

Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Omani EFL Foundation Programme: Constraints and Possibilities

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Abstract

Educational institutions across the globe unanimously acknowledge the importance of incorporating critical thinking skills in their curricula, yet this objective has not always been met adequately or consistently across the board. In EFL settings, the obstacles to teaching critical thinking are not only genuine but also multifaceted, ranging from teachers' and students' training and attitudes, cultural influence and degree of support from the various stakeholders, which often results in a general perception that it is difficult to teach efficaciously. This article will report on the procedures and satisfactory outcomes of an action research that I have conducted with intermediate EFL foundation programme students at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, using a mixed method approach. The scope of the study is to investigate the constraints to teaching critical thinking skills in this context (quite similar to other non-western ones, e.g. Asian cultures) and ultimately pilot a flexible middle-way approach that enables teachers to work around these restrictions to foster critical thinking skills in their students, without detracting from course content or sacrificing test scores. The trialled approach consists of adapting and extending activities from assigned English language course books/materials to

build in more critical thinking awareness and practice, all within a learner-centred social constructivist environment, without the need for extra time or supplementary materials. In their post-course evaluation, most of the students have reported tangible improvement in information literacy, critical thinking abilities and even language proficiency. The article will close by providing practical guidelines on materials and methodology for teaching critical thinking skills in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, 21st Century Life Skills, Language Education

Educationalists all over the world are now emphasizing the importance of what have come to be known as 21st century life skills. Some of these skills are self-direction, information and technology literacy, leadership skills, creativity, problem solving and, especially, critical thinking (CT). Indeed, CT is so often invoked that it has become some kind of a buzz word in the world of education. Even presidents talk about it: "...Don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking" (Obama, 2009 in Hughes 2014, p. 1). Even more telling are the findings from a 2013 survey of employers conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Hart, 2013), which reported that "Nearly all employers surveyed (95%) agree, 'a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.'" Goldsmith (2013, p. 10).

Research on the essence and attributes of CT has long been the prerogative of educational psychology and philosophy which have been consistently pressing to acknowledge it as an inevitable educational goal across all disciplines and specialties without exception. And although such a goal is being more and more widely accepted, its realization in education has often met with constraints and obstacles. For instance, there is a general

impression that CT is hard to teach (Kuhn 2000; Dweck 2002; Halpern 2003; Lauer, 2005; Willingham, 2007; Marin and Halpern 2011). This perceived difficulty is not totally unfounded, for the obstacles to teaching CT are multi-dimensional, relating to students, teachers, material developers, institutions and educational policy makers.

Using the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) English Language Foundation Programme as an example and research testbed, this action research hopes to propose and evaluate the effectiveness of a workable teaching procedure, which, while recognising the major constraints to CT development in Omani English language foundation programme students, enables teachers to overcome these limitations to develop CT skills in their students. The flexible approach proposed in the study is based on modifying and supplementing tasks from assigned English language coursebooks/materials to build in more CT training, instead of the rather impossible task (given the contextual constraints) of teaching it as a standalone subject using critical-thinking-dedicated materials. The ultimate aim of this study is to come up with some general recommendations, based on the research findings, on materials and methodology to introduce Omani foundation programme students, and, hopefully students from any other similar context, to CT skills.

Research Question 1: what are the existing constraints to CT development in Omani EFL Foundation Programme students?

Research Question 2: within the confines of the existing constraints, how can individual English teachers, through personal initiative and individual endeavour, develop CT skills in their students using existing time frames and course books: materials and methodology?

Research Question 3: to what extent is such an approach effective?

1. Literature Review

1.1 Defining Critical Thinking

Probably contributing to the lack of understanding of what CT is and what it actually entails in terms of teaching and learning is the absence of a precise and rigorous definition. Halanon (1995) states that “critical thinking scholarship is in a mystified state. No single definition of critical thinking is widely accepted” (p.75). Mayfield humorously notes that “there are as many definitions of critical thinking as there are writers on the subject” (2001, p.4). Hughes concedes that CT is “a term that often defies simple definition” (2014, p. 2). For instance, Paul (1985) defines CT as “learning how to ask and answer questions of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (p. 37) – a definition closely aligned with Bloom’s upper three levels of educational objectives, which are often referred to as the practical application of CT in education. A study by Griggs et al summarised 25 definitions of CT abilities in the literature as “. . . a process of evaluating evidence for certain claims, determining whether presented conclusions logically follow from the evidence, and considering alternative explanations. ” (1998 in Stapleton, 2011, p. 15).

