

The Comparative Effect of Critical Thinking and Autonomy Instruction on EFL Learners' Speaking

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Received: 08/10/ 2018

Accepted: 22/12/2018

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to compare the effect of teaching critical thinking and autonomy techniques on EFL learners' speaking skill. There is of course ample research on critical thinking and autonomy in the ELT classroom. Qamar (2016) showed that autonomy teaching had a significant effect on EFL learners' speaking while Karakoc (2016) demonstrated that critical thinking is no doubt necessary in language learning. Mall-Amiri and Sheikhy (2014) concluded that there was no significant difference between the impact of autonomy and critical thinking on EFL learners' writing achievement. In another research, Vahdani and Tarighat (2014) found that critical thinking had a significantly positive impact on the speaking proficiency of Iranian female adult EFL learners. This aligns with the findings of a similar study conducted by Malmir and Shoorcheh (2012) in which they concluded that critical thinker is a better language learner. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there is no study comparing the effect of using critical thinking and autonomy improvement strategies on EFL learners' speaking; hence, this research was conducted with the aforesaid purpose in mind to fill the existing gap in the literature.

The present study set out to respond to the following research question:

- Is there any significant difference between teaching critical thinking and autonomy on EFL learners' speaking?

Initially, the researchers piloted the sample PET and following item analysis, the modified version of the test was administered to 100 students through which 60 whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen as the main participants. Next, the 64 participants were randomly divided into two experimental groups of 32 in each: one as the autonomy group and the other as the critical thinking group.

Once the two groups were formed, a statistical test was run on the participants' scores on the speaking part of the sample PET to see if the two groups were

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homogeneous regarding their speaking ability prior to the treatment. The classes of the two groups were held two days a week for a total period of seven weeks (14 sessions each lasting 120 minutes) and they took the same midterm test on the seventh session and the final test on the 14th session.

Both groups were taught by the same teacher using the same materials. In one of these two experimental groups, the researcher used autonomy techniques during the course as treatment while in the other group, he taught the course using critical thinking techniques as the treatment.

The design of this study was quasi-experimental posttest-only and comparison group. In this study, the independent variable was the type of instruction with two modes of practicing critical thinking and autonomy and the dependent variable was the learners' speaking ability. The proficiency level of the participants and their age were the control variables of this study while the unequal number of males and females was the intervening variable.

A series of descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in this research. For the homogenization process and speaking posttest, descriptive statistics was applied. The mean and standard deviation of the raw scores were calculated. The reliability of the sample PET was estimated through the Cronbach alpha formula and the Pearson Product Moment was used to estimate the inter-rater reliability between the raters for the writing and speaking sections.

Ultimately, an independent samples t-test was conducted in order to test the hypothesis. All prerequisites for running parametric tests were also put in place beforehand.

Following the treatment, the results of the independent samples t-test conducted on the posttest scores ($t = 1.735$, $p = 0.008 < 0.05$) indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the posttest with the critical thinking group who gained a higher mean score on the posttest compared to the autonomy group outperforming the latter and thus benefiting more in terms of improving their speaking.

Following the rejection of the null hypothesis, the researchers were interested to know how much of the obtained difference could be explained by the independent variable. To determine the strength of the findings of the research, that is, to evaluate the stability of the research findings across samples, effect size was also estimated to be 0.82. According to Cohen (1988), this is a strong effect size. Therefore, the findings of the study could be strongly generalized.

The result of the data analysis revealed that the critical thinking class enjoyed a far better performance in L2 speaking than the autonomy class. The present finding is in line with that of a good number of previous studies (discussed below) focusing on the effects of critical thinking and autonomy on L2 speaking among EFL learners.

This study has certain pedagogical implications in favor of the application of critical thinking instruction in the ELT classroom.

Keywords: ELT, Speaking, Critical thinking, Autonomy