




PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BENIN



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ABSTRACT

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Critical thinking skills represent an important component in a successful and rewarding study at the university level for it can benefit students' academic life. This paper aims at exploring how critical thinking (CT) can be applied to EFL teaching/learning context at the university level in Benin, in order to develop a deeper and more holistic approach that can enrich students' learning experience. The type of instructional strategies and assessment techniques that can be used to play down the influence of lectures and rote learning, and actively engage students in a learning process that provides them with intellectual challenges were dealt with. The study is exploratory and qualitative and quantitative in nature. University instructors and students were purposively selected as respondents in this research. Data were collected for analysis. Three sources of data: interview, exam papers and questionnaires were examined with the aid of a statistical tool called SPSS (Statistical Package for Social science). The findings revealed that several barriers impede critical thinking instruction and assessment use in Benin: lack of training and information, preconceptions, time constraints, lack of appropriate materials, large size classes, inconsistent current assessment methods, lack of motivation and unstimulating linguistic environment, etc. But, even with these hurdles, the majority of university lecturers and students as well are of the views that critical thinking skills have to be promoted in Benin universities if the battle for development is to be won. As a result, the effort is worth the reward. University EFL students in Benin need to be empowered because critical thinking skills offer the potential of effective learning that can make them professional users of information rather than passive receivers.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is critical thinking CT and mainly in the context of study at the university? To think critically is to examine ideas, evaluate them against what you already know and make decisions about their merit [Open University (2008)]. For Scriven and Paul (2007) it is "the intellectually disciplined process of evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action". Is the concept new and why is it important for a developing country like Benin still struggling for its development? As far as in the 1950s Benjamin Bloom identified a set of important study and thinking skills for university students. In Beninese universities it is a glaring reality that lecturers are more concerned about teaching their students about what to think rather than how to think. In other words, we store a lot of facts in students' minds but

they end up entirely 'empty heads'. In this our era of globalization, possessing knowledge or information is no longer sufficient for the development of a country but it rather needs students, future professionals who can think critically, solve problems and conflicts to make effective decisions.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine why critical thinking is so important in today's world mainly in the academic field and more importantly in EFL learning and how it can be integrated in instructional design and strategies so as to mold English practitioners and equip them to face up the challenges of the 21st century skills. The rationale of this study in fact is that not much research has tried to enlighten lecturers as well as students about the importance and relevance of this so-called fifth skill needed to make EFL language learning a more rewarding experience.

In answering the two research questions, the researcher proposes to pave the way for CT integration into EFL

The research questions present as follows:

- 1 – What are the place and role of CT in the teaching/learning of EFL in Abomey-Calavi university?
- 2 – What are the challenges to overcome for the promotion of higher-order thinking in our students to make the training more rewarding?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Background to the Study

As a former French colony, Benin inherited its educational system from France. Still, the concern to give this system its own identity has been felt over decades by the educational authorities. From the age of five to eleven, children attend primary school where the medium of instruction is French. Secondary school takes care of learners from the age of eleven to eighteen. The medium of instruction is still French but English is introduced and taught across the seven years of proficiency level as a compulsory subject.

The universities (state and private) embody all the units of higher education and are divided up into faculties and professional institutes. With the advent of Licence/ Master/Doctorate (LMD), the system is reshuffled. The main objective is to use modern methods of training so as to make lecturers and students mobility and professional integration easier. It offers the opportunity to make job market needs suitable with the training at the university level while involving the community and making the whole process flexible. The implication is that, instructors and students should be committed to teach, learn, evaluate, manage in a different way and become more professional. Most of the universities in Benin teach English across the different levels and the largest one, the University of Abomey-Calavi was officially declared bilingual some years ago and houses many faculties including the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Communication which includes the Department of English, this research setting. The glaring reality is that the exponential increase of students over many years is compounded by lack of materials in the form of lack classrooms, lack of adequate library and bookshop and as a result, lack of job prospects.

