

## **The Relationship between Upper Intermediate EFL Learners' Critical Thinking and Their Listening Comprehension Ability**

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**Abstract.** This paper investigated the relationship between upper intermediate EFL learners' critical thinking and their listening comprehension ability. The aim was to find out whether learners' critical thinking ability has any significant relationship with their listening comprehension ability or not. For this purpose, at first one sample of FCE for listening comprehension was given to some upper intermediate EFL learners to homogenize the participants. One hundred and twenty participants were selected for the study. Then the researchers asked participants to answer the Watson Glazer Critical thinking questionnaire. Moreover, they were asked to listen to another sample of FCE for listening comprehension and answered the multiple-choice questions. To fulfil the objective of the study, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted to investigate any significant relationship between the two variables. The results showed that there is significant correlation between learners' listening comprehension scores and their total scores in critical thinking. The results may be helpful for the teachers and teacher trainers to include the beneficial aspects of critical thinking in teaching listening courses.

**Key words:** critical thinking; listening comprehension ability

### **Introduction**

People should think of new methods of problems solving in coping with new technology, knowledge and information, they should ask questions properly, connect the new knowledge to their already existing information, be able to apply their achieved knowledge in new faced conditions, and promote their critical thinking ability, which is regarded as the aims of pedagogy. Critical thinking changes into a controversial issue nowadays. A critical thinker is able to ask relevant and suitable questions, distinguish and collect relevant data about things,

divide the data appropriately, and achieve the worthy conclusions about his environment (Center for Critical Thinking, 1996a). Critical thinking (CT) practice can result in productive, ethical, happy, satisfying, successful and fulfilling life (Ellis, 2003). Many researchers have carried out some studies in the domain of critical thinking. For example, Keesing-Styles (2003) carried out a study to find out whether in teacher education, there is any relationship between critical education and evaluation. She argues that many studies have been carried out in finding out how critical thinking in education has promoted and what are its shortcomings. Therefore, regarding the significance of critical thinking in the daily life of each person generally also in pedagogy specifically provoked the researchers to see whether there is any relationship between critical thinking ability of upper intermediate EFL learners and their listening comprehension ability which is regarded as a significant part of interlanguage communication, a kind of need for language acquisition (Swian, 1985).

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to Paul (2005), developing critical thinking ability is essential in all educational settings. Human thinking is integral part of learning. During learning of something, if we think in a good way, we can learn better. If we think in a poor way, we learn poorly. On the other hand, listening comprehension ability is an essential part of second language learning and its use cannot be ignored in various daily situations by the second language learners (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006), it "is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister-speaking." (Nunan, 1997, p.1)

### **Research Question**

To fulfill the purpose of this research one research question was posed:

Is there any significant relationship between upper intermediate EFL learner's critical thinking and their listening comprehension?

### **Significance of the study:**

Listening comprehension is the important part of language for EFL learners because the communication, which can be considered as the goal of EFL learning, fails by the lack of listening comprehension. Relatively, listening comprehension is the most problematic area for EFL learners. On the other hand, Gibson (1995, cited in Dam and Volman, 2004) states that critical thinking provides different kinds of abilities for learners which can enhance the process of learning and teaching. Strohm and Baukus (1995) believe that critical thinking can improve learners' ambiguity tolerance. They argue that ambiguity is a productive and internal part of critical

thinking ability it means that if the learners have higher ambiguity tolerance, they can cope with the problems of listening comprehension in the better way.

## **Review of literature**

### **Critical Thinking**

“Critical Thinking involves recognizing and researching assumptions that undergird thoughts and actions” (Brookfield, 1991, p. 17).

Critical thinking is considered as a kind of thinking, which is essential in coping with some problems in life, recognizing the likely outcomes, making relevant inferences, and having appropriate decisions (Halpern, 1998). Simpson and Courtney (2003) believe that critical thinking is involved in a kind of process and it is not a method, which can be learned. Actually, it involves both affective and cognitive aspects in the mind.

Critical thinking ability provides the environment for us to present our ideas and beliefs, and change them based on different situations (De Boo, 1999). In fact, critical thinking is not a new idea. May be, our ancestors applied their critical thinking abilities to find food sources or a good place to live. It can be said that the critical thinking is referred to Socrates’ idea in 2500 years ago. Socrates pointed out to the importance of making questions to think before doing the things and confirming the others’ views. Now, his method of asking questions is called Socratic questioning which is the helpful way of instructing critical thinking. Many other scientists such as Aristotle, Plato believed in ‘Socrates’ practice. Actually, they believe that usually the things differ from what they are appeared and they mentioned that an active and instructed mind only can comprehend the implied realities of things. (Center for Critical Thinking, 1996a).

