Developing Students' Critical Thinking Skills through Contextual Teaching and Learning

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Abstract This study explored instructors' attitudes toward developing EFL students' critical thinking (CT) skills through contextualized teaching and learning. It specifically investigated instructors' experiences of the challenges as well as strategies for implementing contextual teaching and learning (CTL)-based activities to foster learners' CT skills. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five Afghan EFL instructors of the English Department of Herat University. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that the CTL approach helps to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, build confidence among students, reduce stress and anxiety, and promote a culture of understanding and respect. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the five interviewed participants employed strategies such as role-play, scenario, debate, group work, peer work, problem-solving, and question-answer sessions to develop students' CT skills. Further, large class sizes, lack of resources, and lack of contextualized teaching materials were reported as challenges that constrain the process of incorporating the CTL approach to develop Afghan students' CT. The study's implications and further research directions are discussed.

Keywords: *Critical thinking (CT), Contextual teaching and learning (CTL), EFL students, Teaching, Learning*

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1. Introduction

Grammar-translation is the dominant teaching approach in Afghanistan's academic context. There are large, multi-level, under-resourced classes with a large number of students in each. Teachers are supposed to cover a specific number of pages and/or textbooks in a semester, and students are mainly required to pass structured paper-based examinations. It is common from the very early schooling years for students to rely on memorization to successfully pass examinations and promote to another grade or semester. Grammar-translation, teacher-centered, and lecture-based classes, as well as large multi-level classes with limited teaching and learning resources a lack of contextualized and local teaching materials, are all the issues that prevent students from exercising higher and critical thinking (CT) skills (Kakar et al., 2020; Sarwari, 2018).

The 21st century, according to Miterianifa et al. (2021), Adilbayeva et al. (2022) and Adarbah and Jajarmi (2022), is the century of knowledge, in which

technological innovations develop quickly and bring changes to all facets of human life. Higher-order thinking abilities are essential for a trustworthy workforce in the twenty-first century as a result of the need for everyone to prepare for the globalization age. According to Larsson (2017), to succeed in the modern workforce, students must master 21st-century competencies. Critical, rational, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking are examples of high-order thinking skills. An absence of focus when solving problems is the key factor contributing to poor CT abilities. CT abilities strengthen students' capacity for problem-solving. But the truth is that problem-solving is rarely taught in schools. Therefore, developing pupils' CT abilities is crucial (Kusmaharti, 2022).

Unfortunately, the Afghan education policymakers and curriculum developers ignored the importance of CT skills in the 21st century and that including content and strategies to help students develop inquiry-based learning is a crucial aspect of quality education. Modern educators and policymakers should place high importance on the development of CT skills (Abrami et al., 2015). The capacity to think critically is a prerequisite for many skills, including the capacity to evaluate and analyze arguments, identify personal biases or preconceptions, support conclusions, solve problems, and make "intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do" (Weinstein & Preiss, 2017). Teaching thinking skills provide students with the abilities and mindsets they need to deal with future issues, whether they be academic, personal, or moral (Wegerif et al., 2015).

The current study aimed to investigate the Afghan EFL instructors' perspectives toward developing students' CT skills through the contextual teaching and learning approach. It specifically explored the challenges they encountered with implementing CTL. This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of five Afghan EFL instructors toward developing students' CT skills through the CTL approach?
2. What are the five Afghan EFL instructors' strategies for developing students' CT skills through CTL?
3. What do the five ELT instructors in the English Department of Herat University state as the perceived challenges in developing students' CT skills through CTL?

