
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teaching Critical Thinking to Young Learners: A Review of Educational Practices and Pedagogical Approaches

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| ABSTRACT

The teachability of critical thinking skills in young learners has attracted growing scholarly attention, with researchers emphasising the need for early instructional intervention to foster higher-order cognitive development. This study, therefore, explores the rationale, instructional approaches, learning models, and pedagogical strategies associated with critical thinking instruction in early education. The literature consistently argues that learners are not innately equipped with critical thinking abilities and therefore require structured guidance to develop these competencies from an early age. Moreover, evidence suggests that young learners can engage in complex cognitive processes when provided with appropriate instructional support and learning environments. This study synthesises key perspectives on critical thinking instruction, highlighting the shift from traditional content-focused teaching toward approaches that prioritise reasoning, analysis, and reflective judgment. It further examines various critical thinking learning models that promote active engagement, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative knowledge construction. In addition, the study identifies effective instructional strategies, including questioning techniques, problem-based learning, and metacognitive scaffolding, which support the systematic development of critical thinking skills. Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of embedding critical thinking instruction within early education curricula. By cultivating these skills from a young age, educational systems can better prepare learners for advanced academic challenges and lifelong learning, ensuring continuity in cognitive development as learners progress to higher levels of education.

| KEYWORDS

Critical thinking, young learners, teachability of thinking skills, critical thinking instruction, learning models, instructional strategies, early education.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In light of the literature on teaching critical thinking to young learners, scholars such as (Aizitkovic-Udi, 2015; Facione, 1990; Kenney, 2013; Lai, 2011; and Young, 1992) advocate the teaching of critical thinking to young learners, believing that it is essential, making teachers aware that they need to instruct students on how to think rather than what to think. Therefore, teaching critical thinking skills to young learners can be justified, given that they can engage in sophisticated cognitive processes compared to adults (Lai, 2011). In line with the researchers mentioned earlier, Aizitkovic-Udi (2015) has more recently revealed that students should be introduced to an environment that promotes critical thinking from the early stages of their education. To support the views mentioned earlier, Kenney (2013) reports that learners do not naturally possess critical thinking skills and therefore must receive training and preparation to develop these skills from a young age. In brief, the introduction of teaching critical thinking skills from a young age ensures the development of such skills in universities and higher levels of education Young (1992), and so studies in the field of critical thinking instruction in secondary schools are essential, as stated by Coughlin (2010), demonstrating

that high schools are required to be educational institutions that engage students in meaningful, real-world, cooperative projects; that actively promotes the development of life skills necessary for success in the 21st century.

2. Teachability of critical thinking skills to young learners

Critical thinking, much like other essential academic skills, is an ability that can be cultivated over time using a systematic and intentional approach (Hatcher & Spencer, 2005). This involves engaging in processes such as analysing information, evaluating evidence, and synthesising ideas, which enhance one's ability to reason effectively. The importance of critical thinking extends beyond the classroom; it is fundamental for achieving academic success and is relevant at all educational levels, from elementary school through higher education (Chaffee, 1992). Developing this skill empowers students to navigate complex problems, make informed decisions, and participate more actively in their learning environments.

For the purpose of teaching critical thinking skills to young learners, Landsman and Gorski (2007) noted that elementary school students need to develop critical thinking skills to be active citizens in a global economy. Thomas et al. (2009) emphasise that students may face challenges in the 21st-century workplace without such skills. In addition, Costa (2008) reasoned that individuals can think from birth, and concepts and mental processes emerge early in life, according to Mansilla and Gardner (2008). Critical thinking is suitable for primary school pupils, that it ought to be taught to them early on (Kennedy et al., 1991), and that they ought to be given opportunities to practice critical thinking (Burke et al., 2007).

Since young learners will be the new generation of the future, they need to develop their critical thinking skills. Acquiring critical thinking abilities enables children to make deliberate, methodical, and rational judgments and critically assess different perspectives. Teachers and parents can foster the development of these abilities, resulting in favourable attitudes, strong traits, principles, and character. For instance, young individuals with a critical thinking attitude are more inclined to exhibit diligence, responsibility, scepticism, and determination.

