

## The Impact of Practicing van Dijk's Model of Critical Discourse Analysis on the Improvement of Iranian EFL Undergraduates' Critical Thinking across Different Proficiency Levels

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### Abstract

Despite the saliency of raising critical thinking not only in ELT but also in other aspects of life, there is still lack of studies in this regard that need to be filled. Previous studies dealt with Faiclough's model not that of van Dijk, and besides, they weren't concerned about CDA effects on different proficiency levels. The present study, however, examined the impact of critical discourse analysis (CDA) on EFL undergraduates' critical thinking (CT) ability across different proficiency levels. To this end, 96 EFL undergraduates in three different proficiency levels of high, mid and low participated in this study to all of whom the "Watson and Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal" (WGCTA) was administered. They received treatment of van Dijk's model practice over a period of an hour a week and for four weeks, once the model proved to be appropriate through expert judge. The results indicated that CDA has a positive influence on learners' CT. Besides, the scores for the high group were significantly higher than that of low group, and the high group performed better than the mid-level group, but the difference was not significant for the mid and low proficiency level groups. The findings demonstrated that language proficiency has a positive mediating role in the extent to which a CDA model awareness can improve learners' critical thinking ability.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Critical Thinking (CT), Van Dijk's Model, EFL Undergraduates

### 1. Introduction

Critical thinking (CT) is actually a skill for the use of strategies or cognitive skills that increases the possibility of a desirable outcome. Elder (2005) suggested that the most effective design for professional development is one that introduces the foundations of critical thinking and then is "systematically followed up by contextualization of these foundations throughout curricular areas for developing college wide policies and practices" (p. 41). Actually, critical thinking, resilience, and reasonableness are essential to personal and collective well-being in an increasingly globalized world (OECD, 2014). Moreover, Moon (2007) states that it is time to explore the term critical thinking since this term and its relationship to the educational process has become a major issue. She believes that

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critical thinking as a process is involved in any research activity that's why it can be considered as a major issue in education, especially at higher levels (Hassani, Rahmany & Babaei, 2013). Thus, due to the saliency of CT in academic success, any strategy or approach which may contribute to its improvement would be of crucial value. In this regard, critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a group of methodologies and analytic tools that share common underlying principles and goals (Mayr & Simpson, 2010) seems to be a valuable approach. Hashemi and Ghanizadeh (2012) believe that CDA can illuminate the relations between discourse, dominance, marginalization, social inequality, ideology, and hegemony. According to Rahimi and Sharififar (2015) critical discourse analysis techniques can be employed by the teachers in the classrooms in order for the students to be able to analyze discourse and find the hidden meaning and explore the association between discourse, ideology, and power; this activity will lead students toward a lifelong ability in critical thinking.

Through different techniques and strategies, writers tend to manipulate readers and make them accept ideological messages embedded in a text (Ebrahimi & Rahimi, 2013). CDA also helps readers detect this manipulation and uncover the implicit ideologies in texts. It unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and therefore the exercise of power in texts (Widdowson, 2000). Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) assert that "discourse tends to become normative with repeated use and thus appears to be neutral: however, in actual fact, discourse is never neutral" (p.10). Thus, practicing CDA in the classrooms and unmasking the texts can be of help to raise the students' critical thinking awareness. Regarding these kinds of texts, one of the most recognized varieties of CDA models that can be worked on in the classrooms is that of van Dijk (2004) (Sheyholislami, 2001). This study is one of the few studies that try to put a CDA framework into practice. Much has been written about theoretical aspects of CDA (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2002) yet a few studies could be found that take the practical aspect into consideration and report how CDA and its frameworks and techniques are implemented to improve EFL undergraduates' learning. Besides, unlike this one, the few researches in this regard do not deal with CDA's role across different proficiency levels.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been an endeavor to interpret the relationships between language studies and social practices since 1980s (Fairclough, 1992). According to van Dijk (2008a), CDA, preferably named Critical Discourse Studies by him, is an academic movement rapidly spread in linguistics and the social sciences since its first book publication in 1979. It is a perspective of multidisciplinary discourse studies that focuses on the discursive reproduction of power abuse, such as sexism, racism, and other forms of social inequality, as well as the resistance against such domination (Tannen, Hamilton, & Schiffrin, 2015).

