Enhancing critical thinking skills of EFL learners in Beninese secondary schools: Strategies and implementation

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Abstract: This paper investigates effective strategies for fostering critical thinking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Beninese secondary schools. Critical thinking is essential for language and literacy development, as well as success in all domains. The importance of critical thinking in educational contexts is particularly crucial in a multicultural and diverse setting like Benin. This mixed-methods study combines qualitative interviews with EFL teachers and quantitative surveys with secondary school students to identify effective strategies. Results indicate that collaborative learning, inquiry-based instruction, problem-solving tasks, critical reading and writing exercises, and the integration of real-world issues into the curriculum are effective approaches. The study's findings suggest that incorporating these strategies into EFL instruction can significantly enhance the success of teaching and learning critical thinking in Beninese secondary schools.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Curriculum, EFL learners, Implementation, Strategies.

1. Introduction

Despite the recognition of critical thinking as a crucial skill for lifelong learning and successful participation in society (Paul & Elder, 2008), research suggests that Beninese EFL learners often struggle with critical analysis and problem-solving. While EFL teachers in Beninese secondary schools emphasize basic skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, students may lack the critical thinking skills necessary for engaging with complex ideas and issues. Bankole-Minaflinou (2018) observes that a focus on memorization can lead to students lacking critical thinking skills, even in upper sixth form. Assogba (2024) further highlights this issue, finding that Beninese EFL learners demonstrate relatively low problem-solving proficiency. This study aims to identify effective strategies for fostering critical thinking skills among EFL learners in Beninese secondary schools to address this critical gap in their education.

Despite the growing recognition of critical thinking as a crucial skill, research suggests that Beninese EFL learners struggle with applying critical thinking skills in their studies. This study investigates the effectiveness of current approaches to critical thinking instruction in Beninese EFL classrooms and seeks to identify effective strategies for enhancing critical thinking skills.

This research aims to address the following questions:

RQ1: How are critical thinking tasks effectively taught in Beninese secondary schools?

RQ2: What strategies can EFL teachers use to effectively teach critical thinking to EFL learners?

RQ3: How does the integration of critical thinking exercises into the EFL curriculum affect students' analytical and evaluative abilities?

Based on these research questions, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

RH1: The effectiveness of critical thinking instruction is often underemphasized in Benin's educational system. Factors such as curriculum design, teacher training, and educational resources can impact the effectiveness of critical thinking instruction.

RH2: To effectively teach critical thinking to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, EFL teachers must:

- Incorporate critical thinking activities that challenge students to analyze, evaluate, and create, such as debates, problem-solving tasks, and case studies.
- Integrate critical thinking into language skills by encouraging EFL learners to critically analyse texts, discuss different viewpoints, and develop arguments in both spoken and written English.
- Provide scaffolding and support by using structured frameworks and prompts to guide EFL learners in thinking critically. Gradually increase the complexity of tasks as students become more proficient.
- Promote reflection and metacognition by encouraging EFL learners to reflect on their own thought processes and reasoning strategies, which helps develop their critical thinking skills.

RH3: By engaging with complex texts and problems, EFL learners learn to dissect information, identify patterns, and make connections. They practice assessing the credibility and relevance of information, leading to better judgment and decision-making abilities. As they analyse and discuss content, they simultaneously improve their language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures. Engaging in critical thinking can increase EFL learners' confidence in using English for higher-order thinking tasks.

This research study focuses on identifying effective strategies and their implementation in enhancing EFL learners' critical thinking skills in Beninese secondary schools.

1.1. Literature Review

Critical thinking is an active and skilful cognitive process that involves conceptualizing, applying, and evaluating information to reach conclusions or answers (Scriven & Paul, 2007). Key components of critical thinking include: examining arguments and ideas critically, identifying underlying assumptions, judging the credibility of sources and the strength of arguments, drawing reasonable conclusions from available evidence, and applying critical thinking skills to solve problems effectively and creatively.

