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Critical thinking in the Language Classroom: Teacher Beliefs and Methods

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, English language teaching and research in the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed a significant increase in the emphasis upon critical thinking skills development alongside language proficiency. Fostering a perspective of commitment to teaching critical thinking skills in line with the English language courses, this paper reports on a study conducted at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University. In particular, it explores English language teachers' conceptual definitions of critical thinking, their beliefs about the significance of critical thinking for language teaching and connections between critical thinking and language teaching methods. The results of the study's survey, supported by concrete examples from the classroom, suggest that the ultimate majority of those teachers (96%) recognise the central role played by critical thinking in effective language pedagogy. The results also indicate teachers' preference for aligning their teaching methods with the functional-communicative approach, related to Ennis' (2011) critical thinking categories. They also suggest a predisposition for employing practical aspects of critical thinking teaching methodologies in the English language classroom to more holistically prepare students for further academic studies and their future careers in the workplace.

Keywords: Critical thinking, learner autonomy, Oman, problem solving, reflective thinking, skills for the 21st century

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INTRODUCTION

The significance and value of critical thinking skills are thought about at present as being ones of social empowerment, enhanced communication, employability and networking. The most decisive point at issue, on the one hand, is that of stimulating and enhancing student capacity for critical

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thinking, nurturing and promoting critical thinking skills across disciplines and diverse socio-cultural and educational contexts. On the other, it is that of teachers' ability to continually self-assess their own beliefs and methods in the classroom in order to enhance students' critical thinking skills. In these interrelated conditions, Oman is a case conforming to this general course and prevailing tendency, being a country of distinctive identities, and education that emphasises critical thinking as an essential component of students' personal and social development (Al-Busaidi & Sultana, 2014) and their preparation for future work.

The issue of higher education graduates' preparedness for the modern job markets and the skills' shortages that these markets are facing are currently among the concerns observed by multiple publications noted in Shaw (2011). Most of this research drew attention to the fact that many higher education graduates lack capacity in specific areas wanted by employers (Candy & Crebert, 1991, cited in Robinson & Garton, 2008, p.96). It also raises questions about students being inadequately "equipped with general, transferable skills" (Robinson & Garton, 2008, p.96) that are necessary for successful professional careers in the new global economy and in fast-growing local job markets.

The majority of the local population in the Middle East is under 30, and the composition of Oman's population is no exception. To exemplify this, according to the Oman Demographics Profile (2013), the age groups from 0 to 14 years and from 15 to 24 years make up 30.6% and 20.2% of the total Omani population, respectively. This fact is a concern of the Omani government with regards to the current and future working population, their knowledge and capacities. Low skill levels is also among the most significant current topics of discussion in the Middle East. Addressing this issue, Neil Shaw (2011), regional skills advisor for the Middle East, Near East and North Africa, drew attention to its relevance for future stability and prosperity and suggested that greater alignment is needed between education and industry.

Recent research indicates that team work, problem-solving and critical thinking are essential skills that top the list of the most desired attributes for the 21st century workplace (Billing, 2003; Robinson & Garton, 2008; Wagner, 2008; Wagner, 2012) and the "increasingly complex economy" (Salama, 2004). It also focusses the attention of educators on the importance of skills' development. According to Robinson's study (2000) that has strongly influenced later developments in educational research, "failure to equip young people with the job readiness skills critical to job success is equivalent to placing employability barriers in their path" (p. 2). Similar to other higher education institutions worldwide, universities and colleges in the Sultanate of Oman are interested in ensuring suitable adaptation and adjustment of their training systems in order to equip students with effective skills needed for successful professional careers in the 21st century.

The English language classroom has an important place in these training systems and plays a key role in developing skills, including critical thinking also referred to as the skill of 'responsible thinking' (Eder & Paul, 2009; Vaughn, 2005). As a consequence, critical thinking skills' development, alongside language proficiency, has become one of the key goals of Oman's tertiary education to more holistically prepare students for further academic studies and their future careers in the workplace. As a consequence, there has recently been a significant increase in research in Oman that emphasises theoretical and practical aspects of critical thinking (Al Busaidi & Sultana, 2014; Al-Issa & Al Balushi, 2010; Al-Issa, 2014; Al-Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014; Thakur & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015 etc.).

