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GOD**



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Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

**The Effect of Instructing Critical Thinking (CT) Through  
Debate on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension**

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*Dedicated to*

*My beloved father and mother,*

*My dearest sister,*

*And my professors.*

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ANOVA: Analysis of Variance

CCTDI: California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory

CCTST: California Critical Thinking Skills Test

CCTT: Cornell Critical Thinking Test

CT: Critical Thinking

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

KMO: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

RTCRCCT: Read Theory Critical Reading Comprehension Test

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Scientists

WGCTAT: Watson–Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal Test

## **Abstract**

### **The Effect of Instructing Critical Thinking (CT) Through Debate on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of instruction through debate on male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension, to examine the differences between the performance of male and female participants on the five dimensions of CCTST including analysis, evaluation, inference, deductive reasoning, and inductive reasoning, and to examine the differences between male and female EFL learners' perceptions in the experimental group towards instructing CT through debate. 88 intermediate learners (of Lahijan, Guilan province, Iran) out of 120, who were selected based on convenience sampling method participated in this study. The placement test, OPT, was conducted to choose the intermediate sample. The study utilized a quantitative research method with two kinds of design; experimental pre-post tests and a quantitative content analysis design, respectively. 44 participants represented the experimental group and 44 participants represented the control group. The experimental group received some treatment in the form of "The Meeting-House Debate" strategy, while the control group received no such treatment. Before inserting treatment, both groups participated in the pre-tests. The results of the pre-tests indicated that the participants of the two groups were homogenous with respect to their CT skills and reading comprehension ability. After one month and a half treatment of experimental group, both groups participated in the post-tests. Data analysis was done using descriptive and inferential statistics procedures. The results of two-way ANOVA indicated that there was no significant main effect for gender; i.e., there was not a significant difference between male and female learners' scores on RTCRCT. However, the main effect of participant was significant; i.e., a significant difference was found between control and experimental groups on RTCRCT. Also, the interaction between gender and participant was not significant. Further, the results of independent samples t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the performance of male and female participants on the

five dimensions of CCTST, and there was no significant difference between male and female learners' perceptions on the close-ended items of the questionnaire. It was concluded that instructing CT through debate had a positive impact on male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension. In addition, gender did not have a significant effect on the students' CT skills. It was also concluded that gender did not have an effect on the students' responses. Further, the findings of students' responses on the open-ended questions indicated that majority of the participants had positive views towards the debate technique. Finally, implications for language teachers, material developers, and curriculum designers were also discussed.

**Key words:** CT, Debate Technique, Critical Thinker, Reading Comprehension, Gender.

# **Chapter 1:**

# **Introduction**

## 1.1. Introduction

The domain of reading comprehension has led to an increasing emphasis on the role of problem-solving technique that supposedly enable the student to identify, clarify, evaluate and solve perplexities that arise in reading (Waters, 2000). Researchers agree that creativity, problem-solving, and imagination of one's comprehension processes are critically important aspects of skilled reading. Such imagination and creativity are what often referred to in the literature as critical thinking (CT) (Fitzpatrick, 1993; Kataoka-Yahiro & Saylor, 1994; Stancato, 2000).

Researchers working in the area of CT tried to provide a clear definition of this concept. According to Ennis, Fisher and Kennedy (1991), there is no consensus about CT definition. Remeo (2010) explains that there is currently a lack of an accepted framework for CT, so that there is not a widely acknowledged and accepted theoretical definition for it.

Beyer (1987) defined CT in a narrow sense as convergent thinking. He stated that CT is not a process at least in the sense that decision making or problem solving are processes; that is, CT is not a unified operation consisting of a number of operations through which one proceeds in sequence. Ennis (1962) stated that CT is the correct assessment of statements. Ennis (1985) replaced this definition with a broader one for CT. According to him, CT is seen as a reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to do or believe.

Further, Ennis (1987) explains that CT is a practical reflective activity that has a reasonable action or belief as its goal. There are five ideas in his definition: practical, reflective, reasonable, action, and belief. According to Ennis (1993), for a person to reasonably and reflectively go about deciding what to do or believe, the following items must be done: (a) judge the credibility of source, (b) judge the quality of reasons and assumptions, (c) identify conclusions, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidences, (d) ask appropriate questions, (e) develop and defend a



position on an issue, (f) plan experiments and judge experimental designs, (g) define terms in a way appropriate for the context, (h) be open-minded, (i) try to be well-informed, and (j) draw conclusions when warranted, but with caution.

Paul (1984) deals with CT in the strong sense and in the weak sense. He indicated that in the strong sense, CT skills are understood as a set of integrated macro-logical skills ultimately intrinsic to the character of the person and to insight into one's own cognitive and affective processes. Also, in the weak sense, CT skills are understood as a set of discrete micro-logical skills ultimately extrinsic to the character of the person.

Further, CT comprises two dimensions: (a) cognitive skills and (b) affective dispositions. Having the requisite cognitive CT skills is essential to being a good critical thinker, but it is not enough. The concept of CT has also to do with a set of personal attitudes or dispositions that can be used to describe an individual who is inclined to use CT. Facione (2000) defines CT dispositions as consistent internal motivations to respond to events, persons, or circumstances in habitual, yet potentially malleable ways. In thinking critically, one may analyse one's own inferences, evaluate one's own analysis or explain one's own interpretation (Courtney & Simpson, 2002).

