

Arab EFL Students' Application and Awareness of Critical Thinking in College Writing: A Case Study

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Abstract:

This paper sheds light on the necessity of engaging critical thinking skills in teaching college writing to EFL students at university. The study investigates students' attitudes towards writing, the challenges they face when writing paragraph assignments in terms of generating and organizing ideas. It has been noticed that students' performance in English college writing is not satisfactory not just for linguistic reasons but for lacking critical thinking skills. Many studies focused on the grammatical and vocabulary problems that face Arab EFL learner's when writing in English. Albeit, this research takes us a step further and even more pedagogical than just linguistic. It addresses the difficulties that students face when writing assignments that require them to argue, analyze, infer and judge. Results show that students' inefficient writing is due to their lack of critical thinking skills which are neglected throughout their writing experience at high school.

Key Words: college writing, critical thinking, EFL classrooms, self-confidence

Introduction:

J. K. Rowling writes in the biography on her website that she was on a train when the idea for Harry Potter "fell into my head." She did not have paper or pen, so for the four-hour train ride all she could do was to think. Her mind came up with an idea, and she valued that idea; she was confident that idea was going to grow big, so she let her mind work freely, create and analyze utilizing all the knowledge she has acquired throughout her life. The result was a delightful series of children book, captivating readers in sixty nine languages around the world and turning a depressed mother living a stressful life in London into a billionaire author and philanthropist.

The example mentioned about shows how writing is a thinking process; it starts at the very moment of generating an idea and ends up with words on paper. Arapoff (1967) argues that "writing is much more than an orthographic symbolization of speech; it is, most importantly, a purposeful selection and organization of experience. By experience she means "all thoughts-facts, opinions, or ideas, which require active thinking." while teaching grammar is teaching students "not to think." (p. 33). Elbow (1998) states that students need to have ideas in order to write well. They need to create ideas and then think critically about these ideas

Obviously, teaching writing at college is not the same as teaching the other language skills. It is more than teaching grammar or sentence skills and how to use them; furthermore, it entails addressing other issues related to "thinking actively", thoughts, decisions, logic and reason. In other words, students need to learn to think critically in order to learn to write effectively. Their writing can be described as effective if it includes good ideas that are well organized and well supported.

Improving writing and critical thinking skills is essential to EFL university students. For one thing, university students need to be independent thinkers and active citizens, especially if they live in "societies that suffer political and socioeconomic problems." (Shaila & Trudell 2010) Another reason is that EFL students need to use the knowledge gained whether through life experience or education when they produce their own writings, whether when writing thesis, curriculum vitae, research papers, proposals, letters or essays. In all of these, they need to show strength by deciding on a purpose for their piece of writing, expressing their thoughts and beliefs, convincing and arguing. This can be only done when one has the ability to think independently, use the knowledge acquired through life experience or education, analyze and organize ideas; that is by implementing critical thinking. Another important reason for the need of developing independent and reasonable thinking for EFL university students is that they can easily access so much information through the Internet much of which is either second-hand, unattributed or unverified.

Therefore, when teaching writing, an instructor has more to do than just teaching linguistics and structures; a teacher has to work on the students' thinking, not just to make them think, but to make them think critically. The question is how far teachers are aware of the importance of addressing critical thinking while teaching writing. On the other hand, how willing students are to improve their thinking and learn to think critically.

Critical thinking

"Critical thinking" is not an easy concept to define for it means different things to different people in different contents. The online Oxford Dictionary defines critical thinking as "The objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment." On the other hand, Cambridge online dictionary defines critical thinking as "the process of thinking carefully about a subject or idea, without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you."

Shirkhani & Fahim 2011 define critical thinking as individual's ability to think and make correct decisions independently.

Facione (2011) argues that all the definitions that have been proposed for critical thinking agree that critical thinking is good thinking which is opposite to "irrational, illogical thinking". Facione also asserts the difficulty of providing an exact definition of critical thinking. He presents experts opinion in which an international group of experts was asked to try to form a consensus about the meaning of critical thinking. He quotes from the consensus statement of the national panel the following as "core critical thinking skills".