In recognition of the central role played by critical thinking in effective pedagogy and the multiple factors that influence its successful implementation, the fundamental aspect of teachers' beliefs and methodologies emerges as one of the most important (Al-Issa, 2014). According to Al-Issa (2014), in Oman teachers at different levels remain key players in the policy implementation process (p.20). He further explained that "their motivation and creative teaching approaches, methods, and methodological and critical reflective skills can have positive and direct implications for influencing change in the Oman ELT educational system" (p. 20).

Using information from a pilot study of a research project funded by The Research Council of Oman, this paper focusses on critical thinking skills and discusses different aspects of their integration into English language curricula and teaching at Sultan Qaboos University, a leading higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. Looking closely at language teachers' views and beliefs and considering such pedagogical conditions as teachers' assumptions, age, experience as well as external conditions such as the socio-cultural context in general and the social context of the educational institution (Turebayeva & Doszhanova, 2013, p.1320) adds to a better understanding of the factors that are necessary for developing students' capacity for thinking critically and may help to close the gap between higher education and the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Skills for the 21st Century

Pragmatic concerns for addressing dynamic change in the work environment are highlighted in studies relating to education for the 21st century. Wagner (2008) maintained that today's higher education institutions are, in the main, ill-equipped to meet the cognitive, communicative and technological needs of students. Traditional ways of imparting knowledge are no longer adequate to ensure that students graduating are able to meet the demands of the workforce. Adopting different strategies to answer these needs are both vital and

challenging. According to Warlick (2001), "whether it is the expansion of social networking technologies, the power of digital media tools, or the ability to publish to the world instantly, our students and teachers have access to more information than ever before" (p.vi). He further explained that during our exciting time to be a teacher and a learner "we all possess the ability to interact with learning networks much wider than at any other time in history, and we all now have the unprecedented ability to create powerful artefacts of learning" (Warlick, 2011, p.vi). Tony Wagner (2008) in his seminal work, *The Global Achievement Gap*, focussed on a set of core skills that teachers need to adopt. Among these are critical thinking and problem solving, followed by collaboration, adaptability, entrepreneurialism, oral and written communication, accessing and analysing information, curiosity and imagination. It should be noted here that these skills are particularly relevant to Oman in light of the findings of the Survey of Higher Education Graduates (Ameen, 2013, n.p.), which showed a deficit in Omani graduates' generic skills.

Conceptions of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is interpreted and defined in various ways. In a seminal study on critical thinking and education, Edward Glaser (1941) defined critical thinking as "the ability to think critically" (p.409). Reflecting upon the components of critical thinking, Glaser (1941) pointed out the importance of the range of one's experiences as well as an attitude of being disposed to consider problems and subjects in a thoughtful way and knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning. He also suggested taking into account some skill in applying these methods (p. 409-410).

Several other leaders in the field included in their understanding of critical thinking, skills, practice and the need for reflection both by the student and the teacher. Scriven and Richard (1987) in their address to The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking listed the following as attributes of critical thinking: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness. Fairness and empathy were also supported by Elder and Paul (2009) as traits and attributes of critical thinking.

It should be noted that leading members of The Critical Thinking Community, Elder and Paul (2009), included in their definition of critical thinking, not only information, belief generating and processing skills, but also added the importance of developing a habit of using those skills to guide behaviour. In a similar way, Van Gelder (2005) concurred that learning the skills was not enough and that students must practise using them. According to him, to develop critical thinking, there must be full concentration on improvement, that is, exercises to improve performance that are graduated and including repetition and guidance with timely feedback (p.43).

There is some debate on the transferability of critical thinking skills;

however, Elder and Paul (2006) and Vaughn (2005) considered the skill of critical thinking as transferrable to any subject, content or problem, Willingham (2007) stated that critical thinking is intertwined with content knowledge and is highly discipline specific and, therefore, non-transferable.

