Hurdles Moroccan University Professors Encounter in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

Mounir Beniche
Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco
Benichemounir@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to explore the hurdles Moroccan university professors encounter in enhancing critical thinking skills in Moroccan higher education. The participants of this study were Moroccan university professors from different universities in Morocco . The study uses a qualitative design. The contents of professors' interviews were analyzed qualitatively. The results of the study display clearly that CTS in higher education is crucial for professional contexts, everyday practices, and workplace success; however, their enhancement is challenging for many professors. The difficulties university professors encounter in developing CTS are aligned with many factors. Firstly, students lack the motivation to discuss their views publicly. Secondly, students frequently find it hard to differentiate between opinions and facts and use logical fallacies in their discussions. Thirdly, students typically do not participate in extra-curricular activities that could sharpen their CTS. The study concluded up by displaying practical solutions to overcome such hurdles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Constructing a critical mind starts in the classroom. It is the window that opens horizons. For students to see the world from varied angles and perspectives. In the concept banking of Education, the process of learning "becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat''. (Freire , 2000, p.71). Such a teaching paradigm that is based on drilling and rote learning encourages passivity among students and makes them docile, subservient, and potential victims of all kinds of manipulation and indoctrination.

The modern classroom should conceptualize the student as a future critical thinker who is able to act both academically and in everyday life and an ongoing critical engagement with the world. In this respect, Moon stated (2008) that students should have a clear concept of their knowledge, a good ability to promote their thinking, be well organized, flexible, able to challenge and question ideas, and be willing to deal with different views. (pp.136-137). Such skills and dispositions are crucial for creating a critical proactive student who can act as an agent of change in his/her context.

1.1.Research Problem

Although critical thinking is pervasively recognized as a crucial goal in higher education, many university professors encounter hurdles in enhancing these skills in their students. Diverse

teaching methods and institutional policies tend to develop critical thinking, yet their application is often faced by plenty of obstacles. Furthermore, there is a shortage of detailed qualitative studies that investigate professors' personal experiences and perspectives regarding these difficulties. Without a clear understanding of these hurdles, universities find it hard to offer effective support and resources. This study examines the actual hurdles professors encounter and the possible solutions they can suggest to promote critical thinking skills among students.

1.2.Research Objectives

This study has three major objectives:

1- It tends to examine the difficulties Moroccan University professors encounter in developing students' critical thinking skills.
2- It tends to examine the causes of such challenges.
3- It tends to display possible practical solutions to enhance critical thinking among University students.

1.3.Research Questions

1- What are the hurdles Moroccan university professors encounter in enhancing critical thinking skills?
2- What are the causes of such hurdles?
3- What are the possible solutions to overcome such hurdles?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE
2.1.Higher education and 21ˢᵗ century skills

The 21st century professor should be completely different from the traditional one for many reasons. Firstly, the world is changing rapidly due to the process of globalization and modern technological creations and thinking critically has become a must both academically and in everyday life (Beniche, Larouz, & Anasse, 2021, p.195). Secondly, students have become digital natives and are the most connected generation. Thirdly, skills and dispositions have become of great importance in the process of education. "In the 21st century, knowledge building is fostered by building a bridge from the known to the new. Yet unlike traditional knowledge acquisition, students, often in teams, are assisted to become the creators rather than merely the consumers of new knowledge'' (Kennedy, Latham & Jacinto, 2016,p.23).To meet students' horizons of expectations, professors should be constantly updated and following the latest teaching methods. Knowledge constructing is acquired through a partnership that involves the teacher, the student and the wider members of society. Knowledge construction has currency when there is an authentic task, project, motivation and intentionality. (Kennedy et al., 2016, p.25) The student in 21st-century education is at the centre of the learning process as he/she is supposed to think critically, solve problems in contexts, communicate, collaborate and be a creative thinker. To be more convincing in debates, he/she has to go beyond emotional thinking and back his/her opinions with rational and logical arguments.

