The Concept and Practice of Critical Thinking in EFL Classes in Benin: Prospects and Challenges—Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Republic of Benin

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Abstract

Critical Thinking, formerly viewed as a western concept is now taught to learners worldwide as an important skill in education. This study deals with the necessity of incorporating Critical Thinking teaching in EFL classes in Beninese secondary schools through pointing out its advantages and current challenges to implementation. To collect relevant data for the research, three instruments were used: The Cornell Critical Thinking Test Level X, questionnaire and class observation. The target population has consisted of one hundred and fifty high school learners and sixty EFL teachers. The learners were split into two groups: the control group and the experimental one. Both groups took the critical thinking test twice, as pre- and post- tests. The results of the test and answers provided by teachers have revealed that teachers do not teach critical thinking skills to their learners. Trying to understand the root cause of this situation, the researcher has found that Beninese EFL teachers are not trained to teach and assess critical thinking skills.

Keywords

critical thinking, Beninese EFL teachers, Beninese secondary schools

1. Introduction

Beninese educational system has endured numerous reforms over the last three decades in order to adapt to today's reality. Change in mentality and attitude does not occur at the same pace as sciences, and a change in education can provoke serious concerns, anxiety and even fear. This same situation also occurs when there is a teaching reform which implies a new curriculum. In fact, in 1990, in the quest for a better educational system, the new democratic government of Benin decided to initiate reforms respecting the decisions made at the National Conference in February of that same year. In

light of these reforms, a Conference on Education was held in October of that year. A clear mission was set forth for the educational system in Benin so that no child would be left behind (Beninese Constitution of 1990). The mission stated that Benin should ensure universal education for all learners to reach their full potential, compete successfully in a changing world, and develop respect for themselves, for other people, for human rights, for democracy and for their environment (Loi sur L'Orientation scolaire published by Beninese Government in 1991). What is more is that Beninese learners should be trained to be:

- autonomous, intellectually and socially well-balanced,

- able to take initiatives, take charge of their learning,

- able to be life-long learners.

The Competency-Based Approach (CBA) was then adopted by the authorities in charge of syllabi and curricula design as the ideal model of teaching which might help to reach the goals mentioned above. Thus, it is currently implemented in all subject matters taught at school. This program is used nationwide. This research, however, is only concerned with its relationship to English learning/teaching and addresses a number of concerns raised by the implementation of this teaching program in Benin. Does the program actually encompass important concepts that enable learners to study important skills that can help them survive in this constantly changing modern world?

The Beninese educational system needs teachers who are knowledgeable in teaching and are creative in order to design and implement new teaching techniques. Although the concept of critical thinking is not new, a lot of Beninese EFL teachers are not familiar with it. The concept can be better understood by looking at socio-cultural perspectives in the Beninese context and we can discuss some of its challenges for the EFL teachers in order to plan and implement lessons with activities that develop critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms. These socio-cultural perspectives are of paramount importance since cultural norms and beliefs in some Beninese regions stand as barriers to this type of thinking. This idea is supported by Atkinson (1997) who points out that "… many cultures endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose critical thinking". In Beninese context, learners are culturally taught to view adults as "knowledge banks" and eye-contact is not even allowed when children are talking to adults. In communities where there are kings, no one is allowed to contradict them as this is often viewed as an offense to dignitaries. Those kings are not aware that we can perceive the same things in different ways. Willingham (2007) stated that "critical thinking is effective, in that it avoids common pitfalls, such as seeing only one side of an issue…" The authority and control that these notable people exercise in the community can discourage learners from freely expressing their opinions once they are in EFL classes. It is difficult for learners to get rid of habits culturally built and adopt a new one. They are embarrassed when they have to contradict their teacher's point of view in situations that require sound reasoning. It is then necessary to take into account the socio-cultural parameters hindering free expressions and find appropriate ways to mitigate their effects on the learning and teaching of critical thinking skills in EFL classes.

The textbooks and other teaching materials play important role in teaching and developing critical thinking skills in learners. Materials development should be guided by the belief that learners are individuals who have a need to express and exchange opinions. According to Brown (1994), when learners use meaningful material for language learning, they are more participatory and successful. Using localised English teaching materials that present learners with real-life and culturally familiar language contexts can also be helpful. A great many researchers emphasise the importance of developing EFL learners' critical thinking skills (Shaila & Trudell, 2010; as cited by Lal Bahadur Rana; Coughlin, 2010; Paul & Elder, 2008; Pittman, 2010; Pescatore, 2007; Mendelman, 2007; Snechal, 2010). For these researchers, language classes offer a favourable environment for the development of thinking skills. Teachers should design and implement languages activities that help their learners become independent thinkers and responsible citizens.

1.1 Context of the Study

This section sheds light on the context of the study-Natitingou and its surrounding villages. Natitingou is one of the towns in North-west Benin. It is 645 kilometres away from the economic capital city, Cotonou and 100 kilometres from Porga where there is Pendjari National Park. The waterfalls of Tanongou and the Betammaribe mud-built castles commonly known as "Tata Somba" are a two hour motorcycle ride away from the town. Natitingou is 3045/square in area with a population of approximately 100,620 inhabitants according to the 2014 census. The town is one of Benin's major tourist attractions.

The town is bordered by Toucountouna in the north, Kouande in the east and south and Boukombe in the west. Natitingou is suddivided into nine "arrondissements", four of which are located in the town: Natitingou I, II, III and IV (Peporiyakou); the remaining five "arrondissements" are rural. They include Kotopounga, Kouaba, Kouandata, Perma and Tchoumi-Tchoumi. They are made up of thirty-nine villages and twenty-six urban districts. In Perma, one of the "arrondissements" of Natitingou, gold is produced by artisanal miners from gold mine in the villages of Kwatena and Tchantangou. Efficient natural resource management remains a thought provoking issue that can be raised in EFL classes. Many learners prefer dropping out of school before completing their secondary school to become illegal child miners. Developing the ability to think critically is especially crucial for learners living in a village where a natural resource mismanagement problem exists, for it will help them to look at that issue from different perspectives and to make sound decisions regarding their village development.