Cultivating critical thinking abilities in young children is a gradual and transformative process that empowers them in their daily endeavours. The propensity of a youngster for critical thinking becomes apparent when they display a curious disposition towards the many objects in their surroundings. In contrast to others, critical thinkers can collect, analyse, and critically assess information rather than accept or reject ideas without hesitation. Demonstrating children's critical thinking skills is evidence of their inherent capacity. During the observational phase of an activity, children with critical thinking abilities demonstrate the capacity to recognise and adjust to new elements, offer constructive and perceptive comments, and distinguish parallels and differences in their observations.

The prevailing notion in education is that adult learners benefit more significantly from incorporating critical thinking into language learning and teaching, as it enhances their speaking and writing skills. However, it is important to recognise that developing thinking abilities is a lifelong pursuit. Hence, learning strategies that emphasise critical thinking can also positively impact students from a very young age. Despite this recognition, there needs to be more research focused on critical thinking and other high-order thinking abilities (HOTs) in young learners, highlighting the need for further exploration and support, particularly from educators. Paying exceptional attention to the decision to teach critical thinking to young learners, it should be stated that a stance of refusal was developed and advocated by the researchers influenced by Piaget's works on children's cognitive development. Accordingly, it was argued that teaching critical thinking to young learners is not applicable because children lack the cognitive abilities to perform the operations necessary to think critically (Kennedy et al., 1991).

Subsequently, numerous investigations threw light on this aspect and reported the opposite. Contrary to the abovementioned standpoint, Lai (2011) sees that there can be a place for teaching critical thinking skills to young learners because, just like adults, they can engage in complex levels of thinking. Agreeing with the latter researcher, Aizitkovic-Udi (2015) has recently found that students should be introduced to critical-thinking environments in the early stages of their educational journey, highlighting that developing critical-thinking skills is time-consuming. In line with this, Kenney (2013) argues that because learners are not born with critical thinking skills, they need to be trained and prepared to think critically at an early age.

In the same context, Facione (1990) states that critical thinking instruction should be "an integral part of elementary school education" (p. 27), which is in total contrast to the claims of delaying teaching critical thinking until high school or university level. More support for this is provided by Fisher (1999), who emphasised the idea that the child is born with "an elastic mind capable of being stretched in all directions" (p. 58). In very plain words, Silva (2009) contends that there is no specific age at which children can start thinking in a complex manner, meaning that the argument of considering young learners as concrete thinkers is not generally valid. Similarly, Young (1992) claimed that teaching critical thinking skills can be initiated gradually at an early age to guarantee the fostering of more sophisticated thinking skills at the upper level of education, including the secondary school and university levels.

Secondary school students are required to obtain a high school diploma and a baccalaureate, after which they can choose to pursue higher education at a university or seek employment. They must acquire the critical thinking skills necessary to function in a global society. Therefore, secondary education plays a vital role in developing these skills among students. In this regard, Coughlin (2010) states that high schools must be contexts that engage students in deep, real-world, and collaborative work, assume accountability for developing 21st-century skills, and employ a broad range of evaluation methods to track students' progress in developing these abilities. For this purpose, the EFL classroom is considered a conducive place for developing the habits of mind and for training learners to construct knowledge and contribute to learning through experimenting with different skills that can result in deep, insightful critical thinking. In this way, secondary schools will be relevant to students' needs and growth by teaching skills that help them succeed in a modern, global economy. These skills involve creativity, innovation, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, teamwork, and critical thinking (Coughlin, 2010).