Contrary to traditional teaching, the modern professor is not a mere provider of knowledge but rather an agent of change and a leader. His/her major role is to make students able to face the current challenges in their communities and to become active and engaged citizens. A role

model in this context is the professor of the outstanding educational film, "Freedom Writers Diary," which is based on a real story. She was able to change her students who displayed no interest in studying in the beginning due to their poor background, racial discrimination and marginalization. She succeeded in changing those students from being indifferent and violent to being more motivated to study, be respectful and act as responsible citizens. Her engagement helped in societal change since those students without education would be a danger to their whole community.

Academic and social engagement are highly required from the professor to be a catchy model for his/her students. How can a professor boost skills, criticality and creativity if he/she is not adopting and practicing them? How is he/she preaching things are not part and parcel of his/her everydayness?"Deeds are louder than words", and students get involved in real contexts of credibility and honesty.

In this respect, "Thinking in order to problem-solve is not something that should be taught as a discrete, isolated skill. Rather, it is a way of approaching all aspects of learning. It is in the everydayness of teaching that we pose thinking challenges for ourselves and our students". (Kennedy et al., 2016, p.67).

2.2. Critical thinking and higher education

Higher education in the 21st century tends to create contexts for questioning, interactions, and debating to develop students' thinking skills. Modern technology and social networking display easy access to knowledge in different disciplines, and learners can get it easily by themselves. Higher education, then, is not providing knowledge to students but rather creating a learning environment in which the role of the professor is a facilitator, monitor backing up students to awaken their latent skills through inquiries, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. (Beniche, 2023, p.214) Self-centred learning enables students to participate actively in the learning process. The needs of the learners are a priority to bring interest and motivation. Communicating ideas related to their concerns will display more opportunities to think, reflect and come up with an output that enhances both their knowledge and skills. This is the goal of higher education in the 21st century as it has become a tribune to boost critical thinking skills among university students. (Beniche, 2023, p.214). In higher education, critical thinking includes six crucial dimensions: (1) core skills in critical argumentation (reasoning and inference making), (2) critical judgments, (3) critical-thinking dispositions and attitudes, (4) critical being and critical actions, (5) societal and ideology critique, and (6) critical creativity or critical openness. This suggested model shows that critical thinking, in addition to the individual dimension, refers to the sociocultural one. (Barnett & Davies, 2015,p.8).

Argumentation in higher education boosts students to be critical as they discuss and communicate ideas with reasoning and logic. Thinking critically is a prelude to living as a critical person who takes critical action both academically and in everyday life. University students are supposed to be future leaders influencing their countries positively. They raise awareness about societal issues, work for the common good and participate in the development of their society. Such leadership and engagement is the outcome of a good education that develops students' knowledge and skills to encounter current vexing challenges. In this regard, critical thinking skills are counter-discourses that empower and free them from the clutches of deceptive and notorious ideologies. (Beniche, 2023, p.85)

2.3. Hurdles to critical thinking

Critical thinking is one of the crucial skills an individual should develop in the 21st century. It assists people to analyse critically what is happening around them and to find alternative solutions. In the realm of education, critical thinking is highly required as the learner is supposed to question, analyze, infer, synthesize, and evaluate the provided data in the learning process. However, many barriers or pitfalls hinder such criticality and make the learner no more than a mere consumer and reproducer of knowledge. Here are five crucial barriers to critical thinking:

A- Trusting Your Gut: People tend to use their intuitive judgment and personal feelings to take decisions.

B- Lack of Knowledge: Ignoring critical thinking skills and their use in different contexts.

C- Lack of Willingness : Dispositions are highly required in addition to skills to enable individuals to know and think better both in their daily practices and at workplace.

D- Misunderstanding of Truth : Seeking truth enable people to be objective and honest whatever the consequences and circumstances.

E- Closed-mindedness : Being flexible, adaptive and open to constructive criticism lead people to benefit from their own mistakes and develop themselves constantly which is not the case of narrow-minded individuals who seek truth from one lopsided view. (Dwyer ,2019,pp.1-2)

In the learning process, professors and students encounter many hurdles that hinder the development of critical thinking in classroom context. Professor related barriers emanate from the belief that he/she is obliged to cover all suggested contents. He/she does not devote enough time for critical activities. Classroom assessment does not test critical thinking skills. No room for open-ended questions. No enough resources and sufficient time to suggest activities that boost dialogues and discussions. (Reynolds ,2016, pp.55-56).