One of the commercial activities of Natitingou is the manufacturing and selling of locally produced beer known as "Tchoukoutou". This local beer is cooked with millet by housewives and represent their major source of revenue. The beer is sold at night clubs where there are a lot of consumers. Again most of these local beer consumers are young people and very often, they are involved in other different social problems associated with alcoholism such as prostitution, drug addiction, hacking, thieving, just to mention a few of them. The situation requires that learners think critically about that way of behaving.

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Our secondary schools are supposed to prepare learners in three dimensions: individually, socially and culturally (Décision des Etats Généraux de l'Education d'octobre 1991 published by Beninese Government in 1991). EFL classes can offer learners a great opportunity to reflect on social issues in their community such as "pros and cons of drinking the local beer moderately or in excess; the pros and cons of dropping out of school to become illegal miners". Unfortunately, the textbooks that learners use do not offer them the opportunity for open class discussion during which these important issues affecting their life could be discussed.

Natitingou is located in a valley which is semi-closed by two surrounding mountains ranges. These mountains are important to the local animist beliefs because they are supposed to be inhabited by spirits. In the evenings, these spirits give out sounds similar to those produced by the grindstones used by women to grind the grains of cereals (corn). As a result of this, women have been forbidden to grind grains in the evening in order not to confuse both sounds. For this reason, the region and the name NANTIBATINGOU, derived from the local language "Waama" word "NANTO" has been given to the town. This name refers to the activity of grinding. According to the tradition of the region no one is allowed to question those beliefs. It is challenging to children educated in this context to change their habit when it comes to freely express their opinions in EFL classes. Consequently, they are limited in their thinking. The socio-cultural context stands as a huge barrier to the development of their thinking skills. How can we help our learners to thoughtfully address their community issues, youth problems, poverty, and many other pressing concerns that threaten their life, if EFL teachers do not offer the learners the opportunity to think seriously? All these problems raised above justify the necessity of teaching critical thinking in EFL classes in Natitingou and its surrounding villages as the researcher intends to explore in this research work. The idea is supported by Paul, Binker and Weil (1990) who stated that "critical thinking should be given the highest priority, for it is necessary if we genuinely want to prepare our learners for the real world which awaits them personally, politically, and vocationally". Up to now, to the researcher's knowledge, no study dealt with the concept and practice of critical thinking in EFL classes in Benin.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research work is to explore the concept and practice of critical thinking by involving learners in discussion of social topics such as alcoholism, delinquency, and the lack of values; topics that are closely linked to learners' reality and social conditions. The researcher would also like to make the Beninese Educational authorities aware of the necessity of making critical thinking an integral part of the current English curriculum in the secondary schools. By so doing, Beninese learners can develop their critical thinking in the four language skills. With this study, the researcher intends to work closely with teachers, teachers' trainers and school authorities at the regional board of education level and with the Ministry of education to evaluate how critical thinking activities in EFL classes could encourage learners to deal critically with social issues while practicing English. Finally, the researcher's intention is also to contribute positively, through this study, to the improvement of the

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teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Benin.

1.3 The Statement of the Problem

Benin was formerly known as "Le quartier Latin de l'Afrique (Note 1)" because of its prestigious and enviable educational system. The country has provided most of the senior managers needed in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and even beyond. Over the past decades, however, studies indicate that the country has been falling behind in terms of education and this is due to the poor performance of learners from various country regions on national and international exams. Criticism has come from all sides to claim that learners are not well trained in many of the country secondary schools. My study proposes that the problem is much deeper than what is assumed on the surface level. Understanding the root causes of the problem requires a research study based on specific questions.

1.4 Research Questions

a)   Does the current teaching approach in use in Benin enable the teaching/learning of critical thinking?

b)   What is the current situation in secondary schools in Benin requiring the teaching and learning of critical thinking?

c)   Can supplemental activities help learners to engage in critical thinking practices in order to respond to their needs to deal with societal problems they will likely encounter?

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of the Competency-Based Approach

This section partly deals with the first research question. Actually, the Competency-Based Approach is the current teaching approach in use in all Beninese schools, private and public ones. As previously mentioned, the Competency-Based Approach was adopted in 1990 and after initial experimentation, the program was accepted and adopted in all public and private schools in Benin. The English programme is composed of learning situations (Note 2) which are then divided further into sequences (Note 3). Each learning situation begins with a warm-up, a brainstorming activity, and a starter situation. Most of the starter situations are sets of pictures. It is up to the teacher to use them or design activities for the starter situation. These activities should accomplish these goals: be challenging, motivating, and pose problems related to life; be clear, precise, and understandable. To teach the sequences, the teacher should bear in mind the following three phases: the introductory phase: it enables the learners to activate their previous knowledge in order to prepare their mind to acquire new knowledge. This phase offers great opportunity for EFL teachers to use higher order questions to develop cognitive skills of their learners. The sad news is that not all EFL teachers know how to formulate such questions. How can we then expect our learners to be critical if we do not teach them how to develop thinking skills?

The second phase consists in making English real; in this phase, the learner brings his abilities to do research work, experimentation, and synthesis. The teacher deals with a set of activities related to

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vocabulary, grammar, and functional language. Teachers use the presentation, practice, and production phase framework when introducing each of these language items. Various strategies are used by teachers for the suggested activities. The main strategies are as follows:

a) Teaching aids: chalkboard picture, big books (Note 4), puppets, realia.

b) Short and varied activities such as gap filling, unscrambling, making up sentences, just to mention a few.

c) New information is presented in contexts that are connected with learners' lives.

d) Teaching in themes (this means that the teacher connects many activities with one theme. For example, if the theme is food, then the teacher can use a song about food, a poem about food, a role play about food…).

e) Establishing classroom routines.

f) Giving learners the opportunity to move (to meet the needs of kinaesthetic learners).

g) Making the classroom rich and interesting.

