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Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary School Learners and the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach: A Systematic Literature Review

Habilidades de pensamiento crítico en personas estudiantes de primaria y el enfoque de enseñanza basado en tareas: una revisión bibliográfica

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ABSTRACT:

This paper constitutes a literature review to explore the concepts related to the task-based language teaching approach and critical thinking; this way, it would be possible to clearly understand what they are and their roles in the learning environment. Education stakeholders are tasked with seeking best practices to optimize education while helping students think critically and learn holistically. Therefore, from a qualitative perspective, the researcher analyzed articles and documents that allowed describing the position of different authors on the proposed topics. In addition, the context of the educational system was investigated to describe its current state and the difficulties it faces, since 2018, education had faced obstacles in the way content is taught and skills practiced. Therefore, it is highly relevant to analyze the learning environment, the importance of tasks, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and critical thinking. As a result, this paper can function as a basis for a deeper analysis and an open discussion among stakeholders about the importance of developing CTS in young learners.

KEYWORDS: Task-based Language Teaching, Critical Thinking, Language Teaching, Public Education, Primary School, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Rationalization, Foreign Languages, Learning, Teaching.

RESUMEN:

El presente artículo constituye una revisión bibliográfica que tiene por objetivo explorar los conceptos relacionados al enfoque de enseñanza basado en tareas y el pensamiento crítico para entender mejor lo qué son y sus roles en el ambiente de aprendizaje. De hecho, las partes interesadas en educación tienen la tarea de buscar mejores prácticas para optimizar la educación mientras se ayuda a las personas estudiantes a pensar de manera crítica y formarse de manera integral. Por lo tanto, desde una perspectiva cualitativa, artículos y documentos fueron analizados para describir la posición de diferentes autorías en los temas propuestos. Además, el contexto del sistema educativo fue estudiado con el fin de describir su estado actual y las dificultades que enfrenta. De hecho, desde 2018, la educación viene enfrentando obstáculos en la manera en que los contenidos son impartidos y las habilidades practicadas. Por lo que es de gran importancia también analizar el ambiente de aprendizaje, la importancia de las tareas, el rol de la persona docente, el rol de la persona estudiante y el pensamiento crítico. Como resultado, este artículo puede servir como base para un análisis más profundo y una discusión abierta entre las partes involucradas sobre la importancia de desarrollar habilidades de pensamiento crítico en personas jóvenes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Enfoque basado en tareas, Pensamiento crítico, enseñanza de una lengua, Educación primaria, resolución de problemas, Toma de decisiones, Racionalización, Lenguas extranjeras, Aprendizaje, Enseñanza.

1. INTRODUCTION

The act of teaching and learning requires constant reflection, action, and transformation. Stakeholders in education have the task to search for better practices to improve it while helping learners think critically and grow in an integral way. If there is a way to transform relationships between teachers, students, school, and society is through education (Freire and Shor, 1987). Certainly, it is through it that a positive impact may be

done to continuously inspire learners and stakeholders to apply critical thinking (CT) in school and outside the classroom.

Furthermore, students should be thought of as what they are, active learners capable of reasoning, evaluating, reflecting, making decisions, and analyzing; better if learners are treated like that from early ages within the formal education system. That is the main reason why they should participate in the process of learning, and they should also be held accountable for a high degree of involvement. Freire (2005) affirmed that in education, there should be communication between the subjects who participate in it. The dialogue that originates from the interaction between teachers and learners should also be an act of conscious intention towards the world (Freire, 2005). According to him, because of continuous dialogue, both teacher and learner teach one another and learn from each other.

In this regard, Morales-Zúñiga (2014) insists that through the dialogue encouraged in the critical pedagogy, educators and learners are able to build a new reality, a more equal one because they become aware of structures with power and oppression. It is important to highlight that becoming aware of the circumstances will challenge educators and learners to question the status quo for a better understanding of the world and decision-making processes. Questioning is key to a full development of the human being. Just as Altamirano-Martínez (2018) asserts, CT intends to transcend to better and more desirable futures.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been adopted as a learner-centered and experiential approach that makes emphasis on the learners' prior knowledge to complete tasks in meaningful contexts and real-life scenarios. TBLT has been shown to be effective as it offers valuable input for the use of the target language through the completion of tasks, collaboration, and creation. Thus, learners process the language as a result of carrying out purposeful activities. Nunan (2004) described TBLT as a bridge between language learning in the classroom and language use outside the classroom. The author added that this approach caters opportunities for learners to be more conscious about their learning process. As a result, learners develop communicative competence, become more aware of cultures, build knowledge, reflect upon their experiences, and develop skills as local and global citizens since teachers and learners will participate in decision making processes. These are some reasons why TBLT may result useful when promoting CT in elementary school learners.