2.2. Review of Previous Studies

2.2.1. Why is Critical Thinking So Important?

The today's student generation is a special one and because of their specificity teachers can no longer teach them the way they use to teach; as a result, they must adapt and change. Some of these specificities are that most of them prefer surfing rather than reading; they want to know the relevance of what they are learning to their future career and their real application; they learn best when outcomes are clear and integrated into relevant contexts; they want to be stimulated, active and participatory. As a result, teachers must be creative and flexible by creating opportunities for students to interact with each other and the world outside in nearly authentic situations, by helping them set goals and expectations and more importantly by integrating CT in the teaching. The aim of CT skills is then to keep a balanced position by weighing up all sides of an argument and evaluate its strengths and

weaknesses. It includes the following: (i) actively seeking all sides of an argument; (ii) testing the soundness of the claim made; (iii) testing the soundness of the evidence used to support the claim (OP, 2012).

Simply put, it means responding objectively or keeping an open mind on anything we read, or do. Writing academically supposes we are able to defend an argument against odds such as bias or lack of supporting evidence. Thinking critically helps to create personal strong arguments, for instance in an assignment, a project or examination question by presenting a material, being able to analyze it, evaluate it, use it and draw on evidence to justify one's own arguments and ideas.

2.2.2. Using CT in Language Skills

The teaching of English for communication embodies many elements of CT because it emphasizes form and meaning as well. Jacobs and Farrell (2003) propose a model of communicative language teaching that includes some interconnected aspects such as the social nature of learning and thinking skills that stand the chance of providing students with a place where they can gain and use thinking skills. Examples of these are group activities in communicative language learning environment where with peers they share information, help each other with constructive criticisms and challenge each other's views. Obviously, communicative language teaching provides a fertile ground for CT more importantly at a higher level of EFL learning such as the university context.

What EFL instructors should not overlook is that reading and writing in this context even at the university level can be serious challenges to overcome if the battle of studying for marketability is to be won. How can students read and write using critical thinking skills then?

Booth *et al.* (1995) proposed an enquiry cycle that encourages deeper understanding of the subjects or materials read by students. For them, effective reading and writing are not passive skills but students should gain them by engaging actively with the subject matter, asking appropriate questions of the materials, investigating solutions to any problems, creating new understanding as a result, and then reflecting on what they have gained. They called it 'enquiring-based learning'. See Figure 1