While using the strategies, teachers have learners do individual work, pair work, group work, role play, projects. In dealing with pair or group work the teacher gives clear instructions. She/he must present the new language to the whole class before asking the learners to work in pairs or groups. The final phase is the one of assessment: this phase deals with self-assessment (objectification and projection) and evaluation. Simply stated, it is an exit card giving opportunity for the learner to state, "This is what I learned today and this is how I learned it". Learners may also state that, "These are the problems I have with understanding or this is what I may do with what I learned; "this is projection". This phase holds learners accountable for their learning.

Evaluation is part and parcel of the teaching and learning processes. As far as the CBA is concerned, English testing is designed according to the competences that go along with the target language. Actually, there are three disciplinary competences and they deal with the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The first one is "communicating orally in an appropriate way". The second is "reacting to a message after reading and/or listening to it". The last one is "producing a written text".

As it is clearly stated above, the starter situation should be challenging and also pose problems related to life. However, it fails to suggest how these problems should be solved. In the researcher's opinion, incorporating critical thinking skills into the curriculum will surely equip learners with necessary tools to successfully deal with not only their learning but also with life challenges and problem-solving skills. The current curriculum needs to be reviewed in order to improve it for the benefits of both teachers and learners.

2.2 Description of the Current Situation in EFL Classes in Benin

This section addresses the second research question. In Benin, EFL Classes struggle with the same challenges and structural issues found throughout the secondary school system. The language is not taught through communicative uses to enable learners to know how to use it in real world to

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communicate wants and needs. This does not comply with the idea expressed by Nunan (2003, p. 6) who stated that "language is not viewed as interlocking sets of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules, but as a tool for expressing meaning". An overemphasis on rote-memorization has negatively impacted the development of critical thinking skills in the classroom. Unlike China, Taiwan, and Japan where rote memorisation is culturally embedded (Li, 2007), Beninese learners do not have any major advantage with this passive way of learning. They simply act as "parrots" repeating concepts or recalling information they do not understand. They make no connection between new and previous knowledge learned. Learners view schools as places for "cramming" a few days before exams instead of internalising and automatizing information. Paul and Elder (2008) deplored such a situation by stating that "in a class that consists mainly of structures with periodic quizzes and examinations, learners can often get a passing grade by cramming the night before quizzes and tests".

In EFL Classes, this practice takes the form of learners memorising verb forms and sentence structure formulas instead of learning to actively use English as a tool for communicating their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs. A Beninese student graduating from High School with their high school leaving degree has undertaken seven years of English study lasting from the sixth until the seventh grade during which he/she learns English as a mandatory subject. However there are many learners who find themselves unable to adequately express themselves in English at the end of these seven years of study. The lack of results and progress in English proficiency from a rote-memorization model of learning EFL demonstrates the need for a remodelled approach to encourage the active learning and mastery of English as a communicative tool.

In addition to the structural issues found in learning English in Benin, an equally pernicious problem is the lack of training and experience on developing critical thinking skills on the part of teachers. Teachers find it difficult to engage learners in a way that differs from how they learned and learned to teach English in the past. They were taught with coursebooks and they failed to acknowledge that "the way coursebooks look and what they contain go hand and hand with the prevailing ideas at the time they were published about how languages are best taught and learned" (Nunan, 2003, p. 226). Because the educators themselves have not been trained on creating and incorporating good critical thinking development, they find it difficult to create them in their own lesson plans. Paul, Binker and Weil (1990, p. 1) confirmed that situation when they stated that "to teach for critical thinking requires that teachers themselves think critically, and very often teachers have not been encouraged to do so". This problem is a result of rote-memorization's influence on their education as well as the lack of emphasis that higher education institutions have placed on teaching teachers how to incorporate critical thinking into their classroom activities.

The structural issue of rote-memorization's influence on EFL classes is thus rooted in the lack of development of critical thinking of secondary school learners as well as the lack of available experiences, trainings and resources for English teachers so that they can incorporate these practices into their English lessons.

2.3 Standardised Testing Environment in Benin

With the adoption of the Competency-Based Approach and a new format for the National Exam papers, teachers feel a growing pressure to master this format and to prepare learners to demonstrate sufficient academic skills which can help them take exams successfully. By so doing, teachers are tempted to leave behind the development of higher order thinking (Pescatore, 2007). English teachers are expected to cover a mandatory amount of "Learning Situations" grammatical structures, vocabulary and functional items. Schools apply standardised testing in their midterm and final examinations of each trimester as well as multiple quizzes given throughout each marking period. These examinations focus mostly on mastery of grammatical structure and functions in written format. Midterm and final examinations are organized on a school department wide level to ensure standardised assessment; however, in some cases exams have been standardised on a school district-wide level.

However there is a lot of room for improvement on standardisation of the testing environment. Because there is wide competency gap between teachers writing the exams in written English, many times exams are riddled with errors and contain incomprehensible answers. These global errors present a major problem to the effective implementation of a standardised testing environment in Benin. The realities of the Beninese classroom reveal the challenges and problems of the standardised testing environment. The testing methods rarely match the presentation of the curriculum and lack flexibility and acknowledgement of differing ability levels among learners. This directly affects learners' success and academic performance.

2.4 Critical Thinking Viewed in the EFL/ESL Context

The ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to use it for communication. This is confirmed by Norrish (1983) who stated that: "language isn't a set of facts to be learned but a medium for expressing thoughts, feelings and communicating with other people". Because of that, many EFL teachers focus on the content rather than helping learners develop their individual thinking skills. Deploring this attitude, Poudel (2013) stated that "teachers teach the content more than the language". While it is important to lay the foundation of a foreign language, it is also important to expand lessons to encourage higher level thinking from learners. In the area of cognitive development, many language teachers and scholars agreed on the idea that there is a connection between language learning/teaching and thinking process.