The Afghanistan academic context is underrepresented in the field of research, there is a need for research activities in different areas (Dost Mohammadi, in press; Kakar & Sarwari, 2023; Sarwari, 2018). Since there are very rare publications exploring students' critical thinking skills in an Afghan context, there is an urgent need to explore methods to bring this important topic into discussion. Learning in the twenty-first century is not just about cognitive skills. It is required for students to develop a range of social and personal skills. Students need to develop their critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication abilities. One of the four capacities, specifically the capacity for critical thought, must be developed (Kusmaharti, 2022). Considering the available literature that emphasizes the importance of CT, exploring this topic in an Afghan context which has its unique socio-political and economic situation, is strongly needed. The first research question aimed to explore the Afghan instructors' attitudes toward improving CT abilities and skills through CTL. The second research question aimed to investigate the interviewed instructors' strategies for empowering students' critical abilities through CTL. Furthermore, the third research question attempted to find the challenges that constrain the implementation of CTL-based activities in an Afghan academic context.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current section includes the study's theoretical framework, and a review of the available literature on developing students' CT skills through the CTL approach. In other words, CT definition, strategies for improving students' CT skills, CLT approach, CT skills and CLT approach are discussed in this section.

The researchers employed the constructivist theory of learning, through which students create a sense of their experiences and knowledge, to analyze and interpret the findings of this study. Hill (2014) asserts that "learning is affected by context as well as beliefs and attitudes of the learners; therefore, effective teaching occurs by stimulating students to ask their own questions" (p. 58). Since the current study aimed to explore the reported experiences of five Afghan EFL instructors of the English

Department of Herat University, a Constructivist learning theory helped the researchers to find answers to their research questions.

2.1. Critical Thinking Definition

To arrive at a thorough understanding, CT requires the capacity to pose and/or respond to insightful questions in a most fruitful manner (Hilsdon, 2010). It entails self-control, interpretation, analysis, appraisal, and synthesized justification. To improve students' problem-solving, decision-making, and communication abilities, CT needs to be incorporated into the teaching and learning process for higher education students (Adege, 2016).

According to Pratama et al. (2019), the rapid advancement of information and communication technology marks the 21st century as a digital one. All facets of living patterns are changing as a result of the advancement of information technology. The ten skills that students need to have to function in the twenty-first century are CT, metacognition, communication, collaboration, information literacy, CT literacy (Information Technology Communication), citizenship, work, and career readiness, as well as individual and social responsibilities.

To develop thinking abilities at a more complicated level, a person has to possess certain fundamental skills, which are referred to as CT. According to the United States-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), CT is one of the thinking abilities that should be required in the twenty-first century. These skills from the twenty-first century can enhance the standard of instruction, support students in developing engagement, foster collaboration, and boost participation (Hidayati & Sinaga, 2019).

The process we go through when making a decision always requires critical thought. Today, one of the key ideas being considered in education is CT. In the United States, CT has traditionally been primarily employed for first-language instruction, but it now plays a significant role in second and foreign language learning and teaching (Hassani et al., 2013). CT is a process of judgment reflectively and reasonably that relies upon criteria, self-correcting and sensitivity to the context to decide what to do or what to believe (Fadhillah, 2017).

According to Kuhn (2019), CT is more of a dialogic practice that people engage in, at first in an interactive way and subsequently in an interiorized form. When making arguments, skilled thinkers not only foresee probable rebuttals from others but also consider how easily those arguments might be refuted themselves. The dialogic process, whether in outward or interiorized form, generates something new while also evolving. This viewpoint might assist in clarifying the definition of the concept of CT and, in doing so, help to tie together the various, largely unrelated lines of research, looking at it as a theoretical construct, a quantifiable ability, and an educational goal.

2.2. Strategies for Improving Students' Critical Thinking Skills

CT abilities can be strengthened by engaging in problem-solving activities. The goal of CT is to make decisions about what may be trusted and performed. Humans do not naturally possess the ability to think critically from birth. The learning process must include instruction in CT skills. The five indicator components of CT are fundamental support, inference, advanced support, strategies and tactics, and clarification (Hidayati & Sinaga, 2019).

Since CTL enhances the students' mental functions like interpretation, analysis, evaluation, explanation, inference, and self-regulation, inquiry-based learning helps students develop their CT abilities. According to the available research, inquiry-based learning considerably improves students' CT skills when compared to more conventional teaching strategies. CTL promotes a free medium of learning where students will share positive experiences through an inquiry process that is based on curiosity (Ahmad et al., 2014).