1.1. Rationale

MEP's program mentions the importance of promoting critical thinking skills (CTS) for learners to face challenges demanded by a rapidly changing world such as effective communication, CT and problem-solving skills, leadership, digital literacy, collaboration, creativity, socio-emotional skills. However, after analyzing the document for first and second cycle, there is very limited information related to collaborative work, self and peer assessment, analysis, interpretation, decision making, and creation. In fact, most of the suggested strategies for mediation in elementary school belong to activities such as identifying, repetition, rehearsing, modeling, organizing information, among others. Consequently, there is a need to enhance CTS when designing tasks and classroom activities.

Although, there have been changes to improve education for Elementary School, during the school years of 2019 and 2020, learning was severely affected by strikes and the changes due to the pandemic. In fact, Programa Estado de la Nación (2021) highlighted that learners in public institutions lost approximately 30% of classes in a regular school year. Mathematics and Language were affected the most according to the same report. These two areas are key in the development of CTS. Additionally, Robles-Barrantes (2017) pointed out that there is no sign that the Costa Rican education system is promoting CT in students. He described the Costa Rican system as one in total control of education by perpetuating the traditional dichotomy of an authoritarian teacher who knows everything and a learner with a blank mind waiting to be filled up.

Costa Rican learners, and those around the world, need classrooms where they are engaged in activities which promote CT, reflection, collaboration, problem-solving, and language. Just as United Nations (n.d.) asserted that educational institutions have the responsibility to promote lifelong learning skills by guaranteeing inclusive and quality education for all individuals. It is under the term of Global Citizenship that the organization is trying to ensure that all learners acquire and use skills for the benefit of a local and global community (United Nations, n.d.). Consequently, it is MEP's responsibility, and its body of professionals, to ensure that what and how it is offered in the classrooms respond to a new citizenship that conceives learners as active agents of change, aware of their circumstances, capable of self-evaluation, and willing to question the *status quo*.

Furthermore, it is of great importance to consider Freire and Shor's invitation (1987) to be critical thinkers and active knowers (both teachers and students), willing to learn, question and transform circumstances. In addition, Uribe-Enciso et al. (2017) stated that teachers should take advantage of the large amount of time children spend in school every week to develop the necessary skills to help them become critical thinkers. Therefore, there is a need to examine the context of public education in Costa Rica as well as the TBLT as a useful approach to promote CTS.

1.2. Objective of the Article

This literature review aims to explore the concepts involved in task-based language teaching and CT in order to understand better what it is and its role in the learning environment. Also, understanding better what task-based language teaching approach is and its main elements. This exploration will lay the foundation for a deeper analysis and an open discussion among teachers about the importance of developing CTS in young learners.

2. METHOD

The present paper is a literature review that analyzes a body of research papers published about the Costa Rican education system, English language teaching, TBLT, and CTS. In fact, Snyder (2019) affirms that "[...] a literature review is an excellent way of synthesizing research findings to show evidence on a meta-level and to uncover areas in which more research is needed, which is a critical component of creating theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models" (p.333). Consequently, from a qualitative perspective, research papers and articles were analyzed to describe the position of different authors on the proposed topics. So that it may also offer to others engagement and widening of their knowledge.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is foreseeable that the term *critical* might be described as a pejorative word as it is related to criticism, or something bad. There are various definitions for CT that depend on the emphasis the author gives and/or the field or discipline. CT is highlighted by Morales-Zúñiga (2014) as a set of skills that must be applied in life. Facione (2007) believed that when thinking critically there is purpose, and it may be done collaboratively. For Altamirano-Martínez (2018) in Latin America, CT is directly related to questioning what capitalism has established as the norm with the purpose of integrating the different realities to ultimately reach a dialogue. Briefly, what is most noticeable in the ideas of these authors is the influential role of CT in different fields and areas.

In this sense, it is in the classrooms where learners may learn to think and act consciously and critically based on the processes carried out along with their teachers. Thus, teachers should promote in children their

innate skills of curiosity, wonder, and questioning for everything around them since they are very young (Tamayo et al., 2015). What and how it is offered to elementary school learners in class may help them make sense of their context to develop and practice CTS. Consequently, the main purpose of schools involves a better understanding of the relationships among teachers, learners, and knowledge to reach a comprehensive development of human beings.