Dam and Volman (2004) found that students lacked thinking ability deeply and that society needs to make the students think more critically. Because of that, critical thinking should be paid attention both practically and theoretically.

According to Cottrell (2005), Reasoning is the integral part of critical thinking process. Reasoning is our capacity for rational thought. Rational refers to using reasons for solving problems. Cottrell believes that, people start reasoning which includes: having reasons for what we believe and do, assessing our own beliefs and actions critically and having ability to present the reasons of our beliefs and actions to others.

### **The factors of Critical Thinking**

Goscik (1990) classified the factors of critical thinking in a hierarchal way:

- The observation by which a person can make facts
- The facts by which a person can inference

- The inference by which a person can make assumption
- The assumption by which a person can form his opinions
- The opinions by the use of which and the principles of logic a person can develop the arguments
- The arguments for which a person use critical Analysis
- In addition, the critical Analysis through which a person challenges the observation, facts, inferences, and so on, to analyze the arguments.

### **Listening Comprehension Ability**

Swian (1985) believes that listening comprehension ability is a significant part of interlanguage communication. Interlanguage communication is a kind of necessity for acquisition of language. According to Krashen (1985), listening comprehension ability is regarded as a way for understandable input.

In addition, Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor (2006) believes that listening comprehension ability is an essential aspect of second language learning which the learners in different kinds of daily situations wildly use. In listening comprehension ability a kind of complex process is involved, which improves understanding the different spoken messages by applying different elements such as pragmatic, semantic, phonology, and syntactic.

Buck (1995) believes that if the teachers understand the listening comprehension ability's nature the learning of this skill for learners can be facilitated; however, usually teachers have problems with manipulating the listening processes. They can draw learners' attention to the important aspects of learners' listening comprehension by providing them with appropriate practices, and sufficient motivations and interests. Such kinds of practices, motivations, and interests can be created by the use of active learning instruction.

River (1966) states that listening comprehension of a foreign language involves two levels of activity. The first level is the recognition level, in which listener identifies the words and phrases in the structures and identifies sequences of the time, words and phrases which are used for modifying, and phrases which do not add something important to the idea of the message and are almost redundant. The second level is the selection level in which listener tries to get the main idea of the message.

According to Goh (2008), metacognitive teaching in listening comprehension has provided many worthy results. He mentioned that metacognitive teaching provides the promotion of confidence, motivation, and interests among learners. Moreover, he states that recently some studies have proved the positive effects of metacognitive teaching on enhancing listening comprehension ability.

### **The previous studies about critical thinking and listening**

Pogonowski (1989) in his study of critical thinking and music listening found that dialogues and listening part that make the students engaged in analysis can change them into the better musicians and listeners. He asserts the role of critical thinking in improving music listening skill.

Johnson (2007) in his study investigated that whether the instruction of critical thinking has any significant effect on the music listening abilities of students in the fifth grade. The results showed that subjects with Critical Thinking Instruction (CTI) were more successful in music, affective, associative, and the whole result of pretest to posttest in comparison with the learners of Activity-Based Instruction (ABI). According to Johnson in this study, listening instruction should include the opportunities for critical thinking for being better listeners of music.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

In this study, 120 participants are chosen from a private institute in upper intermediate level. They were 66 females and 54 males. Their ages were from 15-32 and their levels of education ranged from at least high school to at most Bachelor degree.

#### **Instrumentations**

In this study Watson-Glaser questionnaire was applied to evaluate the learners' critical thinking. This questionnaire includes 80 items and is consisted of five subtests: a) Inference b) Recognizing Unstated Assumptions c) Deduction d) Interpretation e) Evaluation of Arguments.

To evaluate listening comprehension ability of participants, some samples of FCE are used. The type of these samples is multiple choices.

### **Results**

For statistical analysis of the data, SPSS of version 19 was applied and the significance level was 0.05. Table 1 displayed the descriptive statistics of the listening comprehension ability and critical thinking scores.

