

# University EFL Teachers Perceptions of Critical Thinking Barriers in Higher Education

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## Abstract

This study aims to uncover university EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the barriers to implementing critical thinking in higher education. Due to the scarcity of previous studies in the Moroccan context, understanding the challenges that prevent critical thinking from being implemented effectively requires recognizing the difficulties that EFL teachers encounter in the process of its integration. This research was conducted with a qualitative design. Specifically, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with university EFL professors affiliated with different higher education institutions in Morocco. Interview data were analyzed by deploying thematic analysis. Results indicate that university EFL teachers consider four factors to be the main challenges of incorporating critical thinking in their instructional strategies. These factors include student, cultural, educational, and class size-related constraints. Furthermore, this study suggests feasible solutions to overcome critical thinking barriers in Moroccan higher education.

**Keywords:** Teachers' Perceptions, Critical Thinking, Higher Education, Critical Thinking Barriers

## 1. Introduction

Critical thinking has been recognized as an essential skill throughout history. It emanated from Greek philosophy when Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle realized the significance of developing critical thinking skills and emphasized the need for training individuals to use logical reasoning while dealing with different subject matters. As the years progressed, educational stakeholders have increasingly realized the significance of developing critical thinking in education. Therefore, several taxonomies were designed to facilitate the transfer of critical thinking in the classroom. These initiatives have been motivated by training students to meet the requirements of a fast-paced world that is characterized by the unprecedented explosion of information in various outlets. Also important, the dynamic evolution in many domains, be they economic, political, or educational, renders critical thinking skills highly required.

In particular, the language classroom can be an ideal setting where critical thinking can be applied. Dong (2006) states that "learning a language is closely connected to learning to think critically in specific subject matters." First, language learners can monitor and assess their learning more successfully if they can control their thoughts. Second, critical thinking broadens students' learning opportunities and gives the language a deeper meaning for them. Third, there is a strong association between critical thinking and learners' academic accomplishments. Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of critical

thinking in enhancing foreign language competency, oral communication skills, and writing skills (Liaw, 2007).

However, the integration of critical thinking in the EFL classroom is confronted by a set of obstacles that hinder the development of its development in higher education. Literature on this issue informs that teaching critical thinking is a demanding endeavor that faces various challenges. Based on this premise, the current study proposes to determine the barriers to incorporating critical thinking in the EFL classroom from the viewpoint of practitioners who are active agents in the process of transferring higher-order thinking skills.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

Incorporating critical thinking skills is becoming more widely acknowledged in education in general and in teaching English as a foreign language in particular. Although critical thinking is regarded as a desirable outcome, ways in which it can be effectively transferred into EFL classrooms is still subject to examination. Understanding the obstacles that prevent critical thinking from being implemented effectively requires recognizing the difficulties that EFL teachers encounter when incorporating it into their instructional strategies. Therefore, the primary thrust of this study is to address how teachers perceive instructing critical thinking in the EFL classroom and the challenges they face in this process.

By providing a thorough understanding of teachers' perceptions, highlighting difficulties, and considering solutions to overcome barriers to implementing critical thinking, the results of this study can help educational policymakers, teacher educators, and EFL practitioners create more effective strategies and support systems to encourage students to develop their critical thinking abilities, ultimately enabling them to think critically and independently in a globalized society.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative research aims to pinpoint the obstacles university EFL teachers encounter when incorporating critical thinking into their teaching methods. This study aims to bring the significant challenges of teaching critical thinking and provide feasible solutions to promote critical thinking in Moroccan higher education. In order to reach a comprehensive understanding of this issue, a semi-structured interview was designed to elucidate teachers' perceptions regarding the factors that hinder the development of critical thinking. Therefore, ten (10) university EFL teachers from Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University were selected to be interviewed. Their responses were gathered, interpreted, and analyzed.

## **4. Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer two main research questions:

1. What are university EFL teachers' perceived challenges in implementing critical thinking in their courses?
2. What are the feasible solutions to overcome critical thinking barriers in higher education?

## **5. Literature Review**

Critical thinking has been a subject of inquiry for many researchers in different research areas. Philosophers, psychologists, and educational experts have explored this concept and its major

components. However, a thorough survey of the literature on critical thinking reveals dissensus in terms of critical thinking definitions. Debates over critical thinking have yet to come to a halt due to the fluid nature of the term. Also important, It should be mentioned that a researcher's field of study or discipline strongly influences how critical thinking is defined and what it can be used for (Halonen, 1995; Moore, 2013). Ennis (1985) defined critical thinking as "reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 45). The researchers' definitions encompass the dispositional aspects of critical thinking since it emanates from the philosophical paradigm.

On the contrary, Sternberg (1986) defines critical thinking as "the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (p. 3). Following this strand, critical thinking can be better defined by thinkers' behaviors, practices, and actions. Most psychologists are concerned with the thinking process: how people assess the validity of assumptions and how they use cognitive skills. Those definitions overlap in some ways as they touch upon key critical thinking components.

