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Effectiveness of Critical Thinking in Acquiring English Speaking Skill for EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking has been encouraged largely in Saudi Arabia to create awareness and enlighten to the students. This is due to the fact that EFL learners are not able to use their critical thinking when practicing English speaking skill in classroom tasks. In recent days, some teachers still use the traditional method in teaching English speaking skill whereby the EFL students may not be given the good opportunity to think critically while communication. Thus, if critical thinking is initiated in schools, colleges or universities, it would create excellent students who are able to use their skills effectively in the future. Therefore, this study aims mainly to investigate the effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill, and how it enhances English language among EFL students. To fulfill this study, the researchers were used Quantitative method, and a questionnaire was designed to collect data. The sample was (42) EFL students at Aljouf University, K.S.A. The findings of the study revealed that students were able to learn better using critical thinking which enhanced their English speaking skills, students are not able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks, critical thinking makes EFL students to engage in independent thinking to solve problems, make decisions and convince others during the communication, and critical thinking enables EFL students to acquire English speaking skill quickly. The study recommends that EFL students should apply the critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill. Also, English lecturers must adopt and prioritize the critical thinking method in teaching speaking skill in classes.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, quantitative Method, EFL students, Acquiring Speaking Skill, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

English speaking skill is deemed to be a crucial part in second language acquisition and teaching. Despite its importance, we find that teaching speaking has still been undervalued, and some of English language teachers have still continued to teach English speaking just as a repetition of tasks or memorization of dialogues. While that the goal of teaching in today's world requires critical thinking to improve students' communicative skills, because, only in that way, students can express themselves, and learn how to follow the social norms and cultural rules appropriately in each communicative circumstance; therefore, recent pedagogical research on teaching students conversation has provided some parameters for developing objectives and techniques.

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Critical thinking in the field of education can be traced back to Dewey's (1916), an American philosopher who demonstrates that teaching students how to think is the main objective of education. According to Dewey (1916), students do not arrive at school as empty minds. By the time the students attend the classroom, they are already intensely active, and the issue of education is the issue of taking hold of students' activities, tasks or giving them direction'.   Philosophy of Education becomes the criteria for determining the purpose, organization and implementation of the teaching curriculum in the classroom. Progressivism is a philosophical belief which states that the best ways of human's learning are through nature and real-life activities. Dewey was mainly in charge of the movement of progressivism. Thus, critical thinking can be evoked by teaching and discussing topics inside the classroom which would be beneficial to the students in acquiring the language at present and for the future. Based on a constructivist lesson which promotes critical thinking is rooted in an authentic context that draws upon the students' real-world experience. The principles of constructivism can be applied in classroom teaching along with helping the internet. As a teacher, one of the most powerful and rewarding instructional method is discussions or debates because it is a real experience and the learners can practice what they have learned and share their thoughts.

Critical thinking is also essential to institutions of higher education. In a survey done by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2011), critical thinking was rated as one of the most essential intellectual skills for students. This is based on the evaluation by 95% of the chief academic officers from 433 institutions. This study revealed how critical thinking helps students in English Language acquisition, and it focuses on the students' use of critical thinking and its effect on improving English Language skills.

Saudi Arabia has begun taught English language at the mids of the fiftieth of the last century. As known, English has taught as a foreign language at Saudi schools, private colleges and universities. This study is deemed significant and value to students, teachers, universities quality of the learning outcomes and education policy makers as it sheds light on one of the most important teaching strategy. To begin with, this study enlightens Saudi EFL undergraduates with effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill for EFL Students at universities. More importantly, it increases their knowledge and awareness of critical thinking in speaking. Moreover, this study presents an invaluable assist to teachers and educators in which it discusses and shows the challenges that EFL students face when dealing with critical thinking in speaking. Furthermore, it helps them to get remedies and employ new and creative teaching strategy such as critical thinking. Finally, it contributes to the solution of communication problems to not only Saudi EFL learners but also the ministry of higher education and curriculum developers and designers. Finally, this research is meant to add some up-to-date findings to English language acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical thinking is the process of analytic thinking that questions ideas, and it is a way to ascertain whether a claim is true, false, or partly true. "It is a self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way" (Mathews & Lowe, 2011). Critical thinking skill does not develop spontaneously but on the contrary, teachers must take a directive role whereby they can initiate and guide critical thinking. In language classes, critical thinking can be used as a medium and is particularly appropriate for the richness of material and the approaches which are interactive. Critical thinking also plays a great role in enhancing English language and to consistently apply it to real-world situations (Butler, 2012).

