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*Original Paper*

# Fostering Students' Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Advanced Classroom

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***Abstract***

*Today, language educators advocate the teaching of critical thinking skills in colleges and higher institutions because it is said to be one of the fundamental skills that can prepare a potential candidate for the job market in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the development of critical thinking has received little emphasis in Benin educational system. Therefore, this paper presents a study on fostering EFL students' critical thinking skills in the advanced classroom. Based on a qualitative method, this study aims at exploring EFL teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and teachers' view on the importance of developing higher cognitive skills with their advanced learners and to find out how to foster critical thinking in the advanced classroom. To reach this goal, interviews with seven (7) senior lecturers and a focus group of twelve (12) advanced students were used to collect data. The findings reveal that teachers are aware of the concept of critical thinking but in practice, many of them do not teach their students these cognitive skills because to them they are discouraged with the educational system which has regressed in terms of quality teaching. Students are no longer assigned challenging tasks that will enable them to develop their cognitive skills. Besides, many teachers seem to ignore the importance of critical thinking skills for their learners' career opportunities. However, teachers mentioned group discussion as a strategy for fostering critical thinking in the EFL classroom. Both teachers and students reported that the challenges to meet in order to achieve critical thinking includes students' poor reading and listening skills, negative attitudes towards learning, class size, content coverage and teachers' training. Teachers are of the opinion that critical skills should be developed with learner's right from secondary schools. This will help them to excel in their academic courses.*

***Keywords***

*critical thinking, cognitive skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) advanced students*

## 1. Introduction

> For tomorrow's world, which is just around the corner, we need creative, questioning individuals, well informed and literate, who can work together to devise solutions to many problems that face us (Court, 1991).

In recent times, the term "critical thinking" has become an important concept in the educational circle. Educators are becoming more and more interested in teaching their learners the act of thinking critically. In fact, critical thinking is now widely viewed as a basic competency, similar to reading and writing, which needs to be taught (Fisher, 2011). In the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), recent trends have emphasized the importance of developing critical thinking with EFL learners. Kabilan (as cited in Orakci, Durnali, & Aktan, 2019) maintains that using the target language and knowing the meaning are not enough. Learners must acquire the ability to critically think through the language because critical thinking enables students to "expand their learning experience and makes language learning deeper and more meaningful in addition to providing learners with a more skilful way of communicating with other people, enabling them to acquire new knowledge, and deal with ideas, beliefs, and attitudes" (ibid., p. 300). Moore and Parker (2015) stated that 'critical thinking involves thinking about thinking. We engage in it when we consider whether our thinking (or someone else's) abides by the criteria of good sense and logic''. In simple terms, critical thinking is the ability and predisposition to identify a problem, question and reflect on information gathered on that problem and make an overall judgement or conclusion. John Dewey, the American philosopher, psychologist and educator commonly referred to as the "Father of Critical Thinking" defines critical thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1933, p. 9; Glaser, 1941) puts that critical thinking is an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience.

In higher education where critical thinking is expected to be a fundamental goal of learning, it is quite common to hear lecturers instructs their students to "think" but unfortunately do not tell them or teach them how to think. As a result, students rely on their teacher for every piece of information instead of reflecting on their own regarding a subject matter or a course's content to have better understanding of it. In this regard, Donnelly (n.d.) add that unfortunately, "we know all-too-well that students are not so prepared, but look to us to spoon-feed them "important" bits and pieces of stuff to memorize for the exam. Few students know how to isolate, or learn, important theories or important data" (p.9). Sahamid (2014) revealed that:

> An education system that is heavily exam oriented has led to produce students who are rote learners and lacking in critical thinking skills (Rahimah Hj. Ahmad, 1998). The system has also encouraged teachers to teach in a way that allows them to cover the syllabus in the shortest time possible, mostly achieved through didactic teaching. Completing the syllabus ahead of time allows teachers to conduct more revisions and drilling sessions in preparation for the exams. In

> these session, students memorize facts and concepts as teachers take them through numerous past year exams questions and especially the model answers. The irony of it is that students who learn through memorization and rote-learning are generally unable to analyse, interpret, or justify their opinion with reasons… Sahamid (2014, p. 166)

Backing this claim, MCEETYA (2008) states that successful learners are those who are "able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines…" (as cited in Qamar, 2016, p. 40). In Benin, the development of critical thinking skills is not a common topic for discussion in the educational sector. Besides, encouraging language learners to be critical thinkers is important in teaching English as a foreign language. Orakci, Durnali and Aktan (2019). Beninese advanced students are ignorant of the importance of critical thinking skills. Alarming is the fact that many students believe that taking notes and memorizing information to pass exams are what characterize a good student. Students are not entirely to blame for this because many courses appear to be lecture-based and do not encourage students' active participation. Duron et al. (as cited in Laabidi, 2021), contended that teachers employ a "lecture format in their classrooms, but this famous approach does not stimulate critical thinking by learners" (p. 55). Besides, many students are not developing higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem- solving because too much focus is placed on content coverage. As cited in Pollock and Stover (2014) this type of learning fails to "prepare students to enter the 21st century workforce, where employers place greater value on the ability of employees to analyse (as opposed to memorize) data, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively" (p. 393). Training students in the twenty-first century requires that the use of higher-order thinking and complex thinking skills, as well as other soft skills such as collaboration and communication be incorporated in their curricular (Donnelly, n.d.).