The barriers related to students can be conceptualized as students are hesitant and afraid of making mistakes. They believe that the professor and the suggested courses are the only source of knowledge. Students display no interest in the given subject and make no effort to think critically. This is due to their lack of background knowledge and training in critical thinking activities. (Reynolds,2016, p.56).

For Fani (2011), barriers to teaching critical thinking can be displayed as the following:
1- Lack of proper assessment**:** Lack of an accurate and objective way to assess students' performance in critical thinking.
2- The concept of CT is vague**:** The concept of critical thinking is still vague and it needs a clear definition and how it can be measured.
3- Teaching CT should be organized**:** To develop students' critical thinking, a clear approach should be created.

- CT practices can be threatening**:** Practising critical thinking can menace the way we are accustomed to dealing with each other. It puts our behavior and interactions under serious questioning.

4- Need of training: Professors are in need of different approaches to critical thinking to apply them appropriately in their classes. (pp.2-3)

Logical fallacies such as Ad Hominem, thinking white-or-black, Bandwagon, Slippery Slope, and Appeal to emotions are also striking barriers that stimulate illogical thinking and deprive persons of using logic and arguments to analyze discourses. (Lucas, 2015, pp.344-351).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative method design. The different major characteristics at each stage of the research process are the following:

1- Investigating a problem and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the central phenomenon
2- Assigning a secondary role to the literature review while still justifying the research problem.
3- Defining the purpose and research questions in a broad and general manner to capture participants' experiences
4- Gathering data through words from a small group of individuals to capture their perspectives
5- Analyzing the data to identify descriptions and themes through text analysis while interpreting the broader implications of the findings.
6- Writing the report using adaptable structures and evaluative criteria, incorporating the researchers' personal reflexivity and potential biases. (Creswell, 2012, p.16)

This qualitative study explores the Hurdles Moroccan University Professors Encounter in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills, the causes of such hurdles, and the possible solutions to overcome such hurdles.

5.1. Participants

Moroccan university professors from different universities participated in the study.

5.2. Instruments

The instruments used to conduct this study were semi-structured interviews with University professors from different universities in the whole of Morocco. They were used to get the feedback of professors about the Hurdles Moroccan University Professors Encounter in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills, the causes of such challenges, and the effective solutions to overcome such difficulties. Many Moroccan university professors from different universities participated in this study by answering pertinent questions related to the research questions. The interviews were followed up online via mobile, email, and WhatsApp. Ten university professors were involved in the study, and the language used was English, as all the interviewees were professors of English.

5.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The data were gathered directly from the interviewed professors who have accumulated a long experience in teaching and evaluating students in CTS.

For the analysis of the collected data, the study used a qualitative design. Professors' opinions about CTS in higher education were analyzed qualitatively.

6. RESULTS

To gain an in-depth understanding and analysis of the major issue and find answers to the research questions, this study used semi-structured interviews. The interviews allowed university professors, through their experiences in teaching, to display their views in detail about the hurdles they encounter in enhancing critical thinking skills in their classes and to suggest practical solutions. The interview questions were pertinent and already prepared to find answers to the issue under study. The deep analysis of the semi-structured interview with university professors leads to the following major points:

All the interviewed university professors believe that critical thinking skills are crucial for students to be independent and creative beings who can make a difference at the workplace, in professional contexts and everyday practices; however, it is challenging for many students as it requires more practice and training to be enhanced.

6.1. University Professors' Perceptions of Critical Thinking Skills (CTS)

Prof.	Perception of CTS	Advantages of CTS
1	CTS enable students to understand complex ideas through analyzing and questioning data.	Deep knowledge, analytical and independent thinking
2	CTS develop cognitive abilities and makes students select reliable data from social media.	Cognitive enhancement, media literacy
3	CTS help students to get deeper engagement with content, preparing them for employability.	Critical involvement, career readiness
4	Developing CTS is crucial to prepare students for the 21st-century challenges.	future-readiness
5	CTS urge students to question knowledge and become autonomous learners.	Critical questioning, autonomous learning
6	CTS broaden the scope for students and assists them to be engaged socially.	Global awareness, community involvement
7	CTS construct a critical mindset, enabling students to be active learners and good evaluators of data.	Active learning, data evaluation
8	CTS help students evaluate ideas clearly and form sound argumentation.	Logical argumentation
9	CTS enable students to understand different and varied views and choose the logical ones.	Compare and contrast views.
10	CTS develop students' ability to assess data.	Data analysis

