

## **Approaching the curriculum critically: evaluating critical thinking components of basic education in Albania**

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### **Abstract**

Critical thinking is widely accepted as a crucial element of the learning process. It critically engages the learners into questioning the relevance and application of knowledge as well as trains them into critical citizens in the future. Should critical thinking components be missing from the basic education curriculum, learners fail to achieve the essential components of education. This paper addresses the relevance of critical thinking throughout the basic education curriculum, by focusing on the discipline of English language. The analysis comprises teachers' evaluation of critical thinking skills in their students within the classroom as well as a review of the English language curriculum framework. Mixed methods research is used to integrate quantitative findings into the qualitative analysis of the curriculum. Findings suggest a higher need for critical thinking practices expanded into the four skills of English language learning.

**Keywords:** *critical thinking, curriculum, basic education, Albania, English language*

### **Introduction: What is critical thinking?**

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally. Critical thinking embraces logical ideas, identifying, constructing and evaluating arguments, judging possible mistakes, problem solving, identifying important ideas, reflecting beliefs and values (Musai, 2003). Learning how to think clearly means to know how to ask, how to find solutions for certain issues, how to make a hypothesis and respect others' opinions (Facione, 2013). Critical thinking is the opposite of by-heart learning and

memorizing facts illogically, and it encapsulates the ability to think according to high levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The process of English language learning always relies on critical thinking strategies, some of which are: clarifying ideas, asking the right questions in order to clarify concepts or contradict them, and judging the validity of information, problem solving and concluding (Allan et al., 2003). Critical thinking is related with EFL because it helps in building introductory skills in English as well as boosting creative skills and self-reflection. When students of English language want to express their own opinion, applying critical thinking helps them express their ideas clearly, which consequently enables developing communicative skills in EFL. Also, if students want to analyze a problem, applying creative thinking may help them reach the best solution of the problem, which also helps in terms of self-reflection and self-assessment by analyzing different topics encountered during the lesson. Through critical thinking learners can identify their strengths and weaknesses and they are enabled to try harder exactly where they mostly need to overcome their weaknesses. Within the framework of EFL, critical thinking tackles the use of English language in real life situations (Facione, 2013).

## **Methodology**

This paper uses mixed methods research methodology. Mainly relying on a qualitative analysis of the Albanian basic education curriculum dimensions where the critical thinking components are part of, this research also discusses qualitative findings from empirical research. The qualitative findings, which derive from a PhD research conducted in ten urban and rural schools in the Elbasan district, reveal that teachers show a considerably low level of evaluation regarding the presence of critical thinking skills in their students. These findings are also analysed within the context of English language curriculum in Albania.

## **Context: Why is critical thinking important in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)?**

Through critical thinking, the language learners are empowered in a way that they know what, when, where and how they will express themselves. Furthermore, learning a foreign language also involves learning about the foreign culture. In this context, the learner of the English language thinks critically through identifying, analyzing, comparing, arguing, interpreting and evaluating their own culture by exposing it to the target culture, which

is the culture of the foreign language, English or American culture in our case. Learning English through critical thinking skills should start since elementary classes so that learners can get used to these strategies. This process helps learners be better pupils, ask questions as well as consider school as part of real life and not as separated from it (Mabe, 2006). Learning through critical thinking skills since in elementary school enables learners to gain prior knowledge of critical thinking strategies in their future studies and university studies as well (Mc Millan, 2010).

English language in Albanian education system is taught in elementary, secondary and high school, as well as university level in most cases. Learning English does not only imply studying this language through grammar and vocabulary, but it also entails learning the English language context where English is spoken based on social and cultural points of view. In this context, learners of English language can also be taught how to study critically by comparing different grammatical structures of Albanian and English language and find out similarities and differences of the social and cultural life. For better learning results in terms of culture, learners should also be open-minded and aware of cultural diversity and not fall into prejudices or stereotypes.

It is true that languages are arbitrary. In most cases, there is no logical connection between the word and its meaning, apart from onomatopoeic words that sound similar to the phenomenon they denote. Therefore, in these regards, critical thinking cannot be applied actively. However, teachers can help students learn the foreign language by actively engaging them through interactive methods and authentic situations. This is a long and tiresome process for both teachers and learners, but it is worthwhile as it brings out many positive results which otherwise would not be present without critical thinking.