To demystify this concept, Riddell (2007) suggests that CT should not be defined, but rather explained by its components, stages, characteristics and sub-tasks, for no single ability can capture the full scope of CT skills and dispositions. The list below summarises the skills and dispositions that many consider basic to the process of CT (based on Mayfield, 2001 and Buskist and Irons, 2008):

Critical thinkers...

- never take things for granted
- differentiate fact from opinion

- are flexible, make connections, apply knowledge to new situations and look at things in new different ways.
- challenge traditional beliefs and practices
- ask challenging questions
- question the validity of evidence
- verify information and the veracity of claims
- evaluate by means of clear, relevant criteria
- listen and observe
- compare and contrast
- resist jumping to conclusions until sufficient evidence is collected
- seek to understand multiple perspectives
- carefully consider their own bias, assumptions and values that may interfere with making objective decisions.
- distinguish credible from non-credible sources
- always support their arguments/claims/opinions with reasons and verified evidence
- respect other people's opinions even if they are different from theirs.

To suit the purpose of this study, which is to develop CT skills in intermediate level Omani EFL foundation programme students, I have synthesized the following definition based on an extensive review of the literature:

Critical Thinking is the thinking process that leads to the making of valid judgements, objective decisions, reasonable conclusions and/or solving problems, based on the careful weighing of available evidence against relevant, clear criteria and by considering different perspectives and/or explanations.

1.2 Common Obstacles to CT Teaching

Obstacles to teaching CT in EFL contexts are multifaceted. To start with, some researchers believe that CT is an intrinsically western style of thinking that is incompatible with other non-western cultures. Kaplan (1997) described CT teaching in Japan ESL settings as a form of ‘xenophobia’ and suggested naming courses in CT as courses in ‘Western-style of thinking’ (in Reid, 1998). In an article that sparked off a heated debate over the teaching of CT in EFL/ESL contexts, Atkinson (1997) advances arguments against teaching CT in TESOL: that CT is rather a “social practice” and “teaching [it] to nonnative speakers may be fraught with cultural problems" (p 71); that it is “beyond the capability of most teachers to teach [it] in more than an anecdotal and hit-and-miss way” (p 77); that CT is not universal and “many cultures endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose it” (p.72), which, not only makes it challenging for “nonnative thinkers” (p 79), but also represents a form of cultural imperialism; and that it is notoriously difficult to transfer to new contexts (p.71).

In response, Davidson (1998) and Kubota (1999) criticise Atkinson’s arguments on the ground that CT is not culture-specific but rather a universal skill that can be acquired equally easily by students from all cultures, and that arguments against teaching CT in non-Western cultures are based on unfounded generalisations and stereotypes of Asian cultures. Davidson interestingly noted that his Japanese students showed more aptitude in some CT skills than western students (1998). Ennis (1996b) asserts that educators should not be discussing whether or not to teach CT, or whether it has value for people from other cultures. This is because not teaching critical thinking to some degree means creating generations of graduates who “believe everything that [they] read and hear” (Ennis, 1996a, p.1).

A no less significant question about the feasibility of teaching CT is whether or not all ELT teachers are equally equipped, trained and ready for such a task. Most of the literature

on the topic seems to suggest that they are not. The absence of unanimity over a rigorous definition of CT seems to have resulted in a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers of the concept of CT and how to incorporate it in the classroom (Lauer 2005; Choy and Cheah, 2009; Stapleton, 2011). Alexander et al explain that “although lecturers claim to value critical thinking highly, they tend to recognize it mainly by its absence” (2008, p. 251). Other studies have revealed that teachers may have misrepresented and/or reductionist perceptions of CT skills, like equating it with rephrasing given facts in students’ own words (Black, 2005), or merely with being opinionated (Long, 2004), or just being able to differentiate fact from opinion (Siegel, 1998; Fok, 2002).

For various reasons, Fok (2002) reports that some teachers think CT cannot be taught while others value it but feel they lack the ability and confidence to teach it effectively. Rana highlights some teachers’ inertia and resistance “to change their stereotypical teaching techniques” (2012, p.54). Rafi maintains that “the teachers need to revamp their pedagogical views, and to adapt a more flexible attitude in the existing system of language education in order to exploit the metalinguistic abilities of the learners” (2009, p. 65).