In the light of the above definitions, it is crystal clear that CDA is situated deeply within social practices. Considering this fact and due to its interdisciplinary nature, CDA can potentially be applied in a variety of disciplines and areas, such as: law, politics, business, and education (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012). In this regard, different practitioners carried out researches in the domain of education. Ko and Wang (2013), for example, used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an appropriate tool for analyzing texts in critical literacy practice since both disciplines share a homogeneous theoretical framework. Finding showed that unlike lower-level students, the higher-level learners identified themselves as actively participating in class discussion, and having greater enthusiasm in critical literacy. However, all participants read the news stories from a critical perspective; no matter at what English proficiency level they were. This study also supports the results of Lo's (2010), which assessed Taiwanese college students' critical reflections in their portfolios who had not received specific instruction.

Integrating CDA into L2 studies is set out by many scholars (for e.g. Cots, 2006; Wallace, 1992) who believed in its absence in language learning classes. To develop an awareness of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and explore the effect of CDA on students' attitudes about learning English Language, Ali (2011) integrated critical activities into her teaching and students' learning process. She believes that it is the teachers' duty to provide ample and significant CDA practice opportunities to the students, and an ideal place for promoting this critical language awareness is a classroom. Because, employing CDA as a tool for comprehending language turns even passive students to critical and as a result creative ones.

## 2.2. *Critical Thinking (CT)*

Different definitions and terminologies of CT have brought about a lot of complexities. Lack of consensus on its definition might be due to various theories and models in two distinct disciplines, psychology (focusing on the nature and products of CT), and philosophy (concentrating on the process of cognition) (Reed, 1998). Psychologically deciding, Beyer (1985) has argued that critical thinking is not a process, neither a unified operation consisting of a number of other operations through which one proceeds in sequence. Every practitioner seems to add a new parameter to CT. Mcpeck (1981) refers to CT as a disposition and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism. Ennis (1993) criticizes his definition since he believes "critical thinking must get beyond skepticism" (p. 180). He refers to the usual steps in problem solving as creative acts, and Facione (1984) views CT as an active process which involves constructing arguments, not just evaluating them. In the same vein, Watson and Glaser (2002) as well as Simpson and Courtney (2002), believe that CT includes analysis, evaluation, and inference. Thus, in general critical thinkers are those who can successfully analyze, argue, evaluate, and make decisions and inferences (Lai, 2011).

Concerning the significance of fostering CT, in a survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2011), 95% of the chief academic officers from 433 institutions rated critical thinking as one of the most salient intellectual skills for their students, and 81% of the employers wanted colleges to place a stronger emphasis on critical thinking. Similarly, Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006) found that among 400 surveyed employers, 92.1% identified critical thinking as a very important skill for 4-year College graduates to be successful in today's workforce (cited in Liu, 2014). It may be because as Barnett (2015a) argues it is not just a way of thinking: it is a way of being and acting.

CT is classified as higher-level thinking (Paul, 1995; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005) and contains elements of both the cognitive domain, critical thinking skills (CTS), and the affective one, critical thinking dispositions (CTD) (Facione, 2011; Yang & Chou, 2008; Yeh, 2000). There are a lot of empirical studies emphasizing the importance of promoting the higher-order thinking skills in foreign language classrooms through different ways (Ganapathy, et al, 2017; Ong et al, 2016; Rahman et al, 2017; Rodas, 2016;). Wilson (2016) believes that the capability of thinking critically is essential to the scholars' success in higher education since language learners with critical thinking ability are capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum, be capable of using their thinking skills, be capable of making decisions and solving problems, etc. (Mahyuddin et al, 2004). Even communicative approaches to language teaching do not help students to become proficient in the target language without being critical thinkers (Kabilan, 2000).