The essence of critical thinking is the ability to analyse and adapt to new situations because critical thinking trains learners to think logically, as affirmed by Paul and Elder (2008) when they claim that critical thinking offers a means of mental education. Young EFL learners, hence, need to possess the ability to think critically when they read, write or speak in class. According to Cooper and Patton (2001), experts acknowledge that having facts on hand by itself is insufficient in this day of constantly changing occupations and ever-expanding information, which means that everything is open to interpretation. Facts, therefore, are not enough since people need to be taught how to think. (Cooper & Patton, 2001)

As a consequence, critical thinking is very crucial for the time being, and it is a determining factor of success in all domains; as explained by Cottrell (2005), being successful in almost all professions necessitates the requirement of having good critical thinking skills, whether for study or work. People must think critically about what they hear, see, do, read, write and speak. They must also apply critical thinking to decipher new situations and events (Cottrell, 2005). When students are taught in a classroom environment centred on a philosophy of critical thinking, they become well prepared for the future. Furthermore, critical thinking is a cognitive process encompassing the generation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of diverse information derived from observations, experiences, and reflections. In addition, critical thinking does not entail rigorous thinking; instead, it promotes intellectual curiosity by formulating how-and-why questions, collecting verified data, being willing to disagree, and integrating new concepts or ideas into conclusions. (Cottrell 2005)

In brief, educators who use the critical thinking-based approach to instruction can train their students to reflect on and evaluate the validity of their reasoning, a kind of self-assessment that could better prepare students for success in the future. In this regard, Coughlin (2010) asserts that students' academic, professional, and personal success is greatly influenced by acquiring 21st-century skills, which are highly valued nowadays. The latter skills may sound new, but it is worth noting that some of them are not new but have gained newfound significance recently, and critical thinking as a 21st-century skill has always been crucial and ever-present (Silva, 2009).

3. Critical thinking instruction

Incorporating critical thinking into the curriculum is essential for students to acquire 21st-century skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). While schools may meet yearly progress requirements, they are not adequately preparing students to compete in the global market. The school system is failing to sufficiently prepare the future leaders of the country (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). Students must possess critical thinking skills to succeed and remain competitive in the workforce of the future. Hence, improving instruction is a crucial way to achieve good learning results; as Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) state, "the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction" (p. 111).

According to Wagner (2008), teachers are not integrating critical thinking into the curriculum; instead, they are preparing pupils for standardised assessments, which are reducing students' opportunities for success in a global marketplace; rather than concentrating on testing. Therefore, educators should be in charge of helping students develop critical thinking skills to help them be prepared for the future.

Critical thinking is one of the seven survival skills that Wagner (2008) listed for success in the workplace, concluding that critical thinking should be taught to students. To improve student achievement in general, educational systems should incorporate critical thinking skills. Paul (1995) concurred, claiming that teaching students to think critically was the first step in equipping them for the twenty-first century's personal, social, and professional requirements. Furthermore, there is a deficit in critical thinking among high school graduates, and in order to prepare children for success in a fiercely competitive globalised society, educators must strike a balance between a challenging curriculum, the pressures of high-stakes testing, and assisting young people in developing critical thinking skills (Law & Kaufhold, 2009).

There are varied frameworks created by different scholars to enhance contemporary skills in the classroom, as well as frameworks that support the application of critical thinking. According to Snyder and Snyder (2008), there are four main barriers

to the integration of critical thinking instruction in schools: (a) the training of teachers, (b) insufficient knowledge and information for educators, (c) preconceived notions about critical thinking, and (d) a lack of time for skill instruction. To prepare students to be critical-thinking citizens, the conventional purpose of education must be changed to include teaching the Four Cs: creativity, communication, cooperation, and critical thinking. According to Paul (1992), content coverage is prioritised in typical classrooms above the development of higher-order thinking abilities like critical thinking. After speaking with educators, Sternberg and Martin (1988) found that many of them thought they "teach for thinking", but they weren't sure if their pupils were learning how to think (p. 570). Teachers will need to adopt new perspectives on what is taught, how it is taught, and how pupils are evaluated to ascertain what they have learned, according to Costa (2001). Therefore, to educate students to think critically, educators must be knowledgeable about critical thinking techniques.

