

Malian High School EFL Teachers' Perceived Constraints in Teaching for Critical Thinking

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Résumé

Bien que le domaine de la recherche sur la pensée critique au Mali soit mûr pour la recherche, aucune étude n'a été réalisée et la plupart des enseignants ne sont pas familiarisés avec la pensée critique. Par conséquent, le chercheur a organisé un atelier au cours duquel les concepts et des techniques d'enseignement de la pensée critique ont été présentés aux participants. La présente étude vise à connaître l'expérience des enseignants participants des contraintes qui affectent leur capacité à appliquer la pensée critique dans leurs classes. Pour atteindre cet objectif, une méthode qualitative, en particulier, les journaux de réflexion des enseignants ont été utilisés pour collecter des données auprès de cinq enseignants. Une réunion avec les participants a également eu lieu pour discuter des solutions possibles aux problèmes identifiés. Une analyse thématique des témoignages écrits des participants a révélé que les politiques scolaires, les classes surpeuplées, la motivation des apprenants et le temps requis pour les activités engagées constituent les principaux obstacles.

Mots clés : Enseignement, pensée critique, défis

Abstract

Although the area of research in critical thinking in Mali is ripe for research, not a single study has been done, and most teachers are nor familiar with critical thinking. Therefore, the researcher organized a workshop through which critical thinking concepts and instructional techniques were introduced to the participants. The present study aims to know the participating teachers' experience of constraints that are affecting their ability to apply critical thinking in their classrooms. To reach this aim, qualitative method, specifically, teachers' reflective journals were utilized to collect data from five EFL teachers. A meeting with the participants was also held to discuss possible solutions to the identified problems. A thematic analysis of the participants' written accounts revealed that school policies, overcrowded classrooms, the learners' motivation, and the required time on task for engaged activities constitute the major obstacles.

Key words : Teaching, critical thinking, challenges

1. Introduction

The Critical Thinking Community defines critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (Scriven & Paul, 2007, p. 1). Critical thinking has also been referred to as metacognition (Tempelaar, 2006) or thinking about thinking in order to improve it (Paul, 1992). As a way of defining the concept of critical thinking, many researchers have drawn connections to other skills, including metacognition, and creativity. Each of these related concepts are discussed below.

Metacognition refers to one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them... For example, I am engaging in meta-cognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A than B; if it strikes me that I should double-check C before accepting it as a fact... if I sense that I had better make a note of D because I may forget it... Meta-cognition refers, among other things, to the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes... usually in the service of some concrete goal or objective (Flavell, 1976, as summarized by Moseley, 2005). At the very least, metacognition can be seen as a supporting condition for critical thinking, in that monitoring the quality of one’s thought makes it more likely that one will engage in high-quality thinking.

Many researchers have also made connections between critical thinking and creativity (Bailin, 2002 ; Paul & Elder, 2006). Bailin (2002) argues that a certain amount of creativity is necessary for critical thought. Paul and Elder (2006) note that both creativity and critical thinking are aspects of “good,” purposeful thinking. As such, critical thinking and creativity are two sides of the same coin. Good thinking requires the ability to generate intellectual products, which is associated with creativity. However, good thinking also requires the individual to be aware, strategic, and critical about the quality of those intellectual products. As the authors note, “critical thinking without creativity reduces to mere skepticism and negativity, and creativity without critical thought reduces to mere novelty” (p. 35). Paul and

Elder (2006) point out that, in practice, the two concepts are inextricably linked and develop in parallel. Accordingly, the authors believe both creative and critical thinking ought to be integrated during instruction.

Lately, critical thinking scholars have acknowledged that critical thinking cannot be a mere teaching of skills, it is also important that individuals develop the dispositions to look at the world through a critical lens. Thus stressing that a critical thinker not only has the ability (the skills) to seek reasons, truth, and evidence, in a given situation, but also that he or she has the disposition to seek them (Facione, 1990 as summarized by Lai, 2011).

From the time of Socrates to now one of the most stated goals of education has been to improve critical thinking skills in the student. According to Fisher (2003, p.3) “The key function of education is to teach children to think critically, creatively and effectively”. In this twenty first century, it is logical to provide students with the skills necessary to deal with flow of information. Kagan (2003) makes this view clear: “In the face of the accelerating information explosion, having the student memorize one more fact is of little value compared to having the students learn how to categorize, analyze, synthesize, summarize, and apply information”.