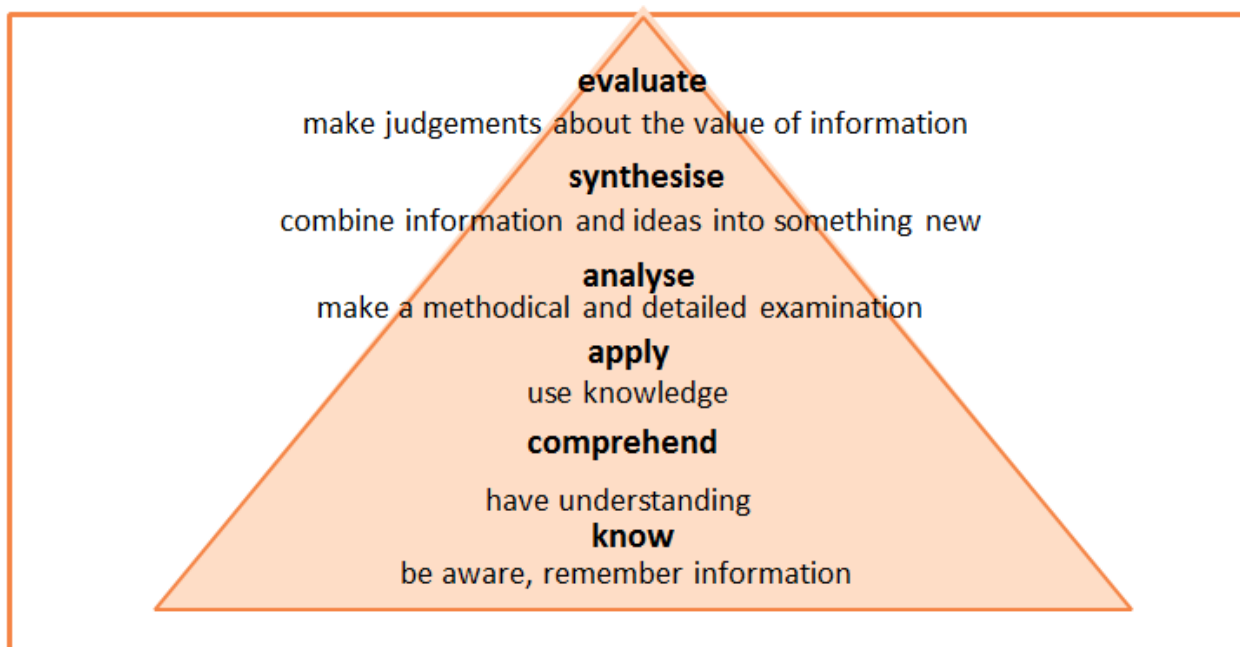


Figure-1. Levels of intellectual skill: the thinking triangle.

Source: Booth *et al.* (1995)

This enquiry-based approach according to the authors helps the students to delve deeper into the materials they read by asking questions and reflecting upon the answers they might come up with. In other words, it means for the students to allow themselves the opportunities to check their understanding, following three steps:

- Identify the thrust of the information;
- Analyze the materials;
- Compare and apply the information.

First, identifying the general thrust of the argument within the information being read stands for identifying the main points of the argument, the claim being made, the evidence used and the conclusion reached. Second, analyzing a material for a university student means that in reading he should be thinking about whether or not the material is relevant to his needs. According to the same authors, he might be answering some questions that can help in the analysis: (i) does the information make sense in relation to other theories and research? (ii) where in the broader picture does this particular argument sit? (iii) how old is the material? (iv) is the material clear or does he need to find additional information to help the understanding? (v) can he identify any implication that might require to look for other materials? (vi) does the argument present a balanced view or is the author disregarding some topics in order to put forward argument? And finally (vii) how can information be compared and applied? These are fine and helpful questions a university student should be able to answer. But the whole process needs training, practice and time mainly for students who are used to being passive receivers of information.

At the university level, assignment questions often require to apply theories, principles or formulae to situations, for they can help build the understanding of the subject. For this to be possible, students should look for the implications of a piece of information for another; looking for shortcomings that might be revealed when the idea is applied to real-life situations and the lack of complete coverage of the theory. [Gueldenzoph and Snyder \(2008\)](#)

For all these to be made feasible, instructors need to play down lecture mode of teaching and consider learning activities and assessment tasks that require guiding student practice and using appropriate questioning techniques.

2.2.3. Reading and Writing Critically

Reading with critical eyes is not enough. Students must be able to express their ideas in a critical way. The OUP (2009) contends that they must not only demonstrate their understanding of the significance of an argument or perspective, but show the relevance and the strength of conclusions made. They pointed out that students are generally expected to draw upon their course materials for evidence when answering assignments or exam questions. A CT approach is also to be applied here. This is made possible by: (i) checking the notes that accompany the question in the assignment; (ii) splitting the question into bite-sized chunks; (iii) looking closely at the 'process words' in the assignment title. In fact, process words are words that tell students what to do with the subject and often verbs such as 'compare and contrast', 'evaluate' 'discriminate' etc. that prompt certain areas of critical thinking are often used. Such words have disappeared from EFL exam questions in Beninese universities for multiple-choice tests, easier to grade.

The CT skills are not only needed at this level for writing and reading but also for students' class presentations because the ability to argue effectively and objectively is required. Students are given the opportunity to share ideas, debating other students' explanations and claims and defending their own viewpoints. It means presenting their views in a positive and friendly way, acknowledging other people's view in a constructive way before they challenge it, being able to identify the strength of another person's argument while being cautious not to be too offensive about the language used. These are life-skills needed for any effective and efficient professional career.