For ESL/EFL students in higher education, CT is crucial to producing quality written documents, such as argumentative essays (Ghaemi & Mirsaeed, 2017). However, a number of studies on students' CT abilities and writing abilities have shown that, because of incorrect reasoning, inability to generate ideas, information management issues, and unsubstantiated claims, students frequently struggle to support

their claims with references to and syntheses of academic literature. "The ability to reflect upon, understand, and control one's learning" or "just thinking about thinking" are two definitions of metacognition. Metacognition includes metacognitive knowledge, experiences, or management of cognition. Processes that support the regulated element of learning are involved in the regulation of cognition. Planning, information management techniques, comprehension monitoring, debugging techniques, and evaluation are its five subcomponents (Pishghadam & Khajavy, 2013). Understanding, paraphrasing, and summarizing written texts is a challenging task for second and foreign language learners in particular (Goodwin, 2014).

Audio-visual media is regarded as a powerful instrument for enhancing students' capacity for critical thought and for inspiring learning. The audio aspect and the visual aspect are the two fundamental components of audio-visual media. The visual aspect aids the communication of the message via the visual sense. Audio-visual media is defined as any technology that transmits information without exclusively relying on reading activity (Gayatri et al., 2018).

The majority of teachers are still impacted by the traditional approach to teaching, despite the facilitative role they may play in helping students improve their CT abilities. It indicates that they have placed too much focus on teaching students what to think rather than how to think; they are overly concerned with providing the right answers, and they do not provide students enough time for open discussion. Students' critical attitudes and thinking abilities can be developed by actively engaging them in CT activities through conversation, reflection, and teacher-initiated questions in a safe environment (Khatib et al., 2011).

Students are expected to possess CT skills in both their personal and professional lives. Universities must therefore make every effort to include it in their curricula, courses, and activities. Although some other tendencies between methodologies and the concept of CT are observed, the results seem to suggest that teachers use and consider as most effective primarily three different methodologies: oral and written reflection and argumentation; reading, analysis, and synthesis of resources; and case studies. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between the approaches that teachers employ and the ones they view as most successful (Bezanilla et al., 2019).

When students struggle with their writing performances or when teachers want to support their students' writing performances, working on improving CT abilities is one way to help (Nejad et al., 2022). People frequently deal with difficult public and political issues, make decisions, and resolve challenges in modern society, even in everyday life (Zarrinabadi et al., 2021). Citizens must critically assess everything they see, hear, and read to accomplish this task successfully and efficiently. In the era of the "information explosion", there is an enormous number of printed content available everywhere, but it is still simple to feel overwhelmed. But since there is so much of it, the information that has accumulated on people's desks and in their heads is useless. As a result, people must read carefully and pick out the information that they find fascinating and valuable. Strong critical reading and thinking abilities are essential for this (Nejad et al., 2022).

According to Siburian (2019), critical thinking is significantly correlated with learning outcomes, including concept acquisition and cognitive ability. High-order thinking abilities, including analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating, are correlated with critical thinking. Multiple linear regression analysis showed that critical and creative thinking abilities can significantly enhance the outcomes of cognitive learning. This demonstrates that critical thinking abilities and creative thinking abilities have a very strong association with the outcomes of cognitive learning. It has been demonstrated that implementing inquiry learning can significantly contribute to critical thinking and creative thinking abilities, which ultimately can improve cognitive learning results.

2.3. Contextual Teaching and Learning Approach

CTL encourages students' engagement in learning by helping teachers connect academic topics to practical applications (Welerubun et al., 2022). According to some experts, CTL is a notion that aids teachers and students in appropriately relating the subject matter to its meaning and real-world situations (Muliani & Sumarsono, 2019).

CTL focuses on students and gives them hands-on experience with educational activities. Through connections to the real world, CTL benefits students by giving their education significant attention. It incorporates the unique talents, passions, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds of students into what they learn, how they learn it, and how they are evaluated. As a result, adopting the CTL technique to create educational materials is beneficial (Rafsanjani et al., 2022).