According to King (2012), new creative methods of teaching and learning are necessary to promote education and the development of innovative skills. Schools must intentionally educate critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and creativity to foster the skills necessary for future vocations and a global society. Kennedy et al. (1991) expressed concern about the ongoing cycle of subpar methods employed in educational institutions. According to Kennedy et al. (1991), teachers will continue to produce pupils who are unprepared for society if they follow the current education course. Concerns regarding textbooks, which do not pose difficult questions, instead requiring students to recall material. Rote memorisation helps pupils remember facts; it does not foster the critical thinking skills necessary for better learning. According to Kennedy et al.'s findings, teachers only cover content and "avoid thought-provoking work and activities" (p. 662). Restructuring the educational system is challenging since teachers impart knowledge in the same way they were instructed, as Kennedy et al. (1991) noted.

Using traditional methods to teach students what to think rather than how to think raises questions about instructional approaches. In keeping with this notion, Elder (2000) questioned the traditional classroom, claiming it does not develop the intelligence required for success. Improving reasoning and thinking skills was one of the National Education Goals Panel's (1999) objectives, which said that "every school in America will ensure require all students learn to use their minds, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy?" (p. vi). "Students need to understand why they are learning, what they are learning, and how this knowledge can be put to constructive use," (Gardner, 2006, p. 142). Critical thinking abilities can be developed in pupils by thinking critically about their thinking (Paul et al., 1993). There has been discussion in education for the past 20 years about teaching thinking skills through content. Thinkers like Piaget and Dewey have supported using critical thinking skills in the classroom. Although critical thinking has always been a part of human development, it has received more attention since the 1980s (Ennis, 1993).

Which teaching strategy will be employed to impart critical thinking skills is a question that educators should think about. "Through course-specific content or a course in critical thinking," according to Bessick (2008), is how explicit training or infusion of critical thinking would take place (p. 7). Students' critical thinking improves whether it is explicitly taught through a critical thinking course or through course-specific content. Students should receive clear and direct instruction in order to successfully engage in critical thinking. According to Snyder and Snyder (2008), critical thinking is a learned discipline, and it needs to be continuously incorporated into the curriculum in the same way that the scientific method is taught. Although most teachers believe implicit instruction is becoming less effective, Fisher (2001) found that most students are expected to acquire critical-thinking abilities through this method. Fisher also stated that educators believed critical thinking teaching should be given directly to students to boost their performance.

According to Dewey (1938), learning should be encouraged through meaningful tasks that students can find significant. Critical thinking abilities should be explicitly and directly taught to students by including them in content courses. Students should also be instructed on how to apply these skills across the curriculum. It is thought that one of the best ways to help students become more proficient thinkers is to teach them thinking skills through direct instruction (Beyer, 2001).

Cognitive theorists and educators continue to be highly interested in the topic of critical thinking CT, which has its roots in Socrates. According to Facione (1990), CT is a conscious and self-regulatory thought process that involves abilities like interpretation, analysis, assessment, inference, and questioning the validity of the evidence. Watson-Glaser (2010) states that the CT process entails the following skills: identifying the presence of a problem, challenging information sources and evidence accuracy, and comparing and contrasting various facts and evidence. To put it another way, the origin of the CT process can be understood as arriving at conclusions based on observations and knowledge that have been verified and challenged (Paul, 1992). Thus, CT helps people develop the ability to think clearly and accurately about their surroundings. Since CT talent involves logical and reflective thinking, as defined by Ennis (1985), people who use it to make decisions about what to believe or how to act seek out reliable information. Thinking, therefore, fosters the development of one's own thought processes, which one then takes control of and shapes in accordance with the intellectual standards one sets for oneself (Paul and Elder, 2019).

Studies have taken different approaches to teaching critical thinking (Beyer, 1987). However, earlier research in the literature suggests that three fundamental methods are frequently employed in the instruction of CT skills. These methods include

content-based, skill-based, and mixed-based teaching. The first of these methods teaches CT skills by including them in the content of the course material. Teaching CT skills outside of context is pointless because thinking skills require an individual to think about material or subject, and because there is no single set of critical thinking skills that is appropriate for all subjects or contents (McPeck, 2016). As a result, critical thinking skills must be taught in all courses and incorporated into educational programs, allowing students to use their knowledge in many courses and in real life.