2.2.4. Critical Thinking and Instructional Design

Gueldenzoph and Snyder (2008) contend that CT is not an innate ability but a learned skill that must be developed, practiced and continually integrated into curriculum to engage students in active and rewarding learning. They went further to shed light on how attention should be focused on the application of content, the process of learning and methods of assessment. Instruction that stimulates and support CT uses questioning techniques that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to solve problems and make decisions rather than teaching techniques that require memorizing information such as vocabulary definitions for instance (Schafersman, 1991); (Templeaar, 2006). Moreover, research supports the evidence that traditional instructional methods most of the time use lectures and memorization which do not lead to long-term knowledge or the ability to apply that knowledge to new situations and consequently to CT skills (Kang and Howren, 2004). This is the case of university learning in Benin and particularly in English language department. Graded assignments, quizzes or tests far from being intellectual challenges are nothing but memory recall. Most of the assessment tools are reduced to multiple choice items rather than essay questions and case studies which are better indicators of understanding. Students are not taught to learn and think independently. Obviously, the current educational trend in Benin seems to undermine the importance of CT in learning at the university level and this for many reasons.

2.2.5. Obstacles to Critical Thinking

Research reveals some impediments to the integration of CT in education: (i) lack of training, (ii) lack of information, (iii) preconceptions, and (iv) time constraints. First, teachers, whether elementary, secondary or even post-secondary have most often no formal methodological training in how to teach CT skills (Broadbear, 2003). Second, very few instructional materials provide CT resources (Scriven and Paul, 2007). Third, preconceptions such as personal bias partiality block CT and become barriers to analytical skills such as being fair, open-minded and inquisitive which prevent people from changing their opinions and adopting new ways of thinking (Kang and Howren, 2004). Finally, time constraints are barriers to integrating CT skills in the classroom. When priority is given to content rather than student effective learning, and more content is to be covered within a short time period, lecturing and using objective tests are the easiest and fastest way-out or simply short-cut than integrating project-based learning opportunities and subjective assessments (Gueldenzoph and Snyder, 2008). This is the glaring reality in Benin.

2.2.6. Questioning Techniques and Critical Thinking

Effective questioning technique plays a paramount role in CT skills. Haynes and Bailey (2003) in their research focused on the importance of asking the right questions to stimulate students' CT skills. The real challenge is how to integrate effective questioning techniques into class discussions to support an environment where students can demonstrate and practice CT skills that can engage them in rewarding learning process. Brown and Kelly (1986) sampled some of these questions: (i) Why do you think that? (ii) What does it imply and presuppose, (iii) What explains it, connects it, leads from it? (iv) How are you viewing it? (iv) Should it be viewed differently?

Research on questioning techniques reveals that students need 8 to 12 seconds to process and formulate a response to a question that requires CT skills. Most of the time, instructors hurry to fill students' silence with rewording, reformulating or change of the question. What is most needed is to give them time to think critically because this requires time and patience (Schafersman, 1991).

The literature reviewed so far shows that the use of CT in language learning reveals three main components: communication, reasoning and self-reflection. Communicative language activities stand the chance of providing students with opportunities to assess their opinions, their ideas in order to test their validity. Research has also shown that communicative language offers opportunities for students to negotiate meanings and to give access to linguistic input and output, which are essential basics for the promotion of effective language learning (Long and

Porter, 1985; Jacobs and Farrell, 2003). Moreover, communicative language teaching as a major characteristic of learner-centered approach being implemented in Benin for some years now can offer an active learning environment through authentic interaction in meaningful contexts between students.

Thinking critically in language learning also involves using the language to explain, to reason or argue. It is generally accepted that reasoning to be appropriate should meet two criteria: logic and ethics. A text is considered logical when its sentences are coherent and cohesive. It is ethical when the author shows objectivity, taking account of other viewpoints.

Most educators consider self-reflection as an important element in language learning. For Dewey (1993) it entails objectivity and open-mindedness. Following Dewey, Dearn (2003) urges educators to design reflective courses. He believes that every course should have reflective elements, allowing students to be reflective about their own performance, their learning experience, and their methods or strategies of learning.

With this available theoretical framework and because of the limited or absence of empirical research that can illuminate the use of CT in the learning of EFL at the university level, mainly in English Department in Benin, there is need to make language learning rewarding at every level. For teachers to be effective instructors they should be able to encourage the development of critical thinking both as explicit instruction included in the curriculum and infused into every subject matter content. Therefore, empirical evidence is needed to make enlightened choices.