6.1.1. The Hurdles Moroccan University Professors Encounter in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

The following table illustrates the challenges professors face in enhancing Critical Thinking Skills (CTS):

Challenges	Description
Professors' Readiness	- Insufficient training in CTS pedagogy- Common stereotypes about CTS- Lack of professional development

Pedagogical resources and classroom aids	- Insufficient teaching materials and support - Poor availability and maintenance of educational technology.
Classroom Conditions	- Overcrowded classes- Elevated levels of non-attendance - Tight schedules
Students' learning readiness and Attitude	- Passive learning attitude- Emphasis solely on exam results – Depending on ready-made materials - Lack of independence in learning- Use of logical fallacies in discussions
Curriculum and Syllabus Design	- Curriculum not aligned with the learner' need`s - Soft skills not given enough importance- Inadequate selection of content to enhance critical thinking skills
Institutional conditions	- Institutional unpreparedness - Insufficient infrastructure (internet, libraries, multimedia spaces)- Open access universities missing fundamental support
Transition from secondary school to higher education	- Students are not mentally and emotionally ready for independent learning

6.1.2. The causes of such hurdles

According to the interviewed university professors, here are the causes of CTS hurdles:

Causes	Description
Passive Learning	Many students depend much on memorization and professors` output without questioning and analyzing which makes the task difficult to enhance critical thinking skills.
Lack of Training	Some professors lack formal training in critical pedagogies that encourage independent thinking, depending instead on traditional methods of teaching.
Assessment Challenges	Assessing critical thinking skills is difficult in the absence of clear criteria and standardized tests.
Overloaded Classes	Large class sizes makes the task hard for professors to engage most students in debatable issues to enhance their critical skills.

6.1.3. The possible solutions to overcome such hurdles

To overcome such hurdles, university professors suggest the following:

Suggested Solutions	Description
Curriculum Integration	Involve courses of critical thinking into the university curriculum to train students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, solve problems and make decisions.

Learning by Doing	Encourage students to be engaged in discussions, mock trials, writing tasks, and public speaking activities to practice CTS in real and different contexts.
Continuous Training	Offer ongoing training for professors to cope with the current teaching methods to be able to train students to think differently and critically.
Raise Awareness of CT's Importance	Students should be aware that critical thinking skills are highly required in their daily practices, academic career, and work place.
Socratic Methods	Socratic reasoning should be encouraged in class debates to encourage students to use questioning and augmenting and not take things for granted.
Critical Pedagogy	Provide teaching approaches that enhance active and independent learning that is based on analysis and interpretation and not on passive learning.

7. DISCUSSION

Through the close analysis of university professors' interviews, this study has attempted to display the importance of CTS in Moroccan higher education and the major difficulties university professors encounter in developing it. It also suggests possible solutions to enhance it. Through the scrutiny and analysis of interviews, it is clearly deduced that university professors face many difficulties in enhancing CTS, which is aligned to many factors:

Firstly, students lack the motivation to discuss their views publicly. Secondly, students frequently find it hard to differentiate between opinions and facts and use logical fallacies in their discussions. Thirdly, students typically do not participate in extra-curricular activities that could sharpen their CTS.

To overcome these challenges and improve their level in CTS, Professors suggest the following points:

Students should be introduced to different and varied activities that enhance CTS. CTS is developed through more training and practice. Hence, students should be motivated to participate in CTS activities like public speaking and debating, Socratic reasoning, critical reading and listening, and argumentative writing and to be given a chance to voice out their views freely.

Thinking critically is highly beneficial for students, not just within the classroom environment but throughout their whole lives. In 21st century education, learners should develop skills in how to look for data in different sources, analyse, synthesize and evaluate them. Such a process helps students draw logical conclusions and create original and new ideas. Classroom dialogue and discussions boost them to express their views about displayed knowledge and current local and global issues.

