

Review research paper

## ENSURING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL CONTEXTS

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines the extent to which students in a supervised undergraduate research project course felt equipped to work independently using a range of critical thinking skills developed within the course. As critical thinking is an important but challenging component in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, empowering students to engage in process-driven reading and writing can be seen to be inclusive. In this sense, inclusivity embraces the quality of embracing diverse skills, interests, competency levels and corresponding outcomes. Based on a qualitative study of student questionnaires and focus group interviews, this study concludes that students are able to comprehend, analyze and apply ideas and theories when given training and practice in these areas. Findings from an extensive questionnaire and student interviews show that EFL learners in the Arab world are capable of thinking critically, particularly when they research areas of significance to themselves and their society. Critical thinking should thus be seen as a series of teachable skills which enable the EFL student to create an individual piece of work which successfully incorporates academic writing skills and enables them to find their own voice. Providing opportunities for independent learning thus ensures inclusivity, equipping students with required skills.*

**Key words:** *inclusive learning, critical thinking, writing in EFL, English as a Foreign Language, research project*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

An ongoing debate among EFL instructors reveals a cultural divide over whether second or foreign language learners of English (ESL or EFL) possess the required critical thinking skills, given the cultural contexts in which they often operate. While critical thinking, in itself an abstract concept difficult to define, is viewed as an important skill among undergraduate students in all international contexts, studies have suggested that the term is primarily understood as possessing an individual voice, questioning of authority and creating a compelling counter argument. This paper suggests that as long as critical thinking is defined as a philosophical aptitude derived from the Socratic tradition, it remains limited in scope and predicted outcomes. A more helpful and useful way of approaching critical thinking is from an educational, particularly EFL perspective

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through which it can be seen to be a set of sub-skills which equip and empower students to approach texts from multiple perspectives using a variety of strategies and being able to transfer these skills into a writing context. This is even more important today when social media has made the distinction between real and fake more problematic. Using the example of a student driven research project, this study investigates the extent to which students felt themselves to be empowered when guided with a set of critical thinking skills to engage in an independent research project. The study concludes that inclusivity in EFL is attainable when students are equally equipped with skills which can be independently applied.

## 2. INCLUSIVITY IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Diversity and inclusivity today have multiple meanings and implications, given the diversity of an EFL classroom in terms of gender, culture, race and physical abilities, among other variables (Chan & Lo, 2017). Various factors such as students' self-esteem (Al-Obaydi, Doncheva & Nashruddin, 2021), curriculum and policy implementation (Villafuerte, & Mosquera 2020) and specific strategies used (Murni, 2019) have been investigated to understand the way in which the EFL classroom could become more productive and achieve the professed learning outcomes. Strategies such as peer tutoring, collaborative and team learning, use of audio visual material and dividing units into smaller ones often tend to be more successful strategies that suit a range of learners with different capacities. One of the most challenging issues in EFL is critical thinking and writing (Mehta & Al Mahrooqi, 2015; Tosuncuoglu, 2018; Saleh, 2019) as the process includes multiple layers of learning the language, understanding its cultural connotations and making decisions based on it. Case studies, such as those of Javorcikova and Badinská (2021) suggest that critical thinking skills is lacking even among adult readers in contexts like Slovakia. While some studies have suggested that critical thinking is particular to some cultures (Atkinson, 1997), it has now been accepted to be an essential but challenging component of all learning. As such, the extent to which critical thinking skills can be developed in an EFL classroom to include learners of different abilities, levels and capacities continues to be debated. This study is based on the hypothesis that critical thinking skills are best developed when students are given autonomy for their learning and when they are discussing issues based on their cultural environment. Giving students autonomy empowers them to think critically and creatively, making learning more inclusive.

## 3. DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

What critical thinking actually means is itself a contentious issue. Ennis' 1993 definition that "critical thinking is reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1993, p. 180) set the tone for the discursive manner in which critical thinking began to be thought of as a process. On the one hand, it can be seen as an activity "that involves the use of information, experience, and world knowledge in ways which allow [EFL] students to seek alternatives, make inferences, pose questions, and solve problems, thereby signaling understanding in a variety of ways" (Liaw, 2007, p. 51). Atkinson (1997) famously defined it as a "social practice" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 77) which could thus not be taught. Willingham adds to this by

stating that “First, critical thinking is not a skill. There is not a set of critical thinking skills that can be acquired and deployed regardless of context” (Willingham, 2007, p. 17). Critical thinking is commonly accepted as a “lifelong competency that enables people to take an active role in a democratic society” (Barak & Shahab, 2023, p. 872).