 A critical thinking approach questions the students' minds, and enables the students to work with the knowledge being learned. Teachers can set goals or learning outcomes which are feasible whereby students are able to achieve. The readings, questions, and exercises in the lesson encourage students to use language to discover the answers. Students and teachers work together to understand, analyze and evaluate the contents

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of the lesson to reach the outcomes which has been stated. Skills in the cognitive domain revolve around knowledge, comprehension, and critical thinking of a particular topic. When learning outcomes are provided to students, they can critically think about information and develop their own answers in a meaningful way. Krashen (1988) believed that the best way to acquire a second language is through natural communication rather than repetition of words and grammar.

Based on previous studies which carried out by Behar-Horenstein and Niu (2011); Fahim and Masouleh (2012), the scholars believe that critical thinking skills can be taught. There have been different methods to teaching critical thinking skills which have been used and thus have evolved over time. In a study by Marin and Halpern (2011), online tutorials using topics were used and students were required to respond. Marin and Halpern's results showed that explicit critical thinking instruction has created a much positive impact on students' critical thinking levels. Abrami (2008) found that critical thinking should be explicitly taught and it would be effective to incorporate it into academic content. On the other hand, Ramsay (2009) also refers to how infusing critical thinking demonstrates impact into reading and writing courses across disciplines. As critical thinking involves analysis, a student needs to be able to evaluate and justify the topic in discussion. In that sense, it is usually connected with problem solving and communication.   Also, in being critical, students must posse the capacity to visualize and evaluate alternative options. (Chabrak & Craig, 2013).

Educators should assist students reflect on their studies so that they can understand their lesson much better. Yang, Gamble and Jeffrey (2013), conducted a study on an experimental group learners, which revealed that a significant improvement in English proficiency compared to the control group. The study highlights that learners cannot enrich the aspects of education and language learning if they do not creatively think about the task given to them. They need to be mindful and consciousness of their knowledge in generating creativity within language itself. When this reflective thinking happens, it would give rise to changes in styles of thinking, problem solving and decision-making. Thus, students learn how to probe questions and learn on their own effort. Yang (2014) demonstrates that the effect of adapting critical thinking in language acquisition using a Moodle system. The empirical findings showed that critical thinking enhanced adaptive English literacy instruction which simultaneously improved students' critical thinking and English literacy. It shows that students study much better when they are given the freedom to explore learning. Being able to make choices and taking responsibility for their own learning activities which are two facets of learning independently with the use of critical thinking. Marin & Halpern (2011) have proved that using the Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment, positive results were seen in students who received explicit instruction compared to those in the Imbedded Instruction group.

METHODS

The subject of the study is the common year students at Aljouf University, EFL students study English before majoring in any specialization at AlJouf University, North Region, Saudi Arabia. The sample was (42) ESP students. Subjects who participated in this study are drawn from different cultural background at Aljouf University. They are the common year students, and they studied English as preparatory level before specializing in health colleges. Their ages vary from (19) and (20) years, and they come from different areas in Saudi Arabia.