In order to advance research on the definition critical and to come up with a monolithic definition, the American Philosophical Association in the Delphi report has come up with a monolithic definition that can be used as a seminal reference. In this regard, Facione (1990) in the Delphi report, reports that:

"We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based [...]The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit" (p. 3).

A close reading of this definition reveals that critical thinking can be better defined regarding skills and dispositions. Skills such as analysis evaluation were listed in the higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy (1956). The latter has been extensively used to define and implement critical thinking skills in educational settings. Whereas interpretation and inferencing constitute critical thinking core skills of many referential classification.

Since this research paper focuses on the challenges of teaching critical thinking, reviewing the literature on this issue is deemed indispensable to contextualize the research within an international theoretical framework. Previous studies in the literature have addressed several challenges that students encounter in demonstrating critical thinking skills. For instance, Snyder and Snyder (2008) note that critical thinking instruction can be hindered by numerous barriers, namely insufficient training, finite resources, preconceived biases, and constraints associated with time. These barriers impinge upon the establishment of a conducive environment for critical thinking. Another study by Tan (2017) highlights cultural compatibility as a significant obstacle in fostering critical thinking among students. These cultural challenges include the social expectations educators hold for students and the idea that critical thinking can fundamentally be adversarial. Furthermore, Al-Kindi and Al-Mekhlafi (2017) studied the effect of class size on promoting critical thinking. The results of their study reveal that educators view class size as a difficult barrier to nurturing a solid foundation for critical thinking instruction. Hence, the

ability of teachers to provide adequate oral and written feedback becomes largely circumscribed while teaching critical thinking.

## 6. Methodology

The present study is conducted with a qualitative design. Zhang and Creswell (2013) postulate that qualitative studies purport to dive deeper into multi-layered and dynamic phenomena." In essence, qualitative research focuses on comprehending the phenomenon under study based on the participants' apprehension rather than the inquirers. Therefore, qualitative research is marked by focusing on exploring how people perceive the world and ascribing meaning to their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative researchers set out to apprehend people's beliefs, behaviors, interactions, and attitudes. Hence, the qualitative design aims to elicit practitioners' perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation, including critical thinking barriers.

This study's qualitative data collection procedure involves conducting semi-structured interviews with ten Moroccan university EFL teachers (n=10) currently working at the University of Sidi Mohamed Ben abdellah. Adams (2015) points out that the semi-structured interview agenda must not be carved in stone. That is, allowing the conversation to take unexpected turns and to reorder the themes and questions accordingly. This allows the researcher to generate new insights into the research problem. However, it is important to stress that semi-structured interviews are implemented with a degree of structure so that at least most participants would receive common questions while allowing for rephrasing and reordering questions according to the flow of the conversation. To that end, the interviews are oriented using an interview guide (i.e., interview schedule), which includes relevant themes and, mainly, open-ended questions to be addressed throughout the interview.

### 6.1. Participants

Since this study investigates the most perceived barriers in higher education EFL context and aims at generating solutions to this problem, university EFL teachers constitute the target population in this research. Participants are selected using a purposeful sampling technique, which involves choosing information-rich cases to provide elaborate insights and understanding of the research topic (Patton, 2002). It is important to note that participants are affiliated with various open and limited-access higher educational institutions. This implies that teachers' areas of interest were considered to deepen understanding of critical thinking barriers in course contents ranging from media studies, travel narratives, cultural studies, ESP, and English Literature to education. Of ten university EFL teachers, seven were males, while three were females. The majority of the interviewees have accumulated more than five years of teaching tenure. The professional title of university EFL teachers was also of great relevance to this study. Among the respondents, two teachers are full professors; four respondents report that they are associate professors, while the rest of the participants are assistant professors. To abide by the objectives of ethical research, each interviewee has been given a unique ID, rather than disclosing their names, to preserve confidentiality and secure the secretiveness of the interviewees. The following table details information about the interviewees.

**Table 1 Demographic information about participants university EFL teachers**

ID	Gender	Professional Title	Areas of Research
1	Female	Assistant Professor	• Media Studies • Cultural Studies
2	Male	Associate Professor	• Media Studies

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applied Linguistics</li> </ul>
3	Male	Assistant Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English Literature</li> <li>• Cultural Studies</li> </ul>
4	Male	Associate Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>
5	Male	Assistant Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparative Studies</li> <li>• Applied Linguistics</li> <li>• Media Studies</li> </ul>
6	Female	Full Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender Studies</li> </ul>
7	Male	Assistant Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural Studies</li> <li>• Travel Narratives</li> <li>• Gender Studies</li> <li>• Diaspora</li> </ul>
8	Female	Associate Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applied Linguistics</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>
9	Male	Full Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature</li> <li>• Cultural studies</li> </ul>
10	Male	Associate Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender Studies</li> <li>• Cultural studies</li> </ul>

## 6.2.Procedures

As stated by Creswell (2014), "a methods discussion in a qualitative proposal also needs to specify the steps in analyzing the various forms of qualitative data" (p. 194). Therefore, the procedure that the interviewer takes is presented as follows. First, respondents were invited for interviews as their perceptions are considered a primary source of generating pertinent information for this study. All participants expressed a strong willingness to participate in this research, which is appealing, timely, and relevant to their professional lives. After checking their availability, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' workplace, while three others were online via platforms of their choice. Each interview lasted for 20 to 25 minutes.