However, Malian educators seem to have ignored this essential goal. In 1990, in his article “English for Developmental Purposes”, Gueye urged teacher training centers to put critical thinking at the core of their curriculum, yet reforms in English learning and teaching approaches in the direction of these skills have not yet received as much attention as they should. The Malian education system seems to use only memorization to produce knowledgeable learners.

Besides in Mali, very little opportunities are offered for a continuous professional development in teaching particularly for lower education teachers. As a response to this problem, Maiga (2021) conducted a research project through which he familiarized some high school teachers with critical thinking concepts and critical pedagogy. A workshop was organized on that effect. This action research project offered the teacher participants the opportunity to do things they did not know about because little progress has been made in changing the monotonous practices of language classrooms. After gaining insights

into critical thinking and its role in learners' education, the teachers showed a clear willingness to embrace the change was brought to them. This led them to change what they do in class. These changes aimed at enhancing language teaching to make it more thoughtful by pursuing new teaching practices.

Nevertheless, applying the changes they have learnt in their classrooms was not without difficulty for the participating teachers. Different constraints to integrating critical thinking in the classroom have been identified by a number of researchers. For example, Tan (2017) identified cultural challenges to the integration of critical thinking in classes in Singapore. Her study shows that the main cultural challenges are the dominant social expectation of teachers as knowledge transmitters and a perception that critical thinking is adversarial. Aliakbari (2012) conducted a survey of 100 educators for barriers to critical thinking implementation in Iran. The results revealed that students' attitudes and expectations, self-efficacy constraint and lack of critical thinking knowledge among teachers were reported as major obstacles in teachers' view. Besides, a prevalent theme that did arise during Reynolds' (2016) exploration of the barriers to teaching critical thinking in Texas Tech University was the feeling that time was a major factor. J. Portelli (1994) considers that taking critical thinking in its entirety seriously in Canada will make teachers have to face delicate and controversial situations, which at times, create conflicts and tensions. The author warns that any teacher who takes critical thinking seriously, as democracy requires, "must expect constantly to be embarrassed ... to be harassed, by his or her class, by his or headmaster, by parents" (p. 147). Portelli's concern is whether Canadian teachers and teacher educators are prepared to take this needed risk or whether they are tempted to set themselves as "little gods within the haven of institutional bureaucracy" (p.147). Another study by Al-Kindi and Al-Mekhlafi (2017) revealed that the course book, extra-curricular activities, and class size constitute some challenges that Omani EFL teachers face when teaching critical thinking. The authors particularly demanded assistance for teachers to get critical thinking course books and to get a clear understanding of the theories that are behind every task in those course books.

The present study aims to explore the barriers to critical thinking in the Malian context. It also attempts to find out solutions to the identified obstacles. To achieve these aims, the following research questions are addressed :

- What possible constraints or challenges are impeding improvement in teaching for critical thinking in Malian private high schools ?
- How can teachers overcome those challenges ?

This study may provide insight for policy makers regarding the barriers to teaching critical thinking within the classroom, possibly reviewing the functioning and privatization of secondary education. The Learners also will receive a benefit from teacher's being able to identify and discuss possible solutions to the difficulties in teaching critical thinking within the classroom.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

A qualitative approach was used to design this study. The teacher participants wrote reflective journals about their experiences. A reflective journal gives a voice to the writer and allows them to reflect on the processes of teaching and learning in order to decide on their future perspectives (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017 as summarized in Koné, 2021). The participating teachers' reflective journals allowed the researcher to get an insight into the situation and understand why these teachers were not using strategies that encourage their learners to get intellectually involved in the lessons. In addition, meetings were held with the participants to discuss possible solutions to the identified problems.

2.2. The participants

The sample involved five high school EFL teachers. They were all teaching in private high schools in Segou. All the participants volunteered to be respondents. They were selected because they participated in a workshop on integrating critical thinking in language learning and teaching curriculum. As a result, they would be able to better explain why they continue to use "*Drills and Kills*" at the

expense of critical thinking instructional strategies. Table 1 offers background information about the participants. The background characteristics include the gender, the age, and the number of teaching experience. The participants were simply numbered to ensure anonymity.