According to Sternberg (1986), the skill-based approach to teaching CT contends that CT skills should be taught separately from the curriculum's course content. The 12 dimensions of CT were established by Ennis (1991), and all of these dimensions are teachable and learnable for students. As a result, teaching these abilities in a distinct course based on skill is not problematic (Ennis, 1991). When teaching CT skills in a course using a content-based approach, the course material is prioritised over the CT skills. Therefore, the skill-based teaching strategy is more effective in bringing CT skills and employing them in other courses because it allows one to avoid focusing on and repeating the course material subjects (Ennis, 1991). The mixed teaching strategy involves teaching critical thinking on a skill level and then moving on to a content level. As a result, proponents of each strategy highlight various benefits or drawbacks of critical thinking. Given this knowledge, it is impossible to determine whether the strategy produces better teaching outcomes for critical thinking.

Critical thinking has been emphasised dramatically in education and is involved in different educational interventions for developing cognitive skills and curricula. As a result, scholars in educational research have introduced varied definitions of the concept. The cognitive domain of human beings has attracted the interest of educators and psychologists, who have sought to recognise the intellectual skills people use in thinking. Bloom (1956) was the first to identify the nature of cognitive skills. Bloom (1956) is known for classifying cognitive skills into six levels of thinking, referred to in the literature as Bloom's taxonomy (1956). Bloom's came out with the following six levels of thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These levels of thinking vary according to their complexity, ranging from the lowest cognitive level, recalling information, to the sixth cognitive level, evaluating (Bloom, 1956).

4. Critical thinking learning models

The cognitivist theory emphasises children's cognitive abilities. Cognitivists argue that language learning involves cognitive development and occurs simultaneously, emphasising that learning happens through experimentation and knowledge construction. In light of this claim, language learning can be regarded as a process of construction/building that is neither innate nor imitative. Considering the previously mentioned ideas, implementing cognitive theory in foreign language learning shows learners as active participants in the FL classroom. Considering such a principle, cognitive theory highlights the role of students' abilities in construction and the contribution of society and culture to the learning process. In addition, the learner-centred approach to language teaching is another learning model which provides more opportunities for learners to be critical thinkers in the classroom. As the name implies, a learner-centred approach focuses more on the learner's or the student's role in learning and teaching. With such an emphasis on the learner, this approach makes us view learners as active classroom participants. In other words, they are supposed to bring their knowledge, experiences, education, and ideas to learning new information. This approach differs from a traditionally teacher-centred approach, which includes all the methods reviewed above. Learner-centred pedagogy creates an environment that speaks to the heart of learning. It encourages students to deeply engage with the material, develop a dialogue, and reflect on their progress. In other words, instructional design should focus on providing tools and environments that help learners interpret the multiple perspectives of the world and create their own world ([Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005](#)).

In its main principle, the learner-centred approach aims to help students develop their critical thinking skills. This can happen by guaranteeing the characteristics below, suggested by [Karagiorgi and Symeou \(2005\)](#):

- Students work in groups or alone, depending on the activity.
- Focus is on both students and the instructor.
- The instructor provides feedback and corrective action when needed.
- Students may answer each other's questions and use the instructor as a resource.
- Students evaluate their learning, which is supported by the instructor.

Additionally, the competency-based instruction (CBI) is an approach to language teaching that integrates all the requisite knowledge, expertise, and attitudes necessary to address practical problems or circumstances. It employs language, vocabulary, punctuation, and pronunciation to communicate proficiently in immediate circumstances. Moreover, it encompasses being linguistically, communicatively, and socio-linguistically proficient in the acquired language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, CBI aims to narrow the disparity between the knowledge acquired by students in the classroom and what they

encounter in practical scenarios. Examples of interactions include soliciting and providing information by engaging with individuals in marketplaces, hospitals, schools, and offices through the four language skills while maintaining concise communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In brief, CBI is viewed as an approach that emphasises the results of learning and focuses on the anticipated actions of the learners rather than the explicit knowledge they are supposed to acquire (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Regarding the functional and interactive aspects of language, CBI focuses on the specific and quantifiable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that students are expected to have at the conclusion of a course of study (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Additionally, task-based instruction is another learning model that teachers can use to teach and develop critical thinking skills. This type of instruction is communicative in nature because teachers use communicative tasks to teach the language (Ellis, 2017). More importantly, the task-based instruction focuses on learner autonomy, allowing learners to foster their critical thinking by engaging in tasks wherein students can give their opinions, express likes and dislikes, classify, evaluate and criticise (Ellis, 2017). In the same way, the project-based approach is another teaching model teachers can use to teach critical thinking.