Students in EFL contexts can be part of the problem, too. Indeed, those who come from a rote learning culture usually tend to resist any change to the learning mode they are accustomed to. As Nisbet and Shucksmith observe, “most adults will avoid the need to learn if they can by clinging to familiar routines and will have difficulty dealing with unfamiliar tasks” (1990 in Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 146). Rana explains that many students are already struggling to improve their linguistic abilities, and so “developing critical thinking skills in the language classroom seems to be a by-product of teaching English... [and] a far-reaching goal” (2012, p.53).

Cultural considerations can also have considerable bearing on how students perceive CT. This is particularly true of students coming from cultures where children and young

adults are made to strictly obey and look up to authority figures, such as parents and teachers, who make decisions for them (Buskit and Irons, 2008). In a highly conservative and religious society like Oman, for example, foundation programme students rarely have opinions of their own on any social, economic or political issues.

The last type of constraint to teaching CT is the lack of support provision on the part of the main stakeholders: syllabus designers, material developers, examiners and institution managers. Overloaded syllabi and exam pressures often result in teachers and students racing against time to complete the usually imposed syllabus, which also induces teachers to switch to the lecturing mode (Astleitner, 2002; Fok, 2002; Petry, 2002; Duron et al, 2006; Choy and Cheah, 2009; Rana, 2012). Another challenge is the washback effect on teaching and learning. Teachers and students alike will often shy away from ‘wasting’ time on the rather time-consuming CT activities as these are almost never tested (Fok, 2002; Rana, 2012).

As far as materials are concerned, only lately have some recent editions of commercial textbooks started to include some CT activities. However, Lucantoni (2015) observes that these are mostly included as add-on activities, rather than providing a scaffolded approach that will progressively help students make their way through the steps of Bloom’s Taxonomy of cognitive levels, or, as Alexander et al put it, that will guide the student *from knowledge telling to knowledge transforming* (2008).

1.3 Materials and Teaching Methodology

There is overwhelming unanimity among researchers and educationalists that challenging tasks not only help students improve their language proficiency, but also trigger higher order thinking skills and best motivate them to engage in critical thinking (Krashen, 1985; Turner, 1995; Ur, 1996). From this perspective, the focus of EFL classes should be on language tasks that require learners to use greater degrees of elaboration and criticality, like

exploring, comparing, evaluating, criticising, or advocating a variety of ideas, reasoning inductively and deductively, and inferring sound conclusions from ambiguous statements (Freeley & Steinberg, 2000). These are the types of tasks that materials should focus on the most, and which particularly draw on premises inherent in the methods known as Task-based Learning (TBL) and Problem-based Learning (PBL).

Activities that best stimulate CT skills are debate and problem solving in speaking, which Benesch calls *dialogical critical thinking* (1999); issue-based and controversial topics in argumentative writing (Benesch, 1999; Ghokale, 1995); and critical reading which involves identifying and evaluating the writer's purpose, attitude, and validity of claims, arguments and evidence (Elder and Paul, 2004).

Whether CT should be taught as a standalone subject or in integration with subject-specific content is another controversial point. Cotton concludes that "neither infused thinking skills instruction nor separate curricula is inherently superior to the other; both can lead to improved student performance, and elements of both are often used together, with beneficial results" (1991, p. 10). In a more recent literature review, however, Lai reports that "stand-alone approaches to instruction in general critical thinking appear to be less successful than approaches in which critical thinking instruction is infused into discipline-specific courses alongside traditional academic content" (2011, p. 16).

Most literature on CT teaching strategies focuses on two main factors: teacher's role and the learning environment. Many researchers have emphasised the need for teachers to be critical thinkers themselves, not only to be able to create the right materials as and when required, but also to be able to model CT and critical attitude in their own teaching (Smith, 1990; Paul 1992 in Lai, 2011; Facione, 2000;). This could be accomplished by making their reasoning visible through "thinking aloud" and by using concrete examples of critical thinking at work (or lack of it) (Paul, 1985; Heyman, 2008 in Lai, 2011). Another greatly

emphasised strategy is the use of teacher questions, particularly Socratic questioning, to probe for assumptions, rationale, evidence, viewpoints, perspectives and implications (Siegel, 1988; Feng, 2013).