Lack of awareness about critical thinking skills at different educational levels in Benin has prompted the choice of this research work which focuses on fostering EFL students' critical thinking skills in the advanced classroom. The main objective of this study is to highlight the importance of developing critical thinking skills and to explore how to foster cognitive skills in advanced learners. To achieve this goal, the study purely adopts a qualitative methodology and uses interview with teachers and with a focus group consisting of advanced students as research instruments to collect data.

*1.1 Research Questions*

Two basic questions form the basis of this research.

1. What are EFL teachers' perception on the development of critical thinking skill for with advanced learner?
2. How can these cognitive skills be fostered in the advanced classroom?

*1.2 Objectives of the Study*

This study aims at finding out how EFL teachers perceive the development of critical thinking skill with advanced learners and seek how to find ways to foster cognitive skills with EFL advanced learners.

## 2. Literature Review

This section highlights research on critical thinking and the various aspects it involves.

### *2.1 The Concept of Critical Thinking*

There have been so many varying definitions of critical thinking. Following Vander-Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen and Meijer (2020), the focus on critical thinking skills has its roots in two approaches which are the cognitive psychological approach and the educational approach. From a cognitive psychological approach, critical thinking is defined by the types of behaviours and skills that a critical thinker can show while the educational approach equates critical thinking to the highest levels of information processing taxonomies. According to Beyer (1990), critical thinking is the ability and readiness of a person to reflect on his own and others' thinking in relation to its truth, value and validity in a logical argument. Ennis (1985) defines critical thinking as comprising of three essential parts which are; a problem-solving process, a reasoning process and a decision-making process. Critical thinking is a purposeful and systematic method of thought. It involves a highly systematic process where there are clear support for solid reasoning, precision, and awareness of thought (Paul & Wilsen, as cited in Rumpagaporn, 2007). In addition, Lipman's (1988) definition of critical thinking is 'skilful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgement because it 1) relies upon criteria, 2) is self-correcting, and 3) is sensitive to context' (p. 39). Paul and Elder (2008) put that critical thinking is the art of thinking about thinking in such a way as to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and recast it in improved form. Following Facione (2015, p. 3), critical thinking is "purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or conceptual considerations upon which that judgement is based. Heard, Scoular, Duckworth, Ramalingam, and Teo (2020, p. 2), stated that:

> David Hitchcock notes that while some definitions from within the philosophical tradition 'treat critical thinking as concerned only with the appraisal of already existing intellectual products' (2017, p. 6) others see it as also applying to the generation of new intellectual products. For example, Robert Ennis's seminal definition – 'reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do' (1985) – extends the outcomes of critical thinking not only to judgements about what to believe but to actions as well. His definition extends to include decision-making, and therefore posits that critical thinking is an activity with practical applications.

It appears that there are conflicting perceptions of critical thinking between those from the educational field and those within the field of psychology itself. Nevertheless, while there seems to be confusion in the relationship of critical thinking and problem solving, researchers such as Fisher and Scriven (1997) stated that they may be related but are quite distinct. Herad and others (2020) believe that the two processes tend to overlap, but differ significantly. Some critical thinking tasks cannot be viewed as some problem-solving activities. The same way, some problem- solving activities cannot be regarded, by their very nature, critical thinking tasks even though problems with poor organisation might necessitate critical thinking not to provide solutions for them to be solved but only to sort them out.

*2.2 The Significance of Critical Thinking in the Educational Field*

Every educator today is an advocate of critical thinking. It is needed in every aspect of human life and in every field of intellectual endeavour. As stated earlier in the introduction, it is one of the skills required in the job market. That is why schools are now integrating critical thinking as an independent course in their program. Paul & Elder (2007) stated that the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends on the quality of our thought. Researchers Moore and Parker (2015) contended that the ultimate objective in thinking critically is to ensure that we reach rational conclusions. Since our decisions show conclusions that we reach, it can simply be said that the primary goal of critical thinking is to reach rational conclusions. Oliver and Utermohlen (1995) observed that students are too often passive receptors of information. Thus, while they strive to solve the complex problem that they encounter in their studies, they need to exercise their critical thinking skills. According to Qing (as cited in Apsari, 2016), a learner with critical ability must ask for questions, collect information that he or she selects and reflects on before reaching dependable. Paul and Elder's Foundation for Critical Thinking emphasizes that a rich intellectual environment is possible only with critical thinking at the foundation of education (Paul & Elder, 2008). The reason why is only when students learn to think critically through the content they are learning in order that they might use it in real life situations. In addition, in rapidly changing world with more and more complexities and interdependences, critical thinking is the answer to economic and social problems.