While having a strong opinion and being able to express it in a unique way (Barnawi, 2011) may be an important component of higher order thinking, many other theories have attempted to focus on the skills which are developed in the course of reading. Research by Davidson (1996) and Chapple & Curtis (2000), among others, posits the idea that critical thinking is a particularly necessary and learnable skill among EFL learners since it provides the language and structure so essential for writing in English. Thus, Rebecca Oxford (2001) rightly advocates “task based rather than content based” writing and Renner (1996) declares that the higher order skills most connected with critical thinking almost always lead to “improved levels of skills in language use” (Renner 1996, p. 14). Culture, it thus appears, may not be the most important consideration for testing critical skills.

#### 4. CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL CONTEXTS

The cultural debate is important in so far as critical thinking continues to be thought of as a way of voicing opinions and dealing with areas which are essentially debatable. This is a point made by Long (2004), Errihani (2012), and Hashemi & Ghanizadeh (2012), all of whom suggest that critical thinking skills in writing should involve more than the ability to question authority and give a clearly formulated opinion on global areas of debate. Errihani cites the work of Ruggiero (2004), who described critical thinking as “the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not” (Ruggiero, as cited by Errihani, p. 6). Errihani goes on to state that these skills are in fact more relevant to EFL contexts than the voicing of political opinions leading to tendencies which would change society (Errihani, 2012, p. 6). Hashemi & Ghanizadeh also use the work of Pennycook (1996), and Davidson & Dunham (1997) to suggest that critical thinking skills actually comprise the ability to look at established hypotheses, question them, and test them in new contexts (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012). Christopher Long (2004) succinctly summarizes how critical thinking ought to be seen more as a series of separate tasks which can be individually taught and evaluated rather than as a holistic ability to “reasonably or reflectively decide on what to believe or do” (Ennis and Weir, 1985 as cited by Long, p. 227).

Far from being simply a series of instructions seemingly unconnected, this way of decoding critical thinking skills addresses various issues in ELT, apart from the fact that it avoids cultural conflicts of all kinds. In this context, it also serves to identify the most crucial elements which make critical thinking an important part of learning and using a second or foreign language - allowing for a subsequent development of ideas and opinions based on more practical skills obtained through a process of reading. Barnawi (2011) uses a similar approach to view critical thinking from a more practical perspective by pointing to a set of issues which the student could be made aware of in the course of reading a text. He identifies features such as understanding the primary purpose of the text, judging a text for important argumentation patterns, understanding the reasons and justifications provided as evidence in an argument, and discussing the extent to which such arguments are convincing. In the debate on definitions, it may become clear that

having a tendency towards critical thinking, by which is meant “an aspect of intrinsic motivation to solve problems and make decisions by using thinking” (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012, p. 39), is perhaps not the only or even the most productive way of using the term in EFL contexts. Most studies which base themselves on the notion of critical thinking as a skill, rather than as a worldview inherent within the reader, use the Watson-Glaser Appraisal format which assesses students on their ability to infer, recognize assumptions, make deductions based on information, interpret given information and evaluate it as being strong/weak, relevant/irrelevant (as cited by Cadvar & Doe, 2012, p. 298). This established method of evaluating critical thinking skills can then be successfully transferred to student writing since it will be more feasible for students to gauge their own system of development as they develop their reading abilities. This is also evident in other studies in EFL contexts (Spirovska, 2022; Tosuncuoglu, 2018).