Critical thinking is a cornerstone of effective education and intellectual development, equipping learners with the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesize information objectively and rationally. In EFL education, critical thinking is particularly crucial for navigating complex problems, making reasoned decisions, and engaging in reflective thinking. Research suggests that EFL learners who engage in critical thinking practices tend to perform better academically (Abrami et al., 2015). For example, a meta-analysis by Abrami and colleagues found a strong correlation between critical thinking instruction and improved academic outcomes, including higher test scores and grades.

In today's rapidly changing world, EFL learners need to be able to tackle complex and multifaceted problems. Critical thinking skills enable EFL students to approach these challenges methodically and devise innovative solutions (Facione, 2015). A study by King and Kitchener (2004) demonstrates that critical thinking skills are vital for effective problem-solving and decision-making in real-world contexts. The ability to think critically supports lifelong learning by encouraging continuous questioning and self-assessment, which are essential skills for adapting to new information and challenges.

Critical thinking skills are increasingly essential in both the workplace and in fostering informed citizenship in a rapidly changing world. As more jobs and technologies evolve, critical thinkers are better equipped to adapt and learn new skills. This adaptability is crucial in today's workforce, where continuous learning is often necessary. Critical thinking is also essential for informed citizenship. By carefully evaluating information, individuals can make well-informed decisions about societal issues and contribute effectively to democratic processes (Levy, 2019). The ability to critically analyse media and political information helps combat misinformation and supports active participation in civic life.

Education that emphasizes critical thinking promotes independence and self-direction, which are key to both personal and professional success. By fostering critical thinking skills throughout education, we can empower individuals to navigate complex challenges and contribute positively to their communities and the world around them.

1.1.1. Effective Strategies in Enhancing EFL Critical Thinking

Hattie (2015) identifies effective strategies as follows:

1.1.1.1. Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning involves EFL students working together in groups to achieve common academic goals and enhance their learning. This approach promotes deeper understanding through peer interaction and shared problem-solving. Effective collaboration relies on clear roles, equitable participation, and effective communication among group members, as these elements promote positive interdependence and individual accountability (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). EFL learners' success in a group is linked to the success of their peers, meaning that each member's contribution is vital to achieving the group's objectives.

Collaborative learning also fosters essential social and interpersonal skills, including communication, conflict resolution, and leadership (Slavin, 2014). Direct interaction among group members enhances learning through discussion, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving. EFL teachers can implement collaborative learning by structuring activities that require students to work together to solve problems or complete tasks. This could include group projects, peer reviews, and cooperative problem-solving exercises. To ensure active participation, teachers should assign roles and responsibilities within groups. Additionally, EFL teachers should provide clear guidelines and frameworks for group interactions to promote productive collaboration and prevent conflicts. Effective implementation of collaborative learning also involves creating a supportive classroom environment. This includes arranging the physical space to facilitate group work and using technology to enhance communication and collaboration. Teachers can also provide training on collaborative skills, such as conflict resolution and effective communication, to help EFL learners navigate group interactions successfully (Gillespie & McClintock, 2002).

Assessing collaborative learning should focus on both the process and the product. Process assessment involves evaluating how well EFL students work together, communicate, and resolve conflicts, while product assessment focuses on the quality of the final output (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Rubrics that assess both individual and group contributions can help provide a clear and objective measure of performance (Oakley et al., 2004). Integrating reflection into collaborative learning activities can enhance the effectiveness of this approach. Encouraging EFL students to reflect on their group experiences and individual roles can help them understand the dynamics of teamwork and their personal strengths and areas for improvement. This reflective practice supports continuous improvement and deepens the learning experience.

1.1.1.2. Inquiry-Based Instruction

Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) is an educational approach that emphasizes the active role of EFL learners in the learning process. Instead of passively receiving information, EFL learners in IBL explore questions, problems, or scenarios, fostering deeper engagement and understanding. Rooted in constructivism, IBL emphasizes that learners build on prior knowledge and experiences to make sense of new information through interaction with the world. By actively generating questions, investigating problems, and discovering answers, EFL learners develop critical thinking skills, enhancing their ability to evaluate evidence, make connections, and develop reasoned conclusions (Kumar & Lee, 2023).