Questionnaire is designed to meet the objectives of the study with some modifications. The purpose of these modifications is to make the questionnaire more applicable to the Saudi EFL learners' environment. Questionnaire consists of fifteen statements regarding effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill for EFL Students at universities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher presented the results of the questionnaire and explained the statistical significant differences between variables on percentages for all variables of the Questionnaire. The researcher placed the results and added some comments and discussions with setting the graphical diagrams as explained below.
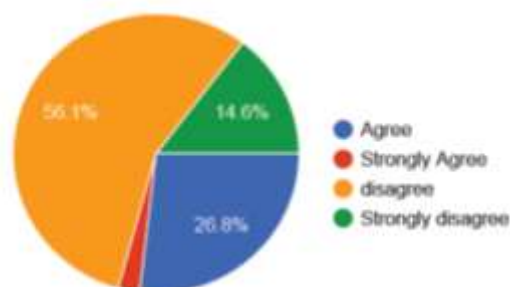

Figure 1. Using the critical thinking in speaking activities in classroom.

Study revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (1) on questionnaire, Statement Number 1, i.e., EFL students do not use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classroom.. The result showed that there is a high percentage for disagree which is 56.1%, and strongly disagree agree which is 14.6%, whereas the results revealed the low percentage for agree which is 26.8%, and 2.5% for strongly agree that EFL students do not use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classroom. Therefore, the total percentage of students' consensus which is 70.7% indicates statistically the significant difference in favor of EFL students use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classroom.
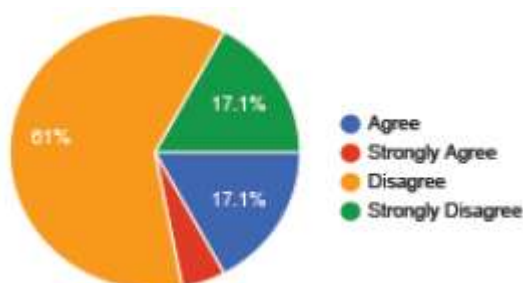

Figure 2. Applying the critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks.

Results of the survey showed that questionnaire statement number (2) which is "EFL students are able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks." The significant difference between participants' results in variable (2) on questionnaire. disagree recorded the highest percentage which is 61.0% followed by strongly disagree which 17.1% whereas there is only 17.1% of students agree and 4.8% strongly agree that EFL students are able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks. Therefore, the significant difference in favor of disagree that ESL students are able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks due to the high of the percentage of students' consensus which is 78.1%. Thus, this result is considered that EFL students are not able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking when classroom tasks.
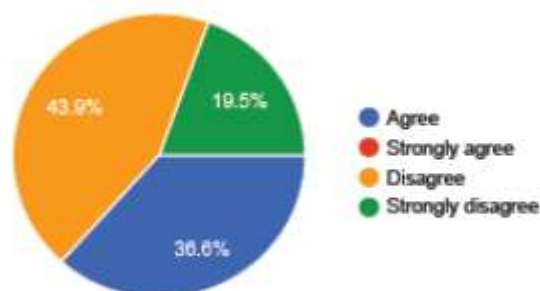
Figure 3. Improving traditional teaching method for EFL learners' critical thinking while speaking English.

Based on statistics, Questionnaire statement number 3, i.e., Traditional teaching method does not improve EFL learners' critical thinking while speaking English. The result revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (3) on questionnaire. The result demonstrates that there is highest percentage for disagree which is 43.9% and 19.5% for strongly disagree whereas the result shows lowest percentage for agree which is 36.6%. Therefore, 63.4% of EFL students' consensus disagree that traditional teaching method does not improve ESL learners' critical thinking while speaking English. Therefore, this consensus supports traditional teaching method improves EFL learners' critical thinking while speaking English.
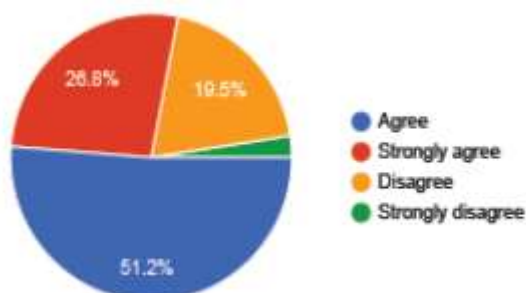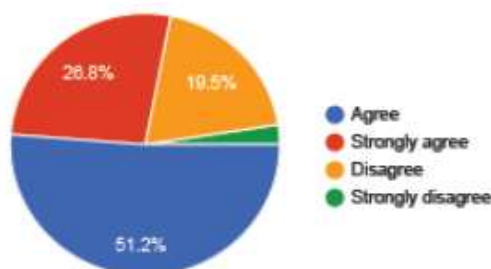

Figure 4. Enabling EFL to learn better using critical thinking in speaking skill.