- Interpretation: " To comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments , conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria".
- Analysis: " To identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions".
- Inference: " to identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to reduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation".
- Evaluation: "to assess the credibility of statements or other representations that are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience , situation, judgment, belief, or opinion; and to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statements, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation".
- Explanation: "To state and to justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based, and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent argument".
- Self-regulation: "Self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, and evaluation to one's own inferential judgments with a view toward questioning , confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results." (pp.9-10)

Engaging critical thinking in the EFL classroom

There are a number of studies that tackle the importance of utilizing critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms for its definite impact on developing the learners language competence and use of the foreign language.

Shirkhani & Fahim (2011) ,for example, argue that critical thinking is an important aspect that needs to be enhanced among language learners because of its important role in developing effective language learning. The researchers suggest that promoting critical thinking skills in the classroom is the task of the teacher. Hence, they suggest some ways in which language teachers can enhance learners' critical thinking skills when learning a foreign language

by using authentic content-based materials and group-work, project-based and presentation activities that require critical thinking on the part of the learner.

Nikoopour, et al (2011) also investigate the relationship between critical thinking and the use of direct and indirect language learning strategies by Iranian learners. Their study revealed that there is a significant relationship between Iranian use of language learning strategies and their way of thinking. This important relation, they believe, can add to the ultimate success of language learners in the challenging language learning process. The researchers suggest that syllabus designers should consider incorporating critical thinking as one of the "effective elements in the academic process" so that they will be equipped with the needed analytical skills. The researchers also emphasize that students who were educated to think critically "will demonstrate more professionalism in the use of ideas, assumptions, inferences, and intellectual processes".

Huang (2011) explores how critical literacy and conventional literacy can be "simultaneously promoted" in an EFL reading and writing courses. He argues that learners can benefit from the simultaneous emphasis on both critical and "conventional literacy- code breakers, meaning makers, and text users." His study also emphasizes the need to assess critical literacy implementation from the students perspectives.

Moreover, Bendriss (2012) shows how the three dimensions of integrated curriculum, class-related activities, and out-of-class experience affect Arab students' critical thinking abilities. His study revealed that students attitude towards integrated curriculum and out-of class experience are the key factors that affect their critical thinking skills. He states that "some educators often points out that Arab students' academic performance in college is weak because they graduate from secondary education systems that rely on rote memorization and neglect critical thinking skills." (P. 36)

Finally, Allamnakhrah (2013) conducted a qualitative case study at King Abdul Aziz University and Arab Open University. His study examines students' perception of learning critical thinking in secondary pre-service teacher education programs . The findings of the study highlight the need for education reforms based on critical thinking to evaluate the quality of education in Saudi Arabia.

Statement of the problem

It has been noticed that students' level of the writing assignments is not satisfactory due to the fact that they have difficulties in generating and organizing ideas logically, not ignoring the idea that they also make common linguistic mistakes.

Objectives of the study

The study aims at investigating students' attitude towards the skill of writing, their awareness and application of critical thinking skills in writing and the influence of their writing experience at high school on their college writing development.

Research questions

1. What is the students' general attitude towards critical thinking and writing?

2. Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application and awareness of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to their grade in English in Tawjihi (the name for the high school certificate in Palestine)?
3. Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application and awareness of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to students' grade in English II course?

Significance of the study

The study aims at investigating students' awareness and application of critical thinking skills in writing. The presented paper can be of beneficial to three main sectors. First, it will give important insights to syllabus designers in terms of the extent to which critical thinking should be implanted in the teaching materials.

Teachers will also take advantage from this study since it will draw their attention to the necessity of addressing critical thinking when teaching college writing as well as giving more appreciation to their students ideas, and so their students' writing assignments can be evaluated as being efficient in terms of the creatively generated ideas.

Taking into consideration the recent trend in the academic process which focuses on creating a learner-centered environment in teaching and learning, students will be the most important party. This is because they can reshape their views of the writing process. They will be encouraged to think out of the box and come up with creative ideas. In other words, they will go beyond providing error-free sentences only, and they will be encouraged to be more self-confident to value their ideas.

