

## The Role of Critical Sociological Thinking on Young Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Ingenuity of English Conversation

Maryam Kaviani\*<sup>1</sup>  
Sahar Mahdavi<sup>2</sup>

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### *Abstract*

This study considered the critical sociological thinking impact on teaching conversation among young Iranian advanced EFL learners. For this purpose, 40 advanced learners, 17-35 years old, were chosen after administering a nonprobability sampling design from classes at Foreign Language Institute in Babolsar, Iran. These 40 participants were randomly allocated to two groups (one experimental and one control group) each comprising of 20 persons. The participants received a pre-test connected to English conversation separately to ensure that they failed to have previous knowledge. The experimental group received the treatment associated with critical sociological thinking to learn conversation. Then the participants were asked to answer related IELTS Speaking Test. But the control group just received the usual instructions as before. After the treatments, the same pre-test was given to the participants as post-test to evaluate the effect of treatment. After collecting and analyzing the data, the results indicated that critical sociological thinking had a positive effect on teaching conversation in in English. The findings of this research can be used in methodological issues.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, English conversation, Young Iranian, Advance, EFL learners.

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<sup>1</sup>.Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics, Department of English, Babol Branch, Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran, mary.kaviani2010@gmail.com(Corresponding author)

<sup>2</sup>. MA in Psychology, Department of Psychology, Babol Branch, Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important and common learning purposes in sociology is enhancing students' critical thinking abilities (Goldsmid and Wilson, 1980), yet empirical research and theoretical clarity on this major learning outcome is sorely lacking (Baker, 1981 and Geertsen, 2003a). Without such research, we remain at a loss to determine whether certain teaching techniques effectively enhance such learning, whether some are more effective than others, or if their effectiveness varies by student, group or institution (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop, 2003).

Also, upon reviewing the Iranian academic EFL context, many EFL teachers intend that the most important priority of EFL courses is to improve students' English proficiency; however, promoting critical social thinking (CST) attitudes in EFL courses take a lower priority. English Language teaching and learning appropriates a new dimension to itself and is as a sociopolitical aspect in the light of Critical Pedagogy.

In the dynamic world, the ability to think critically has become a definitive expected feature among English language teachers. In higher education, the endorsement of critical thinking (CT) has been and is a great challenge in its growing social varieties in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. In terms of Critical Pedagogy, a new diversity named the sociopolitical approach is added to education, including English language teaching (Atagi, 2002; Curtis, Martin & Broadley, 2019 and Kaviani & Mashhadi Heidar, 2020).

Critical thinking defined as one of the argumentative and interdisciplinary issues. In recent years, it has been a noteworthy issue in the area of education. Critical thinking (CT) attracted the most attention in the field of English language teaching in the course of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, when we tend to assume critically, we are appraising the solutions of our thinking processes. In another words, CT, contains reflective thinking that is emphasized on understanding a problem, creating and weighing solutions, and making knowledgeable decisions and choices. It is one amongst the objectives of education that students obtain critical thinking skills enabling easy access to information and overcoming challenges more easily (Halpern, 1998, cited in Semerci, 2011).

Then regarding to recent revolution in the education domain, the necessity of critical thinking skills is emphasized for academic success and life. Students must learn to think and reason critically because it is important for students to reach their fullest potential in today's society (Fahim and Hajimaghsoodi, 2014).

According to Paul (1990) in most educational systems, EFL learners turn to rote learning resulting in misunderstanding, prejudice, and discouragement in which students use some short term techniques to tackle their short term problems including memorization. Establishing such techniques block students' thinking about what they read. Students are not born with critical thinking skills. According to Fisher and Scriven (1997; as cited in Malmir and Shoorcheh, 2012) critical thinking skills are required to be taught because students' thinking skills are not adequate to help them face the problems they deal with in education and even in their lives. Therefore, it is vital for educators to focus on teaching critical thinking to equip students with essential skills instead of transmitting information. According to Paul Elder, and Bartell (1997 as cited in Nair et al., 2013) critical thinking is defined as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information which gathered from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication as a guide to belief and action" (p.4).