## 2.3. *Integrating CT into L2 Learning*

Generally speaking, the association of CT with students' academic success and how critical literacy can work within classrooms of all age and ability levels is demonstrated by many researchers (Bean and Moni, 2003; Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Jewett and Smith, 2003; Johnson & Ciancio, 2003; Morrell, 2004; Phan, 2010;). However, this association has still been peripheral in foreign language learning (Ghonsooly & Showqi, 2012; Li, 2011). Alnofaie (2013) infused critical thinking as a language pedagogy into preparatory programs of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). His paper suggests that as a holistic

language pedagogy, critical thinking should be implemented across all language courses and skills, because it supplies a framework that might be able to facilitate the implementation processes in EFL preparatory programs.

Yang and Gamble's (2013) goal was also to develop and test practical, theory-based instructional strategies by designing a course for CT-integrated EFL instruction. CT-integrated course activities were successful in improving English reading and listening comprehension. While thinking critically is often perceived to be the primary purpose of reading, in an attempt to answer the question of whether it can actually be taught in classrooms, Mehta (2014) carried out a research. An analysis of the writing task results revealed that critical thinking is a skill which can be conveyed to EFL students when divided into its main components of purpose identification which are actually the intention of the written text and the speaker. Based on group discussions and systematic underlining of the focus of the topic, students were able to write in a more effective manner.

In this regard, Yang (2012) carried out a research including two parts: critical thinking training and a formal study for evaluating transfer of critical thinking learning. The results indicated that the English instruction integrated with critical thinking had a positive impact on participants' academic performance. That is, learners in the CT-integrated instruction classes outperformed learners who studied under usual instructional situation. Thus, the advantage of CT-integrated instruction is not confined to measures of critical thinking, rather it affects positively on learners' academic performance in subject-specific achievement measures.

#### 2.4. *van Dijk's Model of CDA*

According to Waugh, et al. (2016) different scholars have different approaches to CDA, such as the dialectical relational (Fairclough), socio-cognitive (van Dijk), discourse historical (Wodak), social actors (van Leeuwen), and Foucauldian dispositive analysis (Jäger and Maier). Among these scholars, van Dijk is one of the most often referenced and quoted in critical studies of media discourse (Sheyholislami, 2001). His approach incorporates the two approaches in media education: interpretive (text based) and social tradition (context based), into one analytical framework for analyzing discourse; however, what noticeably distinguishes van Dijk's approach from other approaches in CDA is that for him it is the sociocognition and personal cognition that matters as the mediator between discourse and society (Sheyholislami, 2001). van Dijk (2004) believes that in the society some phenomena such as elections, parliaments, political campaigns, propaganda, demonstrations, etc. are profoundly ideological. In this regard, he states 27 ideological strategies like categorization, consensus, evidentiality, euphemism, generalization, authority, etc. As well as these rhetorical devices, he also placed a great emphasis on two main discursive strategies of positive self-presentation (i.e. semantic macro-strategy of in-group favoritism) and negative other-presentation (i.e. semantic macro-strategy of derogation of out-group) as the principal basis of his discourse analysis model. Since the concept of social cognitions is central to his approach, it can be defined as socially shared representations of societal groups and relations, as well as mental processes such as interpretation, thinking and arguing, making inferences, and learning that form a core element of the individual's social identity (van Dijk 1993a; Meyer 2001). This definition has some parameters in common with critical thinking (CT), and makes it an approach potentially helpful for fostering CT.

#### 2.5. *Research Questions*

Considering the academic role of CDA instruction in awakening CT ability, some scholars have carried out researches and integrated it into L2 studies (for e.g. Cots, 2006; Phan, 2010; Wallace, 1992). However, they were not conclusive, in that they were merely based on Fairclough or Wodak's models, and there was rarely ever a study based on van Dijk's model (for e.g. Hashemi and Ghanizadeh, 2012; Hassani and Rahmani, 2013). Empirical studies have also supported the contributing role of raising

critical thinking in university L2 classes (Gorjian et al. 2012; Rao 2007; Shahini and Riazi 2011). The results of these studies showed that critical thinking could help L2 learners improve both thinking and language skills, and it also enabled students to recognize their linguistic and cognitive limitations. In these studies, the students were also found to be more active and persistent in performing tasks. But the previously- mentioned researches were a comparison between a control and an experimental group; they didn't consider examining the effect of CDA on nurturing learners' critical thinking ability across different proficiency levels of low, mid and high among the undergraduates. Considering these facts, the research questions of the current study were as follows:

- 1- Does van Dijk's model (2004) meet the requisites for critical thinking ability awareness among Iranian EFL undergraduates?
- 2- Does practicing van Dijk's model in text analysis promote the critical thinking ability of high, mid, and low level undergraduates significantly?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants of the first phase of the research were ten experts in the field of ELT or English translation randomly selected through convenience sampling. As for the second phase the participants were 120 BA students of Azad University of Isfahan (Khorasgan), majoring in English translation. Of course 96 of them consistently attended the classes and could be considered as real participants of this study. They were seventh-semester students attending a Reading Journalistic Text course. There were both male and female students, divided into three classes each with thirty two students. Sex and age were not assumed as moderator variables, thus their effects on the process of the study were not considered. They were chosen on the basis of Oxford Placement Test and divided into three groups of high, mid, and low.

#### 3.2. Instruments

A semi-structured interview which was held among ten experts in the field of ELT or English translation

An Oxford Placement Test used to divide participants into three groups of high, mid, and low

A test named "Watson and Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal" (WGCTA) (Form A) which consists of 5 subtests

#### 3.3. Procedure

Following were the steps taken as the sequence of the study: First an interview was carried out with ten experts in the field of ELT to see whether van Dijk's model (2004) meets the requisites for critical thinking ability awareness among Iranian EFL undergraduates. Second, an Oxford Placement Test was used to divide undergraduates into three groups of high, mid, and low. The "Watson and Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal" was then administered to all of them as pretest to check with their critical thinking ability. Finally, after receiving the treatment, they were administered the "Watson and Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal" again this time as a post test.

##### 3.3.1. Interview

To explore the impact of practicing van Dijk's model in promoting critical thinking ability in different proficiency levels, first it should be decided whether this model meets the requisites for raising the participants' CT ability awareness in the Iranian undergraduates. To this end, ten experts in the field of ELT and English translation studies were provided by the original model of van Dijk as well as its summary to elucidate it more. To carry out this interview, the researcher would rather choose the

university instructors who were aware of CDA and CT. Questions to be asked were pronounced; however, the researcher was ready to give more exemplifications if anything was still vague until the problems became crystal clear. The participants were first informed of the study aims, and then one by one went through the interview while being recorded fully by the researcher.

### 3.3.2. Oxford Placement Test

To start with the explorative phase, at first, “the Oxford Placement Test” was administered to a group of English translation students in the Islamic Azad University of Isfahan in their reading journalistic texts course. The test giver was the researcher as well as their teacher for the reading course. Since it was almost improbable to find truly advanced students (according to Dave Allen’s I2 proficiency chart), after analyzing the scores, the students were divided into three groups of high, mid, and low rather than advanced, intermediate and elementary.

### 3.3.3. Pre-test

All three groups of high, mid, and low first received a pretests of “Watson & Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal” (WGCTA) (Form A). The English version of the Watson-Glaser test was administered to them. The Appraisal consists of 5 subtests and its total reliability was calculated via Cronbach’s alpha as .80. Its booklet contains five types of test designed to find out how well the participants were able to reason analytically and logically. Thus the participants’ critical thinking ability could be pretested through this standard test and after the treatment, their critical thinking ability was post tested. The current study is pre-experimental in nature since its participants were students who were taking reading journalistic texts, and were not randomly selected from among the population pool.

Table 1: The Subtests of CTA along with the Corresponding Descriptions

Subtest	Description
Test 1. <i>Inference</i>	Discriminating among degrees of truth or falsity of inference drawn from given data.
Test 2. <i>Recognizing Unstated Assumption</i>	Recognizing unstated assumptions or presuppositions in given statements or assertions.
Test 3. <i>Deduction</i>	Determining whether certain conclusions necessarily follow from information in given statement or premises.
Test 4. <i>Interpretation</i>	Weighing evidence and deciding if generalizations or conclusions based on the given data are warranted.
Test 5. <i>Evaluation of Arguments</i>	Evaluation of Arguments: Distinguishing between arguments that are strong and relevant and those that are weak or relevant to a particular question at issue.