Table1: Participants' background information

Name	Gender	Age	Teaching experience
Teacher1	Male	36	7 years
Teacher2	Male	27	3 years
Teacher3	Male	29	3 years
Teacher4	Male	31	5 years
Teacher5	Male	28	4 years

2.3. *Danalysis*

A thematic analysis as described by Kiger and Varpio (2020) was used. The participants' reflective reports were manually analyzed and organized on the basis of the main ideas that emerged the most to explain the teachers' reluctance to teach for critical thinking.

3. Results and Discussion

The report and discussion of the findings are organized around the different themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the data with the purpose of explaining why the participants struggle to foster critical thinking in their classrooms. In order to answer the second research question "How can teachers overcome the challenges to active learning and critical thinking", some pedagogical recommendations were made.

3.1. Theme1 : Administrative Challenges

The pressure from the administration to increase test results constitutes a real impediment to creating more opportunities for critical thinking in most Malian private high schools. For example, Teacher5 asserted that his school principal noted him that only academic results matter. He added that by the end of every semester, it is a common practice for some private school principals to increase learners' grades in order to give the school a better reputation. This practice reflects how narrowly principles define education in some private high schools and how much we risk losing if teachers accept that definition. As teacher5 explained : My responsibility to be preparing learners to do well in the examinations and to raise the percentage of passes is always hanging over me". In this condition, this participant is likely to focus on drilling learners with rules as a learner's result in test scores has become the criterion of success. Several researchers (Landsman & Gorski, 2007 ; Wong, 2007) suggest focus on test scores undermines instructors' ability to address critical thinking in the classroom.

3.2. Theme2 : Short class periods

The participants mentioned that they only make sure that the learners learn the basic concepts of the courses not only to prepare them for the test, but also because they have little time to promote critical analysis of course information. In this regard, Teacher2 wrote:

I think one of the biggest constraints I must face is time. After my participation in the critical thinking program, I try to incorporate critical thinking in all my lessons, no matter what I am teaching or the activity I am doing, but this takes time. I do love using Socratic questioning, I do respect students' rhythms and I do make my best to let them find the answers for themselves, but sometimes I need to move faster. I have a syllabus to cover.

Indeed, the schedule can be a constraint because it determines how a school day functions. In most Malian high schools English is taught only once a week for 90 minutes in some classes. Therefore, teachers tend to adhere to the constraints of this time frame. Thinking, on the other hand, takes time for question posing and responding. Through the discussions, Teacher2 proposed a rather radical solution:

If you ask me for a possible solution to this problem I will tell you: change the students' curriculum! Eliminate some subjects and give others more hours. Things will be more balanced and teachers will have enough time to teach for critical thinking (Teacher2).

Obviously teacher2's proposition needs a lot more reflection. The other subjects have been integrated in the curriculum for valid reasons. Throughout the discussion, no readymade solution to short class periods and administration constraints could be found. To meet instructional goals concerning content coverage and critical thinking skills, one way could be to utilize online instructional strategies. The use of Blogs, for example, could be a good idea as blogs have become another learning platform for language teaching (Richardson, 2005). However, the problem is that access to high speed internet is still a luxury in Mali. In addition, more than the majority of the learners do not possess a personal computer and technological equipment. This was illustrated by the inability of the government to create online classes during the Covid19 lockdown. In fact, the learners were asked to follow classes through the national television.

3.3. Theme3 : Overcrowded Classroom

Among the five teachers who participated in the study, Teacher1 was the only one to have mentioned the difficulty of teaching in a large class (52 learners). However, in Mali, many teachers might find this number just right. In anyways what constitutes a large class is not really the researcher's concern here. What is important in the discussion is to recognize when to tweak instructional strategies to better cater to a large number of learners and workload.

The challenge to get everyone engaged was Teacher1's main concern. As a matter of fact, to teach for critical thinking requires learners to practice. However, in large classes, it can be a real challenge just getting learners engaged in activities. As the teacher gets the activities started it can often be difficult to manage the noise levels.

Nevertheless, language can be taught in large classes. The role of the teacher is crucial in determining the rate of language learning in the classroom. By re-organizing the classroom to allow more

opportunities for communicative interactions and on-task activities, students will be in a better position for learning the language.

To incorporate active learning in large classes does not have to be something that takes a lot of preparation. Teacher 1 and others in his situation can use a simple think-pair-share. This activity gives learners time to think through a problem on their own, talk about it with a peer, and then discuss it with the class. Using this classic active learning strategy is a great way to get learners actively involved in the learning process. But the teacher should not get into the trap of using the same activity every day. The teacher must challenge himself and his learners by adding new activities (small groups and individual writing exercises).