Geertsen (2003a) reviews various ways in which critical thinking has been conceptualized dating back to John Dewey. Similar to Dewey, he distinguishes between critical thinking, which involves more confirmatory processes such as corroborating evidence and narrowing perspectives, and reflective thinking, which involves a broadening of perspectives. Geertsen (2003a) suggests that critical thinking and reflective thinking, in their many forms, represent higher-level thinking: "I believe the appropriate umbrella term for all types of extraordinary thinking is higher-level thinking" (p. 8).

Geertsen's (2003a) notion of referential are particularly interested in teaching. Indeed, some sociologists have addressed the connection between critical thinking and sociological imagination. For instance, Bidwell (1995, p. 401) connects the sociological imagination to critical thinking, suggesting that

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"sociologists must design assignments that allow students to think critically in writing about personal experiences and social events." Green and Klug (1990, p. 462) suggest that critical thinking involves "such things as the ability to create logical arguments based on the 'sociological imagination' and to support those arguments empirically." In exploring the connection between multicultural education and the sociological imagination, Thompson and Tyagi (1993, pp. 195-196) propose that "ultimately the sociological imagination will be fully developed through the ability of multicultural education to train students who can critically examine the relations between individuals and their society and can question power relations...." Others have referred to "sociological thinking" or "critical pedagogy" which contain aspects of critical thinking and social critique (Stoecker, Mullin, Schmidbauer, and Young 1993; Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop, 2003).

Due to the fact that "speaking comprehension is a complex cognitive process", EFL/ESL learners need effective speaking skills to master their conversation. Despite all attention, investment and efforts in the field of English teaching in Iran, EFL learners seem to travail from many searchable weaknesses in the area of speaking Ingenuity. The problem seems to be rooted in the out of date methodologies used by traditional teachers.

For the above mentioned reasons the authors try to investigate the impact of critical sociological thinking on young Iranian Advanced EFL learners' ingenuity. In fact, the present research attempted to answer the following question:

**Q1:** Does critical sociological thinking have any significant influence on teaching English conversation among young Iranian advanced EFL learners? To answer the research question of the study, the following null hypothesis was presented:

**H01:** critical sociological thinking does not have any significant influence on teaching English conversation among young Iranian advanced EFL learners.

## 2. Literature Review

There has been much more theoretical work on this topic than empirical investigation despite the overuse and ambiguity of the term critical thinking. In

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Paul Baker's (1981, p. 326) insightful article on critical thinking, he asks: "If critical thinking is so important, why have so few sociologists designed testing methods which can demonstrate the achievement of such educational aims?" Sociologists continue to recognize the value of teaching critical thinking and many have proposed teaching strategies to encourage students' growth in this area nearly two decades later, but very few have empirically tested critical thinking. Obviously, developing reliable and valid measures tends a daunting task, in part because there is so little empirical research from which to draw and also because such highly complex learning is not easily tapped by standard measurement techniques. As Browne and Litwin (1987, p. 390) argue: "Critical thinking is a process, not a body of knowledge like vocabulary that can be mastered.

A few sociologists have attempted to measure critical thinking. Logan (1976) developed a test using 20 items, each of which was an example of uncritical thinking (e.g., "Americans should not allow their foreign policy to continue to be dictated by an egomaniac who would yell 'Yahoo' in the Taj Mahal just to hear the sound of his own voice"). He first asked students to respond to statements in any way (to determine students' inclination to think critically, even when not prompted) and next to identify problems inherent in the statements (to test students' ability to think critically when asked to do so) (Grauerholz, and Bouma-Holtrop, 2003, p. 488).

Also, Several scholars have attempted to synthesize the literature on critical thinking. Ruminski and Hanks (1995, p.5) suggest that despite disagreement over how critical thinking should be defined, most experts agree that "critical thinking includes skills in applying, analyzing, and evaluating information." In his review of the literature on critical thinking, Baker (1981, p.328) suggests that critical thinking is usually conceptualized in two ways: as a "problem-solving process" and as a process of "deductive logic and argument analysis." Similarly, Dorn (cited in Green and Klug, 1990) suggests that critical thinking involves micro-level intellectual abilities and skills, such as the ability to clarify issues and identify value assumptions; macro-level dispositions, such as a predisposition to ask for evidence or to be creative; and macro-level values,

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such as a commitment to fairness Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop, 2003, p. 486).