CTL, according to Sabroni (2017), is a method of instruction that places a strong emphasis on student participation throughout the entire process of locating knowledge and relating it to practical circumstances that motivate students to put it to use in their daily lives. Teachers' efforts to build on situated-cognition research and combine several proven teaching methods that are all too frequently used separately gave rise to CTL (Lotulung et al., 2018). Contextual learning is a theory of learning in which teachers introduce real-world scenarios into the classroom and urge students to connect their knowledge to its practical application in their daily lives as members of their families and communities. Therefore, an individual's meaning and knowledge are a product of their own experiences.

According to Marsuki et al. (2019), the CTL approach entails seven essential elements: constructivism, questioning, inquiry, learning community, modeling, reflections, and authentic assessment. Students must also possess life skills, including the capacity for cooperation, communication, and persistence in learning, as well as the ability to make wise choices when faced with challenging situations. CTL aids teachers in making connections between academic material and actual world circumstances (Dewi & Primayana, 2019). Nawas (2018) draws a conclusion from their study that the CTL approach aids students in connecting the subject matter to actual situations and motivates them to connect the material's relevance to their own life.

2.4. Critical Thinking Skills and Contextual Teaching and Learning Approach

To increase learning motivation and allow students to practice their CT abilities, the production of audio-visual learning materials should be developed using the CTL approach. By teaching the students how to resolve difficulties in their daily lives through the classroom presentation as part of the learning process, the students' CT abilities may be developed. The audio-visual learning materials have a number of indicators that must be satisfied before they may be used in the classroom learning process (Mardhiyah, 2017). These indicators include: (1) having materials that adhere to learning standards, results, and objectives; (2) displaying understandable manuals; (3) interesting topics/problems so that students will be actively engaged in the learning process; (4) using communicative language so that the students will easily understand the learning materials; and (5) presenting the media through interesting colors, pictures, sounds, and animations so that students will be engaged in the learning process.

Students need to strengthen their CT and practical abilities through learning activities. Teachers must plan lessons so that students can practice both CT and practical skills during learning activities. Learning activities should be set up to encourage active participation from pupils. For learning activities to be meaningful for students, learning must also include teaching materials that are relevant to students' daily lives. The CTL is a type of learning technique that places emphasis on the involvement of students as a whole to locate information learned and apply it to actual circumstances for application in their lives (Tari & Rosana, 2019).

Problem-Based-Learning (PBL), which places a strong emphasis on student-centered learning, encourages students to work in groups to solve vague and open-ended problems by using the following learning steps: problem analysis, goal setting, resource gathering, idea synthesis, and reflection on problem-solving experiences. This procedure aims to advance CT components such as analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and collaborative learning. Due to the overlap in content between PBL and CT, PBL is, therefore, theoretically viewed as a potential practical technique for creating CT (Liu & Pásztor, 2022).

3. Methodology

The current exploratory qualitative research attempted to explore the five Afghan instructors of the English Department of Herat University's attitudes toward developing students' CT skills through CTL. According to Galletta (2013), "qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of

comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., nonnumerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest" (p. 7). Since the current study sought to examine each teacher's perspectives toward developing students' CT skills through CTL, a qualitative research approach was found appropriate to answer the research questions. Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative research design helps to investigate the topic from the perspectives of the people who have experienced the problem under investigation, and it helps to reach in-depth information.

3.1. Context

One of the five main public, co-educational institutions in Afghanistan, Herat University is situated in the country's western region. It offers BA degrees in 16 different fields as well as MA degrees in three colleges: business administration, agriculture, and Farsi-Dari literature. This institution has 17,086 students, 8332 female students and 8750 male students (Sarwari, 2018).

3.2. Participants

Five professors from the English Department of the Faculty of Languages and Literature at Herat University were the participants of the current study. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- being current English Department instructors at Herat University;
- having at least five years of teaching experience;
- being willing to share their experiences of developing students' CT skills through CTL.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Information

NO	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Degree	Teaching Experience
1	Shakib	Male	M.A. TESOL	6 years
2	Kabir	Male	M.A. TESOL	13 years
3	Baran	Female	M.A. TESOL	10 years
4	Wesal	Female	M.A. TESOL	8 years
5	Moslem	Male	M.A. TESOL	6 years