5. Critical thinking learning strategies

The ability to think critically is necessary for pupils to acquire knowledge systematically and thoughtfully. Critical thinking skills enable students to recognise, comprehend, assess, evaluate, and draw conclusions from information more effectively. This leads to the ability of students to internalise the knowledge they have learned from teachers. Because of their interest and receptivity to new ideas, critical thinkers can also better participate actively in class discussions by raising more questions and demanding in-depth explanations of the covered topics. These qualities also, in part, support the development of their independence and inventiveness as learners. An essential component of research, problem-solving, and decision-making is critical thinking. As a result, pupils who are more critical thinkers are also more motivated, imaginative, independent, and decisive, which helps them perform better in the classroom. The significant concern is whether critical thinking skills can be taught to pupils. To respond to this query, Lin (2018) hypothesised that less proficient English speakers find it more challenging to participate in critical thinking exercises in EFL sessions. Instead of teaching students what critical thinking is and letting them figure it out independently, teachers can allow them to practice pertinent skills because critical thinking is a collection of abilities rather than knowledge (Lin, 2018).

Given that previous studies have stressed the importance of developing students' critical thinking in class, providing practical chances for learners to be critical thinkers remains crucial. More importantly, teaching critical thinking to young learners might be more challenging because they may initially lack the necessary linguistic knowledge. Accordingly, it is argued by Abrami et al. (2008) that critical thinking skills should be taught explicitly through designing teaching tasks which mainly require students in class to analyse analogies, make classifications or categories and identify relevant information. Another aspect that must be considered is that critical thinking skills exhibit different taxonomies. Suitable strategies to teach the skill of CT, therefore, can effectively foster these skills among students.

Similarly, Dehaan (2009) argues that using problem-solving tasks is effective in teaching critical thinking because such activities require learners to apply critical thinking skills. With these in mind, problem-solving activities, as suggested by Dehaan (2009) and endorsed by Abrami et al. (2008), are in-class tasks that use questioning techniques to intentionally require students to analyse, synthesise and evaluate. In this sense, Abrami et al. (2008) stress the idea that critical thinking skills cannot be developed and fostered through activities which target memorisation and repeating information, which is the case with teaching language content.

In addition, storytelling is an effective educational tool that cultivates students' critical thinking abilities by imparting knowledge and promoting active engagement with the content. Students are encouraged to analyse other views, assess knowledge, and relate it to their personal experiences through narratives. This technique fosters critical thinking and facilitates the construction of their understanding of the surrounding world. Through engagement with narratives, students cultivate the capacity to challenge assumptions, explore diverse perspectives, and enhance their ability to express their ideas coherently (Pham, 2021).

Like storytelling, participating in leisure reading activities is an effective means of improving critical thinking skills. When individuals engage in recreational reading, they encounter a variety of perspectives and concepts, enabling them to examine and assess information with greater depth. This method allows readers to contemplate other perspectives, establish connections, and formulate their interpretations, thus enhancing their critical thinking skills and capacity for informed decision-making. Leisure reading refers to reading in one's free time. It reflects the student's own choice of the nature of books to read at a specific time and in a particular place. In this respect, Cope (1997, p. 22) explains that "if we want our students to grow as readers and develop a lifelong love of reading, then we must trust them to choose literature that will inspire them to read more". So, when students are free to choose the storybooks they want to read, they feel more motivated to read and take responsibility for their choices. Students, in reality, get more engaged when they are allowed some freedom and self-selection of reading materials. This type of reading is not part of the school tasks, but it is an additional activity that the student does outside of school. Nell (1988) defines reading for pleasure as a form of play that allows people to experience different worlds using imagination. This kind of reading

needs to be promoted and, therefore, must be reviewed as well, since it dramatically impacts the student's success and achievement at school, provided that it is very likely to boost students' thinking skills.