The majority of EFL lessons in some countries revolve around rules and rote recollection. While this method is necessary for language formation it can also be stifling if individual expression is not introduced and encouraged. In real life interactions, meaningful conversations do not follow scripts or dialogues. As a result, withholding the skills necessary to either agree or disagree with statements, ideas, etc. and support these stances are preparing learners for failure. EFL/ESL educational system should be improved to become a system that encourages uniqueness of thoughts and analysis, rather than traditional rote learning (Oster, 1989). In this case, school cannot be seen as a place to meet learners' educational needs or their desired paths to success. To have a meaningful character, education should

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aim to enhance learners' critical thinking abilities (Chaffee, 1985; Paul, 1995).

Critical thinking skills are becoming more and more essential to educational systems and cultures worldwide, and there have been a lot of researches devoted to the development of critical thinking skills in EFL/ESL educational Programmes. The advocates of such shifts in education have recognized that critical thinking skills can be taught in EFL/ESL context (Davidson, 1994, 1995; Chamot, 1995; Carrell, 1987; Rezaei, Derakhshand, & Bagherkazemi, 2011; Pineda, 2004). Chamot has strongly argued that EFL/ESL classrooms should be a community of thinkers. To achieve this goal, the role of the EFL/ESL teachers should also change; they should work towards developing not only learners' language skills but also have them reflect on their societal issues by training them to become "agents of change" (Stefanova, Bobkina, & Sanchez-Verdejo, 2017). This change will, not only develop greater thinkers and contributors to these individual societies, but it can also give the chance to the learners to positively impact the world. The first step in making this change possible for Benin can begin with its teachers. Learners spend most of their time in school with their educators and class. By default, this allows teachers more time to influence learners thinking both in and outside of the standard lesson. A group of researchers (Rezaei, Derakhshand, & Bagherkazemi, 2011) pointing out the role of EFL/ESL teachers in developing learners' thinking skills declared that: "Children are not born with the power to think critically, nor do they develop this ability beyond survival-level thinking in the absence of implicit and explicit instruction. Critical thinking has to be learnt, so teachers are called upon to enhance in learners the ability to think critically". By encouraging students to not only give and defend their reasoning for correct responses, but for incorrect ones too, teachers encourage them to use logic and evidence when making decisions. By so doing, EFL/ESL teacher is fulfilling part of his/her tasks which is to prepare learners for the world outside the classroom (Davidson, 1998).

2.5 The Challenges of Teaching Critical Thinking to Secondary School Learners in Benin

Teaching critical thinking viewed as a concept of western university education (Barnett, 1997) can be quite challenging and EFL teachers need to be prepared to face them. The first challenge is the way Beninese secondary schools are managed. There is a great shortage of qualified EFL teachers. Due to the structural Adjustment Programme initiated in 1989 by the Beninese government on the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to improve its economy, less qualified teachers are hired by the government nowadays. Therefore, secondary schools hire part time teachers, who are most often, young university undergraduate with no prior training in teaching. Those teachers do not have the adequate academic background necessary to infuse critical thinking activities in their lesson plans. Moreover, the seasoned teachers can be resistant to the idea of changing their teaching style. They can find it hard to get rid of their stereotypical teaching techniques, failing to recognise that language is dynamic and teaching it requires to update one's own knowledge to adapt it to the current realities.

Another daunting challenge is the parents who cannot help their children develop thinking skills because in Benin, all reforms are introduced following the top down modality and parents are not

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involved. Even if some of them are willing to help, illiteracy is a great barrier since more than 75% of the population cannot read or write. The other challenge is the status of English in the country. Even though the language is mandatorily taught from the secondary school, it is at least the third and even the fourth of the languages children learn. Not many have a good command of it and the examinations are limited to grammatical structures and text comprehension check. Many learners may not be motivated to engage in higher order thinking due to the negative backwash of the assessments. With such testing methods, as Cameron (2001) and Richards (2006) have clearly stated, learners do not see the language as a means of communication, but rather as a set of grammatical rules and formulas to be memorised.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is mainly descriptive and the researcher collected data on the lack of critical thinking through the administration of critical thinking test to learners. Additionally, a questionnaire for EFL teachers was filled out to enable the researcher to find out the root cause of learners' lack of thinking skills. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative techniques for the study.

3.2 Sample

Six secondary schools from Natitingou and its surrounding villages were randomly selected for the study. One hundred and fifty copies of the critical thinking test have been administered as a pre-test in October 2016. Those participants of the investigation were from various communities in Atacora and were split into two groups, a control group of seventy-five learners, and an experimental one of seventy-five learners as well. All the participants are EFL learners whose English level ranges from B1 to B2 based on CEFR (Note 5) classification (2012-2017). None of the participants was previously taught the supplement activities designed for the research purpose. The textbook used by the participants focused on developing the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The experimental group was taught English using the existing textbook (*Go For English, Macmillan, EDICEF, 58, rue Jean-Bleuzen, 92178 VANVES Cedex*) supplemented with activities to develop their thinking skills while the control group had their instruction using only the existing material (*Go For English*). As a reminder, prior to the intervention, both groups received a critical thinking test to determine learners 'current level of critical thinking skills. Seven months after using the supplemental activities, the experimental group and the control group received the same test to determine the impact of those activities on their thinking skills and their overall abilities to deal with their societal issues.

Sixty EFL teachers from the selected school filled out the questionnaire designed to collect information about their overall background and teaching practices. All the teachers are Beninese; some are full time teachers while others teach part-time.

3.3 Research Instruments

To collect data for this research, three instruments were used: The Cornell Critical Thinking Test Level

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X to document the lack of learners' critical thinking abilities, questionnaire to the EFL teachers and class observation. For the teachers' questionnaire, there are ten items; the first three ones are about the teachers' background, the grade level where they teach and the average number of learners per class. The remaining seven items collect information on the teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and their overall teaching practices that may thwart the development of critical thinking in learners. The third instrument is a classroom observation sheet which purpose is to inform on learners' use of thinking skills in the classroom.