Methodology

Sample

The current study has been conducted on second year university EFL students at Hebron University. All students are local citizens in the city of Hebron in Palestine.

The researchers aim at investigating the implementation of critical thinking among English majors in the Writing –I course at Hebron University. Twenty –one second-year students registered in this writing course in the summer semester 2015. The course is designed to give an introduction to writing skills mainly at the level of the paragraph and thus it prepares the ground for Writing-II which deals with essays. Students are taught the nature and purpose of the paragraph and are guided to write one according to a variety of purposes (contrastive, descriptive, argumentative and narrative) using clear, correct and logically-related sentences.

The textbook used in teaching this writing is *Exploring Writing: Paragraphs and Essays* by John Langan. As explained by the author, the main aim of the book is to teach students how to think logically in order to produce effective writing. At the very beginning of the first chapter of the book, Langan recalls the story that helped shape his book; his first college essay for which he received a C because it was “not badly written, but ill conceived” and that he “had not thought out” his “paper clearly.”

As a prerequisite for this writing course (Writing I), all the students had taken English II writing course which focuses on sentence structure and writing error-free simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentences.

Instruments of the study

As regard to this research, two instruments were used as the data collection tools:

1. A writing test.

The students were given the choice to write a paragraph about one topic. They were given three choices. (See appendix. 1). One of the topics was to write a descriptive paragraph about their city, village, or university. The other two choices required the students to write a paragraph including their opinion about argumentative topics where they needed to think and give reasons to support their points of view. The students were given forty minutes to write the paragraphs. It is worth mentioning that the researchers explained to the students that the test would be graded and considered by their teacher so that they could take it seriously.

2. A questionnaire

The researchers developed a three-part questionnaire for the students. (See appendix. 2). After the students had finished the writing test, the researchers collected their papers and distributed the questionnaire. The students were given fifteen minutes to fill out the questionnaire. The researchers here kindly asked the participating students to give honest responses, for the study would help improve the writing courses offered by the English Department further in the future.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts; the first part consisted of students personal data; their grade in English in *Tawjihi* (the name for the high school certificate in Palestine) and their grade in English II, the prerequisite course to Writing I.

The second part contained the items of the questionnaire where students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each one. The questionnaire focused on investigating students' responses to a number of core points related to critical thinking in writing:

- investigating the effect of teaching writing at high school English on their college writing,
- investigating students' self confidence,
- investigating students' understanding of their priorities in writing; whether writing error-free sentences or producing good and creative ideas,
- and finally, investigating their awareness of critical thinking skills.

The third part of the questionnaire asked the students to include any further comments about their experience in writing throughout the writing course.

Statistical methods:

After collecting questionnaires, the researchers recoded answers to numeric values. 5 degrees were given to strongly agree answer, 4 degrees were given to Agree answer, 3 degrees were given to Neutral answer, 2 degrees were given to disagree answer and one degree was given to strongly disagree answer .

The Statistical methods used in the analysis of the research are :

1. Frequencies and percentages to describe the variables.
2. Means (averages) and standard deviations to measure the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses .

3. The Analysis Of Variance(ANOVA) Test for testing the hypothesis.
4. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for validity.
5. Alpha (Cronbach) scales for Reliability.

Table 1: Correction key

Mean Range	Level
Less than 1.8	The mean assumed very low
1.8 to less than 2.6	The mean assumed low
2.6 to less than 3.4	The mean assumed medium
3.4 to less than 4.2	The mean assumed high
More than or equal 4.2	The mean assumed very high

Results and findings

Table 2: Demographic sample

Grade in English in Tawjihi	70_79%	2	9.1
	80_89%	11	50.0
	90_100%	9	40.9
	Total	22	100.0
Grade in English 102 course	75_79%	11	50.0
	80_89%	8	36.4
	90_100%	3	13.6
	Total	22	100.0

Reliability:

The Reliability scale (Alpha Cronbach) of the questionnaire was computed, and its value was (0.41). It is worth mentioning in this regard that the study was conducted in the summer semester 2015. Unlike the fall and spring semesters, the number of the registered students in the summer course is relatively small.