There is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (4) on Questionnaire, Statement No. 4 which is EFL students are able to learn better using critical thinking in speaking skill. Result showed that agree has the highest percentage which is 51.2% and followed by strongly agree which is 26.8 %. Therefore, the total percentage of EFL students' consensus which is 78% indicates statistically the significant difference in favor of agree that ESL students are able to learn better using critical thinking in speaking skill. Thus, teachers should use critical thinking during speaking classes to enable their EFL learners to learn better.

Figure 4. Enabling EFL to learn better using critical thinking Lin speaking skill.

There is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (4) on Questionnaire, Statement No. 4 which is EFL students are able to learn better using critical thinking in speaking skill. Result showed that agree has the highest percentage which is 51.2% and followed by strongly agree which is 26.8 %. Therefore, the total percentage of EFL students' consensus which is 78% indicates statistically the significant difference in favor of agree that EFL students are able to learn better using critical thinking in speaking skill. Thus, teachers should use critical thinking during speaking classes to enable their EFL learners to learn better.
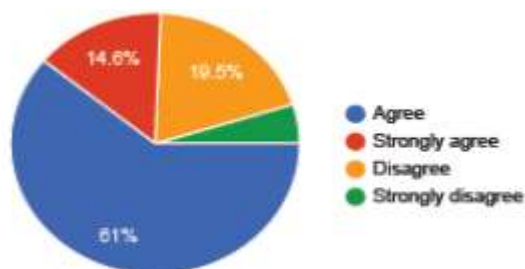

Figure 5. Enhancing critical thinking during speaking skill for EFL student.

Study revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (5) on questionnaire, Statement Number 5, i.e., critical thinking enhances EFL students English speaking skills. The result showed that a high percentage for agree which is 61%, and 14.6 for strongly agree whereas a low percentage for disagree and strongly disagree which are 24,4%.   This indicates statistically the significant difference in favor of agree that critical thinking enhances EFL students English speaking skills.
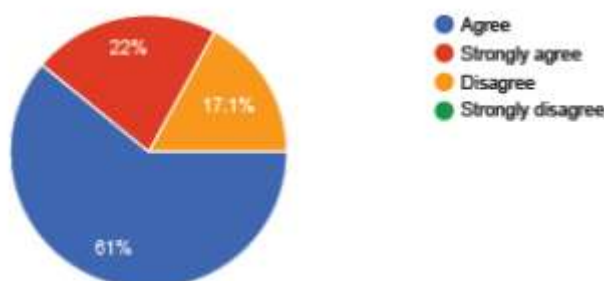

Figure 6. Engaging EFL students in critical thinking independently to solve problems.

Critical thinking makes ESL students to engage in independent thinking to solve problems, which is Questionnaire Statement No. (6) has a high significant difference between participants' results in variable (6) on Questionnaire. Survey results revealed that 61% is recorded for agree and 22% for strongly agree whereas the results demonstrated that 17.1% for disagree. Thus, 83% of EFL students' consensus disagree that critical thinking let EFL students engage in independent thinking to solve problems and making decisions.
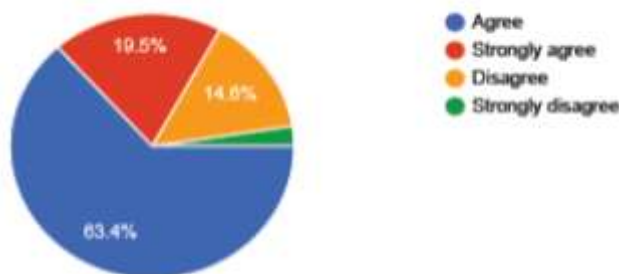
Figure 7. Enabling EFL students to acquire English speaking skill quickly.