### 3.3.4. Treatment

Van Dijk’s model of CDA is better to be exemplified through comparing and contrasting two journalistic texts. To do this, the candidates were provided by the Iranian and American presidents’ UN speeches (2013), Rouhani and Obama at the UNGA. To indicate the precise nature of discursive strategies and rhetorical devices utilized by the speakers and to compare the discursive characteristics and fundamental ideologies of the speeches, every paragraph of the text was considered as a macro unit. Each macro unit was then analyzed on the basis of the ideological strategies defined by the updated model reached through the expert judge. The analysis of these texts which were both political and ideological

was carried out on the basis of Najar zadegan, Dabaghi, Eslami, (2017). When the students learned how to analyze, they themselves tried to find strategies in the texts. They learned how to read critically and not just focus on the surface structure. Once a student came to the front of the class practicing a macro unit, the rest of them endeavored to argue and debate for or against him/her and increase their ability to challenge while having group discussion. The texts were practiced during the term over a period of an hour a week and for four weeks. All groups were taught by the same teacher who was also the researcher in the present study. Due to the lack of time, after direct instruction and exemplification of the model, every session one macro unit was practiced in the class and one was assigned to be done at home. The homework was then checked and talked about the following session.

#### 3.3.5. Post-test

To answer the second research question, once the treatment was finished, the “Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal” was again administered as a post-test to see if the treatment had any impact on raising critical thinking ability of the participants. In order to examine the results of practicing a CDA model on the awareness of the participants’ critical thinking ability, the “Kruskal-Wallis Test” was used. Later, Several Mann-Whitney U tests were also used as post hoc tests to see the exact areas of differences.

### 4. Data Analysis and Results

#### 4.1. Qualitative Analysis

##### 4.1.1. Checking Appropriacy of Van Dijk’s Model for Raising CT Awareness

To explore the impact of practicing van Dijk’s model in promoting critical thinking ability in different proficiency levels, first it should be decided whether this model meets the requisites for raising the participants’ CT ability awareness in the Iranian undergraduates. To this end, ten experts in the field of ELT or English translation studies were provided by van Dijk’s model. They were interviewed and asked about the appropriacy of the model through explaining each discursive strategy of the model. Their views regarding each strategy were recorded. After experts’ judges, it was concluded that some items in this model overlap, which can be used as one: actor description, disclaimer, national self-glorification, polarization and positive self-presentation can be used in one single group. On the other hand evidentiality, authority and consensus were considered as one item while being the opposite of populism. Interestingly enough, burden was judged by most of them not to have any functionality here, and could be omitted. In all, they agreed that after providing these modifications the model would be a suitable one for this research study.

#### 4.2. Quantitative Analysis

##### 4.2.1. The Impact of CDA Practice on Raising CT Awareness

The WGCT appraisal was administered to the participants’ in order to assess the effect of CDA on improving their CT ability. To make comparisons among more than two different groups, one-way between-groups ANOVA should be conducted provided that all the assumptions (e.g., normality, homogeneity of variance, and independence of observations, just to name a few) are met. In the present study, due to the violation of the assumption of normality for some distributions (as shown in the following table), the non-parametric counterpart of one-way between-groups ANOVA, i.e., Kruskal-Wallis test, was employed to make comparisons among the three groups of low, mid, and high proficiency learners both on the pretest and posttest, the results of which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Statistic	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Low Proficiency Pretest	.26	32	.000	.87	32	.003
Mid Proficiency Pretest	.13	32	.193	.97	32	.569
High Proficiency Pretest	.22	32	.001	.88	32	.004
Low Proficiency Posttest	.10	32	.200*	.95	32	.293
Mid Proficiency Posttest	.19	32	.006	.92	32	.027
High Proficiency Posttest	.11	32	.200*	.97	32	.672

In table 2, the Sig. value indicates whether a distribution was normal or not; if the Sig. value exceeds .05, it could be inferred that the distribution was normal; on the other hand, a Sig. value less than .05 implies the violation of the assumption of normality. Since the Sig. value for low and high proficiency learners on the pretest and for mid proficiency learners on the posttest were smaller than .05, the assumption of normality was not met, and as it was mentioned above, the non-parametric test of Kruskal-Wallis must be conducted.