EFL teachers act as facilitators or guides in IBL, providing support and resources to help students through the inquiry process. However, the focus remains on student-led exploration. IBL often involves

real-world problems or scenarios, making learning more relevant and engaging for EFL students. This relevance helps EFL learners understand the application of their knowledge in real-world contexts.

Effective implementation of IBL involves designing learning activities that are driven by EFL students' questions and curiosity (Branford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Teachers facilitate this process by guiding inquiries and helping EFL learners develop their questions into researchable problems. The first step is to introduce open-ended questions or problems that are relevant to the students' interests and curriculum goals (Kuhn, 2007). EFL teachers should create an environment where learners feel comfortable posing questions and exploring various avenues for answers. This might involve using real-world problems or current events to make inquiries more engaging and relevant. Teachers also need to model and teach the skills required for effective inquiry, such as critical thinking, research methods, and data analysis (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Providing EFL students with scaffolding, such as graphic organizers or inquiry journals, can help structure their investigations and keep track of their findings. Encouraging peer collaboration during the inquiry process can also enhance learning and provide diverse perspectives.

Assessment in IBL should focus on both the process and the outcomes of the inquiry. Teachers can use formative assessments, such as observation and feedback, to monitor students' progress and provide support throughout their investigations. Summative assessments, such as presentations or reports, can evaluate the depth of students' understanding and their ability to communicate their findings effectively (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Reflection is a crucial component of IBL because it helps students consolidate their learning and gain insights into how they can improve their inquiry skills in future projects. By encouraging EFL students to reflect on their inquiry process, what they learned, and how they approached problem-solving, teachers can enhance the effectiveness of IBL.

1.1.1.3. Problem-Solving Tasks

Problem-solving tasks are integral to modern educational practices, particularly in inquiry-based learning. These tasks involve tackling complex, real-world issues, requiring students to apply knowledge and skills to devise solutions. Problem-solving tasks are often open-ended, encouraging students to explore various approaches and develop critical thinking skills. Engaging with such tasks allows EFL students to apply theoretical concepts and address real-life challenges, enhancing the relevance and impact of their learning.

Research by Wiliam (2011) highlights that problem-solving tasks foster critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. By encouraging EFL students to evaluate, analyse, and synthesize information, these tasks lead to a deeper understanding and improved cognitive skills. The real-world applicability of problem-solving tasks also tends to increase EFL learners' engagement and motivation, as they recognize the practical value of their studies. This connection between theory and practice creates a more engaging and motivating learning environment.

However, traditional assessment methods may not fully capture the nuances of EFL student responses to problem-solving tasks (Tomlinson, 2014). Additionally, substantial scaffolding is often necessary to support EFL learners in engaging with complex problems, which can be challenging for educators to provide consistently. To address these challenges and ensure the effective integration of problem-solving tasks in the classroom, educators can adopt several strategies. Providing clear objectives and structured guidance helps EFL students understand the purpose and processes involved in problem-solving. This clarity supports them in navigating complex problems and developing appropriate solutions. Implementing problem-solving tasks requires careful selection of relevant and challenging problems that align with curricular goals. Teachers should provide clear instructions and establish criteria for success. Collaboration with peers can also be integrated to enhance problem-solving skills.

Assessment of problem-solving tasks should focus on both the process and the outcome. EFL teachers can use rubrics to evaluate students' problem-solving strategies, reasoning, and final solutions. Providing feedback throughout the problem-solving process helps students refine their approaches and

improve their problem-solving abilities (Graham & Perin, 2007). Self-assessment and peer assessment can also contribute to a deeper understanding of problem-solving techniques.

Professional development for EFL teachers is essential in effectively implementing problem-solving tasks. Training can help educators develop strategies for designing and facilitating problem-solving activities and for assessing EFL student performance in this context (Cuban, 2001). Teachers should also engage in continuous learning to stay updated on best practices and new methodologies.
Integrating technology into problem-solving tasks can enhance the learning experience. Tools such as simulation software, modelling applications, and collaborative platforms can provide students with additional resources and perspectives. Technology can also facilitate more complex problem-solving scenarios and offer interactive ways to explore solutions (Merrill, 2002). By incorporating technology, educators can enrich problem-solving tasks and support EFL student learning in innovative ways.