##### 5. EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO THINK CRITICALLY

The link between critical thinking and the writing process remains tenuous, largely because students are often hesitant to set down their thoughts on paper, struggling as they are with the logistics of expression, grammar and vocabulary. Some studies (Stotsky, 1991; Cavdar & Doe, 2012) argue that students are more involved and committed to their writing when they feel that they are in control of their own material and their own time, rather than being guided by a formulaic method of writing on imposed topics. This is an argument supported in a study by Hidi & McLaren (1998) in which students were seen to be more motivated when writing on topics for which they were equipped in terms of background knowledge and in which they had a real interest. Stapleton (2002) cogently supports this argument in his research based on 45 Japanese students, some of whom were asked to write on a topic familiar to them and some on a topic with which they were not very familiar. Based on the various criteria of critical skills evaluation such as argument, reason, evidence, refutation, conclusion and fallacies, he says that students who wrote on topics on which they had some background knowledge and clear opinions did much better in terms of the given criteria than those made to write on topics which were unfamiliar - in this case, gun control in the United States. “[F]ewer arguments and less evidence” (Stapleton, 2002, p. 523) appeared in essays which dealt with unfamiliar topics, while students voiced their opinions more strongly and confidently in areas with which they were familiar. A similar study by Javorcikova and Badinská (2021) found that vast training was required to equip students with critical thinking skills at the undergraduate level. This makes EFL more inclusive in that it opens up opportunities for students using their own cultural resources. It is in this context that a similar study was made on English major students at an Arab university.

## 6. THE RESEARCH PROJECT: A CASE STUDY

In order to evaluate the critical skills gained in the course of a student-centered research course for Arts and Education English majors at Oman's Sultan Qaboos University, a questionnaire was distributed in order to enable students to reflect on the course and identify crucial areas of competence and achievements, keeping in mind the notion that critical thinking was being defined as a series of analytical skills with which the students might have been equipped in previous courses as well as the one being undertaken at that time - skills they would find an opportunity to use in an original project.

The Research Project at Sultan Qaboos University is a 6<sup>th</sup> semester (third year) undergraduate course for English students (Arts and Education majors), guided by an instructor but researched and written entirely by students themselves. This 15-week course involves students choosing a topic of personal interest, composing a proposal approved by their instructor, and involving a 4000-word literature review. It also involves the submission of an annotated bibliography before the literature review, in which a minimum of 7 sources are to be identified and analyzed for their content, main arguments and relevance to the student's area of interest. The final paper, which is approximately 8000 words long, includes questionnaires, surveys and/or interviews on the topics which are formulated by the students themselves, transcripts and samples of which are appended in their papers. The entire process is supervised by instructors who oversee between six to ten students during the semester. Following their submission of the research paper, students are given an opportunity to present their papers at a student conference and publish a summary of their findings in a student journal.

The course typically follows a fixed pattern in which students choose a topic (almost always in the first week of teaching), submit a proposal within two weeks, spend around four weeks researching their topics by visiting the library and browsing online, submit a literature review, and create questionnaires which are then given to other students or, if necessary, to participants outside the university. The final paper is based on the findings of the questionnaires and on the interviews which are conducted by the students as they are waiting for their samples to be returned. The final paper includes a section on the methodology, findings, and recommendations, together with a final reference list using the APA format.

## 7. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was given to students in their final year (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> semesters) in order to ascertain the kind of critical skills which they felt they had acquired during the research project. The questionnaire was based on Stapleton (2002), Kubota (1999), Yeh (2009) Barnawi (2011) and Errihani (2012), whose studies proved that EFL students display a range of critical thinking and writing skills and are capable of transferring these skills to their writing. The questionnaire also focused particularly on what students felt they had gained in the course of an entire semester where they were given considerable independence and liberty to discover areas of interest and were free to organize their own time for the various assigned tasks. The study involved 84 students studying in the English Department, 28 of whom were English literature specialists and 56 English Education majors. The majority were females (76) and 8 were male. They ranged in age from 20 to 23, and had all volunteered to complete the questionnaire.

Two instruments were used to collect data - a 43-item questionnaire and a structured interview. The questionnaire went through several stages of validation with three professors continuously revising it. The validation process resulted in deleting items felt to be duplicating others or items felt to be unrelated to the topic. It also resulted in a few items being added, such as some pertaining to handling graphical information.

Participants were asked to evaluate how well the research project course they had taken prepared them in terms of skills related to the above item categories by choosing one out of four possible options: no training; inadequate training; good training; very good training.