Critical thinking enables EFL students to acquire English speaking skill quickly, which is Questionnaire Statement No. (7) has a high significant difference between participants' results in variable (7) on Questionnaire. Survey results revealed that 63.4% is recorded for agree, 19.5% for strongly agree, and 14.6% for disagree and 2.5% for strongly disagree. Thus, 82.9% of EFL students are with critical thinking enables EFL students to acquire English speaking skill quickly because it allows students to discuss and share their thoughts freely.
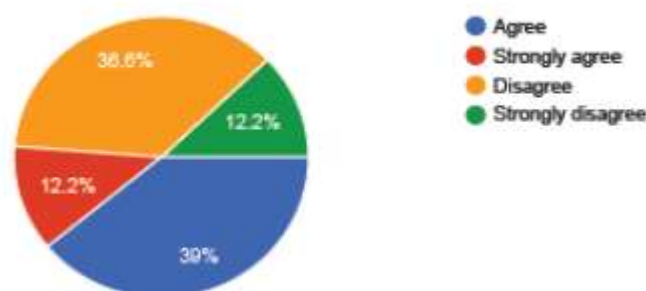

Figure 8. Giving EFL students an opportunity to think critically while speaking in classroom.

Results of the survey showed that questionnaire statement number (8) which is English teachers do not give EFL students an opportunity to think critically while speaking in classroom. "The significant difference between participants' results in variable No. 8 on questionnaire. Agree recorded the highest percentage which is 39% and 12.2% for strongly agree. Therefore, the significant difference in favor of agree that English teachers do not give EFL students an opportunity to think critically while speaking in classroom due to the high of the percentages which is 51.2%. Thus, English teachers do not give EFL students an opportunity to think critically while speaking in classroom. Therefore, English teachers have to give students more chances to discuss topics and express their own opinions.
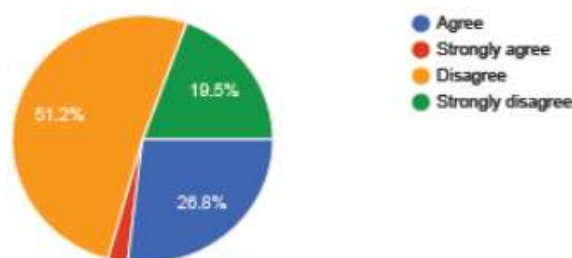

Figure 9. Caring of critical thinking when speaking for EFL learners at universities.

Based on statistics, Questionnaire statement number No. 9, i.e., EFL learners at universities do not care of critical thinking when speaking, the study revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (9) on questionnaire. The result demonstrated that there is highest percentage for disagree which are 51.2% and 19.5% for strongly disagree while there is lowest percentage for agree which is 26.8.7% and 2.2% for strongly agree. Therefore, 70.7% of EFL students' consensus disagree that EFL learners at universities do not care of critical thinking when speaking. Therefore, EFL learners at universities care of critical thinking when they practice English speaking skill.
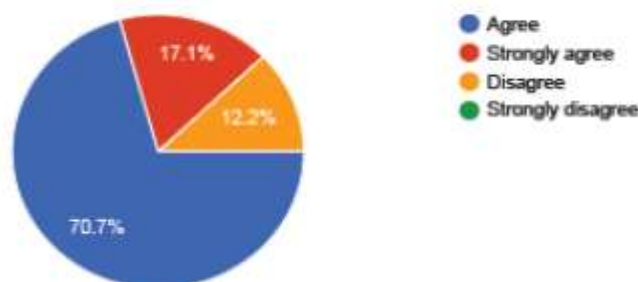

Figure 10. Letting EFL leaners acquire critical thinking in English speaking skill effectively.

