

The Role of Critical Thinking in IELTS Instructors' Teaching Success

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success. The objective was to find out whether critical thinking ability has any significant relationship with teaching success or not. To carry out the study, the researchers asked at least 70 IELTS instructors who teach in different English schools in Iran to answer the "Watson Glazer Critical Thinking Questionnaire". Besides, their students were asked to evaluate their teachers' performance via answering a questionnaire called the "Characteristics of Successful EFL Teachers". The results showed that there is a significant relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success. This result may help teacher trainers to bear in mind the beneficial characteristics of critical thinking when dealing with teacher training courses or teacher in- service courses.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Teachers' success, Successful teachers, Critical thinking, IELTS instructors

1. Introduction

To live and compete in the information age, individuals must ask questions, invent new ways of solving problems, connect new knowledge to the information they already have and apply their knowledge in new situations. In short, individuals must develop critical thinking skills which are the most important goals in education. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable him to live and act successfully in it (Center for Critical Thinking, 1996a). One of the scopes in which critical thinking research penetrated is language teaching. "Teaching is a complex interaction including subject matter, content, teacher characteristics, student characteristics, pedagogy, resources, and learning context" (Campbell, 2000, p, 50). Beyond the shadow of a doubt, as Campbell (2000) mentioned, one of the influential key factors in the process of language teaching and learning is teacher. Teacher plays a fundamental role in students' progress or lack of it. According to King Rice (2003), teaching is a complex activity that is influenced by the many elements of teacher quality and teacher quality is a powerful predictor of student performance. The researcher believes that in this highly technical society which changes and develops every second and with the very curious and inquisitive students who live and study in this informational era, we are in need of teachers who can fulfill students' needs. The researcher thinks that the time of manual teachers, those teachers who just follow the teaching instruction, is over. The educational system needs teachers who are researchers and in line with the new methods in teaching. These teachers think critically and always look for new teaching techniques to be effective teachers. They know how to treat their students. In other words, they know how to be effective reflective teachers.

Therefore, the researcher in this study investigated the relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success scientifically and under the controlled conditions.

2. Background

2.1 Critical Thinking (CT)

Most authors who write about critical thinking agree that critical thinking has many dimensions: it involves knowledge, cognitive skills, and a disposition (a state of mind to “be” a critical thinker). Steven Brookfield (1991), states, “Critical Thinking involves recognizing and researching assumptions that undergird thoughts and actions. (p. 17)”. He implies that critical thinking involves research skills, being able to analyze the source of our knowledge, and how we use it in making decisions. David Russell, as early as 1943, defined critical thinking as a habit of thinking involving four components: knowledge of the field or fields in which the thinking is being done, attitudes and habits of questioning and suspending judgments, the application of a process or procedure to the problem situation, and taking action on this line of thinking (Harpez, 2007). Notice that this definition places critical thinking into a discipline or field, and equates critical thinking with problem solving. Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (2004) define critical thinking as, “that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.” This definition includes an attitudinal element of volition, and self-efficacy, and the metacognitive skill of evaluating one’s own thinking processes. Diane Halpern (1998), past president of the American Psychological Association, defines critical thinking as, “the use of cognitive *skills or strategies* that increase the probability of a desirable outcome ... where desirable is defined by the individual, such as making good career choices or wise financial investments.” She says critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed. She goes on to say that critical thinking is the type of thinking used in problem solving, determining probable outcomes, formulating inferences, and making decisions.

2.2 Attributes of a Critical Thinking Teachers

Critical thinking involves logical thinking and reasoning including skills such as comparison, classification, sequencing, cause/effect, patterning, webbing, analogies, deductive and inductive reasoning, forecasting, planning, hypothesizing, and critiquing. Radhakrishnan (2009) stated that a critical thinking teacher has the following attributes:

- He asks pertinent questions to see whether his students have learned or not.
- He assesses statements and arguments.
- He is able to admit a lack of understanding or information.
- He has a sense of curiosity.
- He is interested in finding new solutions for becoming teaching problems.
- He is able to clearly define a set of criteria for analyzing ideas.
- He is willing to examine beliefs, assumptions, and opinions and weigh them against facts.
- He listens carefully to others and is able to give feedback.
- He sees that critical thinking is a lifelong process of self assessment.
- He suspends judgment until all facts have been gathered and considered.
- He looks for evidence to support assumption and beliefs.
- He is able to adjust opinions when new facts are found.
- He looks for proof.
- He examines problems closely.
- He is able to reject information that is incorrect or irrelevant.