1.1.1.4. Critical Reading and Writing Exercises

Critical reading and writing exercises are designed to enhance students' analytical and evaluative skills. Critical reading involves questioning, analyzing, and interpreting texts, while critical writing requires constructing well-supported arguments and engaging with various perspectives. These exercises promote deeper understanding and effective communication skills among EFL learners (Facione, 2011). To implement critical reading and writing exercises, EFL teachers should select diverse and challenging texts that stimulate thoughtful analysis and discussion. Providing clear guidelines and structured frameworks for reading and writing tasks can help EFL students develop their skills. Incorporating activities such as annotated readings, essays, and peer reviews can enhance their critical thinking and writing abilities (Bean, 2011). Assessment of critical reading and writing should focus on clarity of argument, depth of analysis, and use of evidence. Rubrics can be useful for evaluating EFL students' ability to engage with texts critically and produce coherent and persuasive writing.

Providing constructive feedback and opportunities for revision is crucial for helping EFL learners improve their critical reading and writing skills. Professional development for EFL teachers can support the effective implementation of critical reading and writing exercises. Workshops and training programs can provide educators with strategies for teaching critical reading and writing, as well as methods for assessing and providing feedback on EFL students' work. Collaboration with colleagues can also enhance teaching practices and share successful strategies. Incorporating technology into critical reading and writing exercises can offer additional resources and tools for EFL learners. Digital annotation tools, online databases, and collaborative writing platforms can support EFL students in analyzing texts and developing their writing. Technology can also facilitate peer review processes and provide new ways for EFL learners to engage with texts and produce written work (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Castek, 2004).

1.1.1.5. Integration of Real-World Issues into the Curriculum

Integrating real-world issues into the curriculum helps EFL learners connect academic content with contemporary problems and contexts. This approach fosters relevance and engagement by linking classroom learning to real-life situations. It also encourages them to think critically about the impact of their learning on the world around them. To effectively integrate real-world issues, educators should identify relevant issues that align with curriculum objectives and EFL learners interests. Lessons and projects can be designed to explore these issues from multiple perspectives, incorporating various disciplines and promoting interdisciplinary learning. Collaboration with community organizations or experts can provide additional insights and resources (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Assessment of projects involving real-world issues should focus on EFL students' ability to analyze and apply knowledge in practical contexts. Rubrics can evaluate students' understanding of the issue, their problem-solving approaches, and their ability to propose feasible solutions.

Reflective practices, such as journaling or presentations, can also help EFL leaners articulate their learning and its real-world implications (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004). Professional

development can support EFL teachers in integrating real-world issues into their curriculum. Training programs can offer strategies for identifying relevant issues, designing interdisciplinary projects, and assessing EFL students' outcomes. Collaboration with peers and community partners can also enhance the implementation of real-world issues in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Technology can play a significant role in integrating real-world issues into the curriculum. Online resources, multimedia tools, and virtual field trips can provide EFL leaners with diverse perspectives and up-to-date information on contemporary issues. Technology can also facilitate collaboration with experts and peers, enriching EFL leaners' understanding of real-world problems and potential solutions (Hattie, 2009).

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore and evaluate strategies for enhancing critical thinking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Beninese secondary schools. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. A sample of 30 EFL teachers and 200 EFL learners from various secondary schools across Benin was selected to ensure representation and diversity across regions and school types.

2.1. Research Instruments
2.1.1. Questionnaires for EFL Teachers

The EFL teacher questionnaire aims to gather insights into teachers' approaches, challenges, and experiences with fostering critical thinking skills in their learners. The questionnaire includes sections on teaching practices, professional development, and perceptions of learner engagement. EFL teachers are asked to rate the frequency of their use of specific critical thinking strategies. Additionally, they should provide information on the resources and training they have received to support critical thinking instruction, along with their perceptions of these resources' effectiveness. The questionnaire also explores the challenges teachers face in implementing critical thinking strategies, including issues related to student engagement, curriculum constraints, and classroom management. Teachers are asked to identify the most common obstacles they encounter. Finally, the questionnaire asks EFL teachers to identify their most successful critical thinking activities and their impact on EFL students' learning.