There are also differing opinions as to whether critical thinking is synonymous with higher order thinking skills. Mulnix (2012), Elder and Paul (2006) referred to higher order stages in Bloom's taxonomy when describing critical thinking, while Rudd (2007) stated that critical thinking and higher order thinking are not equivalent, "… [because critical thinking also includes] problem solving, creative thinking and decision making" (p.48). Interestingly, Halpern (2014) also noted the importance of these elements. Following this line of thought, he incorporated practical guidelines including acquisition, retention and retrieval of knowledge and moves onto the importance of problem solving, decision making and creative thinking.

Developing Critical Thinking

The issues of critical thinking skills' development and teaching practices have been addressed by many researchers. Ennis (2002), a leading contributor to the field of critical thinking, designed the 'FRISCO approach' (focus, reasons, inference, situation, clarity and overview) with emphasis on understanding and evaluating an argument. He also produced a super-streamlined conception of critical thinking, which lists the attributes of a critical thinker. According to Ennis (2011), a critical thinker is open-minded and mindful of alternatives; tries to be well-informed; judges well the credibility of sources; identifies conclusions, reasons and assumptions; judges well the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions and evidence; can well develop and defend a reasonable position; asks appropriate clarifying questions; formulates plausible hypotheses; plans experiments well; defines terms in a way appropriate for the context; draws conclusions when warranted, but with caution; and integrates all items in this list when deciding what to believe or do. Other writers in the field have produced similar lists or frameworks including Duron, Limbach and Waugh (2006), who shared their five-step framework, and James Cooper (2013), whose work focusses on the importance of questioning. Another advocate of the importance of questioning techniques to aid engaging in critical thinking is Yilin Sun, of the TESOL International Association in 1997, whose blog explains her use of the acronym FIRE to stand for four areas of critical thinking: factual, insightful, rational and evaluative. Critical thinking has also been linked to autonomous learning (Little, 2004; Pemberton & Nix, 2012), and in particular in relation to writing where the student is engaged in reflective thinking (Nunn, 2015). As well as that, a substantial body of present-day research on critical thinking development emphasises its continued nature and the importance of considering the types of teaching and

learning activities from the point of view of their contribution to such development (Vdovina & Gaibisso, 2013).

Critical Thinking and Language Teaching Methodologies and Approaches

A number of English language educators and researchers have investigated the relationship between foreign language acquisition and cognitive development. Areas that have been explored are language teaching approaches and their role in promoting students' critical thinking skills. For example, Alagozlu (2007) argued that "since the traditional instructional process urges the students to receive ready-made information without questioning, they [students] are not encouraged to think critically, which is probably transferred into ELT classes as well" (p. 185). However, other approaches, for example, the content-based approach that refers to "concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content materials (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, p.2), are viewed as effective techniques for developing students' critical thinking skills while teaching them language skills (Brinton et al., 1989; Kusaka & Robertson, 2006; Liaw, 2007; Stoller, 1997). According to Stoller (1997), it is believed that the content-based language teaching approach is an effective way of teaching higher-order thinking skills due to the infusion of language in teaching all subject matter and the close connections between oral and written language and thinking. Both content-based instruction and critical thinking activities are intrinsically motivating (Brown, 2007). Using a content-based approach brings different and interesting topics from different subject matter into the language classroom. In addition, this approach offers teachers opportunities for using different activities which focus on students' learning capabilities, instead of focussing solely on their linguistic abilities (Chamot, 1995). Moreover, the content-based language classroom has "the potential of increasing intrinsic motivation and empowerment, since students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives," and "… their own competence and autonomy as intelligent individuals capable of actually doing something with their new language" (Brown, 2007, p.56). Similarly, improving students' critical thinking skills motivates them "because it appeals to our innate desire for self-improvement" (Crocker & Bowden, 2010, p.3). Aiming at bringing into discussion practical aspects of critical thinking teaching methodologies, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) also argued that content-based activities provide teachers with opportunities to stimulate students to think using the target language.