Nevertheless, Facione (2007) warned that CTS are neither mechanical nor separate from other cognitive processes. Therefore, as CT abilities do not possess fixed features, constant practice will lead towards their enhancement. Facione (2000) also stated that “through practice, and with guidance from a good instructor, we can develop our thinking skills (like our artistic, athletic, or leadership skills) to the extent our natural abilities allow” (p. 62).

3.1. Costa Rican Education System

Since 2018 the Costa Rican public education system has been in crisis as a result of constant disruptions due to strikes and protests. On top of the crisis, the spread of COVID-19 triggered what many experts call a *shutdown in education*. Programa Estado de la Nación (2021) on its eighth report on education stated that a chain of events compromised the quality of education in the levels of preschool and elementary school. As shown in Figure 1 there were several interruptions in the continuity and quality of the service that affected learning during the school years in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. Indeed, during 2018 learners experienced discontinuity for more than three months due to teachers on indefinite strike. The gap in learning got bigger due to strikes and protests from different groups during 2019. The crisis in education was evident and required immediate intervention, but instead, the pandemic hit and affected the way the curriculum was covered and delivered during 2020 and 2021.

Figure 1.

Note: Outline of interruptions during the school years 2018-20221, their reasons and duration. The text was translated to English. Source: Alfaro, 2021 mentioned by Informe Estado de la Nación, 2021

Moreover, the pandemic for COVID-19 caused school closure and suspension of in-person education during the school years of 2020 and 2021. Certainly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pointed out that learning was disrupted by 175 days in Costa Rica when compared to the average 78 days across the OECD countries (OECD, 2021). During the years 2020 and 2021, when the schools experienced full closure, face-to-face lessons were replaced by virtual ones. However, OECD (2021) highlighted that a day of online instruction, including a blend of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, was not equivalent to a regular day of in-person learning. Therefore, the interaction between teachers, learners, and learning was impacted. The eighth report on education 2021 affirmed that neither teachers, learners, nor families were prepared to face online or blended learning. All this without taking into account the number of learners who did not have internet access or digital skills. Mackinsey mentioned by Programa Estado de la Nación (2021) considered relevant the fact that remote learning does not replace face-to-face education because there will be an unavoidable loss of learning in the way tasks are performed.

Furthermore, Programa Estado de la Nación (2021) mentioned that “the number of lost lessons accumulated due to the strikes and the pandemic is equal to 80% of a regular school year in primary school” (p.39). This means that contents and skills were not covered nor practiced during the period during which schools were shut down. Murillo et al. mentioned by Programa Estado de la Nación (2021) affirmed that important skills such as reading comprehension, reading, oral expression, and oral language comprehension were omitted and neglected during the pandemic. The eighth report on education 2021 affirmed that those skills are fundamental for young learners to be able to solve problems and think critically. Besides, within the education system the English language teaching will be examined next.