2.1.2. Questionnaires for EFL Learners

The EFL learner questionnaires aim to collect data on students' experiences and perceptions of critical thinking activities within their English language classes. The questionnaires include questions about the types and frequency of critical thinking tasks students encounter. Students are asked to rate how often they engage in these activities. The questionnaires also explore learners' views on the effectiveness of these tasks in their classes and how engaging and challenging they find them. Finally, the questionnaires address any barriers EFL learners face when participating in critical thinking tasks, such as difficulties in understanding the tasks, lack of confidence, and any perceived lack of support from their teacher.

2.1.3. Interviews with EFL Teachers

Semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers delve into their experiences and perspectives on implementing strategies to enhance critical thinking skills among their learners. Each interview begins by discussing the most frequent critical thinking tasks that teachers use in class and how they integrate these activities into their lesson plans. The conversation also covers their views on the adequacy and effectiveness of available resources. EFL teachers are additionally prompted to share their experiences with obstacles such as student resistance, limited class time, or insufficient resources. Finally, the interviews explore teachers' observations on the impact of critical thinking activities on EFL learners'

learning and development, providing a comprehensive view of the practical aspects of teaching critical thinking in EFL contexts in Benin.

2.1.4. Classroom Observation

In addition to the questionnaires and interviews, classroom observations have provided further insights into how EFL teachers implement critical thinking strategies and their impact on EFL learners' engagement. Classroom observations were conducted in various secondary schools with the permission of school authorities. These observations focused on identifying how EFL teachers implement critical thinking strategies and how these strategies affect EFL learners' engagement.

3. Results
3.1. Findings from Questionnaires.
3.1.1. Teachers' Responses

The following results were obtained from questionnaires administered to EFL teachers.

Table 1.
Frequency of teaching critical thinking strategies.

Teaching frequency	Frequency	Percentage
Always	20	67.7%
Rarely	10	33.3%
Never	00	00%
Total	30	100%

Table 1 shows that a majority of EFL teachers (66.7%) reported always using critical thinking strategies in their classes, while 33.3% rarely use them.

Table 2.
EFL teachers' perceptions of training and resources.

Statement	Positive answers	Negative answers	Total
EFL teachers are well trained	08	22	30
The resources are effective and efficient	00	30	30
EFL teachers face several challenges	30	00	30

Table 2 indicates that a minority of EFL teachers (26.7%) perceive themselves as well trained, while a majority (73.3%) feel they are not sufficiently trained in critical thinking instruction. All teachers (100%) reported that the available resources are not effective. Furthermore, all teachers (100%) acknowledged that they face several challenges in implementing critical thinking strategies.

Table 3.
The impact of critical thinking tasks on EFL learners.

Impact of CT tasks on learners	Positive	Negative
Great impact	30	00

The analysis of this Likert scale shows that all respondents (100%) indicated that the teaching of critical thinking activities has a great impact on EFL learners.
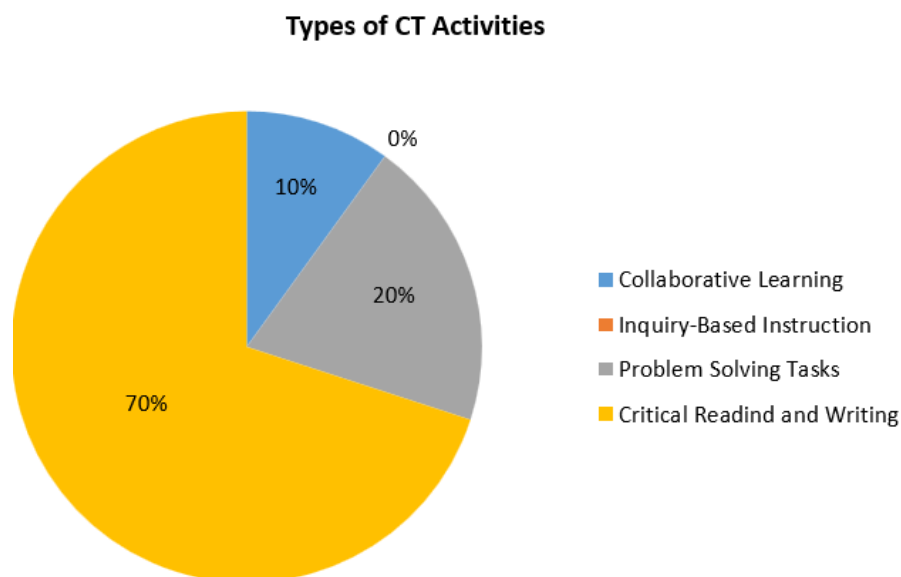
3.1.2. EFL Learners' Results

Types of CT Activities

Figure 1.
Types of critical thinking tasks.