Crocker and Bowden (2010) proposed using a content-based approach as a way of merging the notional-functional approach with critical thinking in a language course. According to them, both the notional-functional approach and the critical thinking subject share similar learning outcomes. Their study also suggested that

"self-correction, clarifying ideas, making distinctions, giving reasons, formulating appropriate questions, making connections and comparing" are examples of learning outcomes that can be found in either discipline (p.3). Crocker and Bowden (2010) believed that the only difference is that in critical thinking the students are expected to improve their cognitive skills, whereas the notional-functional approach aims to improve students' ability "to express or articulate these cognitive skills" (p.3). Hence, combining the two disciplines through a content-based programme places more emphasis on critical thinking in the language classroom. Such an approach allows direct instruction of critical thinking skills while achieving the intended notional-functional learning outcomes.

Learning strategy instruction is also considered an effective approach to teach critical thinking skills in the language classroom. Language teachers can promote their students' critical thinking through teaching them learning strategies. In doing so, students can develop their metacognitive awareness. Teachers can encourage students to describe and share their own learning techniques and strategies. According to Reid (2000), the best way to develop students' metacognitive skills is by making them consciously aware of the learning strategies they use when attempting different tasks. Thus, explicit instruction of learning strategies is needed. Chamot (1995) suggested a framework for building a community of thinkers in the language classroom. This framework consists of five kinds of instruction to help students demonstrate and improve their thinking. These include recognising and building on students' prior knowledge; providing meaningful learning tasks; engaging in interactive teaching and learning; focussing on learning processes and strategies; and helping students to evaluate their own thinking (Chamot, 1995, p.16).

In contrast, the communicative approach, which is extremely popular in the majority of foreign language classrooms, is not believed to be very supportive of incorporating critical thinking. For example, Kabilan (2013) argued that the communicative approach places more emphasis on 'using the language' rather than 'learning about the language'. As a consequence, according to Kabilan (2013), it does not really prepare students to be proficient in the target language. Kabilan, Adlina and Embi (2011) strongly believed that learners should be able to employ creative and critical thinking when using the language. Only then can learners become proficient language users. Similarly, Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991) argued that the communicative approach disregards the importance of reflection in the target language. They stated that "many activities in the communicative language teaching classroom discourage reflection and contemplation and the emphasis is on conspicuous action and spontaneous response" (p.10). Moreover, according to them, "conspicuous action tends to be more highly valued than the need of all participants to pause unilaterally and stand back from and reflect on what they

are doing" (p.10). Therefore, students are not given opportunities to develop their metacognitive awareness when they engage in communicative tasks only.

METHODOLOGY

Our study examined English language teachers' responses regarding the concept of critical thinking and its use in the classroom, which informed a frame of reference regarding teachers' general views on critical thinking and how it relates to English language teaching and learning. The study was conducted at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, the leading national government-funded university in the Sultanate of Oman. Sultan Qaboos University uses English as a medium of instruction in all its science-based colleges and some specialisations in the Colleges of Law, Education, Arts and Social Sciences. The university's Language Centre, the largest language institution in the country, has more than 200 faculty members from 30 different countries bringing with them unique experiences and a variety of linguistic, educational and socio-cultural backgrounds. They provide English language services to support Omani students in their academic studies in preparation for their future roles in the workplace. The Language Centre offers a variety of foundation and credit courses to equip students with prerequisite English language and study skills for English-medium courses in their subject areas to help them succeed in their majors and future professional careers.

The study was grounded on the interpretive approach that "allows the researcher to conduct a study in its natural setting" (Al Riyami, 2015, p.413). The study involved 24 English teachers at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University who participated in the in-house professional development courses. These teachers represent both foundation and credit courses across the Language Centre academic divisions, including Science, Humanities (Arts and Education), Engineering, Economics and Political Science, Medicine and Nursing, Agriculture and English for English Specialists. In addition, they reflect diversity in background, educational cultures and teaching experiences, with the majority of participants having over five years' teaching experience in Oman and the Middle East.

