responses about the Different Strategies of Work

Table 5: Learners' Reponses about the Different Strategies of Work

Learners' Responses about the strategies of work (Individual work, Pair work, Group work)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	105	100
No	00	00
Total	105	100

This table shows that all of learners agree that strategies of work bring them to think.

4.9 Strategy Helping Learners to Better Think

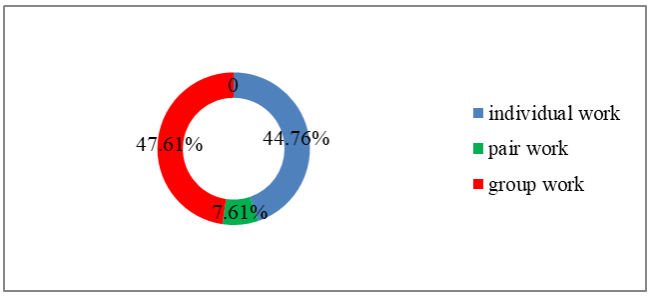


Fig 5: Data about Strategy Helping Learners to Better Think

The results in this figure exhibit that forty-seven point sixty-one percent (47.61%) of learners mentioned group work help them to better think critically, for forty-four point seventy-six percent (44.76%) individual work is the one during which they think better, only seven point sixty-one percent (07.61%) chose pair work. Group work so, is the one preferred by most of the learners.

4.10 Classroom Observation Reports

My goals in making the observation were not only to see if critical thinking is taught and how English courses are delivered but also to witness how teachers motivate, manage their class and which strategies they use while dealing with CT. Firstly I wanted to know whether teachers deal with critical thinking in classroom situation. Unfortunately my remark is that, they do not take it into account so much and rarely implement it. I have noticed that they have difficulties in doing it because activities that can boost learners' comprehension in critical thinking are unavailable. Secondly my intention is to know if teachers organize group work discussions during which instructions such as 'how and why' something occurs are given to learners about topics or case studies to bring them think and build their own knowledge, but I have found that teachers not often do it, they just give instructions and ask learners to respond to them they do not allot enough time to learners to verily think on those instructions to bring their own additions. I have noticed that this is due to the little time that teachers are given to deliver the course. About the method used, I have noticed that teachers focus most on lower order questions. Discussions on topics or issues are not so much remarked and learners centered approach is not so applied.

5. Discussion

To teach and develop in learners CT, teachers need strategies that could guide them to conduct effectively the course. Stacy (2003) [8] states it: *"Numerous instructional methods exist to promote thought and active learning in the classroom, including case studies, discussion methods, written exercises, questioning techniques and debates. Three methods questioning, written exercises, and discussions and debates are highlighted".* The findings revealed sixty percent (30%+30%=60%) of teachers respectively claimed that case studies and assessment can help developing CT, twenty percent (10%+10%=20%) respectively chose games and higher order instructions, twenty percent (20%) mentioned written assignments. So, according to teachers all the activities are good for developing critical thinking. Despite that, seventy percent (70%) of them do not often implement them whereas thirty percent (30%) rarely do them. In this condition teachers should review their way of teaching this skill. All the sampled learners (100%) one hundred percent agreed that strategies of work help them to think

Creating a culture of inquiry by supporting students' thinking process, modeling critical thinking skills, actively question students' thinking, giving real-life facts or activities are some strategies that could help teachers. Work strategies, high order questions, relevant problems or issues intended to lead class in questioning, in analyzing, comparing and contracting ideas among students, play a crucial role in inducing students' higher level cognitive process. Forming small groups for discussion purposes, debates and exchange of viewpoints about issues are ways useful for appealing to CT. Mark Jon Snyder enumerates six steps to effective Thinking and Problem solving that he named "IDEALS" a strategy that teachers can use in implementing CT. It stands for : *"I-Identify the Problem, D-Define the Context, E-Enumerate the Choices, A-Analyze the Options, L-List Reasons Explicitly, S-Self-Correct".*

An open atmosphere in the classroom makes learners feel at ease, it creates in them the feeling that their opinions, ideas, suggestions or comments in thinking critically are taken into consideration. This is a disposition to effective thinking on matters or issues. Christ (2009) [3] says it: *"create a welcoming environment is an effective teaching classroom environment that motivates students to thrive. They are committed to excellence in teaching".* Walking among students and moving around while they are working to know how they are progressing creates a relaxed environment in the classroom favoring the relationship teacher/learner. Explicitly it encourages and pushes learners to ask questions freely when closed to their teacher. Still teacher's passion to the subject in question works also for a good condition of learning critical thinking. It promotes an easy interaction and engages learners in task. Christ (2009:2) [3] is of this opinion when he says: *"Your whole body language and voice must convey the message that there is nowhere else you'd rather be. Many professors like to walk among the students, and have their whole body and voice reflect their great fascination with the subject matter. Classes are much more engaging when teachers are moving around and not sitting still or lecturing from a lectern. When students see their professor's passion, they want to participate".*

Critical thinking teaching derives to learners many advantages. Kori (2017) [5] says*: "you can gain numerous benefits from mastering critical thinking* skills, *such as better control of your own learning and empathy for other points of view."* It promotes creativity and is crucial for self-reflection. All the sampled teachers through findings affirmed that critical thinking yields to students benefits. Fifty percent (50%) of them claimed it can be beneficial to learners in advancing studies and problems solving, whereas thirty (30%) percent said that it is advantageous in real life and workplaces, twenty percent (20%) thought that this is good in developing thought process. So through these responses all the teachers recognize the benefits and importance of critical thinking. Through it skills of solving problem and making decisions are acquired. Moreover learners are able to respond to workplace challenges, are creative and logic in reasoning, independent and autonomous in learning. Kori (2017) [5] asserts: *"Rather than relying on teachers and classroom time for instruction and guidance, students with critical thinking skills become*

more independent, self-directed learners". Critical thinking helps growing in academic performance. Richard and Linda (2008) argue *"Students who know how to analyze and critique ideas are able to make connections across disciplines, see knowledge as useful and applicable to daily life and understand content on a deeper, more lasting level."*

6. Conclusion

As far as the necessity of critical thinking is concerned learners have difficulties in making relevant judgments about a matter or a problem situation. Acquire critical thinking and skills related to it would help learners and make of them problem solvers, analyzers, interpreters and evaluators. Problems will not only be regarded as problems but how to solve them will be emphasized on through questions Zhiven, (2013:149) [9]: argues that: *"Good thinking is prompted by "good" questions rather than correct answer".*

This study revealed some difficulties encountered by teachers and learners in teaching and learning Critical Thinking. That is, they are in lack of activities that can really help developing the skill, many of the teachers do not effectively teach critical thinking since the time they are provided to deliver course is insufficient, and also activities that can help learners in critical thinking are not often implemented or are rarely done. Moreover students are less interesting when dealing with it, not all of them participate, the class becomes boring, etc...

Regarding problems some suggestions have been formulated for the well implementation of critical thinking in EFL beginners' classes. Session of trainings should be organized for EFL teachers. During those sessions measures should be taken to acquire ways to tackle and deal with critical thinking skill during courses in function to the time they have to do the course. Changes should be met on beginners' syllabuses by infusing activities that will help and facilitate learners' comprehension in thinking critically. Strategies that can be used to effectively have learners to think critically and techniques to motivate learners in the vein to make them active should also be met.

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