Saito (2018, reported in Okuyama 2018) indicates that although EFL teachers are interested in an approach to foster critical thinking attitudes in EFL courses, a majority of senior high school EFL teachers do not focus on fostering CT in their classes. In recent years, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has been under pressure to foster students with critical and creative thinking skills at the senior high school level. For instance, at high school level in the revised Course of Study (Japanese national curriculum to be launched at high school level in 2022), the importance of CT is identified in terms of nurturing citizens who can tackle complex issues in a diverse society. However, approaches to teaching and learning to foster CT attitudes in EFL courses at senior high schools have not been yet established in Japan. For this reason, this paper focuses on developing an effective approach to foster CT attitudes in the senior high school EFL context (Akatsuka, 2019).

Consequently, EFL teachers themselves should be researchers; they should be familiar with new methods in teaching. They should not be passive characters and only performers of prescribed methods. Rather they should be active decision-makers who have various personalities. If they want to be efficient, they must be critical thinkers (Nemat Tabrizi and Mohammadi, 2015, Kaviani and Mashhadi Heidar 2018).

Similarly, Hashemi and Zabihi (2012) in their study on the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking and their productive English language proficiency skills found a significant relationship. An important relationship exists between critical thinking and the overall direct language learning strategies and cognitive strategies (Nikoopour et al., 2011). In other words critical thinkers preferred the cognitive language learning strategies. Based on Khorasani and Farimani (2010), the existence of critical thinkers and non-critical thinkers in Iranian setting is that the whole educational program is more teachers centered.

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### 3. Method

This study was done at the Foreign Language Institute, Babolsar, a city in Iran, and emphasized on the advanced level. To do this study, the researchers needed two intact classes as one experimental group and one control group. In other words, class 1 involved the experimental group in which English conversation taught through critical sociological thinking as a treatment. Class 2 involved the control group who learned English conversation in usual way as before. Since the treatment was provided in the usual class time and the participants were of the EFL learners in that institute, the researchers received the Foreign Language Institute's approval and the participants' consent. The researchers managed these two groups so that the groups met thrice a week on three odd days of the week (Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday) for the time half an hour. Number of class time was 12 sessions. The researchers chose advanced IELTS speaking Instruction through critical sociological thinking learning. The treatment of this study were direct approach such as General Guidelines for Teaching Speaking by Seril (2014) and a book of Davidi and Hachen (2000) named " Sociology in Action: Cases for Critical and Sociological Thinking (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Control group have been not allowed to use these treatments. Then after treatments, both experimental and control group were asked to take part in the same posttest.

#### 3.1. Population and Sampling

The individuals from whom the samples were selected for this research involved 164 Iranian advanced EFL students, who studied in a foreign language institute in Babolsar. The participants of this study were chosen based on nonprobability sampling design and divided in two groups in the Winter of 2020 and consisted of 20 EFL learners in each of these two groups. In fact, based on obtaining scores on Nelson-English-Language-Test; these 40 students were selected as homogenous subjects.

#### 3.2. Procedure

The Nelson Test presented for advanced level employed as a test to show the same proficiency *level* of the groups. Then 40 participants were chosen based

on non-probability sampling design in which the participants were chosen based on the one SD above and one SD below the mean. As it was mentioned before, these 40 participants divided in two sects of English skills to assess the effect of critical thinking to promote English conversation. It means that in the first sect there were 20 participants divided in one experimental group and one control group with 20 persons in each group to assess improving speaking skill and also the same procedure was run for the second sect. Then a test as a pretest consisting of IELTS speaking questions in multiple choice form presented to the participants. Finally, after twelve-session treatments, a post-test were administered in order to measure the participants' speaking improvement and also investigate the effect of critical thinking on English conversation.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. Effect of Critical Thinking on Teaching Conversation**

Speaking skill is one of the productive skills and EFL learners doing this desire to converse. It is also conjointly called as active skill. According to Gammidge (2010), speaking skill involves using speech to declare different meanings to different persons. Conversation as a tool of interaction is two-way communication that involves using language and body language to keep our listener involved in what we have a tendency to say and to check that they understand our meaning. We also speak with fluency and accuracy. Fluency emphasizes on the way to speak at a standard speed, without hesitation, repetition or self-correction, and with smooth use of connected speech. Accuracy in speaking is that the use of correct sorts of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. When we have a tendency to speak, we have a tendency to apply totally different aspects of speaking relying on the kind of speaking we tend to use.

