

**Sociological Explanation of Critical Thinking as an Effective Way of
Teaching English Reading Skill among Young Iranian EFL
Pre-Intermediate Learners**

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Abstract

This study considered the sociological explanation of critical thinking on teaching reading skill among young Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners. For this purpose, 40 pre-intermediate learners, 19-30 years old, were chosen after administering a non-probability sampling design from classes at Foreign Language Institute in Babol. 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 reading skill separately to ensure that they failed to have previous knowledge. The experimental group received the treatment associated critical thinking to learn reading skill. Then the participants were asked to answer IELTS Reading Test. But 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 thinking had a positive effect on teaching reading skill in in English.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Reading skill, Teaching English, Pre-intermediate learners.

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1. Introduction

The potency to think critically has become a deterministic properties expected of English teachers and learners in the midst of a continuously dynamic world. However, the entrance of critical thinking in English education has been challenging by the advancement of cultural, social and economic varieties in English Foreign Language classes. English Language teaching appropriates a new dimension to itself and is as a sociopolitical aspect in the light of Critical Pedagogy.

The students should be taught more advanced information-gathering skills. Such pieces of information will equip learners to unearth the correct resources, which are necessary to solve the complex problems. It is worth mentioning that although there are some contradictory definitions regarding the critical thinking, all are in agreement that CT has the influential role in almost every discipline and career due to its association with abilities including decision-making and problem solving (Barjesteh & Vaseghi, 2012, p. 23).

One cannot be a good critical thinker if there is no change in EFL pedagogy. It seems necessary to re-examine the curricula to determine their effectiveness in stimulating critical thinking among EFL students. On the other hand, EFL teachers also should decide on the extent to which they model good thinking. Observing students' performance more carefully seems to be a good way to identify the diagnostic purposes, attitudes, and behaviors in order to make some judgment about the quality of their thinking (Thompson, 2011).

Siegel (1988) defined CT as: "the ability to assess reasons properly and the willingness, desire, and disposition to base one's actions and beliefs on reasons" (p. 23). Norris (1985) also defined these dispositions as a tendency to think in a certain way in certain situations. Similarly, Fisher (2001) proposed three components to define CT "(1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience; (2) is "knowledge of the methods of local inquiry and reasoning; and the last one "(3) some skills in applying those methods"(p.78).

This study also promotes holistic learning or looking at the big picture rather than treating subjects as a disjointed collection of units. In practice, a curriculum that is deep is more effective at facilitating quality thinking than one

with a variety of under-developed topics. Additionally, examination of the past provides opportunities for students to analyze trends and therefore develop a better understanding of the current. They also have sufficient knowledge that will allow them to predict with reasonable accuracy what is likely to happen in the future (Thompson, 2011).

Educators have long been aware of the importance of critical thinking and process-based skills as two outcomes of student learning. More recently, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills has identified critical thinking as one of several learning and innovation skills necessary to prepare students for post-secondary education and the workforce. In addition, the newly created Common Core State Standards reflect both critical thinking and process-based learning as cross-disciplinary skills vital for college and employment.

Also, EFL learners consider reading comprehension tests which are not directly prepared from students' textbooks, but rather the texts are sometimes beyond their acquired knowledge from with reference to ability, Lai (2011, as cited in Zare et al., 2013) asserts that critical thinkers are successful in analyzing argument, evaluating, and making decision.

Due to the fact that "reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process" (Griffith & Ruan, 2005, p. 22), EFL/ESL learners need effective reading skills to master their reading. 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 reading comprehension. The problem seems to be rooted in the out of date methodologies used by traditional teachers.

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 & 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).

For the above mentioned reasons the authors try to investigate the sociological impact of critical thinking on teaching reading skill among young Iranian EFL pre-intermediate learners.

In fact, the present research attempted to answer the following questions:

Q1: Does critical thinking have any significant influence on teaching English reading skill among young Iranian EFL learners?

To answer the research question of the study, the following null hypothesis was presented:

H01: critical thinking does not have any significant influence on teaching English reading skill among young Iranian EFL learners.