The study's primary aim was to yield descriptive information regarding English language teachers' conceptions of critical thinking skills in general, and in relation to the mastery of English, course content, pedagogical strategies, teaching methods and teaching practices being employed in the classroom to communicate and teach these skills. The data collection instrument was a survey. The survey research method was chosen as "a matter of asking a sample of people from a population a set of questions and using the answers from the population" (Fowler, 2014, p.ix) to investigate language teachers' responses to the concept of critical thinking and its use in the classroom. The survey was administered online on the wiggio.com platform. Though the online

survey tool was conducted anonymously, each teacher was assigned a code name [P – participant] and an identifying number from 1 to 24 [P1 to P24] to differentiate their responses.

The survey comprised the following five statements allowing open-ended responses: a) State the meaning of the concept of critical thinking in one sentence (e.g. Critical thinking is … In other words, …); b) State the significance of critical thinking for language teaching (e.g. This idea is important because…); c) Give an example of the concept of critical thinking (as it applies to your teaching at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University); d) Connect the idea of critical thinking skills to other important ideas in language teaching (e.g. This idea is connected to the following ideas within language teaching …); e) Give examples to support the relationship between the ideas of critical thinking skills and other important ideas in language teaching (e.g. Some examples that show the relationship between this idea and other important ideas are ...). These statements were based on the most common contributory factors to the state of critical thinking teaching in higher education in the literature detailed in Paul (2004). In his study of higher education, he identified disturbing facts about the lack of clarity regarding critical thinking among most college faculty at all levels. To exemplify this, he stated that most "don't realize that they lack a substantive concept of critical thinking, believe that they sufficiently understand it, and assume they are already teaching students it" (n.p.). Paul (2004) further goes on to explain that "when faculty have a vague notion of critical thinking, or reduce it to a single-discipline model (as in teaching critical thinking through a "logic" or a "study skills" paradigm), it impedes their ability to identify ineffective, or develop more effective, teaching practices" (n.p.).

The participants of the study responded to the online survey during and after the in-house professional development courses organised by the Language Centre. To optimise the analysis of the responses, computer programmes Word Tabulator [http://www.rvb.ru/soft/index.html] and TextAnalystv2.01 [www.analyst.ru] were used for automatic identification of the descriptors (words and phrases) and their frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 24 teachers participated in the study, representing approximately 10% of the total academic staff of the Language Centre. When asked to state the meaning of the concept of critical thinking in one sentence, teachers gave as many definitions of critical thinking as there were participants in this study. For example, one of the teachers defined critical thinking as "an evaluation of a concept/idea arrived at after questioning, analysis and reflection" [P20]. Another teacher referred to critical thinking as "actively awakening and involving all aspects of thought, with attempts to suppress emotion and environmental boundaries that one is raised or taught with, which

can limit one's ability to objectively view matters rationally" [P2]. A third response stated that critical thinking "means not accepting everything you read or hear at face value, but considering the source and whether or not there is a bias involved" [P3]. However, the most common concepts attributed to critical thinking from the 24 participants were that critical thinking a) requires analysis; b) involves evaluation; c) should be rational; d) involves reflection; e) requires suppression of bias; f) involves problem solving.

The analysis of the responses of the teachers also indicated that they understood the concept of critical thinking quite sufficiently. They associated it with a variety of words and expressions, for example: "application of knowledge", "ability", "process", "complex", "concept", "decision making", "opinion forming", "thinking outside the box", "identifying", "identifying connections", "systematic", "rigorous", "independent", "judgement", 'innovative", "life-long endeavour", "opinion-forming", "objective", "original" etc. However, the most frequently used descriptors involved such elements for identifying and describing critical thinking as "analysis", "evaluation", "rational", reflection", "suppression of bias/ objectivity" and "problem solving".

Paul (2004) argued that most college teachers "have no clear idea of the relation between critical thinking and creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, or communication" (n.p.). On the contrary, most study participants demonstrated their knowledge of such relations; for example, 46% of all the responses included "problem solving" and/or other notions of an applicable outcome of the thought process. To illustrate, one of the teachers was of the opinion that critical thinking is "the application of knowledge gained in the classroom to real life" [P7]. According to this teacher, the purpose of such use may include "logical problem solving, objective decision making and cultivating a questioning stance/perspective" [P7].