So, the researcher used IELTS speaking test questions in advanced level. The participants in two experimental and two control groups (20 individuals in each group) were asked to answer the questions related to critical sociological concept orally. In fact the nature of the question is that the participants should speak and answer orally to the test questions. In other words, one treatment for



an experimental groups was critical sociological thinking and also there was a control group who didn't receive any treatment.

To analyze the effect of the treatments on speaking skill and conversation in English learning process two raters took tests and then scored the answers based on ILETS Speaking Checklist and Rubric. Then the reliability of the scores assessed by these two raters was analyzed to estimate the consistency of the scores.

#### 4.2. Pretest Scores among all two Groups

Table 1 shows the reliability of Pretest speaking scores among all two groups and their reliability statistics.

**Table 1. Case Processing Summary**

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	98.8
	Excluded <sup>a</sup>	1	1.2
	Total	41	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

**Table 2. Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.872	2

As it was presented, and based on Table 2,  $\alpha$  (0.872), the consistency of the scores in all groups is highly consistent. Then all pretest scores are reliable.

#### 4.3. Posttest Scores among all Two Groups

Table 3 and Table 4 show the reliability of posttest speaking scores among all two groups and their reliability statistics

**Table 3 . Case Processing Summary**

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	98.8
	Excluded <sup>a</sup>	1	1.2
	Total	41	100.0

b. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

**Table 4. Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.853	2

As it was presented in Table 4, and based on  $\alpha$  (0.853), the consistency of the scores in all groups is highly consistent. So, all posttest scores are reliable.

Then between group analyses and independent sample t-tests were used to analyze two pretests and two posttests as follows:

#### 4.4. Pretest 1: Critical Sociological Thinking Group vs. Control Group

Table 5 shows group statistics between critical sociological thinking group as experimental and control group 1.

**Table 5. Group Statistics**

Groups of students		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Speaking Pretest score	Experimental critical thinking group	20	16.10	2.973	.666
	Control group	20	15.90	2.723	.608

According to Table 5 and Table 6, the two-tailed P value equals 0.827. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant.

**Table 6. Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Speaking Pretest score	Equal variances assumed	.020	.88	.22	38	.827	.200	.900	-1.621	2.021
	Equal variances not assumed			.22	37.6	.827	.200	.900	-1.622	2.022

Also, Cohen's  $d$  is shown in Figure 1.

In fact, Cohen suggested that  $d=0.7$  be considered a 'small' effect size. Here the effect size is smaller than 0.7 which means that the two groups performance did not differ significantly at the pretest level.

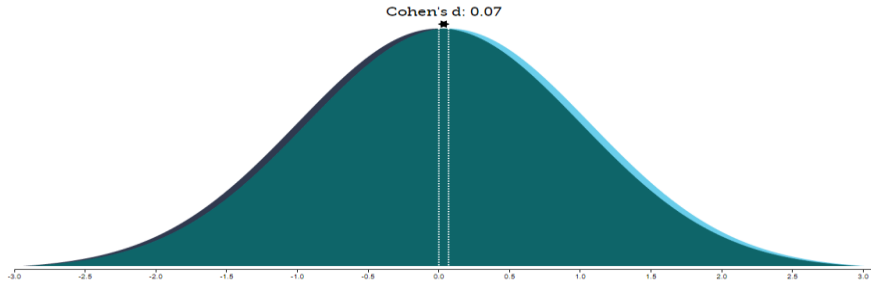


Figure 1. Visualization of Cohen's  $d$  effect size for speaking pretest

#### 4.5. Posttest: Critical Sociological Thinking Group vs. Control Group

Table 7 shows between group analyses between critical sociological thinking group as the experimental group and control group.