3. METHOD

The current study is exploratory in nature, considering the experience, perceptions and attitudes of EFL lecturers and students in Benin. To identify the challenges of the current practices in order to shed light on instructional strategies that can promote students' CT skills, the current study presents two phases. The first phase has first used a qualitative method that consists in conducting interviews to highlight the university teachers' views, attitudes and perceptions about the current practices and the scrutiny of a sample of some exam papers questions. The second phase has used a quantitative method that is questionnaire administration to both teacher and student participants for the same purpose.

This section is split into three subsections dealing with the study sample, the instruments used to collect the data and the analysis of the procedure.

3.1. Sample

The purposive sampling design in this study is chosen to have valid results. Two types of participants were identified: i) ten lecturers teaching English language, literature, civilization and didactics were sampled; ii) twenty students across the three years of study were chosen to participate in the study

Three lecturers were also randomly chosen for interview.

Ten exam papers were selected for close scrutiny in the purpose of assessing how far they promote CT skills

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. Interview

The aim of the qualitative data analysis is to achieve a thorough understanding of the target phenomenon. The choice of qualitative interviews was made since as Scott and Usher (2006) contend, it is meant "to seek in-depth understanding about the experiences of individuals and groups, commonly drawn from a sample of people, selected purposively. Such types of interviews are called semi-structured". So, three semi-structured interview questions were asked to the three lecturers to explore their perceptions, opinions and attitudes in a face-to-face individual audio-taped interview with the researcher. Each of them voiced his/her perceptions and attitudes about the issue at stake. Some questions, probes, prompts and intuitive questions were framed, based on the researcher's own experience as a lecturer. Each

interview lasts twenty to thirty minutes. This open-ended interview method was designed to minimize the limitations of the self-completion questionnaire method. The questions were to find out: (i) the place and role of CT in the course design and delivery today? ii) Their perceptions about new modes of assessment that would go beyond recalling or memorizing or restating learned information to make use of real world problem contexts that can provide evidence of logical argument. (iii) The main challenges to overcome for the promotion of higher-order thinking in students that can make the teaching more rewarding and marketable?

3.2.2. Questionnaire

Based on the purpose of the study and the research questions, the investigator developed a self-made questionnaire so that respondents can easily give the information asked for.

- EFL Lecturers' Questionnaire

The participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire containing ten items. This questionnaire is made up of ten Likert-scale items ranging from "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Uncertain", "Agree" and "strongly agree". The items are as follows: CT as part and parcel of instructional methods; explicit and implicit instruction; traditional instructional methods; barriers to CT; type of CT; focus of CT; assessment methods and CT; course design and delivery review.

- EFL Students' Questionnaire

Students have to make their choices among the same "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Uncertain", "Agree" and "strongly agree", to answer the following items: characteristics of best learning; learning skills content; independent learning and CT; current traditional course methods; preference of objective to subjective methods; benefits of CT; CT a skill for job market; challenges in using CT; new assessment modes.

3.2.3. Exam Paper Questions Scrutiny

Ten exam papers across the three years of study were randomly collected and scrutinized. The objective is to see how far these exam questions meet the requirement of CT to instil high thinking in students.

3.2.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures.

Participation was voluntary and respondents were given additional information about how their answers would be used, together with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. The collection of data lasted two weeks to allow teachers time to reflect carefully before responding to the questionnaire. The items were analyzed using the descriptive statistics including mean scores, minimum, maximum and standard deviation according to the nature of the items. All the data have highlighted the two main research questions.

3.2.5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the content validity and the reliability of the instruments used, the investigator discussed the issue at stake with some experienced E.F.L instructors, lecturers in the English Department who have had some experience in this field. They were asked to judge the appropriateness and relevance of each instrument item bearing in mind the overall purpose of the study. This exercise led to the reformulation or cancellation of some questions in the questionnaires for clarity and conciseness sake.

4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study have shed light on both research questions. They are presented, analyzed and interpreted.

4.1. Presentation of Results

4.1.1. Lecturers' Results

The data generated through the lecturers were analyzed to answer the research questions: the place and the role of CT in the teaching/learning of EFL in English Department and the challenges to overcome for the promotion of higher-order thinking in our students to make the teaching more rewarding.