Research Questions

1. What is the students' general attitude towards critical thinking and writing?

In order to answer these questions, mean and standard deviation of the questionnaire items were computed. The following table shows the results.

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of the questionnaire items

	The students' general attitude towards critical thinking and writing	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
1)	Writing assignments at university is more challenging than it was at school.	4.73	0.46	Very high
2)	I get higher grades when I write correct sentences.	4.05	0.72	High
3)	I find memorizing vocabulary a priority in learning English.	4.00	0.76	High

4)	When I was a school student, my writing assignments were always limited to writing a formal letter or a letter to a friend or describing a building or a place.	3.86	1.13	High
5)	choosing to study English at university was my own independent decision.	3.82	1.37	High
6)	do not find it easy to write about topics that require analysis, logical thinking, creative thinking, self-reflection or explanation.	3.64	0.79	High
7)	Writing is challenging for me because it requires me to interpret, analyze, reflect on and explain a topic.	3.64	1.09	High
8)	Throughout the writing course, I have developed my thinking skills like interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation... etc.	3.55	1.06	high
9)	When writing an assignment, I always choose to write about easy topics that does not require me to think a lot such as descriptive paragraphs.	3.45	0.74	High
10)	Writing is challenging because I always make grammatical, punctuation and spelling mistakes.	3.45	1.14	High
11)	I get higher grades when I come up with creative and logical ideas.	3.41	1.10	High
12)	when writing, I pay more attention to writing free error sentences than to coming up with creative ideas.	3.41	1.14	High
13)	I find it challenging to write argumentative paragraphs or contrast-comparative paragraphs.	3.36	0.79	medium
14)	I am always confident about the ideas I include in my writing.	3.32	1.25	medium
15)	In English classes at high school, my teacher always asked me to think logically and creatively about the writing topic.	2.32	0.99	Low
16)	When I was a school student, the English teacher always focused on teaching us how to write free error sentences.	2.27	1.24	Low
	Total Degree	2.66	0.29	medium

2. Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application and awareness of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to their grade in English in Tawjihi?

The existence of these differences in the students application and awareness of critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses will be tested by using one way analysis of variance(ANOVA) test. The following table shows means and standard deviations and results of this test:

One way AVOVA results**Table 4: The students application and awareness of critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing course.**

Source / Scale	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.14	2	0.07	0.85	0.44
Within Groups	1.58	19	0.08		
Total	1.72	21			

The previous table shows that there are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to students' grade in English in Tawjihi because the F-value = 0.85.

Other conclusions handle students' application and awareness of critical thinking skills in writing with regard to their grade categories; (80_89% and 90_100%) is medium but due to grade category(70_79%), it is low.

The following table shows means and standard deviations of the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to Grade in English in Tawjihi:

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for the variables

Grade in English in Tawjihi	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
70_79%	2	2.41	0.31
80_89%	11	2.68	0.25
90_100%	9	2.69	0.32
Total	22	2.66	0.29

3) Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application and awareness of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to students' grade in English II course?

The existence of these differences in the students application and awareness of critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses will be tested by using one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test. The following table shows means and standard deviations and results of this test:

Table 6: One way AVOVA results for students' grade in English II.

Source / Scale	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.08	2	0.04	0.49	0.62
Within Groups	1.63	19	0.09		
Total	1.72	21			

The previous table shows that there are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to students' grade in English II.

Another conclusion is that the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to all grade categories is medium.

The following table shows means and standard deviations of the students application of the critical thinking skills in EFL university level writing courses due to grade in English II course:

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for the variables

Grade in English 102 course	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
75_79%	11	2.61	0.31
80_89%	8	2.68	0.26
90_100%	3	2.79	0.31
Total	22	2.66	0.29

Findings of the study

In general, results of the study show agreement with the researchers' hypotheses. It is evident that students insufficient performance in college writing is explained by their lack of critical thinking skills and of course influenced by their attitude towards writing as a skill and a process.