3.4 Validity and Reliability of the Research Instruments

The Cornell Critical Thinking Test Level X is a reliable test with the internal consistency ranges from .67 to .90; the split-half reliability ranges from .76 to .87 (William, 2010). For the validity of the test Hughes (1992) reported that the concurrent validity of the test is relatively low. The correlations of the test with student grades are in the .15-.17 range (William, 2010).

For the teachers' questionnaire, the ten items have been validated before the intervention by the researcher's supervisors who are knowledgeable on the area.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Data Collected with the Cornell Critical Thinking Test-Level X for the Pre- and Post-Tests for the Control Group
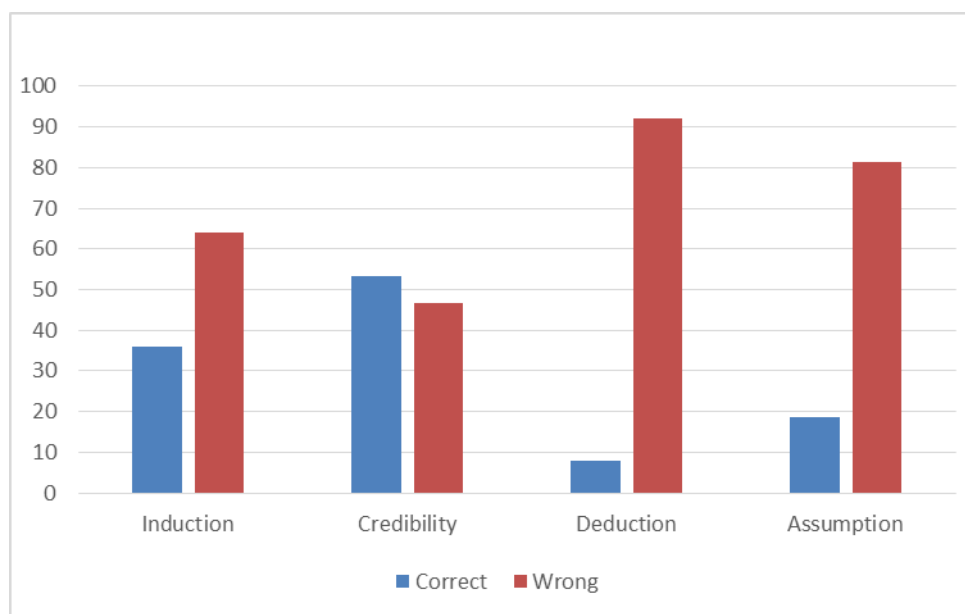
Figure 1. Correct and Wrong Responses for the Control Group for the Pre-Test
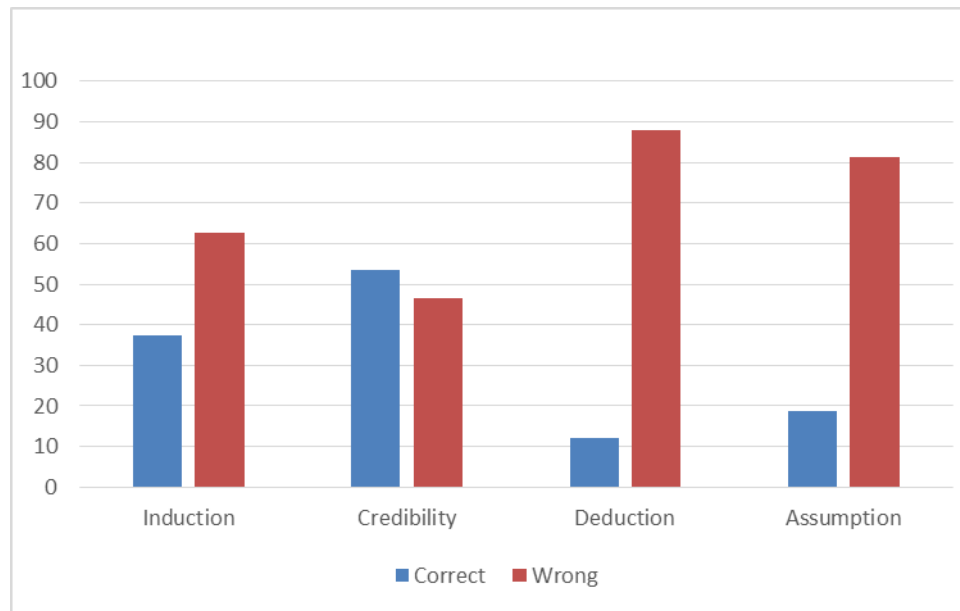
Figure 2. Correct and Wrong Responses for the Control Group for the Post-Test

Figures 1 and 2 present the correct and wrong responses of the Cornell Critical Thinking test Level X for the pre- and post-test for the control group. As indicated in it, for the pre-test, learners responded to questions that required inductive reasoning with 36% of correct answers and 64% of wrong ones. There is any significant difference with the post test. It appears from these responses that learners have difficulties to reason inductively. In EFL classes, inductive approach involves the learners detecting, or noticing, patterns and working out a "rule" for themselves before they practice the language. As Thornburry (1999) stated it "An inductive approach (rule-discovery)" starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred. Inductive approach emphasises the learner-centred and it is often seen as advantageous as the learner is more active in the learning process rather than a passive recipient. Obviously, learners are more engaged in the learning process when the inductive approach is used. As a result, it may help the learner to develop deeper understanding and fix the language being learned. This could also promote and enhance learner autonomy. When learners develop this skill, they can use it in real life to solve their everyday issue.

In section two of the test, which required learners to judge the credibility of an assertion, the learners responded correctly with 53.34% of the time and incorrectly with 46.66% of the time for the pre and post-test. However, in section III of the test, the learners poorly responded to questions requiring deductive reasoning with only 8% of correct answers and 92% of wrong ones for the pre-test and the correct responses slightly increased from 8% to 12% and the wrong one went down from 92% to 88% for the post test. Notwithstanding these differences, learners need to work on their deductive reasoning. Actually, deductive reasoning moves from the general to the particular. It takes a general premise and deduces particular conclusions. A "valid" deductive argument is one in which the conclusion necessarily follows from the premise. For that reason, everything in the conclusion of a valid deductive

argument must also be contained in the premises. Learners are presented with information from various sources. They need to develop their reasoning skills in order to come to a sound reasoning when they are asked to judge situations whether in the school system or in real life. Thornburry (1999) stated that "A deductive approach (rule-driven)" starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. With the lack of deductive reasoning tool, learners cannot categorise information and discover rules; instead, it is predicted that they will merely memorise information. This passive learning often results in a poor understanding and a poor retention of concepts.