This, in turn, entails that teachers should move away from the lecturing mode and take more of a facilitative role in a student-centered context (Paul, 1985; Bonk and Smith, 1998 in Lai, 2011). In fact, most research seems to place a premium on the social constructivist approach as the most conducive environment to effective CT learning, whereby students interact and collaborate by encouraging and respecting the contributions of others (Siegel, 1988; Cotton, 1991; Ghokale, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 2002, Simina and Hamel in Yang and Gamble, 2013). Genuine communication should be targeted in class and students' opinions should be heard and accepted (Bourdillon and Storey, 2002) and students should be "admitted into arguments, challenges and debates based on respect rather than power or exploitation" (Smith, 1990, p.107).

2. Context and Rationale

The participants in the present research study are 38 Omani students, 18 to 19 years old, distributed in two groups of 19 students each. These students have just graduated from high school and are starting a 16-week intermediate English language foundation programme, after which they will proceed to their faculties. Omani students come to university foundation programmes from a background of a heavily teacher-centred teaching and learning tradition where they have had no or very little training in such skills as learning strategies, autonomy or CT. At best, they have been irregularly exposed to *weak* forms of CT, as in occasionally exchanging opinions in speaking activities or writing short opinion essays. And despite attempts to introduce some interactive teaching methods in textbooks, teacher-centredness and focus on exam-oriented input remains the prevalent teaching mode.

The way I see it, the foundation programme should be the place to bridge the gap. Instead of being regarded as a merely language-proficiency-building course, a foundation programme should be considered as a wide-angled EAP course, where additional focus is also placed on those survival academic study skills which students are terribly lacking, before they move to their faculties.

I teach these two groups Reading, Listening and Speaking (two 100-minute classes per week). The assigned materials consist of commercial textbooks as well as in-house materials. The research purpose and procedures were explained to the participants who provided informed consent.

3. Method

Given the aim of the study and research questions, a mixed method approach was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data through various means to achieve complementarity and triangulation. To this end, teachers' perceptions and experiences were probed for by an online questionnaire that combined open-ended and closed questions (appendix. 1). Follow-up interviews were scheduled with ten teachers who volunteered to discuss the constraints and possibilities of teaching CT to Omani EFL foundation programme students more in depth. A pre-course can-do checklist was completed by students in the first week to see what they already know or can/can't do in terms of CT skills. At the end of the course, students completed the same can-do checklist again to see how much they have learned and improved. This was the main tool I used to measure the effectiveness of the approach being piloted (table. 2). Another tool I used to the same purpose was a post-course evaluation form which I asked the students to complete to seek feedback on the extent to which they think they have benefitted from CT practice, how important they think it is, its

application and their evaluation of the teaching methodology and the learning environment(appendix. 2).

4. Key Findings.

In theory, most teachers' attitudes towards critical thinking as an educational and life skill are very positive. The majority of teachers report knowing what CT is and what it actually entails, advocate its incorporation in the ELT curriculum, affirm knowing how to develop materials to that end and believe CT skills can be acquired by learners of all cultural backgrounds. In practice, however, the picture is not as bright. As we dig deeper, it appears that most teachers do have a good understanding of critical thinking but may not necessarily know what teaching it actually entails. For instance, many responses highlight teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to develop CT materials and to teach CT effectively. And although almost all of them assert they do teach critical thinking to some degree, the responses show that most of them use only one or two CT teaching strategies and are never sure of the outcome of their teaching. Moreover, although 81 percent affirmed CT is a universal skill, most of them have cast doubts as to the feasibility of CT teaching in the Omani context as well as on the capacity of Omani students to acquire CT skills due to their linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds.

As far as the students themselves are concerned, and as confirmed by 95 percent of the teachers, the data clearly shows that students coming from the Omani high school system hardly have any critical thinking skills or disposition. This fact serves as a good rationale for incorporating CT in the ELT curriculum as suggested by 87 percent of the teachers. Most of the reasons mentioned by the teachers to account for students' lack of CT competence, like rote learning culture, low language proficiency and lack of world knowledge, are indeed valid and genuine. But these are the very shortcomings that we need to address through the right

materials and methodology rather than use as excuses to shy away from teaching CT or to justify poor results.

Omani EFL foundation programme institutions are not making things any easier either. Acquiring CT skills is only implicitly encouraged in some institutions and in some programmes, but not consistently across the board. Hence the need for these institutions to explicitly adopt CT as a learning outcome and to cope with whatever implications this might entail.

Therefore, based on the literature review and the findings from the collected data, it is the objective of this study to propose a flexible approach that will enable teachers to incorporate CT skills in the foundation programme curriculum without detracting from the linguistic goals of their courses, without having recourse to CT dedicated materials and without the need for extra time allocation.