The following table shows the lecturers' results to the questionnaire

Table-1. Lecturers' results

| Lecturers' Results | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| CT & instructional methods | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4.0 | ,483 |
| CT & explicit & implicit. Methods | 10 | 2 | 5 | 4.20 | ,919 |
| Traditional instructional methods | 10 | 2 | 5 | 3.80 | ,789 |
| Barriers to CT | 10 | 3 | 5 | 4.00 | ,816 |
| Benefits of CT | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4.20 | ,422 |
| CT assessment emphasis | 10 | 3 | 4 | 3.90 | ,316 |
| CT intellectual challenges | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4.40 | ,516 |
| Objective assessment indicators | 10 | 3 | 5 | 4.10 | ,568 |
| Subjective tests benefits | 10 | 2 | 5 | 3.90 | ,738 |
| Review of course delivery & assessment methods | 10 | 3 | 5 | 4.00 | ,667 |

Source: Data from current study (2018)

Based on the descriptive statistics all the ten variables are presented in table 1 above with their mean scores, minimum, maximum and standard deviation. As indicated in the table, the different mean scores of the ten variables ranging from 4.40 to 3.80 are more or less evenly spread over the study population. The highest one (4.40) is the respondents' conviction that different assessments (graded assignments quizzes or tests) should be intellectual challenges rather memory recall. It is followed by the respondents recognizing that in today's world CT should be part and parcel of their instructional methods (4.30). They are also aware that CT can be taught in direct instruction or infused in every subject matter content and the benefit implied in it is that students exposed to CT are given the freedom and responsibility to explore content, analyze resources adapt and apply information (4.20). These respondents (4.10) also agreed that objective tests such as 'True & False' and 'Multiple-choice' items are not always indicators of understanding. Barriers to CT (4.0) in the forms of lack of training, preconceptions, time constraints, class size, etc. and their acceptance that the review of their course delivery and assessment methods to make them meet students' CT needs, struck the same rate (4.0) and seems important to them. They also found that subjective tools such as essay questions, case-studies, project work require that students apply their knowledge to new situations (3.80). Finally, these instructors are aware that traditional instructional methods rely more on too many factual information, too much memorizing and not enough CT (3.80).

Apart from the three variables which struck high standard deviation, 'CT can be taught in direct instruction or infused in every subject matter content' (.919); 'barriers to CT' (.816); 'traditional instructional methods' (.789) which mean that these views are not harmoniously spread among these respondents, all the other seven items reflect the similarity in these respondents' views about the necessity of including CT in training at the university level.

4.1.2. Students' Results

Based on the descriptive statistics all the ten variables in students' questionnaire are presented in table 2 with their mean scores, minimum, maximum and standard deviation.

Table-2. Students' Results

| Students' Results | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Students best learning | 20 | 2 | 5 | 4.05 | ,826 |
| Learning skills today | 20 | 3 | 5 | 3.90 | ,718 |
| Meaning of CT | 20 | 4 | 5 | 4.20 | ,410 |
| CT& independent learner | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.05 | ,686 |
| Traditional methods focus | 20 | 2 | 5 | 3.75 | ,786 |
| Students' assessment preference | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.35 | ,587 |
| CT benefits to students | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.50 | ,688 |
| CT & job market | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.55 | ,605 |
| Challenges in using CT | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.35 | ,587 |
| New modes of assessment. | 20 | 3 | 5 | 4.05 | ,394 |

Source: Data from current study (2018)

Obviously, the mean scores of the ten variables ranging from 4.55 to 3.75 seem to be evenly distributed among the target population. This shows that the respondent students not only supported the use of CT to stimulate the interest of Beninese students in general, but they have a balanced view about the issue. They are conscious of the advantages and even the constraints in using CT.

As far as the standard deviation is concerned, apart from the three items of 'student best learning that goes with clear outcomes and integrated into relevant context' (.826); traditional methods focus' (.786) and 'learning skills today' (.718) which struck high scores, all the other items did not show any big gap. They range between .688 and .394. This confirms the fact that these sampled students are aware that 21st Century content should be delivered in a 21st Century context and that CT is today an avoidable skill to possess at all cost.