In part four, which required learners to identify reasonable assumptions, the percentage of correct answers is 18.66% and 81.34% of wrong ones for both pre- and post-tests. Learners need to know how to identify the two types of assumptions: explicit (directly stated) and implicit (not directly stated but implied) ones. Writing is one of the language skills that learners are submitted to. They have to argue when the writing is a persuasive one. Any argument they make contain assumptions. Often they are not aware of the assumption they make, and sometimes they make bad assumptions without realising it.

On the whole, the control group learners have not made any significant progress in their thinking skills.

4.2 Data Collected with the Cornell Critical Thinking Test-Level X for the Pre- and Post-Tests for the Experimental Group
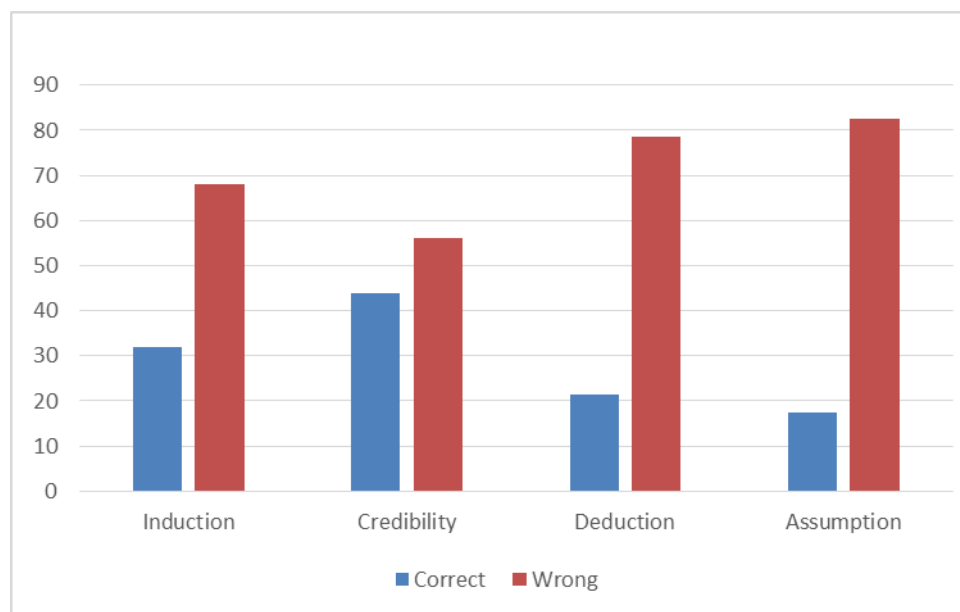
Figure 3. Correct and Wrong Responses for the Experimental Group for the Pre-Test
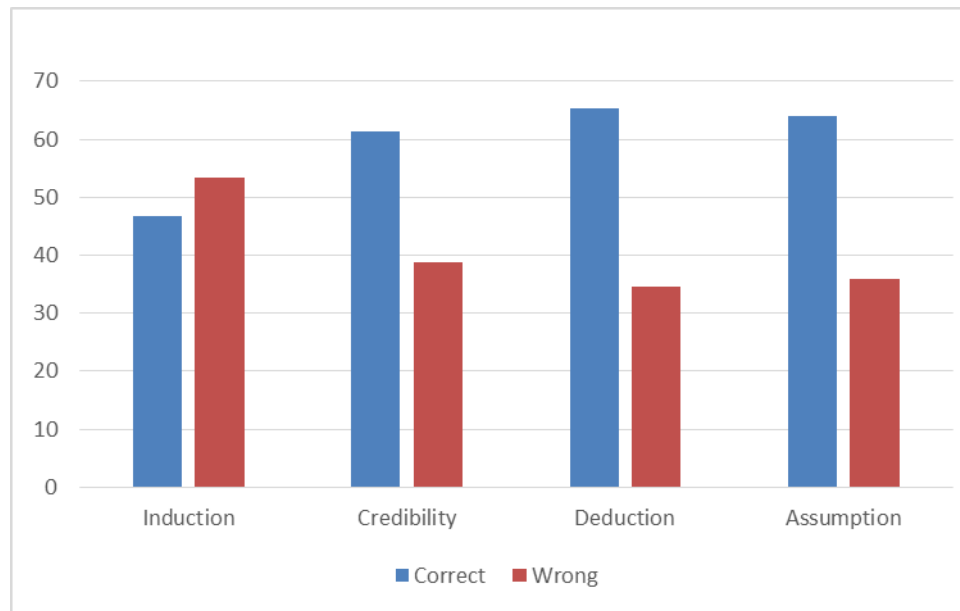
Figure 4. Correct and Wrong Responses for the Experimental Group for the Post-Test

Figures 3 and 4 show respectively the results of the Cornell Critical Thinking Test-Level X for the targeted group administered as the pre-test in October 2016 and as a post-test in May 2016. The aim of the post-test is to assess the effects of supplemental activities to *Go For English* (the textbook used in Benin) on learners' ability to think critically. Since the Cornell Critical Thinking Test focused on four critical thinking abilities, the researcher developed activities to foster the development of those areas. These activities were used as supplemental to the existing material. The intervention appears to have had a positive effect on the experimental group thinking skills. As indicated in Figure 3 and 4, the learners responded correctly to questions requiring induction with 46.66% for the post-test, an increase of 12% from the pre-test. There was also an increase for the questions requiring to judge the credibility by 17.33% for the correct response for the post-test which went up from 44% to 61.33%. The greatest increase for the post-test appeared in the deduction and assumption recognition sections, which were 44% and 46.67% respectively for the correct responses which went up from 21.34% to 65.34% and 17.33% to 64%. The researcher can infer that the designed activities had more effect on deduction and assumption skills. One of the contributing factors could be the extra tutoring offered to the targeted group through extra curricula activities. The target group overall reasoning skills and academic performance have improved not only in English but also in other school subjects. They were able to make the transfer across domains as suggested by Halpern (1998). The data collected with the classroom observation sheet has shown an improved learners' use of critical thinking. Additionally, a survey conducted personally by the researcher in the community helped to gather valuable information on the target group learners. Their behaviour towards social issues such as delinquency, thieving, alcoholism, has changed; they act as role models and even sensitise their peers on pros and cons of these bad things setting back their community.