5. Lesson Procedure

As established by the above literature review (Lai, 2011; Yang & Gamble, 2013) and the researched data, the best approach to teach CT seems to be through explicit teaching in integration with subject-specific content, in a social constructivist environment that encourages enquiry and free airing of opinions, where teachers are called upon to adapt and develop course materials and activities and where students interact and cooperate to create a meaningful learning experience. However, because the concept of CT was completely new to my students, I chose to delay using assigned course materials and to start with mostly self-developed CT materials instead. The aim was to foster in the students explicit awareness of what CT is, its worth, its applications in education and life in general and the various skills and attitudes required to become critical thinkers. Once I was confident this goal had been reasonably achieved, I started adapting and supplementing the course materials to create

graded and supported CT activities. Therefore, the integration of CT skills in the course was effected in two phases:

5.1 Phase one: Standalone approach

For the first three weeks, I taught nothing but CT using materials which I specifically designed to foster CT awareness. Students were first introduced to a list of revised Bloom's taxonomy process verbs, assessments, and questioning strategies and the concepts of lower order thinking skills and higher order thinking skills. These were simplified and explained to the students, emphasising the skills and abilities they will need to acquire in order to be able to exercise higher order thinking skills. This paved the way for the subsequent introduction of a CT definition and a list of qualities of critical thinkers. The purpose of these two steps was two-fold: familiarising the students with the concept of CT and its sub-skills, and motivating them to know how they could apply these in their education and how CT functions.

The next step was to introduce students to information literacy skills and critical reading. The students were provided with a teacher-designed form for the critical evaluation of texts (table. 1).

Table 1. Materials' Critical Evaluation Rubrics

Item	Explanation/Example(s)
Purpose and background	Why am I reading this? What type of text is this? What do I already know about the topic? How does the information in the text relate to the knowledge I already have/or to information from other texts?
The author/speaker and the text	Who is he/she? What authority does the writer/speaker have? Who is the intended audience? What is the author's purpose? What is the source of the text? Is it reputable? Who is the publisher? What reputation do they have? What is the writer's/speaker's attitude towards the topic? What conclusions are drawn?
Writer's/speaker's overall purpose	Examples: to sell you something/ to advertise an item/ to convince you of an idea or action/ to indoctrinate you (politics, religion...etc)/ to rally support for an issue, action, cause/ to criticize or critique/ to express personal opinions/ to spark a discussion over an issue/ to highlight an issue/ to inform...etc.
Source Credibility	Credible sources: an authority in the field/ well known/ positively reviewed/ widely acknowledged/ trusted Incredible sources: biased/ unknown/ blog/ web article by somebody unknown/ unclear ulterior motives
Examples of strong, supported arguments, claims, assumptions	Well known facts/ common sense/ well supported by referenced research from referenced sources/ proven by verified evidence (the scientific method)
Examples of weak, unwarranted arguments, claims, assumptions	Unwarranted/ unjustified/ Unproven/ unsupported/unevidenced/ just traditional beliefs and practices/ generally accepted opinions/ just personal opinions/ based on wrong assumptions and/or definitions
Writer's/speaker's conclusion(s)	Are drawn conclusions logical in the light of presented evidence
Your own conclusions/ comments/ recommendations	Use the arguments in the text, arguments from other sources and your own (supported views) to give a final comment on the validity/acceptability (or not) of the claims/ arguments/ conclusions of the writer/ speaker. You can end up mentioning your own views on the topic and/or making final recommendations

The students practised using the form by evaluating some selected texts in terms of source credibility, bias, author intention, use of supporting data or figures, weak and strong arguments and validity of claims and drawn conclusions. The texts were downloaded from the internet and had the common characteristic of easily lending themselves to CT teaching: issue-based, lacking objectivity, embedding inconsistencies, fallacies and conclusions based on questionable or insufficient evidence. To highlight these, I designed probing questions that gradually led the students to notice these shortcomings, to challenge the advanced arguments and to question the validity of the drawn conclusions. In some cases, I also provided students with other texts that dealt with the same issues, but which were more evidence-based and more objective, so that they could compare and contrast, and differentiate weak from strong

arguments and biased from objective positions. In addition to choosing topics that closely touched on their real lives, I also actively involved the students in the tasks by assigning them important roles, such as being evaluators, voters or decision makers, such as when students had to prepare, evaluate and vote for the best trip plan, or when they had to choose the right candidate for a job based on matching a job description to candidates' profiles and CV's.