The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. With that in mind, the participants who met the above-mentioned criteria were recruited. Furthermore, each participant received an email explaining the purpose of the study and asking for the consent of the participants. The details of the interview protocol, length of the interview, place of the interview, and securing the participants' identity were shared with each interviewee.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. According to Galletta (2013), the semi-structured interview is specifically structured to tackle certain parts of the research questions while providing the subjects with ample opportunities to express and add new meanings and ideas to the topic under study. There were ten main questions, and follow questions were asked when needed. The participants were sent an email explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their consent. The participants were asked to decide on the time and place of the interview. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes, and the interviews were conducted in English. The participants were asked to choose a pseudonym that was used throughout the study. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and were saved on a password-protected file on the researchers' personal laptop.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The information gathered through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with five English Department instructors at Herat University was verbatim transcribed and then thematically analyzed.

The information was broken down into major themes and minor themes, then it was coded and analyzed thematically. According to Bazeley (2013), "coding" was characterized as a significant and useful approach for qualitative analysis. In addition, Bazeley asserted, "it provides a means of access to evidence; it is a tool for querying data, for testing assumptions and conclusions" (p. 125).

To maintain the research's credibility and guarantee the authenticity of the emerging themes, the researchers listened to the recordings and went over the themes several times. To further ensure that the data were reported appropriately, the researchers gave the interviewed participants access to the data transcriptions as well as the important codes.

4. Results

The study's findings collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically. Major themes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Responses

Topic	Summary of Responses	Percentage of participants who endorsed the following themes

Advantages of CTL to developing students' CT skills	• creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere
	  a. building confidence
	  b. reducing stress and anxiety
	  c. making the learning process fun
		100 %

	• providing students with ample opportunities to take the active part • developing autonomous learning	100%
	• promoting freedom of expression	90%
	• developing a culture of respect and understanding among students	80%
Strategies to develop students' CT through CTL	• Role play • Scenario • Visual aids • Debate • Group work discussions • Peer-work	90%
	• Writing prompts • Reading and discussing	80%
	• Comparing and contrasting • Question-answer sessions • Problem-solving • Real-life examples and illustrations	100%
Challenges of implementing CTL in the Afghan education context	• Large multi-level classes • Lack of resources • Lack of level-appropriate and contextualized teaching materials • Lecture-based teaching	100%

As shown in the above table, the findings of the study revealed the interviewed instructors' attitudes and perspectives toward developing students' CT skills through CTL. Each theme is discussed in the following section.

4.1. Advantages of CTL to Developing Students' CT Skills

According to the interviewed participants, one of the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language is students' lack of confidence. In other words, students do not take an active part in the class because they are afraid of making mistakes. CTL helps both students and teachers to create a comfortable teaching and learning environment where students share their thoughts and opinions without being afraid of making mistakes. Furthermore, this helps to reduce stress and anxiety and change the classroom atmosphere from lecture-based, where the instructor is active, and the students are passive listeners. CTL is especially helpful in offering quality teaching and learning as well as integrating CT activities into the classrooms in an Afghan context where grammar-translation is common. The findings indicated that CTL helps teachers to reduce the implementation of lecture-based, teacher-centered approaches to teaching and move toward a communicative-based teaching approach.

The interviewed participants mentioned that CTL provides students with ample opportunities to take an active part throughout the learning process. Implementing CTL-based activities and tasks helps the class to turn from teacher-centered to student-centered. With that in mind, taking part in class activities, doing exercises and activities, connecting them to their real-life situations, analyzing, and interpreting helps students exercise CT skills. Moreover, CTL tasks such as group work, peer work, debate, and games are all engaging and fun activities that reduce students' stress and anxiety. According to the interviewed participants, students' engagement is an important aspect of any classes in general and language classes in particular. CTL-based activities encourage students' participation, and leads to productive learning, and increases students' academic achievements.

The findings indicated that Afghan culture encourages children from the very early age to keep silent and not ask questions, specifically when adults speak. Therefore, Afghan students from the beginning of their school years, prefer to be silent and avoid asking questions from their teachers as a matter of respect and politeness. Shakib stated:

Social norms and practices play an important role in helping students to communicate. When I think about my culture, some students are culturally quiet. For example, something I have always observed in Afghan families is that they encourage children from a young age not to speak before their elders, therefore students are used to this socially, they are socialized in such a way that they do not attend any discussions and debates. This is a cultural trait that persists from childhood to university.