*2.3 Critical Thinking Skills*

Based on previous studies and research, critical thinking skills also known as cognitive skills are basically

a) *Analysing*: identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions or other forms of representation intended to express beliefs, judgements, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions. (Facione as cited in Heard et al., 2020).

b) *Interpretation*: Decoding significance, categorization and clarifying meaning (Murguia, Occhi, Ryan, & Verbeek, n.d.)

c) Evaluating: Assessing claims and arguments

d) *Defining:* intellectual curiosity (Donnelly, n.d.)

e) *Inferring:* assessing whether the knowledge you have is sufficient and reliable (Tomaszewski, 2021).

f) *Decision-making*

g) *Problem-solving*

Conley (2010) viewed students' key cognitive skills as abilities to formulate and solve problems, evaluate and seek evidence to defend arguments and interpret data or conflicting viewpoints. Furthermore, Vander-Zanden et al. (2020) emphasised on analysing, evaluating, creative thinking, and researching as key critical thinking skills required of an advanced student. According to the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Project of the Council for Aid to Education, as cited in Moore and Parker (2015), a student with critical thinking abilities is able to:

- determine what information is or is not pertinent;
- distinguish between rational claims and emotional ones separate fact from opinion;
- recognize the ways in which evidence might be limited or compromised;
- spot deception and holes in the arguments of others;
- present his/her own analysis of the data or information;
- recognize logical flaws in arguments;
- draw connections between discrete sources of data and information;
- attend to contradictory, inadequate, or ambiguous information;
- construct cogent arguments rooted in data rather than opinion;
- select the strongest set of supporting data;
- avoid overstated conclusions;
- identify holes in the evidence and suggest additional information to collect;
- recognize that a problem may have no clear answer or single solution;
- propose other options and weigh them in the decision;
- consider all stakeholders or affected parties in suggesting a course of action;
- articulate the argument and the context for that argument;
- correctly and precisely use evidence to defend the argument;
- logically and cohesively organize the argument;
- avoid extraneous elements in an argument's development;
- present evidence in an order that contributes to a persuasive argument.

Following Andrew (2007), as cited in Donnelly (n.d.), critical thinking skills are reported to be the ability to recognize and validate problems; original, independent thinking; the ability to develop theoretical concepts; knowledge of recent advances within a given field; understanding of relevant research methodologies and techniques; ability to critically analyze and evaluate findings; ability to summarize, document, report, and reflect on progress.

2.3.1 Levels of Critical Thinking

According to Paul and Elder (2010), to grow as critical thinkers, every person must undergo stages of development in critical thinking and the passage from one stage to the next is dependent upon a necessary level of commitment on the part of the person to develop as a critical thinker. The levels or stages of critical thinking as stated by Paul and Elder (2010) are:

- Stage 1: The Unreflective Thinker (unaware of significant problems in his thinking)
- Stage 2: The Challenged Thinker (faced with significant problem in his thinking)
- Stage 3: The Beginning Thinker (recognize that they have basic problems in their thinking and make initial attempts to better understand how they can take charge of and improve it)
- Stage 4: The Practicing Thinker (recognises the need for regular practice)
- Stage 5: The Advanced Thinker (advance in keeping with the practice)
- Stage 6: The Master Thinker (good habits of thought are becoming second nature)

It is also important to refer to Greenlaw and DeLoach's as cited in Donnelly (n.d., p. 69) levels of critical thinking:

- Level 6: consideration of ethical issues in decisions
- Level 5: use of empirical evidence to strengthen theoretical argument
- Level 4: use of theory to make a cohesive argument
- Level 3: analysis of an argument or competing arguments and evaluation with evidence
- Level 2: unsupported assertions, simplistic one-sided arguments
- Level 1: paraphrase, repetition
- Level 0: organizational and off-task

2.3.2 Components and Characteristics of Critical Thinking

As cited in Hitchcock (2011), Researchers Jenicek and Hitchcock identified seven components of the critical thinking process. They are:

1. Problem identification and analysis: The problem (the main question or the main point) is identified and if necessary broken up into component parts.

2. Clarification of meaning: The meaning of terms, phrases and sentences is clarified where necessary. This component includes clarification of the problem to see how it should be investigated, as well as operationalization of key terms in an investigation.

3. Gathering the evidence: Evidence relevant to the problem is obtained.

4. Assessing the evidence: The quality of the evidence is judged.

5. Inferring conclusions: Conclusions are drawn from the best evidence, or inferences drawn by others are evaluated.

6. Other relevant information is considered: possible exception-making circumstances, situational factors, implications of one's tentative conclusions, alternative positions and their justification, alternative explanations of results, possible objections and criticisms, etc.