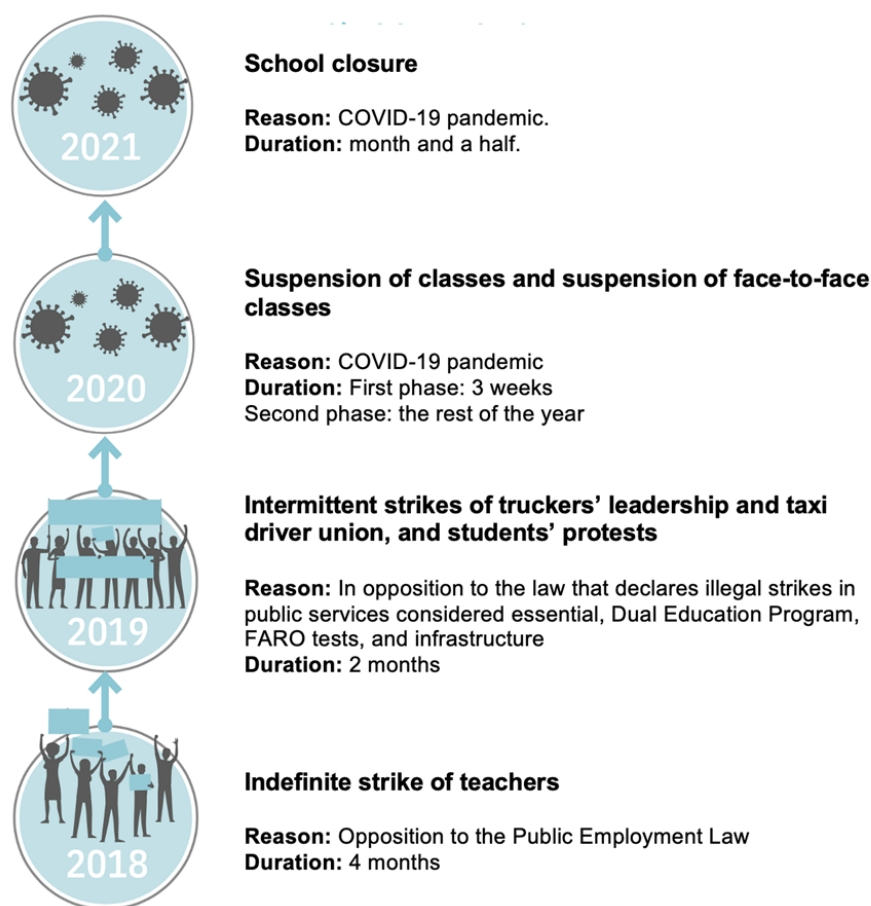


FIGURE 1.
Interruptions to the School Year

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3.1.1. *English Teaching in Costa Rica*

It is generally said that English programs for teaching EFL are neutral, but the truth is that languages always carry a cultural component that in education is also connected with the country's politics and economy. English teaching in Costa Rica has evolved according to economic interests, relationships with foreign countries, commercial reasons, and tourism. Since 1994, English has been a compulsory subject in public institutions. In 2017, MEP, decided to start the school year with a new program that not only holds learners accountable for their own progress in learning and communication, but also instills in them the values of Global Citizenship Education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO, n. d.), some of the attitudes and behaviors of global citizenship include creativity, innovation, tolerance, peacefulness, commitment to human rights, and an active engagement both locally and globally.

Furthermore, when taking a look at the Costa Rican education system and English teaching, Solano-Campos (2012) mentioned that it has been heavily influenced by global neoliberal trends, the tourism industry, foreign investment, production patterns, trade relationship with other countries as well as the Gross Domestic Product. Therefore, the need to learn the English language has increased exponentially, thus affecting how programs are formulated to meet the demands of economic policies, politics, and the above mentioned. Robles-Barrantes (2017) added that the role of education in the intricate mechanism between geopolitics and the rules of the market is to provide individuals capable enough to help with the country's development. Therefore, it is of great concern that education is mostly fulfilling interests from the government and the market without considering neither the development of the actual human being nor individuals managing the market.

To achieve an education that really transforms the individuals and the circumstances, it is imperative to start making changes in the classroom, from the bottom. In fact, Robles-Barrantes (2017) affirmed that for stakeholders to truly experience transformation in education, it is necessary to break with the traditional dichotomy of the Mr. Know-it-all teacher and the empty vessel learner. Teachers in Costa Rica need to start acting as active agents of change with a positive attitude. They should start working on themselves by using CTS, researching, and becoming aware of their context and their relationship with learners. Kubota (2012) highlighted that it is essential for teachers and learners to practice critical reflection, to be in a constant inquiry of new and existing assumptions. There is a lot of control over education, yet teachers should stand out and practice autonomy in their classrooms while promoting second language learning and CT.

3.2. Task-Based Language Teaching

3.2.1. *The Role of Tasks*

TBLT is a learner-centered approach that is based on the use of tasks. According to MEP (2016), tasks refer to activities set in a context that demand the learners' knowledge and skills while allowing them to work collaboratively and to be in contact with authentic experiences. These learning experiences may go beyond the classroom setting. Netto-Shek (2017) pointed out that tasks that encourage CT allow learners to find relevance in what they know, what they may learn, and how they may use what they know. Nevertheless, East (2017) indicated that many teachers struggle with what exactly a task is and its purpose in the TBLT

classroom. Many teachers keep on developing tasks following Communicative Language Teaching in a more structured way. Therefore, there is a difference between tasks in theory and tasks in practice.

As the TBLT approach considers the learner as the protagonist of their learning process, there are plenty of opportunities to develop CTS within the tasks. Challenging activities will gradually increase the use of the target language and skills. As Figure 2 shows, CT tasks are organized in a way that first lay the foundations that will make later use of high order thinking tasks. Thus, observing and identifying represent basic tasks while further inquiry, analyzing and evaluating, and making decisions mark more complex activities. In fact, Beaumont (2010) stated that observation and identification expose learners to structures and topics so that they may discover what they know about them. He added that understanding, organizing, and interpreting will lead to inference which is a core skill of CT. Constant inquiry allows learners take what they know and what they were exposed to go further (Beaumont, 2010). On that ground, the critical tasks at lower levels tasks require some teacher mediation while upper levels allow learners' autonomy (Beaumont, 2010). In this regard, Cakici (2018) affirmed that teaching practices must consider metacognition and CT from early stages. The author also suggested that progress towards a goal needs to be checked to adjust time use and mental effort accordingly.