Table 7. Group Statistics

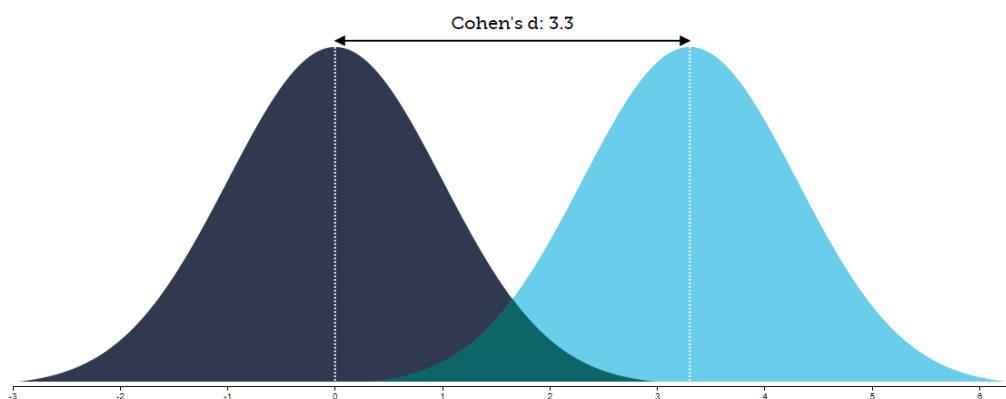
	Groups of students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Speaking Post test score	Experimental critical thinking group	20	26.35	2.540	.567
	Control group 1	20	16.10	3.493	.782

Based on Table 7 and Table 8, the two-tailed P value is less than 0.0001. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be extremely statistically significant.

Also, Cohen's  $d$  is as shown in Figure 2.

**Table 8. Independent Samples Test**

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means									
		F	Sig.	t	df	Si g. (2- tail ed)	Mean Differ ence	Std. Error Differ ence	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Low er		Uppe r
Speaking Posttest score	Equal variances assumed	.522	.474	10.614	38	.000	10.250	.966	8.295	12.205	
	Equal variances not assumed			10.614	34.701	.000	10.250	.966	8.289	12.211	

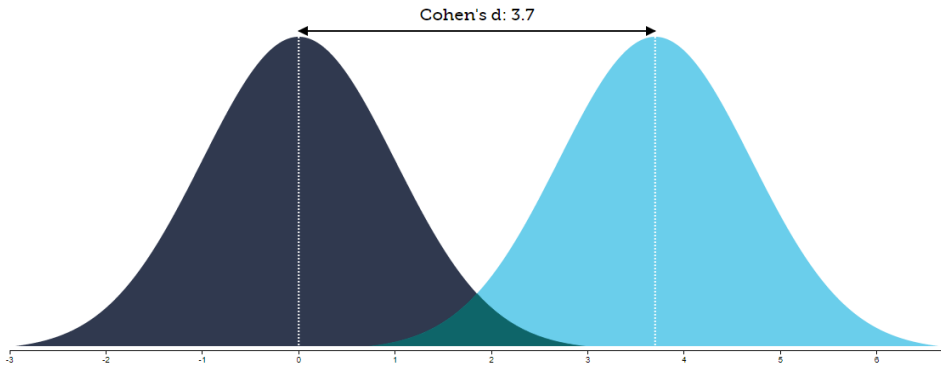
**Figure 2. Visualization of Cohen's *d* effect size for speaking posttest 1**

#### 4.6. Critical Sociological Thinking Group: Pretest vs. Posttest

Based on Table 9, the *t*-value is -11.72613. The *p*-value is  $< .00001$ . The result is significant at  $p < .05$ . Also, Cohen's *d* equals  $(26.35 - 16.1)/2.763377 = 3.70923$  as shown in Figure 3.