Some of the teachers went beyond the requested one sentence to explain their meaning of critical thinking. One teacher shared her view as follows:

> Living and teaching in the 21st century makes one realize that teaching and learning do not demand the knowledge of soon-to-be obsolete facts, but, rather, the fostering of critical thinking at all levels, especially in the field of education. I am not sure if defining it in a sentence will bring out its real essence. Defining will put it in a "box". I also believe there are no set standard ways in teaching and learning critical thinking. However, having taught language through problem based learning …, I find it one of the best ways of promoting critical thinking among young adults. When we envisioned using this method for teaching language, our premise was the demand for 21st century skills in the work force. Traditional education that generated passive learners became a scary thought given that collaboration, communication, teamwork, etc. had become the buzz words for the future. I

> believe it is a soon-to-be organic process through which young minds can be facilitated toward 'thinking out of the box'. [P6]

The study revealed that the ultimate majority of the study participants (96%) considered it significant to incorporate critical thinking in language teaching. Only one teacher expressed the opinion that critical thinking has no significance to the language classroom [P14]. According to most responses, the idea of critical thinking is important and necessary in language teaching, because, as one teacher wrote:

> It provides opportunities for students to think beyond the context/classroom, challenge themselves to invent/offer solutions, relate the issue to their own experiences and bring ingenuity to their ideas and in the process use language in various forms unconsciously. This will facilitate language learning in an autonomous atmosphere without any threat or impediment. [P13]

Moreover, the teachers' responses revealed that incorporating critical thinking ideas into classroom activities changes the language-learning environment while "actively engaging students with constructing a new means of communication" [P9] and "preparing for using the language "outside the classroom situation in real life contexts" [P9]. Indeed, 37.5% of the responses referred to critical thinking skills in relation to processes, events and situations both inside and outside the language classroom and/or other contexts. To exemplify this, one of the study's participants responded to this item of the survey as follows:

> Critical thinking is the essence of tertiary education. If students are to be self-disciplined, self-guided individuals, they need to be able to think at a high level of quality and fair-mindedness. Language teachers have a duty to provide students with an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. These skills should then become a habit whenever they read, write, speak or listen to language. Human thinking is inherently flawed due to a range of factors, such as, social, personal and cultural factors. The use of critical thinking tools helps students to analyze, assess, and evaluate more effectively. Critical thinking helps to develop the intellectual virtues of integrity, humility, rationality and empathy. Most people will, at times, be guilty of irrational decisions, prejudices, biases, assumptions, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos. Critical thinking helps to avoid these human weaknesses. Through the medium of language teaching, teachers are able to promote critical thinking. It is an indispensable tool for students in both their academic life and also their life after university. [P7]

The relevance of critical thinking in relation to teachers was noted in 16% of

the respondents. This result correlates with Kabilan's (2000), who believed that teachers are the primary element needed to produce critical thinkers in language classrooms. Similarly, Lipman (2003) argued that it is a teacher's responsibility to promote students' critical thinking. Therefore, according to Lipman (2003), teachers should change their attitudes towards their students, pedagogy and themselves as teachers. They should respect learners' individuality, listen to their opinions and build mutual relationships with them. In addition, he proposed engaging learners in problem-solving situations and decision-making processes. More importantly, he purported that teachers need to act as facilitators and guides and to lead their students to be critical thinkers.

Some additional responses to the survey referred to both teacher and students; to exemplify this, one of the teachers wrote that, "… the idea of critical thinking is important because it offers both teacher and learner of a foreign language a platform to exploit the vast opportunities that this language has to offer" [P3].