Beaumont (2010) added that teachers need to be aware of what they ask learners to do, how to do something, and the way they address learners. Certainly, the classroom becomes a place where learning takes place through practice and the exchange of opinions that are equally valid and respected (Arias-Rodriguez et al., 2014). Thus, CTS may be promoted through proper input and collaboration. Massa (2014) stated that these skills are expected to be acquired by learners through tasks (another way is through explicit instruction and a third way which is a combination of the previous two). No matter how those skills are either acquired or taught, the role of the teacher is essential in the development of CT, the design of tasks, and the impact of the learning environment.

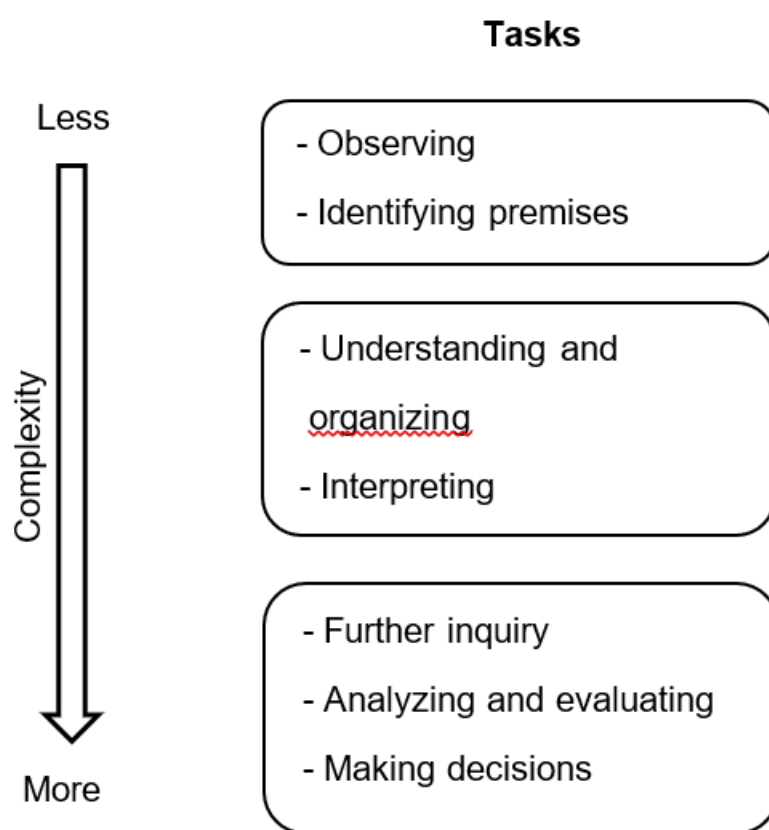


FIGURE 2.

Critical thinking tasks and the level of complexity

Note: This figure demonstrates skills and examples for tasks grouped according to the level of complexity. Source: Adapted from Beaumont (2010).

In short, the task is the heart of language teaching according to TBLT. That is the main reason why context must be considered when designing them. The teacher plays a major role in bringing CT activities to the class that involve the use of the target language to gradually achieve goals. Because thinking critically entails being conscious about situations inside and outside the classroom to make changes, tasks need adequate preparation for them to be interesting, appealing, challenging, and engaging to foster collaboration, reflection, communication, among other things, as Fuquen-Martínez and Jiménez-Niño (2013) indicated. Consequently, the role of the teacher and how it encompasses different aspects involved within the TBLT approach will be studied next.

3.2.2. *The Role of the Teacher*

When it comes to changes in the classroom, it is what the teacher promotes and does that will impact people, himself/herself, and the context. Robles-Barrantes (2017) emphasized how important the role of the teacher is in the classroom where changes may take place, where new ways of thinking and communication may be developed. Nevertheless, teachers must be willing to break the mold and transform his/her practices and himself/herself as an individual to affect other areas. Indeed, Massa (2014) argued that many new teachers are eager to make changes in their milieu, but once that teacher has a considerable amount of time teaching, she/he falls into what the control-oriented system expects her/him to do. Many teachers focus on linguistic competencies, while some others keep on using traditional or teacher-centered teaching methodologies.