### **English language curriculum and critical thinking**

Critical thinking skills are crucial in the English language learning process. They should be addressed specifically so that both teachers and students of English can rely on critical thinking strategies in the classroom. Even though the term critical thinking is not mentioned directly in most English language textbooks, some of them include such critical thinking strategies, mainly on vocabulary exercises. However, there is more space available for integrating critical thinking practices and classroom activities. As Liaw also argues, critical thinking exercises should be more frequent in terms of comparing vocabulary and grammar of mother tongue and EFL, making

differences of linguistic structures and analyzing them, as well as using English language as means of communication through providing arguments (Liaw, 2007). Learning the English language through more explicit strategies of critical thinking also increases the learners' motivation, because learners become independent and they can easily understand if something is not clear, or they can evaluate the truth and respect other learners' opinions (Liaw, 2007). What is more, critical thinking skills make EFL interesting because the learner does not simply study isolated words or grammar, but they use EFL as a means of active communication in class.

The Albanian basic education curriculum highlights the learners' skills to divide facts from opinions, to summarize, to have a rich vocabulary and to speak fluently. As outlined in the curriculum guidelines, critical thinking is part of elementary and secondary education curriculum from class 3 to class 9, but it is also significantly present from class 7 to class 9 where individuals are linked to abstract thinking according to their age development (IZHA, 2013). Critical thinking activities are presented in the same context with social topics that are part of English language textbooks. Basic skills of learning English from class 3 to class 9 are: "Linguistic use of English language, communicative skills in the foreign language, critical and creative thinking skills" (IZHA, 2013). The most important thing is to use English as a means of communication as part of lifelong learning.

### **Results: Critical thinking skills and behaviours evaluated by teachers**

The extent to which students reveal their citizenship skills or behaviours in class was evaluated by twenty teachers of ten different elementary schools in Elbasan. This evaluation shows the results of 120 fifth-grade pupils, equally distributed in terms of gender, which were measured through a Likert scale of frequency ranging from almost never to almost always. Table 1 reveals the overall evaluation that teachers have given to the total number of pupils according to five different statements about pupils' critical thinking skills. Taken out of a much longer PhD research questionnaire, these statements mainly emphasize critical thinking activities performed by pupils, such as asking questions, giving reasons for own opinions, distinguishing facts from opinions, problem solving skills and predicting consequences of one's own actions.

Asking questions is an important skill to help children learn better and easier through critical thinking. From the teachers' evaluation, it is

statistically pointed out that 39.2% of the pupils randomly selected for this evaluation were observed by their teachers to *almost always be able to ask questions which help them understand information correctly*. Another 25% of pupils are evaluated as being able to often ask questions and the rest of the pupils go between pupils who rarely ask questions, with 28.3%, and pupils who never ask questions, with 7%. Even though 7% is not a high percentage in isolation, it is however a considerably high number if added to the number of pupils who only rarely ask questions, by resulting in more than one third of students in the classroom who are passive and who do not engage critically in their learning process.

Another behaviour that can identify and illustrate occurrences of critical thinking in pupils is when students give reasons for their own opinions. *Giving reasons for his or her opinions* has been observed by teachers as almost always present in 38.3% of the pupils. This behaviour is often present for 26.7% of the pupils, only sometimes present in 29.2% of the pupils and it is almost never present in 5.8% of the pupils. Findings in these regards are rather positive, considering the fact that more than sixty percent of the pupils are reported as able to justify and support their own opinions through sound reasons.

The next feature of critical thinking which has been evaluated by teachers is distinguishing facts from opinions. Having taught and observed the randomly selected pupils for a few years, the teachers could distinctly recall episodes of real classroom situations in which pupils were given chances to reveal the extent to which they were able to separate facts from opinions. Accordingly, a total of 36.7% of the pupils were observed and reported to be almost always *able to separate facts from opinions*, while 29.2% others were evaluated as often being able to do so.

The same percentage of pupils as above, namely 29.2% is estimated to occasionally distinguish facts from opinions, and only 5% of the evaluated pupils are seen as almost never able to separate facts from opinions.

*Demonstrating problem solving skills*, such as looking for different solutions to a problem, is also a crucial behaviour to be considered when evaluating the critical thinking skills of pupils. Optimistically, this behaviour is perceived as being almost always and often present in 69.1% of the pupils, who are estimated to demonstrate problem solving skills in their classroom tasks. A smaller number of pupils, 23.3%, are evaluated as putting this skill into practice only occasionally, and the remaining 7.5% of the pupils are regarded as unable to solve problems or demonstrate such problem solving skills in the classroom.