In speaking, a dialogic approach was adopted, in which various interaction patterns were encouraged, mainly group discussions and class debates. Topics were carefully selected in line with specific criteria: engaging and relating to students' real lives, controversial and posing conflicts of interest, e.g. boys vs girls, men vs women or locals vs expats, and which can have more than one possible or defensible solution. Students were also trained on using discussion strategies and expressions that enhance exchange of views and interaction.

The writing component of this initial training consisted of a 400-500 word research-based report. The aim was to introduce students to information literacy skills and how to back up arguments with in-text citations from authorities in the field and proper referencing. To ensure sustained content, this task was designed as an extension of a reading activity on the same topic, thus reinforcing the acquisition and use of related vocabulary and teaching students to suspend judgement until sufficient data is sought and evaluated. Because the students were not familiar with longer research-based writing, their first attempt was far from the required level. I had the students to redraft their reports three times, each time giving them individual as well as collective feedback on synthesising researched information to back up their arguments and proper in-text referencing. After the second feedback, I provided a research-based model for discussion and analysis, which proved to be extremely helpful as they ultimately produced reports with reasonable levels of critical analysis.

5.2 Phase two: Integrated approach

After three weeks of teaching CT as a separate subject, I could safely establish that a reasonable level of critical awareness was successfully fostered in the students. This was obvious in the way they have come to approach reading texts and group discussions and debates. At the very least, they could immediately tell which questions required them to think critically and what modes of thinking and criteria they needed to apply. Another agreeably surprising development is their new vigilant attitude: not willing to take anything for granted until proved by acceptable evidence and resisting jumping to conclusions until clarification is sought and sufficient information is collected.

At this point, I turned to the assigned course books and in-house materials. In order to continue promoting CT skills in my students, my role as a teacher consisted of carefully selecting the content/themes/lessons to be taught from the assigned materials, adapting and supplementing them and creating a classroom environment that would be most conducive to CT development.

As far as the materials are concerned, I focused on the units, themes and lessons that are most suitable for CT teaching: motivating and relating to students' real life interests, but also addressing topics which, if looked at from different perspectives, could prove to be open to question and debate. This meant that merely factual, descriptive and/or narrative materials were systematically discarded.

The process of materials adaptation and supplementation was not much different from what I had done in the initial 3-week direct instruction period. The first and most important step was to make the students interested in the materials so as to actively engage them in the activities (Harmer, 2001; Dornyei, 2007). Secondly, I frequently supplemented the tasks accompanying the materials, as these usually only addressed comprehension and linguistic competence. After quickly checking overall comprehension, I often posed probing questions

that would gradually lead the students to approach the information from different perspectives as well as to notice inconsistencies, inconclusiveness, weak and strong arguments and possibilities of other interpretations.

At this point, I usually gave students out-of-class supplementary activities that required research, often in the form of research-based reports, presentations or preparation for debates. As a rule, I made sure to retain the same themes and topics while selecting, adapting and supplementing the materials in all four skills (Davidson and Dunham, 1996; Yang & Gamble, 2013). The purpose is to give students as much exposure as possible to the same topic from various texts, auditory and visual, preferably offering different perspectives, in order to help students acquire and retain topic-related vocabulary and concepts. This was achieved by consistently making students listen *and* read about the topic, then speak *and/or* write about it (sustained content). Young and Gamble explain that “sustained content builds the vocabulary, conceptual knowledge, and resources necessary to think, speak and write critically” (2013, p. 409). Examples of topics that were addressed in this way are: *English as a Lingua Franca; The Future of Education; Which Future for Libraries; Ecotourism; Travel and Technology; Principles of Journalism; How We Each Learn Best; The Changing Family...etc.*

As far as methodology is concerned, my primary focus was on creating a *safe* environment for students to openly voice their opinions (Krashen, 1985; Scrivener, 2005; Cheng and Dörnyei, 2007), one that is free from peer pressure or teacher power and where all opinions are respected and reacted to in a polite manner. Students were also given enough time to think and prepare for their contributions, mostly within groups of their own choice. Group and whole class interaction were used the most, where students collaborated and helped each other, and where the teacher also mingled as a facilitator and scaffolder.

In order to address the disparity between their level of thinking and their linguistic competence, and in order not to deprive them from an important resource already at their disposal, the students were allowed to code-switch to their L1 as and when required when discussing issues within their groups. Then they could ask for help from their more able peers or the teacher for the English equivalent words, or otherwise use the bilingual dictionaries on their mobile phones. This proved to be an effective way of acquiring new vocabulary that enabled students, especially the weaker ones, to effectually articulate their opinions.