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4.3 Data Collected with Questionnaire from EFL Teachers

Table 1. Responses Provided by EFL Teachers to the Questionnaire

Questionnaire statements	Responses	Number of respondents
1- Name and school	They have introduced themselves	60 teachers
2- Average number of learners per class where you teach	60 learners	60 teachers
3- Years of teaching experience	- Less than 5 years	35 teachers
	- More than 5years	25 teachers
4- Which grade level do you teach?	- First cycle grade (Note 6)	60 teachers
	- Second cycle grade	60 teachers
5- Do you hold open class discussions with your learners?	- I hold open class discussion	10 teachers
	- I do not hold open class discussion	50 teachers
6- Have you read any articles or books, or attended any conferences on critical thinking?	- I read articles or books, or attended conferences on critical thinking	5 teachers
	- I haven't read any articles or books, or attended conferences on critical thinking	55 teachers
7- When designing lesson plans, do you incorporate critical thinking activities??	- When designing lesson plans, I incorporate critical thinking activities	4 teachers
	- When designing lesson plans, I do not incorporate critical thinking activities	56 teachers
8- Do you feel well prepared by your teacher education programme to develop critical thinking in your learners?	- I feel well prepared by my teacher education programme to develop critical thinking in my learners	1 teacher
	- I do not feel well prepared by my teacher education programme to develop critical thinking in my learners	59 teachers
9- Do you think that teaching thinking skills to your learners can help them be effectively prepared to deal with social issues affecting their community?	- teaching thinking skills to my learners can help them be effectively prepared to deal with social issues affecting their community	55 teachers
	- I don't think teaching thinking skills to my learners can help them be effectively prepared to deal with social issues affecting their community	5 teachers
10- What may be the most significant obstacles to teaching critical thinking through the current curriculum?	- Large classes	60 teachers
	- Curriculum requirement/course content	50 teachers
	- Lack of adequate teaching materials	57 teachers
	- Textbooks	58 teachers

Note. N=60.

From the table above, it appears that there are too many learners to be handled by one teacher in our secondary schools and this may be one of the reasons why teachers are not developing thinking skills activities. As shown in the table 50 (83.33%) teachers did not hold classroom discussions with their learners. This finding implicitly means that they did not create an environment in which thinking skills were encouraged. Sandra and Howard (2007) confirmed it when they stated that "although learners may do activities individually in pencil-and-paper form, it is important to follow up each activity with class discussion to foster vocabulary development and to promote better transfer of thinking skills to content learning". Only 5 (8.33%) teachers read articles or books, or attended conferences on critical thinking. This statistic demonstrates that the majority of the teachers have no idea of what critical thinking is. Overall, the majority of the teachers acknowledged that their training as teachers did not adequately prepare them to develop critical thinking in their learners. The teachers listed some factors that, in their own opinion, may affect the teaching of critical thinking through the current curriculum in use in our secondary schools. These include the shortage of adequate instructional materials, especially, good and relevant books as well as other materials to teach critical thinking. Large classes increase the burden of work. In fact, the size of some of the classes is over sixty learners. The teachers may, therefore, be over-saddled with the task of monitoring classroom discussions and giving effective feedback to everyone.

The pressure to cover course content in order to prepare learners for the national exams may thwart many teachers to design critical thinking activities in their lesson plans. However, the respondents made several suggestions as solutions to the problems which may prevent teachers from teaching critical thinking skills. The existing texts in textbooks can be adapted so that they develop thinking skills. If the government can provide enough and adequate classrooms to reduce over populated classes and the workload of the English language teachers, this can be helpful to engage learners in thinking skills. They are willing to attend workshops, in-service training and professional seminars in order to update their knowledge so as to teach critical thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed some shortcomings about English teaching and learning in Benin. In fact, the current English curriculum does not thoroughly prepare the learners to face challenges awaiting them in the ever-changing world and especially their communities. From the above findings and discussion, the researcher can assume EFL teachers agree on the idea that teaching thinking skills to their learners can help them be effectively prepared to deal with social issues affecting their community. Consequently EFL teachers need to be trained to develop lessons that incorporate critical thinking strategies so that they can attach serious attention to the intellectual development of learners rather than preparing them only for standardised tests. As decisions are made through a top down modality, it will take time to reach out to all the EFL teachers. Each EFL teacher can start supplementing the existing teaching materials with activities to develop learners' cognitive skills.

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Appendix A

Teachers' Questionnaire

Below is a questionnaire designed for the secondary school English teachers. It is designed with regard to a study that I am undertaking on the necessity of incorporating Critical thinking in the English curriculum for Secondary school learners in Natitingou and its surrounding villages.

Your answers will be confidential and your identity anonymous; moreover, the study will not report on individual schools. Thank you for your participation.

1-   Your name and your school _____

2-   average number of learners per class where you teach_____

3-   Years of teaching experience? _____

4-   Which grade level do you regularly teach? (please tick the appropriate box with regard to the level and cycle)

a- First cycle grade level

b- Second cycle grade level

5-   Do you hold open class discussions with your learners?