2.3 Successful Teachers

Ur (1996) believes that good teachers know how to challenge students. They know their students thoroughly and understand each student’s leaning styles, thus they teach in a way that students will not only learn but also be intrigued by the information provided to them. Quality teachers understand students and have the capability to reach them, and know them on a personal level, to help and mentor them. Although it is difficult for a teacher to be able to reach all of his/her students in a personal level, successful teachers try their best because they need to have the students’ attention and respect in order to teach them. There are many different ways to assess teachers' success. Final exam scores, class observations, students' judgments and so on.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, teachers are one of the key factors in the process of language teaching and learning. They can have fundamental role in their students' progress or lack. According to King Rice (2003), teaching is a complex

activity that is influenced by the many elements of teacher quality and teacher quality is a powerful predictor of student performance. Sanders and Rivers (1996) argue that teacher is the single most important factor influencing student achievement. Suwandee (1995) assumed teaching as a two-way interaction between teachers and students and stated that what students learn, to a great extent, depends on the teacher's commitment to the teaching task.

Haskvitz (2007) considered eleven traits for successful teachers. These characteristics are as follows:

1. Be unsatisfied: The first trait of a high-quality teacher is that he or she is a good learner. They are always eager and ready to learn new things, increase their knowledge base, and experiment with better ways to achieve success. They are lifelong learners and produce lifelong learners. So, the first trait is to be unsatisfied with what is. In other words, the best teacher is always a student.
2. High expectations: High expectations are the second trait of excellent teachers. Setting high standards causes students to do their best, as a result, brings out the best in students. It also creates a feeling of accomplishment in them. In other words, good teachers encourage risk taking and accept errors.
3. Create independence: Thirdly, highly effective teachers are skilful at monitoring student problems and progress. Their classes are not teacher-centered. They encourage students to look for help and answers on their own. They are passionate about not teaching, but facilitating learning. The same as a fine manager who has a team in place that can operate well without him or her, a good teacher creates a sense of self in students that lasts a lifetime. In other words, they create independence.
4. Knowledgeable: Fourth, they have a deep knowledge of the subject matter. Because they are a master of the subject matter, they are able to manipulate, simplify, and individualize the data more easily. Besides possessing the thorough knowledge of the subject matter, they have a passion for the subject. They are able to understand students who might not like the subject and to compensate for the lack of enthusiasm; they present the facts from a different angle.
5. Humor: The fifth trait of the first-class teachers is to possess a good sense of humor. They make jokes and accept jokes. They tell stories, mention silly things, make the difficult situations joyful, and are not afraid of laughter. They use humor to create a good connection with their students. In other words, excellent teachers try to keep the students' attention without fear.
6. Insightful: The sixth characteristic is to obtain quick and accurate assessment of the students' work. Good teachers evaluate tests and other projects in a timely manner and through suitable feedback, they improve students' achievements. All times, the qualified teachers are looking for the student's reasoning, rather than the answer. In other words, for the insightful teacher, students' assessment evaluates the teacher's performance and the results provide the ideas of what changes both teacher and learners need to improve their success.
7. Flexible: Seventh, the best teachers use the community as their resource. For them, education is seen as more than what is done in the classroom. They participate in organizations and use their contacts to enhance student learning. They utilize newspapers and current events to open the students' minds to what is happening in the world and at all times they search for a teachable moment (any instance where a learner expresses an interest in something that could be used to stimulate his/her learning). Excellent teachers use the community to make for more strengthening teaching. In other words, a quality instructor is a master of flexibility.
8. Diverse: Eighth, first-rate teachers provide various techniques for learners to learn. They use several subjects to presents the lessons; they use research papers, artwork, poetry and even physical education as part of the learning process. For example, when a learner is studying an explorer, the teacher talk about how many miles per hour he walk, how to create a graph of the calories he would need, make a map of the trip with legend, write a journal of what he saw, draw pictures of the flora and fauna, and make a presentation of what the student felt was the best and worst part of the discovery.
9. Unaccepting: Ninth, quality teachers are unaccepting. They do not accept pat answers, first drafts and false excuses. Because of this trait, they are not the easiest teachers. In essence, education is the disciplining of the mind. A student, who knows the rules, knows what to expect and what is right. The best teachers are those that have suitable criteria and build good habits.
10. Uncomforting: The tenth and perhaps most interesting quality of a teacher is keeping children off balance. The students whose teachers have such a trait are not bored in the class; they are motivated because they cannot expect what their teacher asks them to do each session. When they come home, they talk about what they did in the class. Skillful teachers have different methods for teaching. They show a video, take them to the library, and have them work on a project, create lessons for one another, work on a computer, proofread a classmate's work, and invent a game to play at recess, all before noon. Each day is different from the next but there is continuity in teaching.

11. A communicator: There is not any research paper which outlines good teachers with their tidy rooms, easy grades, ability to write neatly or dress well. All which are important for a qualified teacher deal with the ability to trigger learning, thus the ability to communicate is the most important trait.