7. Overall judgment: Some sort of overall judgment on the problem is reached, taking into account all the components of the critical thinking process. (Hitchcock, 2011, p.12). In addition, according to Wade (1995), characteristics of critical thinking include: asking questions, defining a problem, examining evidence, analysing assumptions and biases, avoiding emotional reasoning, avoiding oversimplification, considering other interpretations and tolerating ambiguity. A critical thinker is clear, accurate, relevant, logical and fair. Facione (2015) puts that a good critical thinker is flexible in considering alternatives and opinions, understands the opinions of other people, is open minded and honest in face of his own biases. A critical thinker is also prudent in suspending, making or altering judgements and is willing to revise or reconsider views. (ibid.). Hitchcock (2011) describe critical thinking as the following:

- It is a type of thinking.
- It applies to all subject matters.
- It involves reflection, looking back, and suspending judgment.
- Good critical thinking is reasonable.

- Critical thinking involves a careful consideration of evidence.
- Critical thinking is oriented towards making a definite judgment.
- The ideal "critical thinker" thinks critically whenever it is appropriate. Being a critical thinker involves knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions (behavioral tendencies).

According to Paul and Elder (2007), a well-cultivated critical thinker as is able to:

- raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively
- come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards
- think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognising and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences
- communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

2.3.3 Strategies for Promoting Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom

The following are two major strategies that can promote critical thinking in the classroom:

- **Collaborative Learning:** Collaborative learning can best be observed when students work in group rather in pairs. Maintaining a small size of group members can make students at various performance levels work together to reach a common goal (Ali, 2018). Professional learning communities in which rich discussions of teaching, learning, and thinking become a fundamental part of teachers' experiences, provide the foundation for nurturing thinking and learning in the classroom (St Martin's, 2021). According to Marcia (1991), a viable alternative for facilitating critical thinking is small group discussion. Group discussion seems to be an effective strategy of developing critical thinking in students. Through group discussion, students themselves can question the opinion or views of their peers. Besides, a student's thinking is 'further heightened by other students' views and questions and contributions on the topic of discussion which are also sought during the process of questioning' (Sahamid, 2014, p. 167). Collaborative learning requires human interaction. This interaction forces students to internalize the skills they are being taught as well as the opportunity to observe manifestations of others' critical thinking processes.
- **Socratic Questioning:** The Socratic questioning technique is the oldest strategy for developing critical thinking and is still effective until today. Clark and Egan (2015) put that Socratic questioning involves asking a series of focused, open-ended questions that encourage reflection (as cited in Sutton, 2020). It is an effective way of exploring ideas in depth.

*2.4 Richard Paul's Critical Thinking Model*

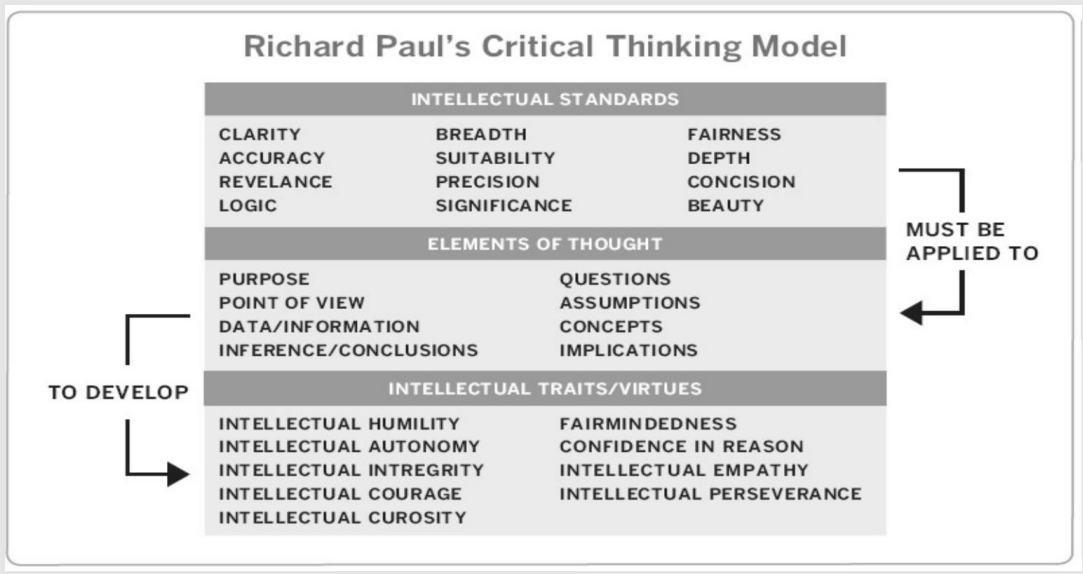


**Figure 1. Richard Paul's Critical Thinking Model**

*Source*: Adapted from Donnelly (n.d.).