4.1.3. Exam Paper Results

The ten exam papers collected dealt with subject matters such as 'American Civilization and Literature', 'African Literature', 'Language and Communication', 'Language and Phonetics and Phonology'. Out of the ten exam papers examined, only three used essay- type questions. Out of the three essay-type questions, only one encouraged the use of CT skills by using self-reflection or reflective judgment and contextualization. As for the other seven exam questions, they dealt with gap-filling, 'True or False', 'Right or Wrong', 'Matching', and 'Choose the correct answers' items.

4.1.4. Interview Results

The semi-structured interviews organized with three randomly sampled lecturers have revealed the following:

- i. Two out of the three lecturers have hazy ideas about what is meant by CT and its place and role in the teaching/learning of English at the university level;
- ii. They all agreed that though CT is not yet integrated in the curriculum and in the assessment methods. So, the chance of engaging the students in active learning by stimulating their thinking and prepare them for professional life is nearly inexistent.
- iii. They opined that it is important to review test questions to suit CT, but found challenges really daunting;
- iv. For them the most prominent challenges are: lack of training and information, difficult teaching/learning conditions, exponential class size, lack of instructional materials that provide CT resources,
- v. Appropriate training is compulsory.
- vi. Students behavior modelling is necessary before any application of CT.

4.2. Discussion

The present section hinges around the two main questions this study is supposed to answer: the place and role of CT in the course design and delivery today and the main challenges to overcome for the promotion of higher-order thinking in students so as to make the teaching/learning of EFL more rewarding and marketable. The results provided by the various participants in the study have highlighted the topic at stake.

4.2.1. Place and Role of CT in the Course Design and Delivery

The results of the questionnaires of both lecturers and students have showed that the role of CT in the learning of EFL at the university level is not to be demonstrated. For [Shakirova \(2007\)](#) CT role is so important that it enables students “to deal effectively with social, scientific, and practical problems.” Simply put, nobody can deny today the importance of CT in everyday life. This century is rightly called the era of information and communication technologies. But, it is not enough to store information. To be effective in personal and interpersonal relationships and later in professional life, students must be able to analyze, to evaluate, to compare, to contrast, to solve problems and make decisions. For this to happen, they must be able to use CT.

For Beninese university students, communicating in English can be very challenging because while developing their competence in spoken or written forms in academic contexts or outside, they need to use the ability to think critically in a sociocultural perspective. This may be why the majority of respondent students believe that their learning skills should entail thinking and reasoning which involve CT, problem-solving, creating and innovating skills. Likewise, respondent lecturers opined that in today’s world CT should be part and parcel in instructional methods.

However, both types of respondents admitted that the current curriculum has made little space to CT in its instructional design and delivery even in the era of LMD. It is a stark reality that much factual information in lectures requiring too much rote memorization is given to the students as revealed by the scrutiny of a sample of exam papers. As [Clement \(1979\)](#) rightly puts it “We should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think”. And of course this cannot lead to long-term knowledge or the ability to apply that knowledge to new situations ([Celuch and Slama, 1999](#); [Daz-Lefebvre, 2004](#)). CT rather requires students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information received against what they already know to solve problems and make decisions. This implies using higher-order thinking skills. Obviously, training, practice and time are unavoidable assets.

It is fortunate that these university instructors recognized the teachability of CT skills and even suggested they should be taught in direct and explicit instruction or infused in every subject matter content. This mixed approach combines aspects of both the general and subject-specific items and has diverse support from different researchers. [Pithers and Soden \(2000\)](#) reject the view that CT could be taught as a separate subject but rather as a way of teaching and learning in every field, and contend that it is the most effective way of teaching it. Researchers such as [Ennis \(1989\)](#) is of opposite view and supported the stand-alone course versus integration into regular instruction. What is undeniable in a foreign language context like Benin, is that students need active participation in the learning process and need help to revive their thinking skills and knowledge acquisition. Considering the unfavorable environment which seems to be a huge barrier, one may wonder how is this possible mainly when one knows that students are not born with the ability to think critically and mainly if they were not accustomed to make use of it in their prior learning experience. This represents part of the challenges to overcome to promote CT at this level of EFL learning.