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a- Yes

b- No

6-   Have you read any articles or books, or attended any conferences on critical thinking?

a- Yes

b- No

If your answers is "yes" for N °5, would you explain your concept of critical thinking? Perhaps you could begin by completing the following sentence; to me, critical thinking is_____

7-   When designing lesson plans, do you incorporate critical thinking activities?

a- Yes

b- No

8-   Do you feel well prepared by your teacher education programme to develop critical thinking in your learners?

a- Yes

b- No

9-   Do you think that teaching thinking skills to your learners can help them be effectively prepared to deal with social issues affecting their communities?

a- Yes

b- No

10-   In your own opinion, what may be the most significant obstacles to teaching critical thinking through the current curriculum?

_____

Appendix B

Observation Sheet: Learners' Use of Critical Thinking

Learner Name: _____ Academic Year_____

Teacher's Name: _____ School: _____

Critical thinking skills	Never	Once	Sometimes	Often	Always
1) Supports opinion with facts					
2) Raises challenges questions					
3) Uses abstract thinking					
4) Shows openness to differing perspectives/new evidence					
5) New skill demonstrated					
6) Uses problem-solving techniques by applying					

facts/reasoning					
7) Shows more complexity in decision making or problem solving regarding social issues such as considering more variables, considering additional data, considering more points of view or perspectives, engaging in analysis that is more abstract.					
8) Considers at least one other factor desire in decision making; engaging in forward planning; problem-solving using evidence, perspective-taking to consider other points of view, providing support for an opinion, or generating a series of opinions then choosing the best based on analysis.					
Number showing increase in frequency					

Appendix C

**A Few Supplemental Activities to the Ones in the Textbook (*Go For English)*

Activity 1: Identifying fact and opinion and respond to higher order questions

Level: Second cycle

Time: 25 minutes

Objectives: think creatively and critically

Text: an excavator operator job

I operate an excavator. I started work with a small local builder digging trenches for foundations and laying blocks. Then I took the opportunity to work on a big construction site. We were building a 20-storey office block. I was fascinated by the various machines: cranes, excavators and bulldozers, which made the work so much faster and easier. But it was very hot and dusty work. It was dangerous, too. A friend of mine was badly injured when a concrete block fell on his leg.

When I had the chance to train as an excavator operator, I took it eagerly. I have always been interested in machines. Operating the excavator is a very responsible job.   You need quick reactions and good eyesight. One mistake and someone might get killed. But at the end of the day when you see the building completed, you get enormous satisfaction. And I have a great time with my friends. We have to rely on each other. That makes us really close.

Adapted from *Go For English* première (p. 76).

1-   Is this a fact or an opinion? Circle one

a-   The narrator is passionate about his job……………………………………fact or opinion

b-   Operating an excavator is the most dangerous job in the world………………fact or opinion

c-   Even though the sophisticated machines make the work much faster and easier, they are the ones causing the accident; that is why the job is dangerous……………………………fact or opinion

d-   The narration relies on his friends…..…………………………….……...fact or opinion

2-   Answer these questions

a-   How does this text related to other text you have read?

b-   How does this text relate to what you know about jobs?

c-   Based on the analysis of the text, would you like to be an excavator operator, why or why not?

Activity 2: Comparing the past to the present

Level: Second cycle

Time: 15 minutes

Objectives: think creatively and critically

Today, life is different than it was for our grandparents in our community, think about some differences between those days and today; write them in the boxes; then think about why some things have changed. Think too about things that have stayed the same, and why that is.

Lifestyles	In the past	In the present
Communication	Many people communicated by…	Many people communicate by…
Transportation	People travelled by…	People travel by…
Youth problems	There was no…	There are …
Community problems	The main problem was…because…	The main problem is…because…

Activity 3: Inductive Reasoning Practice (done as warning up)

Level: Second cycle

Time: 5 minutes

Objectives: think creatively and critically

We resort to inductive reasoning for some of our day-to day activities without realising it.   In fact, in some specific circumstances, we have no other options than relying on that form of reasoning. This kind of reasoning will help our secondary school learners to develop their thinking skills.

Now it is your turn to use your reasoning skills to draw logical inferences. Please, read carefully the information you are given (the premises) and consider what would be the most logical conclusion to draw based on the evidence.

1- Every rainy season, when there are puddles on roads, there are a lot of mosquitoes and many children get malaria. Last night, two of your siblings were diagnosed having malaria.

You can therefore logically conclude that:

Rainy season has just started

There are a lot mosquitoes now

None of the two conclusions is correct

2- Each time someone dies in the community, the post-mortem examination to discover the cause of death reveals alcoholism. A close friend of yours has just died.

You can therefore logically conclude that:

She/he dies from alcoholism

It is time for you to stop having friend

None of the two conclusions is correct

Activity 4: Deductive Reasoning Practice (done as warning up)

Level: Second cycle

Time: 5 minutes

Objectives: think creatively and critically

Good critical thinking is always based on sound reasoning. Faulty reasoning leads us to mistakes in our thoughts and actions. Learners need to know how to draw and test conclusions. This will help them in their day-today activities. Here is a list of syllogisms; use deductive reasoning to find out the good ones. Remember that a syllogism may show either good reasoning or faulty reasoning. Good reasoning leads to workable conclusion and it makes sense as well.

1-   All EFL teachers are poor. Your friend is an EFL teacher. Therefore, she/he is poor.

2-   Some teachers teaching French wear glasses. You met a teacher wearing glasses. Therefore, s/he is a French teacher.

3-   All Africans are corrupted; Abel is an African. Therefore, he is corrupted.

4-   All Beninese speak at least a local language. You are Beninese. Therefore, you speak a local language.

Notes

Note 1. "The Latin Quarter of Africa" (Translation, mine).

Note 2. Learning situations are Units.

Note 3. Sequences are sections.

Note 4. Big books are magnified or enlarged versions of children's books, usually narratives and are considered to be one of the most effective ways of getting EFL young children involved with reading instruction in English.

Note 5. CEFR Common European Framework of Reference For Languages.

Note 6. First cycle is from 6th grade to 9th grade; second cycle is from 10th grade to 12th grade.