Richard Paul's critical thinking model has three component which are intellectual standards, elements of thought and intellectual traits. Paul and Elder (2007) stated that critical thinkers apply intellectual standards to the elements of reasoning in order to develop intellectual traits. Intellectual standards are standards which must be applied to thinking whenever one is interested in checking the quality of reasoning about a problem, issue or situation (ibid.). They include clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness. Furthermore, the elements of reasoning is based on the fact that:

1. All reasoning has a *purpose*
2. All reasoning is an attempt to *figure* something out, to settle some *question*, to solve some *problem*
3. All reasoning is based on *assumptions*
4. All reasoning is done from some *point of view*
5. All reasoning is based on *data, information and evidence*
6. All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, *concepts and ideas*
7. All reasoning contains *inferences* or *interpretations* by which we draw *conclusions* and give meaning to data
8. All reasoning leads somewhere or has *implications* and *consequences* (Paul & Elder, 2007, p. 7).

The consistent application of intellectual standards to the elements of reasoning develops intellectual traits which are intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, intellectual autonomy, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, fair-mindedness and confidence in reason. However,

Richard Paul's model of critical thinking is practical and can be adapted for classroom instruction (Sahamid, 2014).

2.4.1 Bloom's Taxonomy for Critical Thinking

A taxonomy is a term to refer to a form of classification. Bloom's Taxonomy is a classification system used to define and distinguish the levels of human cognition (Angela, 2020). Bloom's taxonomy was originally a method created by Benjamin Bloom in 1956 to categorize the levels of reasoning skills that students use for effective learning. Later in 2001, a group of cognitive psychologists, theorists and instructional researchers revised and provided an updated version of Bloom's taxonomy. The levels are usually depicted in a pyramid format as shown below:

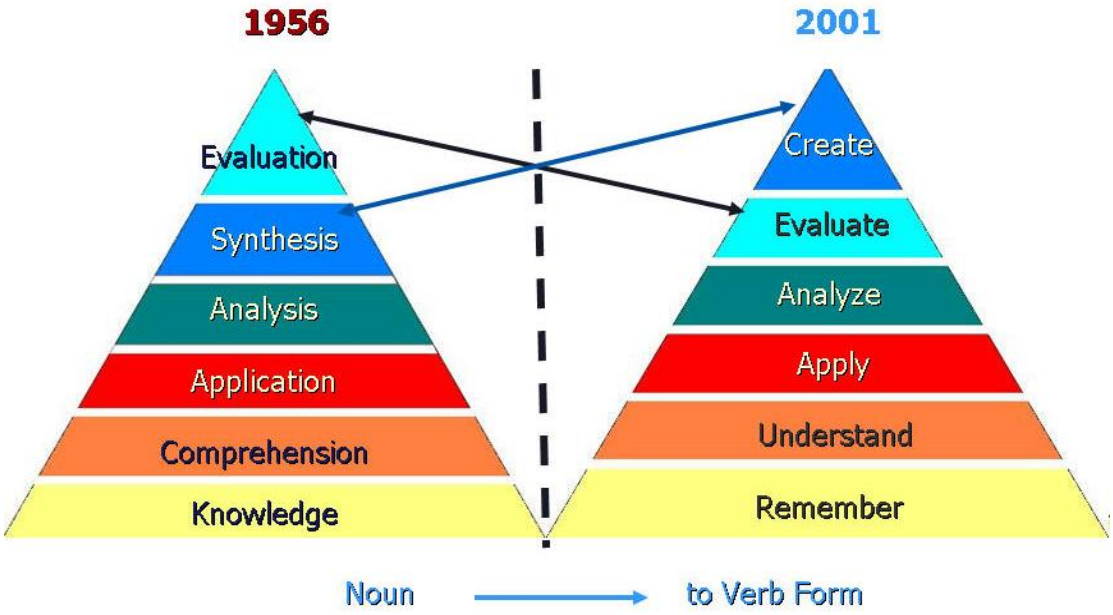


**Figure 2. Bloom's Taxonomy for Critical Thinking**

*Source*: Wilson (2001, p. 4)

The six categories of Bloom's taxonomy are ordered from simple to complex. In fact, representing the skills like this gives the impression of a hierarchical approach to critical thinking. There is the Lower Order Thinking Skills: remember, understand and apply, and the Higher Order Thinking Skills: analyse, evaluate and create. Starting from lowest to highest, Westbrook (2014) in her article, explains that each of the six skills have the following signification:

- *Remember:* can students recall information they have read or heard?
- *Understand*: can students explain the ideas or concepts they have read or heard about?
- *Apply*: can students use the information in another context or a different situation or for a different task?
- *Analyse*: can students break the information down into its components and parts?
- *Evaluate:* can students assess the value of the input information?

- *Create*: can students use the input to create something new?

Following these guidelines, teachers can develop cognitive skills for students to have the capacity to think and act creatively, to meet challenges positively and show initiative and enterprise in how they think and learn (Angela, 2020).

*2.5 Activities for Developing Critical Thinking Skills*

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), there are some communicative tasks or activities that develop students' critical thinking.