Students' attitudes towards critical thinking skills and writing:

Students' responses show clearly that they avoid applying critical thinking skills in their academic writing. When asked to answer the writing test as designed by the researchers, the participating students tended to choose the topic that they are familiar with and so does not require them to think a lot in order to infer, analyze or organize. Instead, most of them (60%) chose the question that asked them to write a descriptive paragraph about their city village, or university largely similar to what they had been taught at high school. This means that the students find it challenging when writing about topics that require analysis, logical thinking, self reflection or explanation, a thing which they highly agreed with in the questionnaire. The researchers interestingly noticed that even those students who chose to write an argumentative paragraph did not devote time for pre-writing activities such as brain storming, mind maps or free writing. This tells that they do not consider thinking as a core part of the writing process.

Generally speaking, students regard writing as a linguistic skill; they see that their ultimate success in writing is all about writing error-free sentences regardless of the ideas. The teacher's feedback here is a factor, for students think that the teacher's feedback is limited to writing error-free sentences. Most of them agreed that they expect high grades if they produce error-free sentences. Such an attitude by the teacher actually demotivates the students to devote more time and effort to thinking critically and creatively. In this regard, one student commented that "the teacher always focuses on my sentence skills and grammar mistakes and pay no attention to ideas. This makes me always depressed and anxious when I write."

Most students agreed that they have developed their thinking skills like interpretation, analysis, inference and evaluation. Yet, this is not highly reflected in their responses to other questionnaire items and the writing test, showing that the students find difficulties when applying these skills. This could be justified by students' limited knowledge of these skills and lack of self-confidence.

Pedagogically speaking, one has to be self-confident when writing creatively. Students have to learn to value their ideas so that they can include them in their writings. Interestingly, a good number of the students indicated that they are not always confident about the ideas they include in their writing.

Students experience of writing at high school

The students agreed that writing is more challenging at university than it was at high school. This is explained when students also agreed that the writing topics at school were limited to writing a letter or describing something, indicating that their English teachers at high school did not ask them to think logically about the writing topic. They also believe that their high school teachers did not focus on teaching how to write error-free sentences. This all shows that the writing skill is not well-addressed at high school which impairs students ability to do well in academic writing courses at university.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers find it necessary to investigate the statement of general goals for the Palestinian English Language Curriculum "English for Palestine" (see appendix. 3) where a number of goals is related to developing critical thinking skills. Here, it is also stated that the curriculum aims to "develop students' ability to think critically about different social, environmental, and political problems".

Yet, unfortunately these goals of writing are not reflected in teaching English at high school where the teachers' main concern becomes helping students pass the Tawjihi exam which in turn does not assess writing as a thinking process; here the main task on students is always memorizing words and answering grammar questions. The negative effects of the Tawjihi exam are clearly noticed in students' responses to the questionnaire.

Recommendations

With the regard the results of this study, the researchers provide the following recommendations:

- 1- Syllabus designers should consider including materials and activities that help develop students' critical thinking skills in EFL textbooks.
- 2- Teachers should emphasize the idea of writing as a thinking process.
- 3- Teachers should emphasize critical thinking skills in teaching and assessing students' academic writing.
- 4- Teachers should value their students ideas in writing with relatively little emphasis on their linguistic mistakes.
- 5- Further studies may take into consideration a larger sample.

- 6- The researchers suggest that further studies may consider gender as a variable when exploring the issue of applying critical thinking skills in EFL writing.
- 7- The researchers recommend that educators at higher education institutions should play an active role in helping students develop their self-confidence.

Conclusion

All in all, critical thinking skills are core elements in the EFL classroom. There is no doubt that the writing skill requires a lot of thinking on behalf of the students, which entails the teachers to highly consider applying addressing critical thinking skills in their teaching of writing. Students writing can sometimes be described as insufficient and ineffective because of students low level of critical thinking skills application in their writing. Besides learning structures of sentences, paragraphs or essays, students need to learn to value their ideas and think creatively and independently. This will definitely lead to an effective environment to learning in EFL classes in general and academic writing in particular.

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