Figure 1 shows the types of critical thinking tasks reported by EFL learners. The data indicates that 10% of learners reported engaging in collaborative learning activities, while no learners (0%) reported experiencing inquiry-based instruction. 20% of learners reported practicing problem-solving tasks, and 70% reported practicing critical reading and writing exercises.
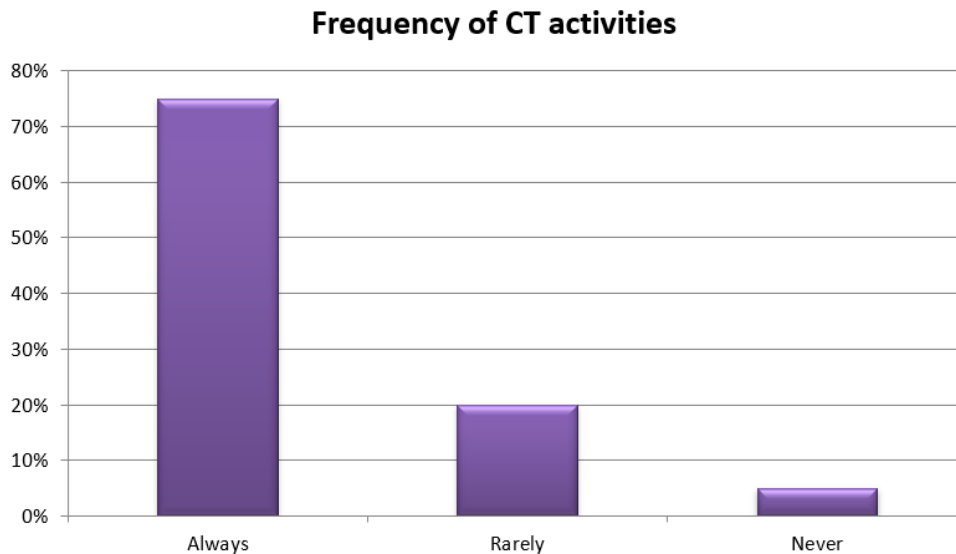
Frequency of CT activities

Figure 2.
Learning frequency of critical thinking tasks.

Throughout the analysis of this figure, 75% of the respondents said that they always do a specific critical thinking activity in class, 20% of them approved that they rarely practice specific CT tasks in their class, and 05% said they never do critical thinking activities in class.
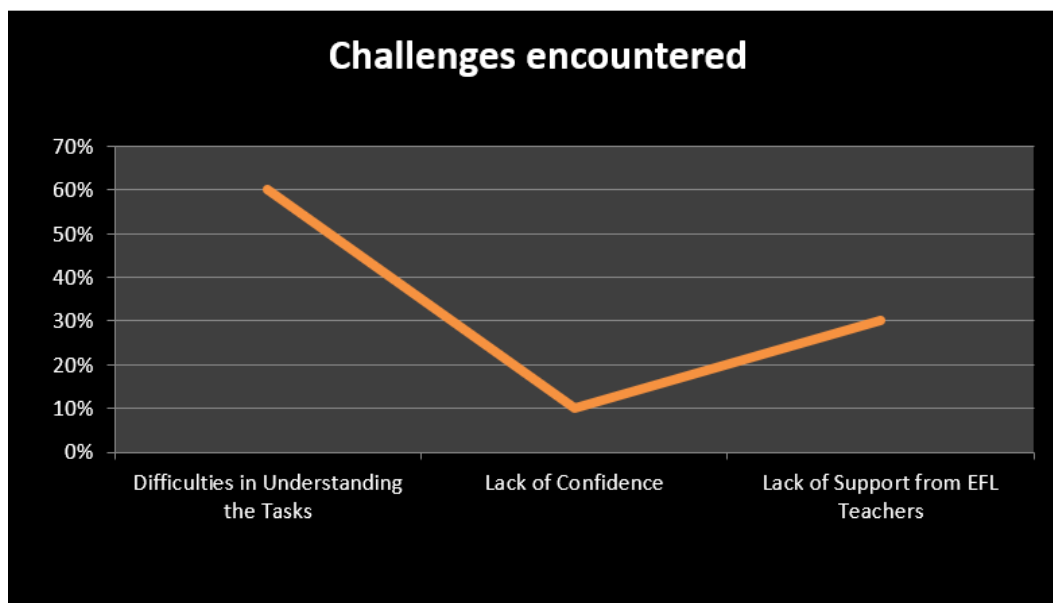
Figure 3.
EFL challenges in class.