- Information Gap Activities: This is an activity where learners are missing the information that are needed to complete a task and need to talk to one another to find it. Examples of Information gap activities include describe and draw, jigsaw and spot the difference.
- Simulation: They are instructional scenarios where a learner is placed in a 'world' defined by the teacher and represent a reality within which students interact. Since they are ambiguous and open-ended, they encourage students to consider the implications of a scenario. (UNSW, 2018). Simulations promote the use of critical and evaluative thinking and give them an opportunity to practice communicating effectively and also, to think critically, to solve problems that can possibly occur in real-life situations (Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018).
- Role-Play: This is a communicative activity in which "learners speak to each other in different roles from real life contexts. For example, two learners can engage in a discussion and each other's answer the questions in their different roles. Such a classroom task can contribute to developing their critical thinking skills (Orakci, Durnali, & Aktan, 2019, p. 303).
- Authentic Materials: These are materials that are not intended for classroom usage. They include newspapers, magazines, movies, TV commercials,etc. Following Orakci, Durnali and Aktan (2019) in terms of development of critical thinking skills, authentic materials require understanding the meaning, analyzing the fact from the opinion, and then expressing learners' own views.

*2.6 Appropriate Conditions for Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom*

Becker (1999) suggested two general approaches that are helpful in producing a classroom setting conducive to critical thinking which are 1) the establishment of an environment in which both parties, student and teacher, function as partners in inquiry; 2) the employment of a set of questioning strategies specifically geared to the acquisition of higher-order thinking and reasoning skills. Students feel more comfortable and confident enough to share their own ideas when they feel they are involved in a process. Expatiating more on the conditions for fostering critical thinking, Becker (1999) observes that it is important for teachers to construct pivotal questions that address the key concepts of the lesson. Questions containing words such as why, discover, interpret, compare and contrast are important in enabling students to apply their knowledge and understanding of the course. To help students develop their critical thinking, teachers should pose challenging questions to their learners. Paul and Elder (2016) have this to say to that effect. "The ultimate goal, then, is for these standards to become infused in the thinking of students, forming part of their inner voice, which then guides to the better reasoning"

(Paul & Elder as cited in Apsari, 2016, p. 56). Tomaszewski (2021) adds that asking simple critical thinking questions, opposing 'common sense', being aware of one's biases and reading a lot are appropriate conditions that foster critical thinking.

## 3. Research Method

This study highlights the importance of developing of critical thinking with advanced learners. Its goals have been to explore teachers' view on critical thinking skills and to find out how to foster critical thinking in advanced learners. To this end, the study adopts a qualitative approach. It has basically used interview with teachers and a focus group made up of advanced learners from the department of English studies as source of data collection.

### *3.1 Participants*

The participants in the study have been selected based on purposive sampling Among them are seven (7) senior lecturers and 12 advanced students from the Department of English Studies at Université d'Abomey Calavi (UAC) in Benin. There are five (5) male lecturers and a female lecturer; seven (7) male students and five (5) female students. All the participating students are graduate students not including two post-graduate students. An informative email about the study was sent to the participating teachers who responded positively to the invitation and volunteered to participate.

### *3.2 Instrumentation and Data Analysis/Procedure*

Semi structured interviews with seven teachers and a focus group of 12 advanced learners were used for the collection of data. According to Gillham (2005), the semi-structured interview is the most important way of conducting a research interview because it is well-structured, flexible and balanced and enables the researcher to obtain reliable data despite the high cost that it involves, the complexity of its analysis and the degree of the interpretation of the material. Its various steps are clear with no short-cuts.

A focus group is a form of group interviewing in which a small group is led by an interviewer in a loosely structured discussion on a topic of interest (Mishram, 2016). The interview questions consist of six (6) open-ended questions to give room for participants to provide more explanation or elaborate on their responses. The interviews were held in October and November 2021. Each interview lasted forty-five minutes. Anonymity of participants was guaranteed and each lecturer was asked for permission to record the interview.

The interview session with the focus group was carried out successfully and the selected students unanimously agreed on the day, time and place for the interview.

### *3.3 Data Analysis*

Qualitative content analysis was used in the interpretation of data collected. Luo (2019) defines content analysis as a research method used to "identify patterns in recorded communication" (para. 1). The recordings from the various interviews conducted were transcribed for data analysis. Emerging patterns and themes have been found classified and developed based on the participants' responses.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the findings based on the data obtained from the interviews conducted with the lecturers and the focus group for the study. It is divided into two parts; results of the teachers' interview and the results of the interview with the focus group.