4.2.2. The Main Challenges to Overcome for the Promotion of Higher-Order Thinking in our Students So as to Make the Teaching/Learning of EFL More Rewarding.

There are a number of challenges Beninese lecturers easily identified: lack of training and information, preconceptions, time constraints, lack of appropriate materials, large size classes, inconsistent current assessment

methods, lack of motivation and unstimulating linguistic environment, etc. The interview results showed that few instructors are knowledgeable about the meaning of CT. That is why training in CT methodology and instructional materials with CT resources are compulsory. As a result, the respondent lecturers agreed that new assessment modes should be found that make use of authentic real world problem contexts and go beyond recalling or restating memorized information. The close examination of exam questions is revealing of this challenge. For this reason, [Ku \(2009\)](#) recommends using tests of mixed item format, both multiple-choice and open-ended items. He argues that *“teachers should adopt different assessment methods, such as exercises that allow students to self-construct answers, assignments that facilitate the practice of strategic use of thinking skills in everyday contexts, and when adopting multiple-choice exercises, follow-up questions should be given to probe students’ underlying reasoning”* For this to be possible, instructors need to ask the right questions to stimulate students’ critical skills that can engage them actively in the learning process. [Brown and Kelly \(1986\)](#) sampled some of these questions: ‘what do you think about ...?’; ‘why do you think that...?’; ‘what is your knowledge based upon?’; ‘what does it imply and presuppose?’; ‘what explains it, connects to it, leads from it?’; ‘how are you viewing it?’; ‘should it be viewed differently?’, etc. The real challenge here is to turn passive learners used to memorizing and recalling information into active and independent learners using CT opportunities. There is need for instructors to use their creativity and investigation skills to guide students through the CT process and create a learning and comfortable environment conducive to the integration of CT activities into their courses.

However, motivation is a real support to CT as students who are motivated to learn are more likely to exert more effort and time for tasks that call for CT which most of the time are challenging, stimulating and interesting. All this leads to open-mindedness and flexibility which are characteristics of better collaboration, considered as assets needed in workplaces.

One of the activities that present potential benefits and that can be used to make CT a reality in this part of the world is project work which is becoming increasingly popular these days. It offers students the opportunity to work on a topic, using an enquiry method, to collect materials with the aid of the Internet, organize and present the data. Advantages include motivation enhancing, creativity sparking, student-student collaboration, development of a broader perspective on contemporary issues etc.

Another approach that can make assessment more rewarding is the case-study method which according to [Brown and Rodgers \(2002\)](#) is *“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context... and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (p.23)*. It has the potential to take into account the complexity of classroom practice, and provides data that reveal rich insights ([Nunan, 1982; Miller, 1997](#)). More importantly it calls for stimulus materials that include contradictions and inconsistencies that are likely to activate CT. Such assessment tasks require students to offer evidence or logical arguments that can support judgments choices, claims or assertions.

Another way of making CT a reality in this EFL university setting is to involve students in personal discovery of information with problem-solving instructional strategies and content-based assessments, using online learning environment.

The competitiveness of the job market today with its performance-based assessment requires students to go beyond the traditional textbook and lecture methods to turn to more rewarding methods such as work-based learning with reflective judgment that call for individualized feedback. It means that lecturers should develop a learning environment that would promote CT in students learning. Opportunities should therefore be provided to use English in a meaningful and purposeful way with peers and other English practitioners, members of the communities to complete tasks. The presence of the CT leads to negotiate meaning, shedding light on students’ own beliefs and helping them learn the target language more effectively ([Long and Porter, 1985](#)).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has set the aim to examine why CT is so important in today's world mainly in the academic field in EFL learning at the university level. More importantly it has tried to examine how it can be integrated in the instructional design and strategies so as to mold students to face up the challenges of the 21st century life skills.

The study has revealed that though the challenges to overcome are daunting: lack of instructors training and information, preconceptions, time constraints, large size classes, lack of appropriate materials, etc. CT integration in the instructional design and delivery is undoubtedly a must. Obviously, because it offers many benefits that can enrich and boost students' experience in their communicative real life use of the language, it has to be promoted, for where there a will there is a way. The effort is worth the reward. Therefore, some strategies were offered to make this language learning a bit more rewarding.

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