**Table 9. Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<b>Sig. (2- tailed)</b>
		Mean	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Pretest score - Posttest score	-10.25	0.903	-12.14	-8.36	11.35	19 .000



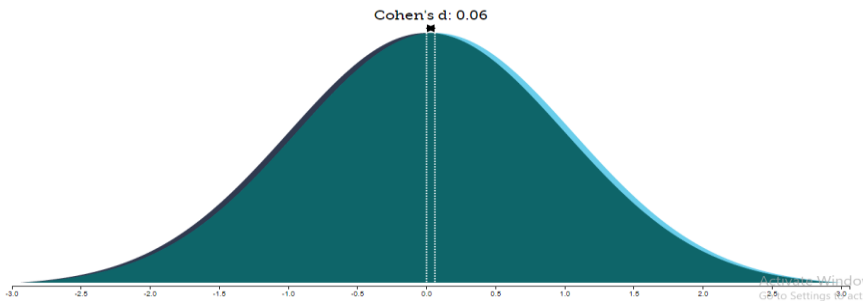
**Figure 3. Visualization of Cohen's *d* effect size of critical thinking group pretest vs. posttest**

**4.7. Control Group 1: Pretest vs. Posttest**

Based on Table 10, the two-tailed P value equals 0.7181. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant. Also, Cohen's *d* is shown in Figure 4.

**Table 10. Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Error Mean	95% Interval Difference Lower	Confidence of the Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest score - Posttest score	-0.20	0.546	-1.34	0.94	0.366	19	.000
						4		



**Figure 4. Visualization of Cohen's *d* effect size of the first control group pretest vs. posttest**

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**Result:** Critical sociological thinking as a treatment has a positive effect on teaching English conversation for Iranian EFL learners.

## 5. Discussion

Advancement of students' critical thinking abilities is considered to be a core learning purpose in critical sociology. For decades scholars have explored creative strategies to help students achieve this purpose. Unfortunately, the concept of critical thinking has remained unclear in spite of this attention. Further, few sociologists have attempted to test empirically whether such strategies are effective in advancing critical sociological thinking. In fact, few measures of critical thinking in sociology have been developed to facilitate this type of discovery (Kaviani and Mashhadi Heidar, 2020).

To support current study, following research had the same results (Garrison et al., 2000; De Sherf, 2002; Buranapatana, 2006; Shams, 2008; Choy and Cheah, 2009; Gomleksiz, 2010; Chalak and Kassain, 2010; Fakeye, 2010). On the other hand this study had the different results with some previous studies (Kumagai, 1994; Genc et al., 2005; Subbhuraam, 2010).

Further the EFL learners may tend to rely on these ways of learning English to promote skills in English. To support the current study, following research had the same results (Swarbrick, 2002; Cohen, 2004; Helgesen & Steven, 2007; Macaro, 2007; Taghva et al., 2014; Mills, 2015, Osman, 2015; Zohrabi and Shokrzadeh, 2017). Paul (1990) indicated although anyone agrees about the importance of teaching critical sociological thinking in language classroom, many teachers neglect to incorporate it across the lessons. Then the EFL teachers and students should alter their opinions toward the basic objectives of English instruction, which is growth of critical thinkers, and process-based teachers and learners and use the available time in the most useful ways to accomplish this task.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings on applying critical sociological strategies with its corresponding activities and learning outcomes allow drawing the following conclusion. Global shift in required workplace skills such as creativity, originality and

initiative, emotional intelligence and critical sociological thinking is set to see further particular increase in demand relative to their current prominence today. Conversation in a critical class community involves complex collaborative interpretation and discussion of the meaning of social texts. Critical discourse analysis presents an interdisciplinary approach and affect positively on English conversation.

In other words, based on this study results, critical sociological thinking (CST) as a methodological shift can promote learning. In fact, adopting new techniques which can assist learners to improve speaking skills should be highlighted. Indeed CST as the productive skill can be contributive in speaking skill among EFL learners. CT can provide an opportunity to learn these skills better than the common traditional approaches in which CST instructions are not applied.

Critical speaking can be applied as an analytic pedagogic procedure, which enables language learners to converse clearly, identify and interpret socio-cultural issues. Classroom-based critical speaking activities facilitate more dynamic interaction between the speakers. Implementation of critical sociological thinking activities can facilitate language learning specially speaking skill or conversation skill.

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