### *4.1 Results of Teachers Interview*

The interview conducted with EFL lecturers aimed mainly at finding out their perception of critical thinking and how it could developed with their advanced learners. The teachers' result are presented in three main themes which are:

a- Teachers' View of Critical Thinking:

All the interviewed lecturers appear to have a clear idea of the term 'critical thinking'. The answers provided by teachers regarding the definition of critical thinking are the ability to "reason well"; "to argue", "to support arguments with evidence"; "to evaluate", "to judge" "to take right decision". All the interviewed teachers held positive opinion about the concept of critical thinking. The majority of the interviewed lecturers observed that the development of students' critical thinking is completed neglected in their circle. According to a teacher, they all know the significance of critical thinking but ignore it in their teaching *"because the educational system of nowadays is nothing to write home about so there is no point teaching critical thinking skills"* The argument provided by this lecturer reveals that the system, the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) operating in today's schools favours the memorization of lessons or course content. Lessons contents are less challenging or "difficult" as opposed to those of their own time. Citing an example, the teacher stated that even exam questions at the university are generally multiple-choice questions as opposed to questions that require student to support or oppose a hypothesis, evaluate a given situation or even write a short essay on a topic. Supporting this line of argument, some lecturers mentioned that in their own time, "*you are given just a sentence and ask to comment on it for four hours which is not just enough for you as a student who knows what to write*" Some of the participants reported that when asked to conduct a research on a topic, students like reproducing given information or presenting what is generally called "*copie-coller*" which means "copy and paste". The information gathered from teachers' opinions also revealed that many teachers believe that critical thinking skills should be developed with student right from secondary school. They believe that the development of critical thinking skills should be the primary goal that secondary school teachers must achieve while they prepare their learners for academic life.

b- Teaching Strategies for Developing Critical Thinking

According to the interviewed teachers, many students are not even aware of what critical thinking is. Nevertheless, some teachers expressed the need to raise awareness about critical thinking with students by creating conditions likely to foster critical thinking during lecture time. Regarding how teachers can help to students develop critical thinking, most interviewed teachers simply stated that critical thinking could be developed in the language classroom through a question-answer activity. Although when asked if collaborative learning could be an effective strategy for developing critical thinking with

learners, all the teachers answered positively. However, two teachers pointed out that group discussion is an effective strategy for fostering learners' critical thinking skills. A lecturer said that "*group discussion creates room for diverse opinions and healthy debates which the teacher could use to students own advantage*". Learning in group according to some participants will force students who never participate in class to become involved in the group activity because he or she will not want to be "*the only one left out*" as stated by a lecturer.

c- Challenges Obstructing the Development of Critical Thinking with Advanced Learners

Following the data gathered from teachers' interview, teachers' opinions on the challenges affecting the development of critical thinking skills can be summarised as follows:

- students poor reading and listening skills
- students negative attitudes towards learning
- students low level language proficiency
- Teachers inadequate training on critical thinking
- Class size
- Course design
- Content coverage

*4.2 Results of the Interview with the Focus Group*

The findings from the focused group interview have revealed that there is lack of awareness with students on the concept of critical thinking and its importance not only in education or career opportunities, but in other aspects of human life. The participating students stated that many of them have not heard about or encounter the term "critical thinking". To some, however, critical thinking simply means "to think well better than others". When asked if critical thinking is developed in their classroom or not, students stated that they are not conscious of whether critical thinking is developed with them in the classroom or not. Many of the students perceive their courses to be boring and lecture-based. Students mentioned that many of them do not participate in the classroom discussions. The reasons vary from one participant to another. While some of them stated that students do not participate or share their opinions in class because they do not even understand the course content, others are of the opinion that they understand but do not know the right way to express themselves. Some students are afraid that they might sound stupid in the presence of their peers or teacher. Some students wants to participate but leave the floor to other students to speak first in order not to appear as what one of the graduate students called a "I-know-it- all" However, students have revealed that the attitudes of some teachers' towards learners' questions or concerns in the classroom are sometimes discouraging. This makes some students passive learners and limit themselves to students who only attend classes, jot down some sentences and then care about their various preoccupations waiting for examination to reproduce exactly what they had jotted down. They also revealed that some of their lecturers only provide hand-outs and ask students to read or do research on what they do not understand. According to the students, it is true that they are expected to be independent learners, they still need the

help of their teacher in order to fully comprehend what they read. Students revealed that some teachers assign some tasks that they they are to present in groups in the next class. They, however, stated they find it difficult to carry out research assignments because they do not know the procedures to follow to do so and are often forced to memorize concepts at secondary school to pass their exams.

## 5. Discussion

This paper aims at exploring teacher's perception about the importance of developing critical thinking with advanced learners and finding out how critical thinking skills can be fostered with them. This section discusses the findings of the study in close relationship with the research questions addressed in the study.