Table 1:

*Descriptive statistics for listening scores and critical thinking scores*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Critical Thinking	120	23.00	67.00	42.508	1.22529
Listening	120	5.00	15.00	10.091	2.39746

The normality of the distribution of the scores was evaluated by a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The findings showed that the distribution of scores in each variable was normal ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 2).

Table 2:  
*Test of normality*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Critical Thinking	.101	120	.004
Listening	.092	120	.014

To find the correlation between learners' listening comprehension ability and their critical thinking scores, a Pearson Product-Moment correlation was applied. The results indicated that there was significant correlation between listening comprehension marks and total scores in critical thinking ( $r = .728$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), so the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Table 3:  
*Correlation between learners' listening and critical thinking scores*

	Listening	Sig. (2-tailed)
Critical Thinking	.728**	.000

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To examine whether in predicting learners' listening comprehension ability, critical thinking aspects has any predictive power or not a stepwise regression analysis was used.

Table 4:  
*The results of regression analysis for listening and the subscales of critical thinking*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.031	.546		7.387	.000
	Critical thinking	.142	.012	.728	11.540	.000

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*The results of regression analysis for listening and the subscales of critical thinking*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.031	.546		7.387	.000
	Critical thinking	.142	.012	.728	11.540	.000

a. Dependent Variable: listening

As Table 4 displays that critical thinking was a positive predictor of the listening comprehension ability.

Table 5:  
*R square table for critical thinking as the predictors of learners' listening*

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.728 <sup>a</sup>	.530	.526	1.64919

a. Predictors: (Constant), critical thinking

b. Dependent Variable: Listening

The model summary statistics of variables was displayed in Table 5. The results showed that Critical thinking could predict 52 percent of the learners' listening comprehension. The R-value was .728, which revealed the correlation coefficient between students' listening and Critical thinking. Moreover, it indicated a large magnitude of effect size (Larson-Hall, 2010). Its square value was .530. It showed that about 52% of the differences in learners' listening comprehension could be described by considering their Critical thinking. According to the amount of the adjusted R square (Larson-Hall, 2010), it was found that Critical thinking ability could justify the variance of learners' listening comprehension to a large extent (see Table 5).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The researchers of this study investigated the relationship between upper intermediate EFL learner's critical thinking and their listening comprehension ability. The results of the correlation between critical thinking and listening

comprehension showed that there was significant correlation between listening comprehension marks and critical thinking's total scores. By examining whether critical thinking has any predictive power in predicting learners' listening comprehension ability, it was found that Critical thinking, can be the positive predictor of the listening comprehension ability. The results indicated that the model could predict 52 percent of the students' listening comprehension and they could justify the variance of learners' listening comprehension to a large extent.

The findings of this study confirm many studies in the critical thinking domain such as the study in which "the effect of critical thinking instruction on the music listening skills of fifth grade students" was investigated. The results showed that subjects with Critical Thinking Instruction (CTI ) were more successful in music, affective, associative, and the whole result of pretest to posttest in comparison with the learners of Activity-Based Instruction (ABI) (Johnson, 2007). Pogonowski (1989) in his study of critical thinking and music listening found that dialogues and listening part that make the students engaged in analysis can change them into the better musicians and listeners. He asserts the role of critical thinking in improving music listening skill. The results of the conducted studies in this area provide obvious proofs for effectiveness of critical thinking in learning process. Critical thinking includes some skills of researching, makes a person capable of investigating the different sources to make the appropriate decisions; therefore, a learner with these abilities can perform effectively in educational setting (Steven Brookfield, 1991). According to Dam and Volman (2004) critical thinking should be paid attention both practically and theoretically in learning and teaching process to make learners think deeply and logically.

The study has some implications: for teachers and teacher trainers to inject critical thinking in their teaching process including listening comprehension instruction, for students to apply different aspects of critical thinking in their learning process generally and acquiring listening comprehension ability specifically, for the providers and developers of educational materials, also for syllabus designers to include critical thinking in the syllabus of pedagogy.

There were some limitations, which the researchers faced during the study. For example because of the length and complexity of Watson Glazer questionnaire, in spite of the researcher's emphasis, some of the subjects did not answer questions with full attention. Participants' different ages and educational background were other kinds of limitations, which the researchers faced during the study. In this study the relationship between critical thinking and listening comprehension ability was investigated, other researchers can investigate this relationship with other language skills and components. In addition, this relationship can be explored with different ages and the proficiency levels. Moreover, other researchers can replicate this study in high school and university.

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