Within the TBLT approach, the role of the teacher is described as that of a facilitator and mediator in the learners' language and skills development. Teachers should get rid of the idea that knowledge and values are transferable from teacher to students (Freire, 2005). Through relevant, interesting, and significant tasks, learners should become aware of the usefulness of what they learned for real life; they should also engage in constant inquiry. Uribe-Enciso et al., (2017) declared that students are also capable of making changes when they understand that they belong to a local and global community.

It is challenging for teachers to make changes because there is a syllabus to adhere to, a textbook to cover, procedures to follow, evaluations to perform, and approaches to respect, but there are areas that are in total control of teachers such as time management (within the allotted time of the class), motivation, and tasks. Van den Branden (2016) mentioned that teachers should focus on what they may control to offer valuable input, such as designing tasks and material, deciding the amount of time spent on tasks, and making a balance between meaning, form, and skills. Considering these challenges, teachers should address themselves first before transforming education. They may achieve changes in a more practical way by taking care of their mental health, finding motivation on what they do, encouraging and motivating learners, by developing community with other teachers and stakeholders, by acting as leaders.

As CTS are lifelong skills, they require constant practice throughout a long period of time. The teacher who promotes these skills within the TBLT approach by designing significant tasks will grow along with learners as these skills are directly related to reflective processes (Arias-Rodriguez et al., 2014). Thus, increasing the level of involvement and participation in the learning process at a young age will impact their lives positively. Therefore, the quality of the input matters to encourage and support learning. Teachers need to show a good understanding of the approach, CTS, the development of children, and the specific characteristics of the context.

The decisions a teacher makes will determine how the class is managed and the position and purpose the learner and the teacher herself/himself carry out. Hall (2011) highlighted that the teacher's beliefs and the context itself will affect the way teaching and learning are organized. He also suggested the role of both teachers and learners will switch as required, fitting at times into more than one. Thereupon, teachers need to create opportunities through which learners may think critically, learn the language, generate knowledge, and transform circumstances. The part the learner takes on in a TBLT classroom that intends to promote CT will be described next.

3.2.3. *The Role of the Learner*

The learner is the star of the whole process and the main reason why decisions are made in education. Both the TBLT approach and the promotion of CTS are student-centered, giving learners an active role. Hence, active agents with an identity, beliefs, values, prior knowledge, and experiences, all of which should be considered. Murawski (2014) mentioned that those learners who put into practice CTS participate more and get involved actively in the learning process. Consequently, an adequate learning environment that suits young learners will help them use the target language and practice thinking skills. In fact, the classroom setting and the input through tasks are means for learners to activate schema, build knowledge, encourage CT, and engage in learning in a more contextualized way (Netto-Shek, 2017).

All classrooms are very different due to the particularities of the individuals that belong to the same group. Hall (2011) suggested teachers focus on reducing the amount of teacher talk and raise actions that contribute to the target language learning considering the learners' individuality. Learners should never be seen as passive subjects, receivers of information. The official approach should be addressed bearing in mind the learners so that the decisions made suit the teachers' beliefs and intuition, the learners' needs and proficiency, the demands of the world, and specific features of the context. In addition, age, personality, motivation, and attitudes may provide teachers with enough insight to apply strategies with the language input learners

need. Consequently, learners are eager to complete tasks that require them to interact, participate, reflect, collaborate, think critically, give feedback, and use the language.

Moreover, Nunan (2004) mentioned active learning as one of the main principles of TBLT which states that learning takes place through action. That is the learner who completes the action, not the teacher. Then teacher-focused tasks should be kept to the minimum. Besides, TBLT introduces learners to reflect upon their learning process and their outcomes. As a result, learners take a more active role and become more aware, creative, critical, and autonomous of their learning. After going through several aspects regarding the environment, the tasks, the teacher, and the learner, examining the country's education system will provide a better understanding of specific details that will impact the promotion of CT within the official approach.

3.3. Critical thinking

Dewey (1910) established a difference between thought and thinking; the former happens involuntarily while the latter is described as an act that involves consciousness. Hence, thinking itself is a very complex and active process which is different in everyone as it also involves other processes such as negotiating, analyzing, updating, creating, questioning, understanding, evaluating, learning to learn. Thus, CTS are related to active use of knowledge to improve learning and thinking itself (Cakici, 2018).