### *5.1 Teachers' Perception of Critical Thinking and its Development with Advanced Learners*

Based on the analysis of the interviews conducted with teachers and students, it is clear that critical thinking has received limited attention in the Beninese educational system. Although, all the teachers have a positive perception about critical thinking, there are still other deeper aspects related to critical thinking which many of them seem to overlook such as decision- making and problem-solving. Advanced learners are not familiar with the concept of critical thinking and critical thinking is not practiced in the classroom. This is quite a problem because as Pajares (2002) maintained, EFL learners who are equipped with the ability to think critically feel more efficacious in learning a foreign language. Not only that, with the rapidly changing in the world where only those who have higher cognitive abilities are needed in the job market, how can Beninese learners compete with their peers across the globe if they are unable to reflect, analyse, evaluate and provide solutions to a problem? Nowadays interviewed teachers complained about the type of activities students are asked to answer during examination which are not challenging enough This relates to the findings of Kamali & Fahim, as cited in Tahiri, 2015) who stated that it is essential for language teachers to encourage learners to use their thinking abilities by providing them challenging opportunities in which they reflect, grow and learn and try to express their opinions critically which can contribute to their progress in language learning. In this study, teachers have revealed that collaborative learning in forms of group discussion is a good strategy for improving or developing critical thinking skills with learners in the classroom. Moreover, Fisher (2011) indicates that "Although some things need to be explained by the teacher, I find that discussion in small groups can be very successful (four per group is a good number). Students love arguing with each other and, given good examples (stimulus passages), this can be both enjoyable and instructive" (p. vi). Nevertheless, there are conditions that should be met before elements of critical thinking could be introduced through group discussions in the classroom. Students' psychological dispositions need to be considered. That is, language teachers are to ensure that their students are in the right state of mind to participate in the discussion. In this regard, teachers need to create an environment where students can feel free to give their opinions on the topic discussed. Motivation is key in fostering critical thinking through group discussion. That is why in terms of motivation,

Hitchcock (2011) stated it is helpful if the students can acquire at the "beginning a sense of the advantages to them of improving their critical thinking skills. One way to foster such an appreciation is to ask students to think of situations in which it would be helpful to think critically about a problem" (p. 19). Also, in developing critical thinking, teachers training is required to empower teachers on how to introduce elements of higher cognitive skills in their course content. Besides, teachers have mentioned the problem of content coverage as a challenge to developing critical thinking. This means that more focus is placed on covering the course syllabus. This, however, should not be an excuse for not incorporating critical thinking in the classroom because it is an important part of their job as a language teacher. During the preparation of lesson, activities that require that students reflect deeply could be used by the teacher. In this light, training is required to empower teachers with skills about how to develop critical thinking skills. Findings from the interview held with teachers have mentioned the need of training. According to the studies carried out by Tahiri (2015), "further training among instructors who try to incorporate strategies in their classes and improve their students CT ability" (p. 394). He further commented that "students' achievement is associated with teachers' abilities to put CT skills into practice. Therefore, training teachers to instruct these techniques as part of their methodology would be of great importance" (ibid.).

## 6. Recommendation

Findings of the study and previous research have emphasized the importance of developing critical thinking skills with learners. However, it has not received enough attention in Beninese EFL teaching due to unawareness of the importance that it plays and some specific challenges as revealed in the results of the various interviews conducted. In this regard, to help learners become good critical thinkers or develop their higher cognitive skills, some suggestions and recommendations have been proposed in this section:

Government

- Government and policy makers should introduce 'Critical Thinking' as an independent subject or course at the university. In doing so, students will be part of the decision making process since "they are the main concern of the teaching-learning operation" (Chouari, 2016, p.458).
- Critical thinking skills should be developed from early stages of academic learning
- Teacher's training workshop should be organised in order to empower teachers on how to develop cognitive skills with learners

Teachers

- should raise awareness in learners about the concept of critical thinking
- should create a conducive environment for critical thinking in the classroom
- Teachers should motivate learners, especially those with inferiority complex and should promote metacognition by incorporating into their assignments encouragement students be aware of and direct their own thinking (Swartz & Perkins 1990).

## 7. Conclusion

One of the primary goals of education should involve the teaching of tools for lifelong learning. Consequently, today educators must place high priority on teaching critical thinking skills in schools. Thus, this research has explored how critical thinking could be developed with advanced learners through group discussions. Its overall goal has been to find out teachers and students perceptions about the importance of developing cognitive skills with advanced learners and to explore the effectiveness of group discussions as a strategy for developing critical thinking skills with advanced learners. It has adopted a qualitative methodology employing the use of interviews with lecturers and a focus group of advanced students. The literature has explored the concept of critical thinking, its main aspects, components and characteristics. The findings, through the use of content analysis have revealed that teachers have a positive view of critical thinking but in practice, many of them do not develop cognitive skill with their students. This is because they are discouraged with the education system which has regressed in terms of quality teaching. Students are no longer provided challenging tasks that could activate their cognitive skills. Besides, many teachers seem to ignore the importance of critical thinking skills for career opportunities for their students. Both teachers and students have revealed that the challenges to meet to develop critical thinking with learners includes poor reading and listening skills, negative attitudes towards learning, class size, content coverage and teachers' training. Teachers believe that critical skills should be developed with learners right from secondary schools. This will enable them to face the challenging courses that they have at the university. It has been recommended that Government organise workshops for teachers in order to empower them with effective ways of fostering their learners' critical thinking skills. Teachers have also been recommended to motivate their learners and raise awareness about the concept of critical thinking. Further research could be carried out on the pedagogy of critical thinking and the challenges associated with teaching and assessing critical thinking in the advanced classroom.

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