6. Discussion

The effectiveness of the suggested approach of integrating CT skills in the Omani EFL foundation programme was evaluated through two main tools: a student post-course can-do checklist and a student post-course feedback form. The collected data from both tools seem to suggest that the proposed approach was highly effective, not only in developing students' higher order thinking skills but also in improving their language proficiency. Below are the findings from the two methods:

Student post-course can-do checklist

This is the same checklist that the students filled in at the very beginning at the course prior to CT teaching. Filling in the same checklist after having completed the course gives them the chance to see where they have come from and to what extent their CT skills have improved. As can be seen in the table below (table. 2), all the figures accounting for students' initial CT competencies have risen by various degrees, some more dramatically than others. The numbers are self-explanatory and a simple comparison of the figures will easily point to that effect.

Table.2 Can-Do Checklist: Statistics

Dear Student

This instrument will serve to assess your initial critical thinking level at the beginning of the course and how much you will have improved by the end of it. In the first column, for every skill check (✓) if you think you already can do it and (x) if you think you can't. At the end of the course, you will fill in the second column to see how much you have improved.

	Skill	Week 1		Week 16	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	I can distinguish facts from opinions	21 (55.26%)	17 (44.7%)	38 (100%)	0%
2	I never take things for granted	8 (21%)	30 (79%)	30 (79%)	8 (21%)
3	I can consider issues from different perspectives	12 (31.5 %)	26 (68.5%)	32 (84.2%)	6 (15.8%)
4	I can give more than one interpretation of stories, events, conversations and actions	13 (34.2%)	25 (65.8%)	24 (63%)	14 (37%)
5	I can compare and evaluate different points of view	15 (39.4%)	23 (60.5%)	29 (76.3%)	9 (23.7%)
6	I can evaluate different opinions and draw reasonable conclusions	9 (23.7%)	29 (76.3%)	22 (58%)	16 (42%)
7	I can distinguish weak and strong arguments	10 (26.3%)	28 (73.7%)	30 (79%)	8 (21%)
8	I can analyze arguments and respond to them logically	5 (13%)	33 (87%)	21 (55.3%)	17 (44.7%)
9	I can make deep inferences	5 (13%)	33(87%)	12 (31.5 %)	26 (68.5%)
10	I can identify a writer's or speaker's purpose	19 (50%)	19(50%)	32 (84.2%)	6 (15.8%)
11	I can formulate positions and support them with valid reasons	10 (26.3%)	28 (73.7%)	33 (87%)	5 (13%)
12	I can argue my opinions convincingly	8 (21%)	30(79%)	30 (79%)	8 (21%)
13	I respect other people's opinions even if they are different from mine	25 (65.8%)	13 (34.2%)	36 (95%)	2 (5%)
14	I can search for relevant and reliable sources for my written assignments and presentations	4 (10%)	34 (90 %)	29 (76.3%)	9 (23.7%)
15	I can assess sources' relevance and credibility (printed and online)	3 (8%)	35 (92%)	19 (50%)	19(50%)
16	I can synthesize relevant information from various sources and use them effectively with the correct referencing	1 (2.5%)	37(97.5%)	29 (76.3%)	9 (23.7%)

Student course evaluation

A student course evaluation form was distributed to the students at the very end of the course. It consisted of both open-ended questions and Likert-style questionnaire. The responses were organised into categories through content analysis. The students were given

the option of writing their feedback in Arabic or in English so that students with lower language proficiency could fully express their feedback. Emerging themes and examples of students' responses are presented below (some are translated from Arabic).

Satisfaction

A large majority of the students (87%) agreed with the statement "I am more satisfied with my English class this semester", even though many (52%) agreed that "Critical Thinking activities put greater workload on [them] this semester". The reasons provided by students for greater satisfaction fell into the following categories: (1) completely new and interesting way of learning; (2) acquiring higher order thinking skills that are useful for education and life in general; (3) promotion of learner autonomy; and (4) improvement of language proficiency.

Importance of teaching CT on the foundation programme

In response to the statement "It is important to learn CT skills on the foundation programme", 84 percent agreed. The reasons for the importance fell into 3 categories: (1) The need to learn about it before moving on to the faculties, especially that it is completely new to them; (2) The need for a stronger foundation, not only in language but also in ways and level of thinking; and (3) promotes learner autonomy- all three being deemed by the students as very important conditions for success in the upcoming university education.