The subsequent interviews were voluntary and invitations were sent via e-mail to all the students who had participated in the questionnaire. Ten students volunteered and each was met separately. Since the interviewees gave detailed answers, it was felt that their responses were indicative of the larger student sample, and so no more students were pursued to do the interviews. The interview sample consisted of female students majoring in English at the College of Education. All were 22 years old, except one who was 23. No male students volunteered.

The interview contained 5 main questions which aimed to find out the extent to which students thought that the Research Project course honed their critical thinking skills and how these skills could be further developed.

## 8. RESULTS

The aim of the study was to discover how well participants felt that they were prepared in terms of specified critical thinking skills taught in their research-project classes. Two instruments were employed to collect data in order to achieve the study's objective: a close-item questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

The 43 skills and sub-skills included in the questionnaire were categorized into 11 groups and participants were asked to choose from a scale of 1-4 (one being the lowest and 4 the highest). The categories included the following:

- a. Critical thinking and topic choice
- b. Examining ideas
- c. Critical thinking and choosing and handling sources
- d. Idea synthesis
- e. Argumentation
- f. Idea organization
- g. Instrument design
- h. Visual/graphical information
- i. Justifying results
- j. Arriving at logical conclusions
- k. Problem solving

The means of the six categories above (ranging from 2.88 to 3.5) indicate that most participants felt they were well trained through their research courses in most of the skills listed under those categories. Participants felt confident that they were well prepared to choose topics which would be worth researching. However, fewer participants felt that they were trained well in finding and developing insights into a research problem important to their society, as the mean for item one was the lowest (2.82) in this category.

They also believed that they were well trained in instrument design as all items under this category had a mean of 3 or above, and the same is true of the category on idea organization. The choosing and handling sources category had 8 items, among which there were 5 obtaining a mean of above 3, indicating a majority agreement among participants that they were trained well in these. The three items that obtained less than a mean of 3 dealt with the following: adding participants' own ideas and insights to comment on previous research (mean = 2.99); distinguishing between important and unimportant information (mean = 2.98); and criticising a source to pinpoint strengths and/or weaknesses (mean = 2.65). The last three are closely related to source examination, a category that obtained a mean of less than 3.

As for the fifth category with the highest mean, critical thinking and result justification, the mean for the two items was above 3, indicating an agreement that participants felt well trained in comparing and contrasting findings with findings from previous research, and explaining them in the light of factors relevant to Omani society. This could be due to their familiarity with their own cultural context, which enabled them to view data and results through their own cultural lens. This is especially possible because the data was collected from Omani society, of which the participants were members.

The only category that received less than 2.5 was "critical thinking and handling graphical information", which had a mean of 2.46. The participants felt they were inadequately trained to interpret graphical information (mean = 2.54), create effective graphical representations of their results (mean = 2.46), and determine patterns from visual data (mean = 2.40). This could be attributed to the fact that teachers were more concerned about instructing students in matters related to the written word than about visual data interpretation and to the fact that such data is not always present in Applied Linguistics research, which is the area to which most students (as education majors) belonged.

## 9. INTERVIEW RESULTS

Most of the information garnered from the questionnaires was also substantiated by a series of semi-structured interviews conducted on ten volunteering students. In many ways, their responses echoed most of the responses to the questions in the close-ended questionnaire. The data obtained from the interviews was transcribed and later classified thematically. Ideas pertaining to the same theme were grouped together. Differences were noted and examples quoted. The results are given below, retaining, however, much of the students' own vocabulary in order to remain authentic.

### *1. In what ways did the Research Project course foster your critical thinking skills?*

Classroom discussions of various research ideas and sample articles seem to have given students the opportunity to examine how their classmates thought, and this resulted in their gaining new and multiple perspectives on a research idea. In the words of one interviewee: "Research Project promoted critical thinking significantly through various ways. First, through the discussions that were conducted during the lessons as students got the chance to look deeply on the way their classmates think."

Choosing a significant researchable topic according to a set of criteria provided by instructors compelled students to think carefully so that their selected topics met the required criteria. Interviewees replied as follows:

- i. "The first way the course fostered my critical thinking is through choosing a topic.... We were forced to think deeply especially that the topic we will choose must meet some conditions."
- ii. "[c]ritical thinking was fostered in this course from the beginning – since choosing the topic. First, I learned to examine the society around me and know what are the aspects and problems that really require research. Second the way of setting the significance of my research and finding its place among previous studies was also a way of improving the critical thinking skills."
- iii. "Choosing a topic was difficult and it took me more than two weeks. This fostered my thinking when I thought about each topic that came to my mind from different aspects. In fact, I changed my topic three times, the last of which I had finished writing the proposal, but changed the whole thing to another completely different one."