Based on statistics, Questionnaire statement number 10, i.e., critical thinking lets EFL leaners acquire English speaking skill effectively. The result revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (10) on questionnaire. The result demonstrates that there is highest percentage for agree which is 70.7% and 17.1% for strongly agree whereas the result shows lowest percentage for disagree which is 12.2%. Therefore, 87.8% of EFL students' consensus agree that critical thinking lets EFL leaners acquire English speaking skill effectively. Therefore, this consensus supports the idea of critical thinking is the most effective teaching method for EFL students which helps them acquire English speaking skill quickly.
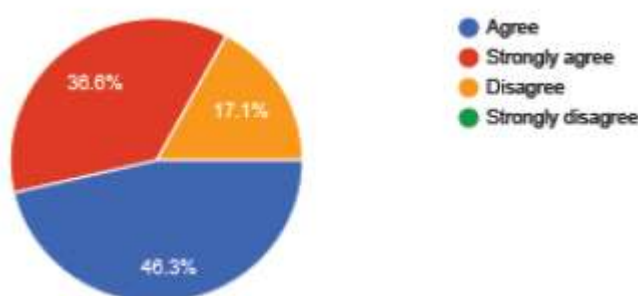

Figure 11. Building the students' confidence during English speaking.

Study revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (11) on questionnaire, Statement Number 11, i.e., Critical thinking builds the students' confidence during English speaking. The result showed that a high percentage for agree which is 46.3% and 36.6 for strongly agree, whereas a low percentage for disagree which is 17.1%. This indicates statistically the significant difference in favor of agree that Critical thinking builds the students' confidence during English speaking due to practicing the critical thinking in every single lecture.
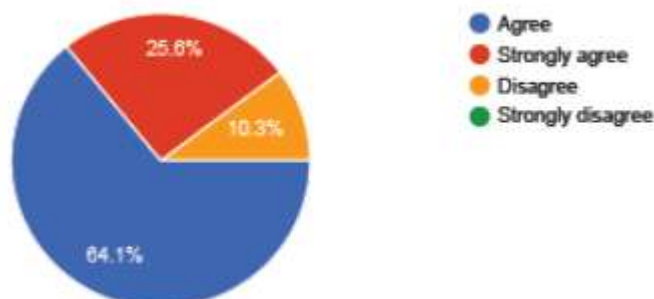
Figure 12. Assisting EFL learners to practice critical thinking in both their personal and academic lives.

Critical thinking assists EFL learners in both their personal and academic lives, which is Questionnaire Statement No. (12) has a high significant difference between participants' results in variable (12) on Questionnaire. Survey results revealed that 64.1% is recorded for agree and 25.6% for strongly agree whereas the results demonstrated that 10.3% for disagree. Thus, 89.7% of ESL students' consensus agree that critical thinking assists EFL learners in both their personal and academic lives. Therefore, critical thinking enables the learners to participate effectively in every aspect of life.
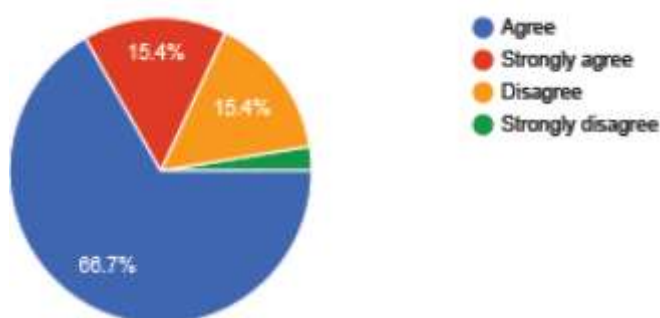

Figure 13. a Mark of critical thinking on an EFL student's ability to objectively evaluate certain situations.

Critical thinking leaves a mark on an EFL student's ability to objectively evaluate certain situations which is Questionnaire Statement No. (13) has a high significant difference between participants' results in variable (13) on Questionnaire. Survey results revealed that 66.7% is recorded for agree, 15.4% for strongly agree, 15.4% for disagree, and 2.4% for strongly disagree. Thus, 82.1% of EFL students' consensus agree that critical thinking leaves a mark on an EFL student's ability to objectively evaluate certain situations.
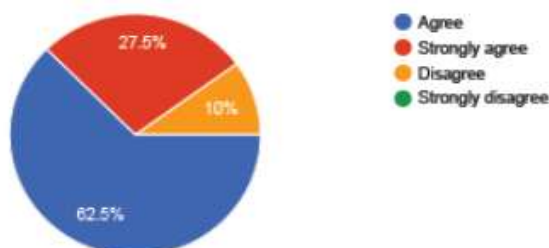

Figure 14. Supporting EFL learners to gather information to convince others during the communication.