Whatever CT is comprised of, it is claimed to be important in the acquisition of language skills particularly writing and reading (Moore, 1995 & Stapleton, 2001). Facione (1992) suggests that there is a significant correlation between CT skills and reading comprehension. According to him, improvements in one are paralleled by improvements in the other. Ruggiero (1984) indicates that reading is reasoning. Beck (1989) points out that there is no reading without reasoning. Norris and Phillips (1987) also stated that CT provides a means of explaining the ability to work out ambiguous texts by generating alternative interpretations, considering them in light of world knowledge and experience, accepting alternative explanations, and suspending decision until further information is available. They conclude that CT is the process which the

reader uses to comprehend. Also, Osborne (2005) believes that to demonstrate the ability to read and write critically, debate is effective.

Bartanen and Frank (1991) claim that debate is a form of CT, a way of gathering and interpreting information. Freeley and Steinberg (2005) believe that CT that includes debate allows for collaboration where teams can achieve higher levels of thinking through the use of persuasive evidence. This collaboration allows individuals to retain information longer and the opportunity to engage in discussion and shared learning. According to Colbert (1995), the interactive experience of the debating process appears to present a catalyst creating the disequilibrium, motivation, and framework needed to facilitate the acquisition of CT abilities.

Additionally, the debate technique could be defined as variant to the discussion method taking place between two teams; one team argues for the assigned issue and the other argues against it with the purpose of arriving at a joint position to which both sides agree (Cheriquinn & Moore, 1994). The format for a debate can range from the formal presentation of opposing sides with a chance for rebuttal to less formal situations where the presentation of arguments for both sides serves as the basis for discussion in class (Ebert & Schroeder, 1983). According to Garrett, Hood, and Schoener (1996), consideration must be given to the criteria for assessing the debaters' performance. More often, a rubric is utilized by teachers to assess the debaters. Glantz and Gorman (1997) suggest that the instructor could consider the following questions when formulating a rubric:

- Is the student persuasive?
- Is the student well organized?
- Does the student focus on the central ideas of the debate?
- Is every statement supported by cited researched evidence?
- Is the research recent?
- Is the research complete or are there large gaps of knowledge?

- Are an adequate number of sources used?
- Is the evidence presented with bias in some way?
- Does the student make frequent eye contact with the audience?
- Does the student respond to all of the opponents' points?
- Does the student challenge flaws in the opposition's arguments?
- Does the student avoid distorting information, making faulty generalizations, and oversimplifying issues?

In addition, Beck (1999) describes an assessment in which debaters are evaluated by the rest of the students. He asserts that requiring all students to write down and evaluate each argument used by both sides encourages active participation. Walker and Warhurst (2000) assigned a group of students to assess each debate team's performance individually, and then the group of student evaluators worked together to arrive at a decision on the assessments.

Despite the way learners are assessed, it is important to help them develop a set of abilities. Students who participate in debate have to think critically. Debate helps learners become critical thinkers. King (1995) believes that a critical thinker has an inquiring mind. Good critical thinkers are good questioners. Whatever they hear, see, read or experience, they are constantly analysing it, searching for explanations, puzzling over its significance, and speculating about relations between that experience and what they know. A good thinker welcomes problematic situations and is tolerant of ambiguity. The good thinker is self-critical and looks for alternative goals and possibilities, and seeks evidence on both sides. The good thinker is deliberative and reflective. He/she believes in the value of rationality. The good thinker considers alternatives and is open to multiple suggestions. He/she uses evidence that challenges favoured possibilities (Baron & Glatthorn, 1985).

Ennis (1989) stated that critical thinkers demonstrate particular attributes that distinguish them from others who do not demonstrate CT. According to him, they tend to: (a) be capable of taking a position or changing a position as evidence dictates, (b) seek information, (c) remain relevant to the point, (d) take into account the entire situation, (e) be open-minded, (f) search for reasons, (g) keep the original problem in mind, (h) deal with the components of a complex problem in an orderly manner, (i) look for options, (j) seek a clear statement of the problem, (k) exhibit sensitivity to depth of knowledge, and (l) use credible sources.

Elder and Paul (2006) believed that a well-cultivated critical thinker solves a complex problem by gathering relevant information, raising vital questions, determining findings, and communicating effectively. Likewise, Paul and Scriven (2006) claim that a well-cultivated critical thinker:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them precisely and clearly,
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract solutions and ideas, testing them against relevant standards and criteria,
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing their assumptions, implications and practical consequences,
- and effectively communicates with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

It should be noted that knowing the degree to which males and females are critical thinkers can be helpful in enhancement of the quality of language learning. As a matter of fact, women have different “ways of knowing” from men (Finley, Mckinley & Miller, 1990). According to Facione, Facione, Gainen and Giancarlo (1995), females are more open-minded and mature in their thinking while males are more analytical. Traditional beliefs and stereotypes claimed that men are superior at analytical thinking, so they are better critical thinkers (cited in Barjesteh & Vaseghi, 2012). On the other hand, Walsh (1996) and Wilson (1989) found that females have higher levels of CT skills than males.