The results of comparing the pretest scores indicated that there were no differences prior to the study ( $X^2 = .755$   $p = .686$ ) with the mean ranks of low (34.31), mid (37.33), and high (39.86). Once the treatment was given to the participants, the WGCTA was again administered as a posttest. The Kruskal-Wallis test was again computed to see whether teaching the CDA model created any effects on improving participants' CT ability. The results of the posttest on CT indicated that CDA significantly influenced the CT ability of the students. ( $X^2 = 15.578$   $p = .000$ ) with the mean ranks of low (37.09), mid (54.41), and high (58.00).

As the Kruskal-Wallis test was significant, several Mann-Whitney U tests were computed as post hoc tests to see the exact areas of differences. First the CT scores for the high (mean rank = 40.02) and low group (mean rank = 24.98) were compared. The Mann-Whitney U results indicated that the scores for the high group were significantly higher than that of low group ( $U = 271.50$ ,  $p = .001$ ).



Table 3: Mann-Whitney U Table for High and Low Proficiency Level Groups

	<b>CT (posttest)</b>
<b>Mann-Whitney U</b>	271.500
<b>Wilcoxon W</b>	799.500
<b>Z</b>	-3.309
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.001

Moreover, the CT scores for the high (mean rank = 40.39) and mid group (mean rank = 24.61) were compared and the Mann-Whitney U test showed that the high group was statistically significantly higher than the mid-level group ( $U = 259.500$ ,  $p = .001$ ). (See Table 4).

Table 4: Mann-Whitney U Table for High and Mid Proficiency Level Groups

	<b>CT (posttest)</b>
<b>Mann-Whitney U</b>	259.500
<b>Wilcoxon W</b>	787.500
<b>Z</b>	-3.452
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.001

However, the results indicated that the Mann-Whitney U test was not significant for the mid (mean rank = 30.89) and low group (mean rank = 34.11). In other words the scores for these two groups were not meaningfully different. ( $U = 460.50$ ,  $p = .476$ ) (See Table 5).

Table 5: Mann-Whitney U Table for Mid and Low Proficiency Level Groups

	<b>CT (posttest)</b>
<b>Mann-Whitney U</b>	460.500
<b>Wilcoxon W</b>	988.500
<b>Z</b>	-.710
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.478

## 5. Discussion

The current study set out to examine, first, whether van Dijk's model meets all the requisites for raising the participants' CT ability awareness in the Iranian undergraduates. The results from the experts' judge revealed its appropriacy though it was proved to need some modifications. The modified version was the one practiced in the class. As a prominent task of language teachers, integrating CT in English

language classrooms can improve the learners' level of thinking and at the same time help them to understand the main meanings of the text (Waters, 2006). Besides, in the domain of university education, practitioners agree that the improvement of students' higher-order thinking skills such as CT is the main task of higher education (Jarvis, 2005). Therefore, it is essential for language teachers to encourage learners to use their CT abilities by providing them challenging opportunities in which they reflect, grow and learn to express their opinions critically which can contribute to their progress in language learning (Kamali & Fahim, 2011).

Thus, any method that raises this ability is highly salient. That's why the second and the capstone issue explored here was the impact of implementing van Dijk's model of CDA in EFL classes on CT ability of high, mid, and low level undergraduates. The results of the posttest on CT indicated that CDA significantly influenced the CT ability of the students. In other words the findings revealed the positive role of a CDA model awareness on the improvement of their critical thinking ability. The findings are theoretically compatible with the literature indicating the role of practicing Fairclough's CDA model in the class (Carpenter et al, 2015; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012). It was proved through their research studies that the integration of CDA model of Fairclough in the undergraduates' classes tended to foster TEFL students' CT. It was also found that the enhancement of learners' CT abilities in turn may lead to the development of other emotional, motivational, and metacognitive factors.