2. Background of the Study

Critical thinking (CT) is one of the controversial issues as an interdisciplinary term. In recent years, CT has been a remarkable issue in the area of education. In the course of the final decade of the twentieth century, CT became the focus of attention in the field of language teaching. Teachers play a vital role in ELT and in the procedure of students' progress or lack of it. Teachers must consider that human beings live in a technical world today, which is changing every second, and that they have curious students who live in this ever-changing world.

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 Tabarii and Mohammadi, 2015).

Similarly, Hashemi and Zabihi (2012) in their investigation on the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' critical thinking and their receptive English language proficiency skills and found an important relationship.

According to Nikoopour et al., (2011), a significant relationship exists between critical thinking and the overall direct language learning strategies and cognitive strategies. In other words critical thinkers preferred the cognitive language learning strategies. According to 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.

3. Learning Sociology and Assessing Critical Thinking

Sociological inquiry emphasizes on the new claims of human reasoning (Bendix, 1970). Sociologists who make their living in the academic organization often claim this commitment to reason in the company of undergraduate students. Sharing the educational purposes of their learned colleagues, sociologists join the chorus of academicians who believe that students "should be able to think clearly, to read critically, and to write and speak effectively"(University of Illinois, 1979: 6). The rhetoric of curriculum committee reports and college catalogs is also supported by a recent national survey of sociology departments. According to Bradshaw and McPherron (1987: 17), chairpersons in universities, four-year colleges, and community colleges agree that the most significant academic goal in the sociology curriculum is the development of critical thinking (1987: 17).

4. Methodology

This study was done at the Foreign Language Institute, Babol, a city in Iran, and emphasized on the pre-intermediate level. For conducting 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 reading skill taught through critical thinking as a treatment. Class 2 involved the control group who learned reading skill 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 even days of the week (Saturday, Monday and Tuesday) for the time half an hour. Number of class time was 12 sessions. The researchers chose pre-intermediate IELTS Reading Instruction through critical thinking learning. The treatment of this study were direct approach such as learning Reading through the model of metacognitive strategies training, proposed by the General Guidelines for Teaching Listening as a Process (Vandergrift, 2007) and General Guidelines for Teaching Speaking by Seril (2014). 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.

4.1. Population and Sampling

The persons from whom the samples were selected for this research involved 164 Iranian pre-intermediate EFL students, who studied in a foreign language institute in Babol. The participants of this study were chosen based on non-probability sampling design and divided in two groups in the spring of 2018 and consisted of 20 EFL learners in each of these two groups. In fact, based on obtaining scores on OPT test; these 40 students were selected as homogenous subjects.

4.2. Procedure

The OPT, adjusted from Oxford University Press, presented for pre-intermediate level employed as a test to ensure the homogeneity of the participants.

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 reading skill. 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 reading skill and also the same procedure was run for the

second sect. Then a test as a pretest consisting of IELTS reading 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' reading improvement and also investigate the effect of critical thinking on English reading skill.

5. Results

After establishing the homogeneity of the EFL learners, the researchers administered another test was developed by themselves as the initial pre-test.

Table 1. Group Statistics

	Groups of students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading	Experimental critical thinking group	20	5.15	1.137	.254
Pretest	Control group 1	20	4.95	1.669	.373

The goal of this test was to assure that there is no vital distinction between the participants at the start of the instruction. This pretest material was IELTS Reading Test.

Pretest: Critical Thinking Group vs. Control Group 1

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

Based on Table 2, the two-tailed P value equals 0.6604. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant. Also, Cohe n's *d* equals $(4.95 - 5.15) / 1.422738 = 0.140574$ as shown in Figure 1.