While analyzing figure 3, 60% of EFL learners affirmed that they have difficulties in understanding critical thinking tasks, 10% said they lack confidence during CT activities, and 30% pointed that they lack support from their teachers during these activities.

3.1.3. Classroom Observation Report

Classroom observations were conducted in four EFL classes located in different areas of Benin to further investigate how EFL teachers implement critical thinking strategies and their impact on learner engagement.

Observations revealed that some EFL teachers effectively employed strategies such as critical reading and writing exercises, problem-solving tasks, and analysis of texts to encourage critical thinking. In one observed upper sixth class, the teacher had students write about a contemporary issue, prompting them to construct and defend arguments. The classroom environment was interactive, with students actively participating and demonstrating increased engagement when given opportunities to discuss their work and challenge each other's views.

However, observations also highlighted variations in the effectiveness of these strategies. In some classes, critical thinking activities were well-integrated into the lesson plans, with clear objectives and structured guidance from the teacher. In other sessions, however, the implementation of critical thinking tasks seemed less effective due to unclear instructions or insufficient support. As a result, some EFL learners appeared confused or disengaged, indicating that the effectiveness of the strategies depended heavily on the teacher's approach and preparation.

Furthermore, classroom dynamics played a significant role in the success of critical thinking activities. In observations where the teacher created a supportive and open atmosphere, EFL learners felt more comfortable sharing their ideas and participating in critical activities. The use of formative feedback and encouragement also contributed to a positive learning environment. However, in classrooms where the atmosphere was less supportive, EFL learners were less likely to engage fully in critical thinking exercises.

4. Discussion

This study explored the effectiveness of critical thinking instruction in Beninese EFL classrooms. Findings from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations highlight the importance of critical thinking skills in EFL education and the challenges faced by teachers in implementing these strategies effectively.

The data reveals that while most EFL teachers acknowledge the importance of critical thinking skills, they also face significant obstacles in providing effective instruction. The study found that 66.7% of EFL teachers always use critical thinking activities in their classrooms, while 33.3% rarely use them. This finding suggests a need for further professional development opportunities for EFL teachers in Benin, focusing on effective strategies for incorporating critical thinking into EFL instruction.

The study further revealed that a majority of EFL teachers (73.3%) reported they are not well-trained in critical thinking instruction, and all teachers (100%) indicated that the available resources are not effective or efficient. These findings align with previous research, which highlights the significant challenges faced by EFL teachers in implementing critical thinking strategies (Akinola & Oladipo, 2020; Adeyemi & Afolabi, 2018). These challenges include limited teacher training, inadequate resources, and a cultural emphasis on memorization.

To address these challenges, ongoing professional development programs focused on innovative teaching methods can help educators stay current with best practices and adapt their instruction to better support critical thinking (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Furthermore, providing teachers with access to authentic materials, such as news articles and multimedia resources, can enhance critical thinking by providing students with relevant contexts for applying their language skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

Integrating technology into the EFL curriculum can make critical thinking instruction more dynamic and effective (Warschauer, 2011). Educational apps, online forums, and collaborative platforms can offer interactive and engaging tools that facilitate collaborative learning and provide diverse opportunities for critical analysis.