Another interesting outcome of this study was derived from the Mann-Whitney U test results which indicated that posttest scores for the high group were significantly higher than that of low group, and that the high group was significantly higher than the mid-level group, but the difference was not significant for the mid and low proficiency level groups. In other words the scores for these two groups were not meaningfully different. The results focused on the prominent role of CDA for the more proficient learners. These findings clearly demonstrated that the more proficient a language learner is the more he can make use of CDA tactics to improve his critical thinking ability. In other words, language proficiency has a positive mediating role in the extent to which a CDA model awareness can improve learners' critical thinking ability. The reverse is also proved to be true that the low proficiency level undergraduates cannot enjoy the benefit of a CDA model awareness to raise their critical thinking ability even though they receive full instruction for that. These results are in line with previous research findings (e.g. Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010; Collins and Onwuegbuzie, 2000; Rashid and Hashim, 2008, Afshar and Movassagh, 2014); however, Burbules and Berk (2006) argue that language is not solely responsible for determining one's thought but functions instead as one of the elements that helps to shape the thought.

The findings were also compatible with the theoretical controversies in the literature indicating the contributing role of learners' exposure to texts that contain ideological assumptions in the improvement of their critical thinking abilities (Wallace, 1992). According to literature, it is essential for teachers to teach students critically, involve them in class discussions, promote their ability of challenge, and let them argue and debate while learning (Beck, 2005; Cots, 2006; Michell, 2006; Pietrandrea, 2008; Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006; Singer & Shagoury, 2005).

There were few limitations to this research like the one related to the participants. Since the administration time was long, some of the respondents felt bored and might have not given sufficient consideration required for answering the questions, and as a result could have endangered the internal validity of the research. Another important and problematic part was to make the candidates so interested in the issue in order not to lose the treatment and be present for administrations. Not attending all the sessions would lead to incomplete data due to reduction of the number of candidates. Fortunately, however, they seemed to be really interested in receiving the treatment. Last but not the least was lack of randomization which turned the experimental design to the pre-experimental one. Since the researcher had access to three classes passing journalistic text reading comprehension course, the very available samples had to be used for the study.

## 6. Conclusion

Although various studies (McKinley, 2013) called for defining CT as more than just an implicit quality which is incapable of change (Willingham, 2007), the ways in which critical thinking could be encouraged, sustained and evaluated is remained insufficiently explored. This study is one of the few researches that put a CDA framework into practice to raise critical thinking awareness for the undergraduates. This research demonstrates how successfully CT can be raised across high and mid-level undergraduates through critical discourse analysis (CDA) practice in the class. This could result in coming to the fact that CT-integrated EFL instruction, which includes activities and assignments that may supplement or expand upon textbook content can be of real help not only for the learners' language learning but also for their future life. Actually the challenge of critical evaluation lead to a higher level of engagement with the course materials resulting in both higher-order thinking and knowledge retention (Reed & Stavreva, 2006) as well as improved academic and target language performance.

Further studies seem to be needed in this regard. For instance, focusing on gender as a moderator variable, researchers can show the differences between male and female's CT ability influenced by a CDA model practice. Here, it was not possible since the number of male students in every class was few. On the other hand, using triangulation the researchers can make use of qualitative research methods like that of think aloud. This way thought process, which are otherwise far from the reach of researchers, can be analyzed as well. A replication and extension of this study, particularly involving longitudinal data can also be another line of research that is needed in order to provide more evidence.

Focusing the results of studies like this can lead EFL teachers to change their previous memorization-based methods through the incorporation of critical thinking skills. This way they can have students who autonomously decide how to think not what to think, and involve themselves in text analysis, exploration, reflection, problem solving, interpretation, etc. Moreover, teachers can improve their professional knowledge and expertise using critical -based approaches through which they awaken the consciousness of language learners. The findings of the study can inspire the curriculum designers to include critical thinking strategies both in students' textbooks and in teacher training courses. Textbooks the learners need are the ones that can awake their critical thinking ability and foster it later. Also, teachers should be trained to change their attitudes toward students and themselves (Kabilan, 2000); this can be possible through critical thinking ability increase.

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