Schools represent a key place where children may develop CTS since it provides them with enough tools to exercise these skills in tasks within the classroom and in their daily life. During childhood, CTS let learners take part in the creation of knowledge, at the same time as pupils improve their academic outcomes (Polanco-Tintaya et al., 2022). Given the many benefits, the value of teaching CTS is immeasurable that society should prioritize liberal education. In fact, Facione (2007) emphasized that if schools and colleges do not teach people to think both critically and effectively, society might see any democratic form of government threatened.

Facione (1990) defined CT as a "[...] purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual consideration upon which that judgement is based" (p.3). From this perspective, CT has significant characteristics that may benefit pupils and society. In addition, Facione (2007) along with a panel of experts proposed six core CTS. Each core skill has subskills that are more specific to each one as Figure 3 shows: interpretation has categorization, decoding significance, and clarifying as their sub-skills; analysis includes examining ideas, detecting arguments, and analyzing arguments; evaluation encompasses assessing arguments and assessing the quality of arguments; inference includes querying evidence, conjecturing alternatives, and drawing conclusions; explanation embraces describing methods and results, justifying procedures, present arguments, and state results; and last but not least, self-regulation which contains self-examination and self-correction. The author pointed self-regulation as the most outstanding skills because it allows critical thinkers to improve themselves.

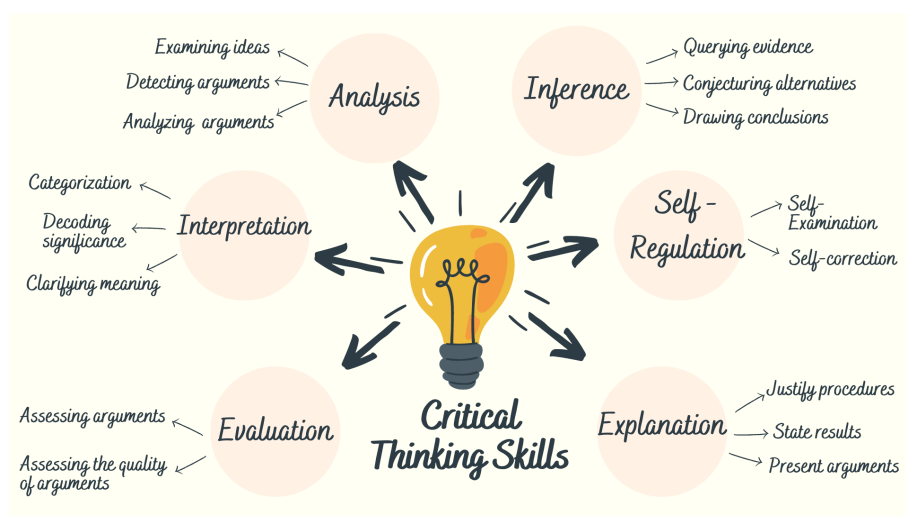


FIGURE 3.

Core critical thinking skills and sub-skills

Note: This figure shows core critical thinking skills and their corresponding sub-skills. Source: Adapted from Facione (2007).

When trying to implement CTS in the primary school classroom, teachers must bear in mind to guide learners into interesting and appealing tasks that help them collaborate in the exercise of these skills. In this regard, Polanco-Tintaya et al. (2022) suggested that “in the creation of new educational methodologies should also take into account the implementation of innovative measures that in addition to developing critical thinking use digital and creative tools [...]” (p.6501) with the guide of the educator. Therefore, the importance of the learning environment will be explored next.

3.3.1. Critical Thinking and the Learning Environment

It is of great significance to start making changes in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom beginning with the learning environment, which in many cases focuses on transmitting contents and recalling information. Freire and Shor (1987) affirmed that individuals must be considered as who they are, conscious subjects capable of reflecting and taking action to change the world. Consequently, there is a need to build an adequate learning environment where creative activities are developed, points of view are explored, conclusions are drawn, deductive reasoning is practiced, hypotheses are questioned and formulated, analysis is carried out, comparisons are performed, new ideas are proposed, and reflection is done.

Furthermore, Pineada-Báez (2009) mentioned that CT involves such skills as interpretation, analysis, comparison, clarification, inference, and self-regulation, which later will benefit learners to face the world. UNESCO (2016), in Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG), is committed to acknowledge the transforming role of education by achieving SDGs. These goals call to action by strengthening methodologies, inputs, processes, and measurement of outputs within the framework of lifelong learning. Therefore, the learning environment should respond to the learners' context and their needs.