Table 2. Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Reading Pretest	Equal variances assumed	2.062	.159	.443	38	.660	.200	.452	-.714	1.114
	Equal variances not assumed			.443	33.501	.661	.200	.452	-.718	1.118

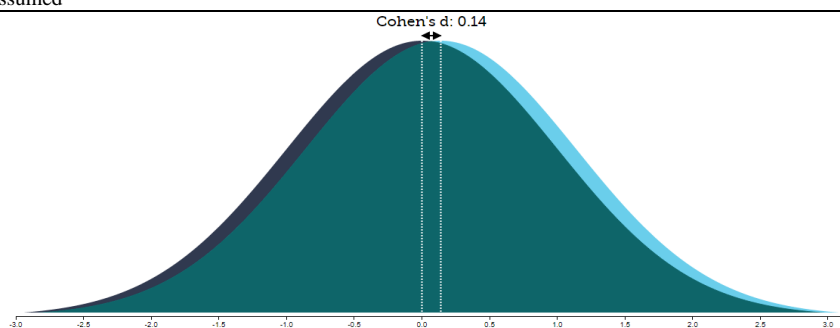
**Figure 1. Visualization of Cohen's *d* effect size for reading pretest 1****Posttest: Critical Thinking Group vs. Control Group**

Table 3 shows group statistics between critical thinking group as the first experimental group and control group 1.

Table 3. Group Statistics

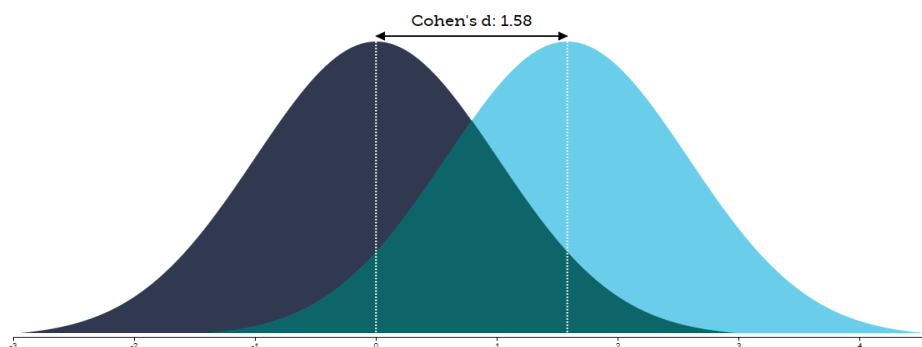
Groups of students		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading Posttest	Experimental critical thinking group	20	7.55	2.139	.478
	Control group 1	20	4.65	1.461	.327

Based on Table 4, 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* equals $(4.65 - 7.55)/1.831246 = 1.583622$ as shown in Figure 2.

Table 4. Group statistics independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.			Lower	Upper
Reading Posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.692	.201	5.007	38	.000	2.900	.579	1.727	4.073
	Equal variances not assumed			5.007	33.556	.000	2.900	.579	1.722	4.078

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

As the statistics show that critical thinking has a positive impact on teaching reading skill.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The underlying reason behind English language in educational system in Iran is that typically the language of teaching and learning which in most situations is English that is more initially foreign to the country. Because of this reason the progressive use of English as an instrument of instruction has come to be considered by some as 'linguistic imperialism' in the literature.

In recent years, English language has created an influence on educational activities. It assimilate instructional subject content while focusing on language

learning in order to prepare students for the educational requests of general instruction classrooms (Short, 1991).

The general aim of this investigation is to consider the effect of critical thinking teaching reading skill. The results of this investigation showed the effectiveness of critical thinking on teaching reading comprehension

To support current study, following research had the same results (Garrison et al. 2000; De Sherf, 2002; Buranapatana, 2006; Shams, 2008; 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).

In addition, English as the world's international language currently features mainly in Iran's official instruction curriculum and even more so in the private instructional organizations. Accordingly, having English knowledge is now regarded as a key of academic as well as social achievement (Seargeant, 2009). The reasons for the poor foreign language learning skills of students have long been a subject of discussion among English educators or instructors because their attitudes towards English learning may not be positive. Although a huge amount of time and energy are spent, students either cannot go beyond the basic principles or they face problem in enhancing their level of English proficiency unless they are individually motivated (Büyüku, 2004).

Accordingly, the government of Iran should make some applied programs and curriculums for promoting the teachers/learners' viewpoints towards critical thinking as useful way to promote English instruction. The recognition of affective factors on critical thinking and process-based learning in Iran society may not, interestingly, lead learners to have active steps in English learning process. One of the reasons behind this result may be the fact that there is no enough knowledge on employing useful techniques and up-to-date shifts in English education. Educational system in Iran should provide this knowledge for both teachers and learners.

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