Results of the survey showed that questionnaire statement number (14) which is critical thinking process supports EFL learners to gather information or convince other during the communication. "The significant difference between participants' results in variable No. 14 on questionnaire. Agree recorded the highest percentage which is 62.5% and 27.5% for strongly agree. Therefore, the significant difference in favor of agree that critical thinking process supports EFL learners to gather information or convince others during the communication due to the high of the percentages which is 90%. Thus, the process of critical thinking helps and supports EFL learners to gather information and construct them to convince others during the communication.
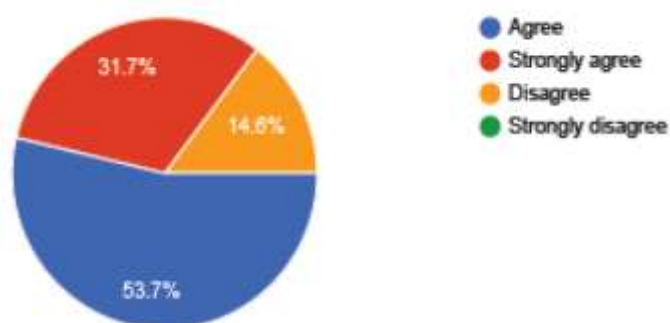

Figure 15. Allowing EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions by using Critical thinking.

Based on statistics, Questionnaire statement number No. 15, i.e., critical thinking allows EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions, revealed that there is a significant difference between participants' results in variable (15) on questionnaire. The result demonstrated that there is highest percentage for agree and strongly agree which are 85.4%, whereas 14.6% for disagree. Therefore, 85.4% of the students' consensus agree that critical thinking allows EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions. Therefore, critical thinking is effective teaching method because it allows EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions.

Referring to the questionnaire, which investigated the effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill for EFL students at Aljouf University, K.S.A. The subjects' responses of this study as follow:

1)   EFL students do not use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classrooms.

2)   EFL students are not able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking in classroom tasks.

3)   EFL students were able to learn better by using critical thinking which enhanced their English speaking skills.

4)   Critical thinking makes EFL students to engage in independent thinking to solve problems and make decisions.

5)   Critical thinking enables EFL students to acquire English speaking skill quickly because it allows them to discuss and share their thoughts freely.

6)   English teachers do not give EFL students an opportunity to think critically while speaking in classroom.

7)   EFL learners at universities care of critical thinking when they practice English speaking skill.

8)   Critical thinking lets EFL leaners acquire English speaking skill effectively.

9) Critical thinking builds the students' confidence during English speaking due to practicing the critical thinking in every single lecture.

10) Critical thinking process helps and supports EFL learners to gather information and construct them to convince others during the communication.

11) Critical thinking is effective teaching method because it allows EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions.

According to the findings of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

1) EFL students should use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classroom tasks.

2) EFL students should able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking in classroom tasks.

3) EFL students should raise their awareness to use critical thinking permanently in order to learn better and enhance their English speaking skills.

4) Critical thinking should be an essential part of EFL students' learning method because it enables them to acquire English speaking skill quickly.

5) English teachers should apply the critical thinking instead of using the traditional teaching method.

6) English teachers should enable EFL students to acquire English speaking skill by using critical thinking because it allows them to discuss and share their thoughts freely and independently.

7) English teachers should give students more opportunities to discuss topics and express their own opinions in the classes.

8) EFL learners at universities should give the critical thinking more consideration when practicing English speaking skill.

9) EFL students at universities should learn how to speak English language by practicing critical thinking.

10) EFL learners at universities should take care of critical thinking when speaking.

11) EFL students should build their confidence during English speaking by using critical thinking.

12) EFL student should objectively analyze facts and certain situations using critical thinking to come up with logical conclusions.

DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis suggests the effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill for EFL students. The EFL students did not seem to have much opportunity to deal with critical thinking during speaking skill classes due to teachers do not use it as method in teaching speaking skill. Various reasons were noted, such as, the students did not apply the critical thinking in speaking. Therefore, EFL students were not able to practice critical thinking inside speaking classes where it was one of main factors that impede them to use critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill.

The main benefits of critical thinking are: 1) Critical thinking enhances EFL students' speaking skill and enables them to learn well and quickly because it allows them to discuss and share their thoughts freely, and; 2) Critical thinking lets EFL students acquire English speaking skill effectively, and; 3) Critical thinking makes EFL learners to engage in independent thinking process to solve problems and make decisions, and; 4) Critical thinking builds the learners' confidence during English speaking classes due to practicing the critical thinking in every single topic, and; 5) Critical thinking process helps and supports EFL learners to gather information and construct them to convince others during the communication, and 6) Critical thinking is effective teaching method because it allows EFL learners to analyze facts and situations and come up with logical conclusions.

Most of the respondents pointed clearly to the effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill for EFL students at Aljouf University, K.S.A. The respondents found that critical thinking lets them acquire English speaking skill effectively and it builds their confidence due to practicing the critical thinking in discussing the topics. Therefore, most of EFL students engage in critical thinking independently to solve the problems and make the decisions. Every student should apply to practice critical thinking to analyze facts and situations.

Lack of exposure to critical thinking for EFL students in speaking classes, was a real problem impeded mastery over problem solving and decision making. Most of the respondents believed that there is little concentration of critical thinking which leads to weakness of applying critical thinking. Moreover, there was a little awareness of importance of critical thinking, most of the respondents agreed that Saudi EFL students are not able to apply their critical thinking in English speaking in classroom tasks. They do not give their best to recall or think critically while practicing speaking skill.

According to the respondent's results, they pointed obviously that English teachers should give students more opportunities to discuss the topics in the English classes. Thus, they will be familiar with critical thinking, and they will discuss the topics with their own opinions effortlessly and properly.

Another problem which has faced Saudi EFL students in analyzing the spoken tasks critically. Most of them do not know whether the topic is controversial or not because they do not experiences topics like them before or because of confidence lacking. Therefore, EFL students do not use the critical thinking in speaking activities in classrooms.

Despite critical thinking is an effective task, and yet, some EFL teachers do not adopt critical thinking in teaching English speaking. Most importantly, all the students showed awareness of the significance and effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring speaking skill which enables them to convey their thoughts critically.

CONCLUSIONS

Although most of Saudi EFL students at colleges and universities understand the significance of critical thinking in communication; however, they still do not use it effectively. The results of this study indicates obviously that critical thinking is an essential methods and modern teaching English strategies at universities. Thus, Effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill depends on teachers and lecturers who to apply this strategy.

The faculty staff of English language should devout enough time to the EFL learners to practice critical thinking in teaching speaking skill. They should draw great attention to debates. Lecturers and teachers should adopt critical thinking strategy for teaching speaking skill to raise EFL learners' awareness through practicing various critical thinking tasks, and trying to catch up the latest English teaching strategies.

Teachers, educators, and syllabi designers should integrate critical thinking for EFL learners. They should improve the engagement on the various topics. EFL learners have to apply critical thinking independently. Classroom debates should be on top-priority of EFL students upon which critical thinking promotes simultaneously. The researchers should give more attention and suggestions to the critical thinking. The significance of critical thinking must be highlighted and officials must make sure the implementation of critical thinking in English teaching and learning. Critical thinking should be incorporated in curriculum from early stages to later stages which enable EFL students to gain creativity and critical thinking through their studies. As a result, ESL students will expose to various range of thoughts which will assist them to participate effectively in problem-

solving and decision making. Thus, critical thinking is deemed to be the modern learning strategy which concentrates on shifting students to higher level of learning. Therefore, the mentioned suggestions will contribute in increasing the effectiveness of critical thinking in acquiring English speaking skill.

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