Quite interestingly, students' ability to use critical thinking when using language creatively and to solve problems in learning English ranked high in the responses. In addition, students taking an active role in being responsible for their learning was seen as significant; this was evident in responses indicating autonomy, application outside the class and self-reflection as a language learner. Teachers agreed that the idea of critical thinking was significant because it could "engage students intellectually and assist them in the process of applying skills learnt in various contexts" [P4], help them "become adventurous thinkers, generate creative solutions, use their reasoning skills to analyse and evaluate, plan and think cleverly" [P5] and assist their "development as independent learners" [P11]. Other benefits for the language classroom given in the responses included improved "attention", "observation", "analytical skills", "self-reflection", "personalized study" and the development of "intellectual virtues".

When asked to give an example of the concept of critical thinking as it applied to their teaching in the Language Centre, most teachers (87.5%) provided examples related to different language functions and areas of language learning with an emphasis on the notional-functional approach (Crocker & Bowden, 2010) and communication as both the means and the ultimate goal of language education.

A composite view listed by participants within receptive and productive areas of language learning can be presented in the following categorisations:

a) In relation to speaking, participants mentioned debate, discuss, argue and promote higher order questions, report, present, link to wider field of study, reflective interactions. To illustrate this, one of the teachers observed that she (sometimes consciously) employs "strategies that involve debate, discussion, argument in class and provides opportunities to students to come up with their own free responses" [P8].

In order to do so, she, for example, asks students to come up with topics that have intrinsic arguments in agriculture (e.g. marine pollution, genetically modified foods/ plants, processed foods, chemical fertilisers vs natural fertilisers etc.) and then asks them to research for information/ideas, and present their thoughts in an argument/discussion. This teacher believes that she "can easily notice that students are using critical skills in the process" [P8].

b) In relation to reading, participants listed analyse, evaluate, reflect, demonstrate open-mindedness, link ideas to wider field of study, recognise bias, identify main ideas, details, infer, evaluate. According to one of the teachers, "A simple example would be to give students an argumentative text on a certain controversial issue/problem, such as internet censorship or globalization and ask them what they think of the writer's ideas, whether they agree or disagree with him/her and why, and also suggest other solutions to the problem" [P3].

c) In relation to writing, participants wrote research, source information, report, reflective journals, portfolios, paraphrase, summarise, reference, evaluate evidence, link to wider field of study. For example, one of the teachers contended: "I teach students to apply/use their language and study skills and to come up with a 500-word research paper. They are guided through the research process and for their research paper to be valid/useful to the community they need to pose real questions which need answers. They need to analyse previous theory and research, evaluate this and reflect on their own standpoint and of course how they will use this second language to communicate their ideas via a written report, and a presentation, to their instructor and their colleagues" [P9].

d) In relation to listening, participants listed evaluate, reflect, demonstrate open-mindedness, link to wider field of study, identify main ideas, details, infer, recognise bias, evaluate, paraphrase, summarise. This categorisation can be supported by an example statement from one of the responses, "Creating and developing vocabulary mind-maps, writing reflective paragraphs on the listening tasks, creating their own quizzes, are just examples of tools that nourish their ability to think critically simply because they push students to reason, apply their knowledge to accomplish their task, synthesize and summarize their material" [P21].

The majority (75%) of the surveyed teachers suggested the connection of the idea of critical thinking with diverse ideas in language teaching and education. According

to teachers' responses, critical thinking is connected with "applying acquired language in new contexts", "collaborative learning", "convincing others", "creating", "developing values", "expressing opinions", "inferring", "innovative thinking", "learner autonomy", "paraphrasing", "presentation skills", "problem solving", "self-awareness", "self-reflection", "self-regulation", "social skills", "summarizing", "working with task-based approaches (projects, portfolios, journaling)", "using lexis, syntax and grammar to guess meaning of unknown words" and "using logic and reason". For example, according to one of the teachers who participated in the study, critical thinking skills "pave the way to promoting learner's autonomy" [P4]. Another teacher believed that the idea of critical thinking "is connected to the following ideas within language teaching: student engagement, active learning, personalized experience, cultural integration, sharing ideas, cooperative learning, group work/ pair work, but most importantly in teaching reading skills at a higher level" [P22]. In the view of a third participant of the study, critical thinking "is part and parcel of the modern language teaching methodology" [P5]. This teacher also expressed her strong belief that "learning best takes place through internalization; so developing critical thinking is a way to help students internalize the idea and later apply it in real life situations". When asked to connect the idea of critical thinking with language teaching, the fourth teacher observed that "using critical thinking strategies in language teaching can help teachers develop students' ability to solve problems, discuss an issue in a congenial atmosphere, express an opinion, convince the others, analyze issues in a scientific manner using logic and reasoning" [P11]. This teacher further argued that when teachers "allow these things to happen freely, students would develop autonomous learning skills which should be the primary goal of any instructional process" [P11].