Cultural norms and values can influence EFL students' attitudes toward questioning and debate (Holliday, 2010). EFL teachers should be mindful of these cultural factors and adapt their approaches to create a culturally responsive learning environment that supports critical thinking.

All teachers (100%) recognized the importance of integrating critical thinking exercises into the EFL curriculum for understanding their effectiveness. The importance of systematic evaluation to assess the outcomes of teaching methods is emphasized (Hattie, 2009). Gathering data on EFL students' analytical and evaluative abilities can provide insights into the success of these integration efforts and inform future improvements.

As far as classroom observations are concerned, the results revealed that EFL teachers employed various critical thinking strategies. Observations also indicated that when critical thinking tasks were well-integrated into lesson plans with clear objectives and structured guidance, student involvement was notably high. This finding is supported by Liu and Zhang (2018), who found that effective critical thinking instruction positively impacts EFL learners' performance and engagement.

However, the report also highlights variability in the effectiveness of these strategies. In some classes, the lack of clear instructions or adequate support led to student confusion and disengagement. This aligns with Walsh and Sattes (2005), who emphasize the importance of clear communication and effective questioning in deepening student engagement. The report also found that in more supportive environments, students were more comfortable sharing ideas and engaging in critical thinking activities.

5. Recommendations and Suggestions

To enhance the critical thinking skills of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Beninese secondary schools, it is crucial to adopt a multifaceted approach involving EFL teachers, learners, school authorities, and the government. These stakeholders must work collaboratively to develop and implement effective strategies that foster critical thinking, a key skill in language acquisition and overall

cognitive development. For EFL teachers, the focus should be on integrating critical thinking into the curriculum. Teachers can incorporate activities that challenge students to analyze, evaluate, and create rather than just memorize. For instance, using problem-solving tasks, debates, and discussions on various topics can stimulate learners' analytical skills. EFL teachers should also provide guidance on how to construct arguments and support opinions with evidence. Professional development programs should be established to equip them with techniques and resources for teaching critical thinking.

EFL learners themselves need to adopt a proactive role in developing their critical thinking skills. Active participation in discussions and projects that require them to think critically about different perspectives is essential. EFL students can benefit from using metacognitive strategies, such as reflecting on their thought processes and questioning their assumptions. Creating a learning environment that promotes curiosity and intellectual risk-taking will support their growth in this area. School authorities play a pivotal role in creating an environment conducive to critical thinking. Schools should implement policies that prioritize the development of critical thinking across all subjects, not just in language classes. This can include revising curricula to integrate critical thinking components, supporting cross-disciplinary projects, and investing in resources such as libraries and digital tools. Schools should also foster a culture that values and rewards critical engagement and innovative thinking among students and staff.

The government can support these initiatives by developing national educational policies that emphasize critical thinking and its importance in language learning. This includes setting standards and guidelines for incorporating critical thinking into the curriculum and providing funding for teacher training and educational resources. Additionally, the government should support research and development programs focused on effective teaching strategies for critical thinking. Collaboration with educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies can further enhance the implementation of these strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study evaluated and implemented various instructional strategies to enhance the critical thinking skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Beninese secondary schools. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection. This method included questionnaires for 30 EFL teachers and 200 EFL learners, interviews with EFL teachers, and classroom observations to assess the impact of the interventions on students' cognitive skills.

The findings revealed that while some EFL teachers use specific critical thinking tasks with their learners, the majority seem to neglect these activities, potentially due to their teaching experiences and challenges with EFL learners. Moreover, EFL learners face challenges such as understanding the language used in critical thinking tasks and receiving adequate support from their teachers.

The study had several limitations. The research was conducted with a relatively small and geographically limited sample, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the integration of technology into the curriculum was not fully explored in this study.

Future research should focus on addressing these limitations by investigating the role of cultural factors in shaping critical thinking skills and exploring the integration of digital tools in the learning process to further enhance the understanding and effectiveness of critical thinking strategies in EFL education. By continuing to explore these areas, researchers can contribute to the development of more effective and culturally responsive critical thinking instruction in EFL contexts like Benin.

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