8. CONCLUSION

The study aims to explore the hurdles Moroccan University professors encounter in enhancing CTS. It uses a qualitative design to get a deep understanding of the research problem. The study results revealed that university professors encounter many challenges in developing CTS which

are the outcome of many factors. According to university professors' output, most students are using common logical fallacies in their discussions and wishful thinking. In addition, most students need more training to be familiar with CTS. They are in need of more educational spaces and more activities to sharpen their CTS. In this regard, professors suggested that students should be encouraged to speak and express their views freely in different contexts and be introduced to CTS gradually. They should also be given enough time to develop argumentative performances. Finally, students should be aware that CTS are highly required in their daily practices, academic careers and at workplace.

8.1. Limitation of the Study

Although considerable efforts were invested in this study to abide by the principles of scientific research in the realm of humanities, it is not free of some limitations and shortcomings.

First, this study approached just the experience and perspective of university professors of English. Including professors from other disciplines would enrich the study and help in generalizing the findings.

Second, it was limited to a qualitative design. Applying other designs and methods may have contributed better and provided a deeper understanding of the research problem.

Thirdly, this study investigated only critical thinking skills. Examining other soft skills in the academic context may have provided more data and findings as they are the current skills needed for academic and workplace success.

8.2. Recommendations and Implications

Several recommendations and implications can be derived from the findings of this study:

1. As future leaders, students should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills. They are essential in academic settings, in the workplace, and in everyday life.
2. Students should be gradually introduced to critical thinking skills.
3. Creating an optimal educational atmosphere is crucial to enhance students' CTS.
4. Higher education institutions should hold frequent educational events and conferences focusing on critical thinking and soft skills to allow researchers to tackle emerging issues, highlight new ideas and provide practical solutions to enhance critical skills in Moroccan higher education.
5. The Ministry of Higher Education should collaborate with outstanding international academic institutions to provide ongoing training for faculty members.

REFERENCES

Barnett, R. & Davies, M. (2015). *The Palgrave handbook of critical thinking in higher education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beniche,M., Larouz,M., & Anasse,K. (2021). Examining the Relationship between Critical Thinking Skills and Argumentative Writing Skills in Moroccan Preparatory Classes of Higher Engineering Schools (CPGE). *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*,*4*(9),194-201.

Beniche,M., Larouz,M., & Anasse,K. (2021). An Analysis of Major Difficulties Moroccan Engineering Students Encounter in Argumentative Essay Writing : The Case of Preparatory Classes of Higher Engineering Schools. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, *3*(4), 119–130. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v3i4.752

Beniche, M. (2023). The Correlation between Critical Thinking Skills and Argumentative Writing Skills in Moroccan Higher Education: The Case of the Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 5*(1).212-229. http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v5i1.1226

Beniche, M. (2023). Assessing the Experience of Public Speaking Contest in Moroccan Tertiary. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies, 4*(3), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i3.342

Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

Dwyer, C. P. (2019). 5 barriers to critical thinking: What holds us back from thinking critically in day-to-day situations? *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/thoughts-thinking/201901/5-barriers-critical-thinking

Fani, T. (2011). Overcoming barriers to teaching critical thinking. *Edu Future Conference*. https://conference.pixel-online.net/conferences/edu_future/common/download/Paper_pdf/SOE07-Fani.pdf

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Kennedy,I.G., Latham,G., & Jacinto, H. (2016). *Education skills for 21st century teachers : Voices from a global online educators' forum*. New York : Springer.

Lucas, E. S.(2015). *The art of public speaking* (12th ed.). New York, NY: Mc Graw Hill.

Moon, J. (2008). *Critical thinking : An exploration of theory and practice.* London : Routledge.

Reynolds,S.W.(2016). *Determining and exploring teachers' perceptions on the barriers to teaching critical thinking in the classroom: A survey study*. PhD. Thesis, Texas Tech University.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Dr. Mounir Beniche is a university professor at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. He is also a freelance translator and a public speaking coach. He participated in many national and international conferences about communication in contexts, education and current challenges, cooperative learning and teaching, and education and civic engagement. His research interests include applied linguistics, language proficiency, soft skills, discourse analysis and cultural studies.

.