Although uncertainty about which topic to choose may influence students taking the Research Project course, they value this experience as they become metacognitively aware of the skills they have gained.

Another challenge which the students found daunting was to read sources critically in order to determine the validity of their assertions and to determine the objectivity or bias of their authors. Students felt that the course had developed a certain degree of skepticism about other people's ideas, positions and perceptions. Comments included the following:

- i. "The Research Project course fostered my critical thinking in helping me rethink about some of the facts found in articles and trying to prove whether they are right or wrong, or at least to speculate on the different dimensions of a certain concept."
- ii. "The course helped me think deeply of the subject of the research to be studied, examined and evaluated. During the process of writing the literature review, I thought about the writers' ideas and whether they are sensible and logical. We have to bear in mind that not all what is written is correct; there is also the likelihood of "wrongness in every written piece."
- iii. "Taking research courses (Academic Writing and Research Project) helped me enrich my critical thinking skills. Before I took these courses, I used to believe everything I read. I used to think that whatever is published must have been reviewed and that its validity was tested. After taking the research courses, I learned that the facts are changeable and what is true in the context of one study might not be considered true in another. Also, I learned that many facts are questionable and they can be criticized. Most studies have limitations that affect their results, that is why these limitations can be the basis of my criticism. In addition, I learned to support my argument with examples and statistics to increase its validity."

The majority reported that writing the literature review required critical thinking as they were all asked to analyze, compare and contrast ideas and sources, construct arguments and take positions. They were also asked to use their own words to write the review:

- i. "Writing a literature review needs also critical thinking since we are not just copying what we read in books and articles (which also needs critical thinking). We read, analyze, compare and write an argument."
- ii. "Now I am better in creating a way that makes the information I get from the sources support my point and in linking ideas which might seem unrelated to make them support the same point."



- iii. "The literature review is like a puzzle we have to solve. We had to see what the writers say and write about the same aspect from different points of view and then logically connect everything."

Constructing the research questions and creating a questionnaire based on them, as well as their own experiences of the Omani context further enhanced their critical thinking about what items to include and in what ways they would relate to the topic, and what function they would serve in answering which question(s). A sample of the interview responses include: "designing the study in general and setting the research questions were taught in a good way that involved taking into consideration several factors related to the examined issue. The students have to do everything by themselves. They were only guided by instructors. Also, critical thinking was promoted when designing the research tool. It was the first time for me to design a full questionnaire. It really involves critical thinking, clear vision of the measured issue and good observation for things related to it."

Analyzing the collected data and consolidating the results needed skills with which students were not previously well equipped, particularly about relating this to their literature review. In this regard, responses included the following:

- i. "Students are required to conduct a questionnaire and I think analyzing the statistics fosters critical thinking."
- ii. "Analyzing our own data and writing our own results need deep thinking."
- iii. "The area that I thought critically about more than any other area was the data analysis. I reflected on the respondents' answers and evaluated them on the basis of how much they were in harmony with what I got from the literature review."
- iv. "Analyzing the results of the study and drawing conclusions were useful steps in enhancing my critical thinking skills, especially evaluating and synthesizing."

Arriving at valid recommendations based on the results and the literature review was another aspect stressed by interviewees. They thought that since the suggestions had to fit the Omani context, producing useful and viable ones involved much critical thinking.

Skills emphasized by interviewees included effective topic choice, establishing the significance of a topic, analysis, synthesis, logical thinking, argumentation, categorization of relevant ideas, assessing sources' objectivity and relevance, recognizing bias, evaluating the validity of other people's ideas, criticising ideas, research methodology or results, supporting one's assertions, comparing and contrasting ideas, consolidating results, comparing one's own results with results from previous studies, and coming up with valid recommendations. One interviewee emphasized an added benefit which she got from the course, namely effective time management. She stated, "Now I find myself able to do intensive research in perfect time which is a result of time management skill I gained through the course." Another stressed the linguistic benefit she got from the course. In her words, "The course increased my vocabulary and improved my grammar and spelling skills."