It is noteworthy that 65% of the respondents provided examples of the relationship between critical thinking and other important elements of language teaching. These examples drive critical thinking skills associated with multiple activities performed in the communication environment of the language classroom. These included such types of activities as argue for/against; brainstorm; compare connoted (associative or implied) and denoted (dictionary) meanings of vocabulary in context; consider alternatives; design ways of organising and representing information; infer sub-textual meaning; link ideas; organise ideas in a logical sequence; reflect; while reading, identify patterns sequence, similarities and contrasts, guess and predict, find relationships, predict consequences, judge validity of sources; use the discovery process including: paying attention, finding patters, cross-checking, negating or confirming their own ideas, summarising and concluding; write opinion essays etc. To illustrate this, one of the survey respondents contended that "when asked to write a reflection on a given task, the students identify the 'weaknesses'

and then devise an action plan to rectify the shortcomings they have identified, themselves, in the analyses they provide. By doing so, the students take control of their own learning. It also shows that they are actively engaged with what they are learning and are not just passive learners" [P9].

Additionally, one teacher provided a thought-provoking response concerning teachers' critical awareness of their teaching methods [P18]. This respondent cited Chick's (1996) argument that the use of the communicative approach in language teaching "was possibly a sort of naive ethno centrism prompted by the thought that what is good for Europe or the USA had to be good for KwaZulu" (p. 22) and observed that similar issues were raised by researchers in China, India, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea and Thailand. In lieu with the study by Canagarajah (1999) that examined how teachers and students working in remote Sri Lankan classes use creative classroom strategies that reflect an engagement with local context, need and resources, this teacher called for "providing students with a teaching approach that will help them find ways to reconstruct their languages, cultures, and identities to their advantage" [P18]. Indeed, this response broadens the focus of employing critical thinking in higher education institutions. It encourages teachers to consider critically their philosophy of teaching, the strategies they use and the experiences they provide for their students in their classes. It widens the scope beyond student engagement and, therefore, has the possibility of developing a more contextualised methodology to engage students in a way that may utilise their strengths rather than demand they develop less appropriate skills for the context in which they live and study.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot of interest and valuable implementation of critical thinking already taking place at the Sultan Qaboos University Language Centre, and the majority of participants in this study recognised the central role played by critical thinking in effective language teaching and pedagogy. According to the teachers, fostering a perspective of renewed commitment to teaching critical thinking skills in line with a functional and communicative language-learning environment enhances students' chances of success and achievement in both their studies and potentially the job market. However, in spite of the identified connection between critical thinking and other elements of language teaching and a variety of activities directly relating to language teaching, there is no consensus among teachers regarding the understanding and interpretation of thinking that "defines the content" (Paul, 2004) of what is taught in the English language classroom. Therefore, there is a need for targeted professional development for teachers in the area of critical thinking that will include a theoretical rationale, reinforcement of the basic principles of critical thinking and practical examples that teachers can utilise and better understand the idea of critical thinking in general and critical thinking

approaches in teaching specifically. As Paul (2004) stated, "If we understand critical thinking substantively, we not only explain the idea explicitly to our students, but we use it to give order and meaning to virtually everything we do as teachers and learners" (n.p.).

Though the study examined teacher beliefs and methods of teaching critical thinking in the language classroom only at one institution of higher education in Oman, its results may provide relevant information to other English language teachers in similar educational contexts. In addition, they may stimulate further research on critical thinking skills development alongside language proficiency to better conceptualise and organise the design and implementation of critical thinking teaching and student learning in the English language classroom.

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