Teacher 1's main concern was the increased number of learners and the noise level in his classroom. However, that was not the only problem. He also mentioned problems of discipline in his classroom. Discipline problems were not of the concern of this investigating, but they constitute an impediment to a productive teaching. There are many reasons for problem behavior. It can stem from factors inside the classroom, or from outside factors. It is the role of the teacher to maintain discipline in the classroom.

During the discussions it has been recommended that the teachers take immediate action when dealing with rising problems. In the researcher's experience, learners often try to find the limits how the teacher can tolerate misbehavior. It is, then, important not to let things get out-of-hand, and to react to problems immediately.

However, it is better to deal with the problem quietly. Some teachers can be harsh toward their learners and often use threats. This attitude can keep the class quiet, yet using threats is not a good solution because teachers who threaten students with terrible punishments and then do not carry them out do both the class and themselves a disservice. The learners might stop taking them seriously.

When the problem has exploded, reseating can be a solution. An effective way of controlling a learner who is behaving badly is to make the learner sit in a different place immediately, troublesome learners should be separated.

Chuska (1977) suggested talks after class as a way to motivate learners to answer questions in class. It is the researcher's belief that

the same technique works with troublesome learners as well. When one of the learners is continually causing trouble, the teacher should take that learner to one site after the class is over and the learner should be given a chance to say why he or she behaves in this way.

Nevertheless, it is worth saying that these strategies are no substitute for good teaching. Good teaching is a preventative measure. It keeps learners so involved and interested that they do not want to cause discipline problems.

3.4. Theme4: Learners' motivation

The majority of Malian learners do not have the fundamental notions of learning and have a relatively low level of motivation. Teacher4 also made a similar observation.

In my school, some learners don't do their tasks (homework, readings...). They come to school because their parents send them. They make no effort to speak in English. When you try to communicate with them in English they respond in Bamanankan or in French (Teacher4).

They wait till the period of examination to start studying seriously. Most of the time, they ask to know what they will have in the test or if we are not going to do a preparation for the test. What hurts me in all this is that they want to pass to next level in spite of their laziness. The worst part is the support they have from the Direction of the school because after the assessment, when you have a low percentage of success you'll be seen as a bad teacher. In this condition how can we work consciously? (Teacher4).

Teacher3 and Teacher5 also said that their learners do not want to think, and they may be right. Typically, learners (even the brighter ones) avoid tasks that appear to require more energy than they are willing to expend. And from the teacher's point of view, it is often easier and quicker to provide the answer and move on. Thus, the learners are satisfied because they have got the answer without thinking and have maintained the status quo of the classroom.

Teacher2 mentioned the learners' use of French and sometimes Bamanankan while communicating with teachers. This is a reality in Mali, but it is the researcher's belief that learners are not to be blamed for that because they do not have enough of the language

to communicate and express their ideas or opinions. If they are required to speak only in English, the majority of them would most likely be more reluctant to speak. Teachers need to try and be a little bit tolerant when learners use their mother tongue, especially if they are trying to understand through another learner. However, there are of course some times when learners take advantage of the situation and use French or Bamanankan when it is not necessary. In this case, it is the task of the teacher to guide them back to communicating in English. As the teacher guides the learners back to communicating in English he must reward the smallest successful attempts to use English.

Making the learning meaningful to the learners can help solve teacher4' problem of his learners lack of interest in the courses. Telling them how what they are learning can serve them in the future might be a source of motivation. Teacher4 must also be aware of the learners learning styles, and multiple intelligences, so he can plan lessons in which the learners' learning needs are taken into account. Above all these, he can motivate his learners by focusing more on cooperative learning. The simple placement of learners into cooperative learning groups forces them to think in a higher-order manner. They will need to think critically and creatively. They will use analysis and evaluation. They will need to make decisions and solve problems. Such thinking happens naturally as a result of interacting in the group.

4. Conclusion

The findings after the thematic analysis of the teachers' reflective journals and the discussions, revealed that school policies and shortage of time constitute problems to effective teaching in Malian private high schools with no sight of a way out. Teachers cannot change course until they disprove how school principals define education. The findings, although significant, have limitations as well. The relatively small sample size and limiting the study to private schools call for additional research of this type with larger number of educators in both sectors. Future studies investigating learners' perception of critical thinking activities may also be useful in revealing other conclusions.

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