On the other hand, Afghanistan's educational materials and curriculum do not support and encourage inquiry-based learning and especially CT. The interviewed participants stated that students are mainly required to memorize a specific amount of content to be able to pass the course. Therefore, when students get admitted into the university, they develop a culture of silence and as a matter of respect and politeness, they do not ask any questions from the teacher. According to the findings, CTL-based activities encourage students to develop skills such as asking and answering questions, problem-solving, and critiquing issues under discussion. Furthermore, it helps them to understand that asking questions and critiquing is not an indication of impoliteness, but it is a significant concept in education and leads to offering quality teaching and learning. Moreover, CTL develops a culture of respecting opposing ideas and understanding that everyone is entitled to his/her opinions. Therefore, it encourages students not to be afraid of expressing their perspectives and respecting as well as tolerating each other's opinions.

4.2. Strategies to Develop Students' CT Skills through CTL

The interviewed participants have shared their strategies for developing EFL students' CT skills through the CTL approach. The findings indicated that role play, scenarios, and debates are the most common strategies through which students can experience real-life situations. Shakib, one of the participants, stated that he teaches public speaking courses and he has struggled a lot to encourage his students to

take part in class discussions. He added that his students were shy and afraid of making language mistakes; he specifically talked about girls who did not have the experience of studying in co-education contexts before coming to the university. Therefore, male and female students, in general, and female students, in particular, were passive listeners in Shakib's speaking classes. He stated that he found assigning students to do role play as an effective strategy to encourage students to participate in the class, relate the lesson to their real-life situation, and critique each other's performance. Kabir added:

> *The more students are motivated, the more they are willing to communicate and discuss issues. If the teacher persistently encourages students to take part in classroom discussions, students are willing to share their ideas. Further, students should be encouraged that communication and discussions are effective ways to learn and a useful skill to develop CT abilities. The other factor is the topic selection. If the instructor chooses interesting and relevant topics that are aligned with students' interests and lived experiences, they are willing to communicate in EFL classes to a greater extent.*

Moreover, role play and scenario bring joy and fun to the class, reduce anxiety and stress, and give students the opportunity to discuss socio-political issues in the form of role-play and critique mainly social phenomena through performances. Baran mentioned:

> *Role play is one of the techniques I use in my classes a lot. They are assigned a role, and they have to act, this encourages students to take part and to boost their confidence and CT abilities. Another strategy is using games and fun activities that encourage students to communicate because it is a kind of hobby for them and the more they feel relaxed and entertained, the better they can communicate. Some activities are complex and complicated for students which require students to think critically. Generally, the target is the students, so they should talk, so lecturing and formal presentations hinder students' CT abilities.*

The participants stated that running debates among students is also an interesting and contextual strategy through which students are provided with ample opportunities to practice CT skills. Baran, one of the female participants, mentioned that managing and implementing debates was challenging because students were not used to debating, supporting, and defending their perspectives through formal in-class discussions. But she added, over the course of time, students were encouraged to attend debates and defend different positions throughout the debate process. She added that students choose a list of topics to debate, and for each class, they pick up one topic. The class is divided into two groups, and each group takes a position. Participants believe that in-class debates, especially in language classes and particularly in speaking classes, provide students with ample opportunities to practice the language, critique socio-political issues, and foster their critical and higher thinking skills.

Moreover, the participants mentioned strategies such as group work, peer-work as well as using visual aids materials as effective in developing students' CT skills. In other words, the findings indicated that dividing students into groups to discuss topics, ask and answer questions, and relate the topics to their lived experiences greatly helps to foster CT skills. Moslem stated:

> *I implement various types of activities and tasks such as pair work and group work to develop my students' CT abilities. Personalization activities are useful in getting students to talk and think more. Presentations and classroom discussions are other strategies that help them practice CT skills. It is significantly important to create a comfortable and engaging classroom environment to help all students feel at ease to communicate, think and critique. The instructors' approach plays an important role; if the instructor is too critical, learners do not communicate. Course content, preparation, confidence, and cultural background all affect learners' CT skills.*

Further, bringing visual aids and materials relevant to the students' experiences to the class for group discussions, writing about them, and critiquing them promote CT skills. Wesal stated that the textbooks she uses in her classes are not in accordance with her students' level of language proficiency, needs, and wants; therefore, implementing localized and contextualized teaching materials is important to foster students' critical and higher thinking skills. She added that she tries to supplement teaching materials, including interactive and engaging activities that help students exercise CT skills.