In order to achieve the purpose of the study the following research question was poised:

Q: Is there any significant relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success?

Based on the above-mentioned research question, the following null hypothesis was raised:

H0: There is no significant relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

To accomplish the purpose of the research, two groups took part in this research. First, a sample of 70 male and female IELTS instructors from different English schools (Danesh, Sohravardi, Golestan, Ariyanpur, Zabansara, Allameh, Marefat, Kish, Kish Air, College, Jihad-e-daneshgahi, and ILI). The second group of participants was the students of the above-mentioned teachers. They were 779 Iranian EFL learners who studied English in the above-mentioned schools.

3.2 Instrumentation

The first instrument in this study was Watson-Glaser's Critical Thinking Appraisal. This instrument was applied to investigate the mentioned English teachers' CT abilities.

This test is comprised of 80 items with the 16 Likert scale questions with alternatives ranging from T as true, PT as probably true, ID as insufficient data, PF as probably false and F as false and 16 two scaled questions with alternatives ranging from MADE and NOT MADE and another 33 two scaled questions with the alternatives ranging from FOLLOWS and Does not FOLLOW and also 15 other two Likert scale questions with the choices of STRONG and WEAK.

The scoring key of the above mentioned CT test was bought by the researcher from the site www.psychcorp.com which indicated that each item in each subtest has one points, therefore the total score of the test was 80.

In this study, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated via Cronbach's alpha within a group of thirty subjects similar in characteristics to the target participants and the estimate turned out to be 0.83.

The second instrument applied to investigate English teachers' success was the Characteristics of Successful Iranian IELTS instructors Questionnaire (2009).

This questionnaire has been designed and standardized by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009). It consists of 47 Likert type items and every item is followed by alternatives ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted in several private Language Schools (Danesh, Sohravardi, Golestan, Ariyanpur, Zabansara, Allameh, Marefat, Kish, Kish Air, College, Jihad-e-daneshgahi, and ILI in Iran between November 2009 and March 2010. The Schools were selected based on credibility and feasibility criteria. The first participants were the above mentioned schools' IELTS instructors who were asked to take the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. They took the questionnaire home, filled it in and submitted it to the researcher within a week.

At the end of the semester of the above mentioned English schools on February 2010, the researcher distributed the second questionnaire among the EFL learners to collect the data of the IELTS Instructors' success. To receive the reliable data, the researcher explained the purpose of administering the questionnaires and assured the participants that no-one except the researcher would have access to these questionnaires, no-one would know how exactly they had answered these questions and they were not to be identified. The students were explained that their exact and correct fair responses to the questionnaires would be very important for the result of the research. In other words, endeavor was made to observe the confidentiality and anonymity considerations. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was piloted with a number of 30 students similar in characteristics to that of the target sample and the reliability index turned out to be 0.89.

3.4 Design

The design of the present study was ex post facto because the aim of the researcher was to investigate the relationship between two variables i.e. teacher's critical thinking was the predictor variable and the predicted variable was the teacher's success.

According to Hatch and Farhady (1981), in ex post facto designs, what is important for the researcher is the degree of relationship between the two variables and not the cause-and-effect relationship and in this type of design; the researcher has no control over what has happened to the subjects before and no treatment was given to them. Correlational designs and regression studies were used for determining and comparing the relationships which are the most commonly used subset of ex-post-facto designs (Hatch and Farhady, 1981).

4. Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics of the results of Watson Glazer Critical Thinking Appraisal as the independent (predictor) variable and Characteristics of Successful Iranian IELTS instructors Questionnaire as the dependant (predicted) variable are elaborated in the following tables:

The descriptive statistics for the results of CTA is reported in Table.1.

<Tables 1 & 2 about here>

In order to test the research hypothesis and describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the two variables, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was applied to find the relationship between the two variables.

The results of the correlation coefficients between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success are reported in Table 3.

<Table 3 about here>

5. Regression Analysis for Critical Thinking and Teachers Success

To analyze the data further, regression analysis was conducted. The results indicated that teachers' total score of CT is a positive predictor of the dependent variable (teaching success).

The result of regression analysis for teachers' critical thinking and their teaching success is reported in table.4.

<Table 4 about here>

As it is obvious from this table, there was a positive correlation between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success ($r = 0.84, p \leq .05$). Therefore, the researcher was able to reject the null hypothesis of the study which stated that there is no significant relationship between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success.

<Table 5 about here>

The results revealed that the model containing scores of CT test can predict 70 percent of the teachers' teaching success. The R value is 0.84 which indicates the correlation coefficient between teachers' CT and success. Its square value is 0.70. It indicates that about 70% of the variation in teachers' success can be explained by taking their CT into account (See Table.5 and 6).