Most enjoyed CT activities

Most CT activities conducted during the course have been reported as more or less enjoyable by the students. However, two activities stood out as the most valued by the students: critical reading and debates (45% and 53% respectively).

Classroom Environment

In response to the statement “The classroom environment was safe and encouraging to express our opinions freely”, 82 percent agreed. The aspects of classroom environment that students valued the most fell into four main categories: (1) freedom; (2) respect; (3) collaboration; and (4) active involvement.

7. Guidelines for Classroom Practice

7.1 Materials

A key element in the choice of materials is the need to be selective. Teachers should choose issue-based and debatable topics of immediate relevance and interest to the students to ensure motivation and engagement. The next step is to adapt the activities accompanying the materials, or even design new ones (especially in critical reading/listening), through posing probing questions that would lead the students to identify writer's/speaker's purpose/attitude, notice and evaluate weak/strong arguments, valid/invalid claims, inconsistencies, different perspectives, alternative interpretations and possible solutions to problems. Finally, wherever possible, and without going to the extent of straining the students with extra workload, the materials should be supplemented with out-of-class activities on the same themes discussed in class (sustained content), mainly research-based argumentative writing, presentations or preparation for debate in order to build argumentation into the course and develop learner autonomy. This could be best done through designing activities that will culminate in the students solving a problem, taking a stance or making a decision and defending it with solid arguments (TBL/PBL).

7.2 Methodology

As previously established, the social constructivist approach is the most conducive environment to learning CT skills: greater teacher support and facilitation, learner collaboration in co-construction of knowledge and promotion of learner autonomy. In order for student cooperation to be fruitful, enough time and opportunity should be allowed for the students to discuss and collaborate to achieve the task and seek help from the teacher as and when required. It is also imperative that a safe and engaging classroom environment be created in order to encourage students to freely voice their opinions. This could be achieved by 1) granting students as much freedom as possible in choosing their partners and/or groups, in discussing with the teacher, in expressing their viewpoints and in disagreeing with others, and 2) ensuring that all opinions are respected and reacted to respectfully. Finally, teachers should model CT by posing probing questions, by thinking aloud and by getting involved in the discussions as the students' equal and not necessarily as the one who holds the truth.

8. Conclusion

The evaluation data, especially the student course feedback form, suggest that the proposed approach was largely successful. The areas of success could be summed up in the points confirmed by more than 80 percent of the students: all surveyed CT abilities have largely increased in the students, some have even more than doubled or tripled; being more satisfied with their English course this semester; that it is important to study CT at the foundation programme; that they have greatly enjoyed CT activities, especially critical reading and debate; that they have noticed an improvement in their linguistic proficiency and information literacy; and that they have greatly valued the adopted methodology and classroom environment.

For CT to be effectively incorporated in SQU foundation programme and other similar EFL contexts, it has to be fully endorsed by such institutions rather than paying it lip service support. This is a rather long-term aim that will take many years to materialize, for it will involve massive on-the-job training for all teachers, revisiting of in-house materials, significant time reallocation and a substantial adjustment to the testing system in both summative and, especially, formative assessment. In the meantime, it is left up to individual teachers to fill the gap through personal initiative and endeavour. Teachers who are willing to go the extra mile in order to foster CT abilities in their students should rely more on themselves by learning more about what CT is and how to teach it effectively, by adapting and extending activities from assigned course materials and by creating the right classroom environment.

It is my belief that the proposed approach of integrating CT skills in the Omani EFL foundation programme without having recourse to extra time allocation or many additional materials can be successfully implemented in any other EFL context due to its simplicity and flexibility. However, the study could benefit more from some kind of assessment-based evaluation, especially a formative one, to be able to gauge the degree of CT assimilation and transferability more tangibly.

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Appendix.1 CT Teacher Questionnaire

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1RBVLDHYxQwAJqtG_DRk1zzPCNkNOtF2c65_qqrwMzWg/viewform

Appendix 2. Student Course Evaluation Form

I am more satisfied with my English class this semester				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Reasons:				

Critical Thinking activities put greater workload on us this semester				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree

It is important to learn Critical Thinking skills at the foundation programme				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Reasons:				

Which Critical Thinking activity(s) did you enjoy the most? Why?

The classroom environment was safe and encouraging to express our opinions freely				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree

What aspect(s) of classroom environment did you value the most? Why?