- 2. *Do you think Omani students are capable of critical thinking?  
Please explain your answer.*

Eight out of the eleven gave a positive reply to this question. They argued that all students have their own opinion depending on their life experiences and thinking styles. Answers varied, such as:

- i. "If they were not, we would not see Omani student with different opinions and different views. I think those dissimilar thoughts and ideologies have resulted from criticizing what students see and read."
- ii. "Everybody can think critically, especially in a university like SQU where we are taught not to accept anything without thinking. We are taught to read, search, make sure, analyze, criticize and then say our opinions if we agree or not."
- iii. "I notice that SQU students specifically have this skill because they are required to critique and criticize."

The remaining three students expressed reservations regarding the validity of generalizing the ability to think critically to all Omani students. They argued that some schools do not foster critical thinking and so students at first lack this skill on entering university. One interviewee stressed the influence of culture and an educational system which, she said, was based on "spoon-feeding". In the words of another interviewee, "The Omani culture is similar to most Arab countries' cultures, which teach students to follow blindly the rules of the ancestors and religion. That does not give students the chance to think reasonably about these rules and their accuracy. For example, students at school are taught to accept what the teacher is saying without any question. It might be considered a sign of disrespect if the students argued with what the teachers say and students will be punished. Moreover, the assessment used to test students' comprehension focuses more on students' ability to memorize what is written on the textbook rather than what is their opinion about it."

### *3. What challenges do students face in acquiring critical thinking skills in research-based courses?*

The main challenges the interviewees talked about related to their inadequate familiarity with conducting research. They lack practice in writing literature reviews and some of them possess inadequate background knowledge on the topics they choose to study. One commented that some students might not be familiar with the society's problems and significant issues that deserve research. Such a challenge has a bearing on students' ability to choose a researchable topic in good time. Narrowing the selected topic so that it was not too wide to research within one semester was yet another challenge reported by one interviewee. Another mentioned lack of instructor supervision, and a few said that taking an objective stance and being able to detect bias were other challenges facing students. Due to lack of background knowledge and practice in critical thinking, students sometimes tend to just read and paraphrase what they find. One also commented that many students find it hard to support their arguments with valid information. Others find it difficult to locate relevant and current sources for their literature review. One emphasized academic pressure and multiple duties which reduced the time available for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection. Another interviewee agreed that students might find it "hard to organize their work while having other courses to do." A last challenge reported was the difficulty students found in sticking to a certain number of words for each section of the paper because they were not accustomed to having to do this. While each interviewee mentioned her own set of challenges, there were common ones among them all, especially, for example, the lack of familiarity with the research process.

4. *In your opinion, how can those challenges be tackled?*

In order to tackle the challenges which had been earlier pointed out, interviewees suggested increased reading and training in the application of reflection and critical thinking when handling reading material. They also suggested the integration of research skills into other courses, especially content-based ones. One interviewee suggested increased collaboration between students and instructors. Another recommended increasing the Research Project's duration "so students can take their time to think, observe and evaluate things around them." She further remarked that "the steps of the research were considered as assignments to be submitted on time which put us under pressure. Our main concern was not to lose grades rather than focus on doing things in a way that makes our study more effective." Hence, extending the Research Project course to two semesters, it was felt, would give students an opportunity to engage more with critical thinking and reflection.

5. *What can be done to improve the integration of critical thinking skills into research-based courses offered by SQU's Department of English?*

A few interviewees suggested integrating critical thinking skills into courses that preceded the Research Project in order to prepare students for using the skills in research. One suggested developing critical thinking skills indirectly at first and then step by step "through small activities given during various courses in the department not only in research-based courses." A few interviews suggested encouraging "group work during the classes because students get the chance to learn from their classmates. In addition, they exchange ideas, which I think develops critical thinking." Other interviewees espoused the value of discussions and urged instructors to encourage students in their classes by selecting topics relevant to their lives. Another said, "Providing texts during sessions to criticize them might be helpful." Two interviewees suggested encouraging students to reflect on their experiences and to think critically about what happens around them.