*Being able to predict the consequences of a certain action* is the last critical thinking skill that teachers observed and evaluated in their pupils. Surprisingly, only 35.8% of the pupils are seen as fitting into the category of almost always predicting their actions, even though such a skill is essential to everyone. The next 32.5% of the pupils are seen as often revealing this ability and 26.7% of the children rarely can predict the results of their own actions. The lowest percentage of 5% is considered as never being able to foresee the consequence of certain actions. Unfortunately, almost one third of the pupils were constantly evaluated as rarely being able to perform critical thinking skills in the classroom, which emphasises the importance of critical thinking skills in life as well as language learning processes. However, two thirds of the pupils were regularly evaluated as frequently and almost always being able to demonstrate critical thinking in their classroom activities.

*Table 1 Teachers' evaluation of pupils' critical thinking skills*

Critical thinking skills	Almost never	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Total
Asks questions which help them understand information correctly	7.5	28.3	25.0	39.2	100.0
Giving reasons for his or her opinions	5.8	29.2	26.7	38.3	100.0
Is able to separate facts from opinions	5.0	29.2	29.2	36.7	100.0
Demonstrates problem solving skills, such as looking for different solutions to a problem	7.5	23.3	33.3	35.8	100.0
Is able to predict the consequences of a certain action	5.0	26.7	32.5	35.8	100.0

### **Evaluating the curriculum framework**

The general framework of basic and secondary education in Albania involves critical thinking ability in general without explicitly emphasizing its importance in specific subjects. It is mentioned as the ability of pupils to provide arguments, to identify facts from opinions, to create their own arguments and to predict the results of their own actions. This is also the reason behind the choice of the five critical thinking skills included in the

questionnaire evaluating students in this research. The syllabus of English language assigns English language classes to a frequency of two classes a week for grade 7 and three classes a week for grades eight and nine. The textbooks are compiled and designed by foreign authors and are available for international use. As resulting from this research, teachers and students of EFL admit that the number of classes per week is not sufficient for complex activities practicing critical thinking skills to be present to the right extent. However, critical thinking skills can be enhanced even through simpler activities.

Another important aspect of the curriculum is the syllabus and the general objectives; it is important for teachers to include critical thinking abilities in relation to EFL. Some of these skills are summarizing, interpreting, and evaluating arguments. According to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) critical thinking skills are implied in EFL. We suggest critical thinking skills should also be part of daily lesson planning as long as critical thinking skills are also based on analysis and evaluation. This refers to high levels on Bloom Taxonomy, which recalls that critical thinking skills are part of a broader general framework which is specified in daily lesson plans. Textbooks are created in the form of concentric circles, where knowledge is learned and relearned by adding more information on a regular basis. Eventually, knowledge is not isolated; on the contrary, it is related to previously acquired concepts and further developed through new bits of information.

In this context, knowledge is linked as a chain (Liaw, 2007). However, the main problem is that students find difficulties in the first step and these difficulties are passed step by step. Integration is another aspect of learning for real life purposes and using language in everyday life. Practically speaking, English language textbooks offer a considerable amount of exercises aiming to create dialogues, offering situations, providing arguments, agreeing and disagreeing with social topics. These activities help students to use English through real life situations by implying critical thinking skills.

### **Conclusion: European dimension for education and critical thinking**

European research openly emphasises the need for comprehensive and qualitative learning. According to such research, the school is the place that prepares students for the society of knowledge, and critical thinking is one of these elements of the European dimension. In fact, critical thinking skills

are the basic skills for life and work, and pupils are citizens of the whole world. Critical thinking skills are linked to lifelong learning and pupils need to engage in activities that are similar to real life in different environments, such as school, community and work. If individuals share real life experiences with their peers, they can also open themselves to considering knowledge and skills acquired in school as applicable to life situations outside the school environment. Therefore, schools should prepare individuals to learn beyond school in real life situations (Facione, 2013). For our schools in Albania to be able to provide learners with life skills that stem from critical thinking activities in the classroom, they need to explicitly focus on critical thinking skills as necessary in every learning domain, not simply foreign language learning.

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