<Table 6 about here>

Table 6 shows the contribution of the independent variable (critical thinking) on the dependant variable (success in teaching) equals .841, therefore; Critical thinking is making a significant contribution to the prediction of success in teaching.

As the results of this study demonstrated there is a significant correlation between IELTS Instructors' critical thinking and their teaching success in English schools.

It means that more successful IELTS instructors at English schools are the ones who have benefited from critical thinking abilities.

The more critical thinking the EFL teacher is the more successful he/she in his/her teaching career. In other words, the researcher of this study believes that those IELTS instructors who are successful in their teaching and are highly admired by their pupils for sure benefit from their critical thinking abilities.

6. Conclusion

The objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between teachers' CT and their teaching success. According to Nunan and Lamb (1999, p.202) Critical thinking teachers are ones who are capable of monitoring, critiquing and defending their actions in planning, implementing and evaluating language programs. They are sensitive to a range of learner needs and able to use these as a basis for selecting and organizing goals, objectives, content, and learning experiences of language programs; they are able to analyze and critique their own classroom behavior and the behavior of their learners; they are able to encourage learners to self-monitor and self-assess and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching (cited in Yang, 2005).

Based on logical reasoning, the researcher of this study presumed that there might be a relationship between teachers CT and their teaching success and the results support this hypothesis. The findings indicated that there is significant relationship between teachers' CT and their success. The current study revealed that almost 84 percent of those teachers who benefited from CT abilities are successful in their teaching career.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the study have some implications for IELTS instructors, practitioners and curriculum and material developers.

1. As for teachers, they should become aware that being critical thinkers will help them increase their teaching success. It fosters their inferential abilities and enhances their deep understanding of teaching. CT will help them become flexible, reflective and effective teachers who are critical thinkers and this can reflect on their students as well in that it can help the students to apply argumentation and reasoning and implement it to all language skills.
2. EFL practitioners and material developers should arrange some in service courses for IELTS instructors to familiarize them with critical thinking benefits and advantages in teaching. Through these courses IELTS instructors can properly exploit their potentialities of applying higher CT ability in improving their teaching success. In these courses, teacher trainers should provide IELTS instructors with information on the characteristics of critical thinking. They should also make them aware of thinking instructions and their usefulness in EFL domain.
3. All components and criteria of critical thinking abilities about teaching profession should be welcomed by all teachers since it has proven to be influential in maximizing teachers' success. Therefore, teachers should be provided with the necessary resources and support structures for effective implementation which consists of teacher training, and support systems such as class observation and feedback.
4. Wade (1995) identifies eight characteristics of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves asking questions, defining a problem, examining evidence, analyzing assumptions and biases, avoiding emotional reasoning, avoiding oversimplification, considering other interpretations, and tolerating ambiguity. The researcher thinks that when our IELTS instructors become familiar with these characteristics and do their best to apply them in their teaching career, they will become successful. They will know how to deal with the problems which come up during teaching, they will become patient and thoughtful. They will welcome other colleagues' criticisms and suggestions and never give up when facing a problem. They will always control their teaching process and become reflective. These teachers are loved by their students and in other words they will become successful.
5. Curriculum and material developers should infuse thinking into materials in teacher training courses.
6. Syllabus designers in teacher training courses should consider critical thinking abilities and the fostering of them as an important part of their agenda.
7. Thinking in general and critical thinking in particular could be beneficial in all teaching domain and as Elder (2005) puts it critical thinking is foundational to the effective teaching of any subject, and it must be at the heart of any professional development program.

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Table.1 Descriptive statistics of CTA

N	Valid	70
	Missing	1
Mean		42.4143
Std. Error of Mean		.94584
Std. Deviation		7.91347
Variance		62.623

Table.2 Statistical description of the IELTS instructors' success

N	Valid	70
	Missing	1
Mean		203.8786
Std. Error of Mean		2.42385
Std. Deviation		20.27937
Variance		411.253

Table.3. Correlations

		CT	Success
CT	Pearson Correlation	1	.841(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	70	70
Success	Pearson Correlation	.841(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	70	70

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table.4. Regression analysis

Sig.	T	Standardized Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients			Model
Std. Error	B	Beta	Std. Error	B		
.000	15.502		7.256	112.486	(Constant)	1
.000	12.810	.841	.168	2.155	CT	

Table.5. R square for CT as the predictor of teachers' success

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.841(a)	.707	.703	11.05734
Predictors: (Constant), CT				

Table.6. Coefficients (a*)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	112.486	7.256		15.502	.000
	CT	2.155	.168	.841	12.810	.000

* a: Dependent Variable: Success