Nowadays, leisure reading is considered an essential key element in the success of individuals and society. When the individual reads for pleasure, he or she acquires basic skills and competencies that can help him or her succeed at school, at home, at work and in society due to developing critical thinking skills. Reading for pleasure is very crucial for adolescents' educational success. Reading for pleasure can be considered a vital way to help raise educational standards. In this case, Krashen (1993, p. 85) supports and emphasises the value of reading for pleasure when he argues that children unconsciously acquire various language skills that people are concerned with. Children become qualified readers, foster comprehension ability, develop complex grammatical elements, enrich and develop a writing style, and polish and expand the student's vocabulary and spelling (Krashen, 1993). Reading for pleasure, therefore, is very important for school success since it develops the students' literacy levels.

Krashen (1993) also argues that free voluntary reading has tremendous benefits. For instance, the student's reading comprehension will improve, making complex academic texts easy and understandable. In addition, the students' writing style will improve, and they will be capable of composing a variety of prose and writing that renowned schools, professional institutions, and the scientific community accredit. Likewise, the students' vocabulary, spelling, and grammar will improve significantly if they devote a class or a course to teaching and expanding their vocabulary, spelling, or grammar (Krashen, 1993).

In addition to the skills mentioned above, Gold (1990) proposes other benefits, which he refers to as the transformative power of leisure reading. For instance, reading for pleasure can allow adolescents to learn about themselves and comprehend their feelings, anxieties, anger, and preferences. Furthermore, reading fiction can influence, change and shape the students' way of thinking and perceiving as the reader receives ideas from the text and contributes to the understanding of the text. Reading fiction, in short, is a powerful and influential factor that can bring about healthy change and reward creativity for students in developing their critical thinking skills.

According to Holden (2004), reading for pleasure is a vital gateway for developing personal, social, economic and civic life. Reading is, in fact, a prerequisite activity for individuals and societies to develop further. Hence, adolescents need to be equipped with reading skills, especially reading for pleasure, since they will be responsible for the future of their country. These skills are essential for an adolescent to meet the expectations and the requirements of the challenges of the 21st century.

In the same respect, Moore et al. (1999) demonstrate that adolescents are required to read further and write more than before in the history of humanity to enter the world of adults in the 21st century. This requirement is because adolescents will need more developed and advanced literacy levels to run their personal and professional duties effectively, and hence could act as responsible citizens. In addition, advanced literacy levels will help individuals in the 21st century manage and deal with the massive amount of information and knowledge available to run their households and manage their personal lives (Moore et al., 1999). Hence, literacy is crucial for adolescents to improve their ability to imagine, cope with, and sort out complex situations, and to create a better future for living.

Given the potential advantages of reading in leisure time, it is vital to motivate adolescents to read as much as possible and to exploit these advantages for their own and their community's benefit. This requires active and productive citizens who read effectively and meet the demands of the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

This study reinforces the argument that critical thinking is not an innate ability but a skill set that can and should be systematically developed from an early age. The synthesis of literature on critical thinking instruction, learning models, and pedagogical strategies shows that young learners can engage in complex cognitive processes when provided with appropriate instructional support. Teaching approaches that emphasise inquiry, reflection, and active engagement are particularly effective in fostering these skills. The findings further highlight the importance of integrating structured critical thinking instruction into early education curricula rather than postponing its development to higher levels of schooling. Learning models and instructional strategies such as problem-based learning, guided questioning, and metacognitive scaffolding play a crucial role in nurturing learners' analytical and evaluative abilities. Overall, introducing critical thinking education in early learning environments lays a strong foundation for continuous cognitive development. This early preparation not only enhances academic performance in later stages of education but also equips learners with essential lifelong skills needed for effective reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving in diverse contexts.

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