According to Florea and Hurjui (2015), CT is an ongoing process through which the individual interacts and transforms knowledge. In fact, during that process knowledge is not only transformed but also created. Moreover, they added that classroom activities play a major role in developing CTS because it is through an encouraging environment that those skills are acquired and practiced. Indeed, the quality of the learning environment is key when promoting these skills under a specific approach and when helping learners become aware of the learning process. Indeed, Murawski (2014) stated that those who have the opportunity to

develop and practice CTS take part in the learning process in a more productive and effective way. Then, learners become active knowers capable of transforming their lives and circumstances.

Moreover, teachers should take advantage of the amount of time students spend in school not only to focus on communicative and linguistic skills but also to foster growth in other areas. Certainly, every teacher has the potential to successfully develop linguistic and CTS by practicing them frequently. Freire and Shor (1987) affirmed that in order to develop participation, democracy, and CT, it is necessary to apply them regularly in class. Uribe-Enciso et al. (2017) added that to make sure that CTS are being properly developed, they must be worked on gradually. Those skills will continue over time. Consequently, learners may understand that they will eventually make use of the learned skills at a local and global level to generate a positive impact in the short and long term.

Briefly, CT and language learning should be prioritized simultaneously in a learner-centered setting. This means that an engaging environment is one where thinking critically is promoted through learning experiences that include exercises to ask and answer questions, synthesize, evaluate, compare, reflect, contextualize, make inferences, summarize, and solve problems. For this reason, more attractive, flexible, and effective lessons will result in learners who feel motivated to express themselves critically in the target language. Likewise, it is worth examining what a task is and the role it plays in TBL and according to MEP as follows.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present fast-paced, ever-changing world challenges education to prepare individuals in terms of technology, soft skills, and high order thinking skills for them to be capable of transforming themselves and their circumstances. Based on what has been examined the following conclusions were drawn.

Educators require to be aware of the need of being more reflective, curious, and inquisitive towards their practices to become a critical thinker and then promote CT.

It is urgent to work on the skills and contents neglected by the crisis experienced in education and the pandemic. The government, schools, and educators have experienced difficulties to ensure access to quality of education and to minimize disruption to learning. Consequently, skills related to CT such as reading comprehension, problem solving, oral comprehension skills were abandoned due to the *education shutdown*.

Critical thinking skills should be a significant part of language instruction practices from first grade on. Pupils should be engaged in simple tasks that include CTS and collaboration. There is a need to develop strategies, activities, and assignments that enable learners to perform CT according to their specific characteristics. CTS need to be fostered in classroom environments to strengthen a sense of community (collaboration) and belonging.

The learning environment has the potential to either help or hinder learners' becoming aware of their learning process. In fact, when conscious learners monitor their learning, emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and ideas, they will make use of the learned skills and language to generate a positive impact in the short and long term. In consequence, it is essential to build a learning environment where creative activities are developed, points of view are explored, conclusions are drawn, deductive reasoning is practiced, hypotheses are questioned and formulated, analysis is carried out, comparisons are performed, new ideas are proposed, analysis is performed, and reflection is carried out.

Tasks are the core of TBLT as it is a learner-centered approach. These must provide learners with proper input to both learn the target language and develop social and critical thinking skills. When designing tasks, it is important to take into account specific characteristics from the group of learners such as the context, their needs, their abilities, and their interests. That is why the role of the teacher is significant because she/he is in charge of tailoring appealing, interesting, meaningful, challenging, collaborative, and engaging activities, assignments, and situations inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers are the subjects that encompass different aspects of TBLT and who design tasks accordingly. They must practice participation, inquiring, and reflection. Indeed, they should be aware, learn, be autonomous, and think critically about their own practice. Then, they may reinvent their teaching if necessary. Thereupon, teachers need to create opportunities through which learners may think critically, learn the language, generate knowledge, and transform circumstances.

In the TBLT approach, learners are meant to be highly involved in meaningful tasks with an active and autonomous role. Indeed, learners are introduced to take responsibility and reflect upon their learning process and their outcomes. Teachers must be open minded as learners become more aware, accountable, and independent, they may react critically about the class, teaching, tasks, assignment, and decision-making processes.

In addition, the present paper intends to encourage further research on integrating CT into the EFL classrooms, developing CTS in teachers, boosting CTS in elementary school learners, diversifying CT teaching strategies in the elementary school classroom, exploring the use of gamification to develop CT, enhancing CTS through play-based learning as well as the role of CT in the classroom and beyond.

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