The majority of the participants mentioned that improving students' CT skills through contextualized writing and reading is important. In other words, giving students texts on topics relevant to their lived experiences and their socio-economical situations to read and discuss in groups by raising questions and critiquing helps to foster CT skills. Kabir stated that he provides his students with literary texts to read and critique. Furthermore, students are asked to discuss and present their opinions with the whole class. Moslem asserted that his students read texts relevant to the class agenda and write response papers based on their understanding. With that in mind, reading, and writing are important skills that greatly contribute to incorporating CT activities.

The findings also revealed that question-answer sessions, problem-solving, and comparing and contrasting are the strategies that foster students' critical and higher thinking skills. Kabir stated that he runs a question-answer session each week giving opportunities to his students to have their questions and answer their peer's questions and inquiries. He added that the questions are mainly from the class' content but are not limited to what he covers in a week. Students critique one another's answers and try to convince one another by analyzing, interpreting, and providing logical and comprehensive answers. Further, problem-solving is another strategy, the participant stated to be useful in encouraging and promoting learners' CT. Moslem pointed out that he usually raises questions related to the students' common real-life challenges and issues and asks them to find ways to solve or minimize the problems. He believes that this strategy helps his students to look at the issues from different angles, analyze and interpret them to reach a solution.

4.3. Challenges of Implementing CTL in the Afghan Education Context

The findings indicated some challenges associated with implementing CTL in the Afghan education context. The participants mentioned large classes, lack of teaching resources, lack of level-appropriate and contextualized teaching resources, and grammar-translation approach to teaching as the most common challenges that limit the implementation of the CTL approach in an Afghan academic context.

The majority of the participants believed that CTL could not be appropriately implemented in classes with a large number of students. They added that there are classes made up of 50-100 multi-level classes. The CTL-based activities require equipped classes with a small number of students, ideally 15-20. With that in mind, group work discussions, peer work, and generally interactive-based activities are difficult to apply in large classes. Furthermore, the lack of teaching resources is another issue that instructors struggle with, in an Afghan context. Moslem and Baran stated that they try to design contextualized teaching materials, including activities and tasks that promote students' CT skills, but most of the time, they fail because they do not have access to enough resources, such as technological tools, copying, and printing facilities. Wesal added:

> Teachers need time and energy to be able to teach effectively and design activities and tasks to improve students' CT abilities. But in Afghanistan, teachers are overloaded and work pressure does not allow them to allocate time to design appropriate teaching materials. I teach five different classes, 18 sessions a week. There are about 60 students in each class. So, reaching each student's needs and style is sometimes impossible.

Moreover, the use of grammar-translation in teaching is common in Afghanistan's academic and educational context. With that in mind, students are used to being passive listeners and the teachers are comfortable with giving lectures. Moreover, the administration in higher education also supports lecture-based teaching. Furthermore, each teacher is supposed to teach several sessions in a week which is a difficult and challenging task. Shakib stated that each instructor is supposed to cover at least 18 hours/sessions in a week in large classes, which requires a lot of preparation. With that said, the instructors do not have enough time and energy to prepare CTL-based activities.

4. Discussion

The findings indicated that the CTL helps autonomous learning, where it encourages learners to lead their learning process. This is particularly aligned with Rafsanjani et al. (2022), who asserted that CTL focuses on students and gives them hands-on experience with educational activities. Through connections to the real world, CTL benefits students by giving their education significant attention. It

incorporates the unique talents, passions, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds of students into what they learn, how they learn it, and how they are evaluated. As a result, adopting the CTL technique to create educational materials is beneficial.