## 10. OBSERVATIONS ON THE STUDY

In this context of a supervised but independently written research project, critical thinking appears to be a skill which can be taught within the context of an EFL classroom, even though students may not have been culturally trained in earlier years. The research conducted on this set of students demonstrates that training in reading and thinking, with the opportunity for writing based on the readings, is an effective way of establishing a life-long habit of viewing ideas from a critical perspective. As students have noted, they are more comfortable working with areas which seem to be socially close to their own world and are more satisfied when dealing with contexts and persons with whom they are culturally familiar. As Stapleton's (2002) data showed, critical thinking cannot be viewed as an all-inclusive skill, the rules of which are established in a blanket series of established conventions. Empowered with the responsibility to produce a relevant, data-driven project, students are able to successfully employ their critical thinking abilities to help generate their own research.

As the data here has shown, most students were satisfied with the progress they made during the course of the semester in which they had to write an entire research paper on an original topic. As the course allowed them sufficient independence to create their own topics, though tailored enough to provide the necessary research skills, it was possible for

students to create an original piece of research based on established academic conventions. The limitations identified, namely, criticising others' positions, synthesizing multiple perspectives, and drawing more general conclusions based on individual writings, can be viewed as being more advanced skills which would require another platform for further training. In fact, the only lacuna within the program, according to the students, seemed to be the lack of skills in analysing visual data. This would not be a very challenging aspect to incorporate into the course itself.

## 11. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the plethora of student interview data, as well as responses to the questionnaire, this research allows for the articulation of a diverse set of possibilities to inculcate, develop inclusive learning by empowering students with critical thinking skills. It is imperative, as the research has shown and the students have suggested, to make higher order thinking skills an important component of the schooling curriculum, including it as part of the various subjects which are taught, and not as a separate skill. What is most important is to be able to re-define critical thinking as a series of sub skills which can be taught at various levels rather than a worldview which is inculcated wholesale. Identifying author intention, reading for meaning and suggestions, organizing material in a convincing way are all skills which can fit into an increasing hierarchy of student development. This is particularly true of visual images such as data interpretation and usage. Students should be taught how to use graphs, diagrams, as well as statistics, for their own specific purpose, and know how to use data to convince others of their argument. This could be done through debate settings where data could be used to convince others of a particular opinion.

Pedagogically, it is also a good idea to introduce more local works of literature to the students in Oman in order to foster a sense of self-knowledge and criticism as far as writing styles, content and context are concerned. If the use of familiar material eases the process of critical thinking, such an introduction in the Omani context would enable school students to be able to better identify themselves with their journalistic as well as literary writing. This, in turn, would foster an atmosphere of questioning, but more importantly, create models of thought within local contexts. As students have frequently pointed out, they feel the need to have further training in these skills which could be introduced well ahead of their tertiary education.

## 12. CONCLUSION

Viewing the results from a holistic perspective, they seem to suggest that students view critical thinking as an important outcome of independent writing as long as the relevant skills are introduced and worked on for a certain period of time. Critical thinking might thus be seen as a series of teachable skills which empower the EFL student to create a piece of work which would include such academic writing components as argumentation and thus help them to develop a specific, individual voice.

A self-driven research project which originates from students' own interests and knowledge thus seems to go a long way towards ensuring the application of critical skills in writing classes, thus working towards inclusivity. Given that students in the English

program brought very few critical skills with them from previous reading and writing classes, it is relevant to note that a course which allowed them to learn and actually use most of the writing skills, such as topic generation, source identification, synthesizing related material and understanding biases, was most effective in internalizing critical thinking skills. Although some skills, such as visual data interpretation, were viewed as being underrepresented, the overwhelmingly positive reaction to such a course points to the direction in which university learning in the Arab world should move. Based on questionnaires and interviews with selected students, this study concludes that respondents felt empowered once given an opportunity to take ownership of their reading and then used critical thinking skills in their writing. This was particularly so when they could pick topics interesting to them and had access to a range of relevant instruments. When asked about the skills they felt they had gained, a large majority said that being in control of their own writing and time frame enabled them to own their projects in a way impossible in earlier courses which involved writing. Far from being unable to acquire or use critical thinking, learners seemed only too eager to test their skills, provided they were in areas contextually relevant and once they had been sufficiently trained in the methodological aspects of writing research papers.

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