Contextual learning is created with the goal of making learning more fruitful and meaningful, similar to other learning methodologies. Furthermore, the majority of the participants stated that developing students' CT through implementing CTL in language classes is significantly important and leads to quality teaching and learning outcomes. Unfortunately, based on the findings, CT is undermined in the Afghan education context.

The findings also indicated that interactive-based activities and CTL-based tasks greatly help to foster students' CT skills. The majority of the participants mentioned that group work, peer work, role-play, games, and debates are the strategies through which students in general and EFL learners' CT in particular can be developed. This is aligned with Khatib et al. (2011) who asserted that students' critical attitudes and thinking abilities can be developed by actively engaging them in CT activities through conversation, reflection, and teacher-initiated questions in a safe environment. Further, according to Kuhn (2019), CT is more of a dialogic practice that people engage in, at first in an interactive way and subsequently in an interiorized form. When making arguments, skilled thinkers not only foresee probable rebuttals from others but also consider how easily those arguments might be refuted themselves.

The interviewed participants also discussed promoting students' CT skills through reading and writing. In other words, assigning students contextualized and literary texts to read, analyze, interpret, critique, and write their responses greatly help to develop CT skills as well as their creativity. This finding is supported by Nejad et al. (2022); writing and thinking are related in the sense that without clear thinking, one cannot write clearly. Thinking skills increase through writing. Because one must express thoughts and arguments in a style that encourages higher-order thinking, it enhances the thinking process and aids in the development of thinking abilities.

The findings revealed that grammar translation is a common approach to teaching in Afghanistan's academic context. There is an urgent need to shift attention from grammar translation to CTL and other interactive-based approaches to be able to help students improve their CT skills and creativity. CTL, in accordance with Sabroni (2017), is a method of instruction that places a strong emphasis on student participation throughout the entire process of locating knowledge and relating it to practical circumstances that motivate students to put it to use in their daily lives. In a similar vein, Nawas (2018) draws a conclusion from their study that the CTL approach aids students in connecting the subject matter to actual situations and motivates them to connect the material's relevance to their own life.

CT is one of the very crucial skills students need to be equipped with to be able to compete in the job market. Unfortunately, grammar-translation to teaching is common in an Afghan academic context where, according to the participants of the current study, a shift to CTL and interactive-based approaches to teaching is required. There are several issues, such as large multi-level classes, lack of resources, lack of level-appropriate and contextualized teaching materials, pressure on teachers and teacher-centered classes, constrain the process of incorporating CT skills.

Strategies such as role-play, scenario, visual aids, debate, group work discussions, peer-work writing prompts, question-answer sessions, reading and discussing, comparing and contrasting, problem-solving, real-life examples and illustrations were found to be helpful CTL-based activities that foster students' CT skills. University instructors need administrative in higher education support to incorporate CT content into the curriculum and their classrooms. Furthermore, instructors need enough resources and contextualized teaching materials to help students develop their CT skills. Instructors also need training programs on how to design the CTL-based tasks through which EFL learners' CT skills can be promoted.

This study contributes to the body of literature in general and in the Afghan context, which is underrepresented in the field of research study in particular. Moreover, it reminds the instructors and the administration in higher education of the importance of incorporating CT into the curricula and the

classrooms. The findings also revealed that the instructors need the support of the higher education administration to include CT content and skills into the curricula. Moreover, in order to incorporate CT activities following CTL, smaller class size, resources such as technological tools, copying and printing facilities, and access to the internet is required.

The researchers were not able to access a larger number of female instructors as well as female students due to a ban on female education. In other words, female instructors are only allowed to go to the university to sign their attendance only once a month, and female students are completely banned from entering the university campus. The researchers were able to only interview two female participants outside the university. Further research studies can be conducted through a different research method, such as a mixed-method or a quantitative one recruiting a wider population, exploring students' perspectives and experiences, investigating the impact of CTL on students' academic performance or future career success, or examining the long-term effects of integrating CT instruction into the curriculum. Moreover, further research can be conducted investigating the current political regime (Taliban) and its administration in higher education attitudes toward CT skills.

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