The interviews were moderated toward eliciting anything the participants thought was helpful and relevant. Moreover, after the participants' permission was granted, all interviews were audio-recorded using an unobtrusive digital recorder. This practice allows the researcher to preserve everything discussed during the analysis interview. It also allows the interviewer to listen for ways to ameliorate his or her questioning method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, extensive notes were taken in order to complement the digital recording. During this process, responses were either paraphrased or written verbatim, in which quotation marks were placed.

The analysis procedure occurs over two principal processes. The first is the discovery process, in which notes from the ten interviews are repeatedly reviewed and revisited. The integration of note-taking and audio-taping assists in gathering a substantial amount of data that is further elaborated and used to write more detailed notes. The subsequent analysis involves coding the interview data by identifying themes, categories, and patterns. The generating of codes is conducted manually. Patton (2002) asserts that

software analysis is not a prerequisite in qualitative research since the researcher carries out the actual analysis. Subsequently, notes and excerpts from the interviews are placed under the corresponding themes to be quoted later to support the inductively emerged interpretations.

## 7. Results

Within the frame of barriers to teaching critical thinking, EFL teachers' responses touched upon many matters related to the constraints impeding the development of critical thinking in higher education. The interviews show that teachers attribute the challenges of implementing critical thinking to many factors, including students-, educational-, and cultural- to overcrowded classrooms-related constraints. Instructors perceive that critical thinking cannot be successfully incorporated unless those challenges are overcome.

### Students related constraints

As to the most recurrent obstacle of teaching critical thinking, all interviewees (n= 10) stress keywords, such as poor students' linguistic knowledge and students' lack of inclination to think critically and reasonably. These key words are conflated into students-related constraints. Within this scope, one of the professors reports:

*“The major stumbling block behind this issue is students' poor linguistic levels. Critical thinking demands a good language and knowledge proficiency, but our students are still struggling with some basic linguistics features. So, it is difficult for students to analyze controversial texts that employ an abstruse language and challenging key terms.” [Interviewee 3]*

In light of this quote, a good critical thinker is already predisposed to a good level of language proficiency through which students can express their ideas clearly and engage in discussions and debates effectively. Moreover, participants agree that language proficiency influences students' critical thinking. They agree that a decent linguistics background improves students' capacity for comprehending, analyzing, evaluating, and communicating complex ideas. From another perspective, some informants consider that students-related constraints are pertained to their dispositional aspects of learning. The interview results reveal that some critical thinking dispositions, for example, motivation, tendency, and the willingness to think, have significant implications in the practice of critical thinking. As a case in point, a respondent notes,

*“One challenge that may affect the development of critical thinking in my classroom is connected with students' characteristics. As a university teacher, I believe that few students are interested in critical thinking. Also, a large portion lacks intrinsic motivation in the classroom. I would say that there is an interference between critical thinking and motivation.” [Interviewee 1]*

Another prevailing view is that students are passive because they were not encouraged to think from an early age. Students, therefore, need to apply critical thinking into the course contents they are being exposed to in higher education. In this regard, a respondent notes:

*“It is imperative to cultivate the habit of thinking in primary, middle and secondary school. More concretely, students should be encouraged to explore new perspectives. In so doing, students will be more inclined to expand their thinking strategies. I believe that the role of higher education is to foster a climate that puts critical thinking at the heart of*

*teaching. As a result, our students will be more inquisitive to use critical thinking in all subjects.*” [Interviewee 6]

Tied to the issue of students’ willingness to develop critical thinking skills, informants’ responses also reveal that shyness and lack of confidence hinder the development of critical thinking. This is what an informant states in her testimony,

*“To get around the barriers of critical thinking in higher education, we should first understand that many students, especially adolescents, are afraid to interact with teachers because they perceive us as the only source of knowledge. In addition to this, students get reluctant to participate because of many inherited and rooted problems; their disinclination emanates from their fear of giving correct answers [...] the solution is establishing a supportive and tolerant atmosphere in the classroom.”* [Interviewee 8]

### **Educational system related constraints**

Besides, the *educational system-related* constraints were also extracted from university teachers’ opinions. They perceive that much more effort should be made to promote critical thinking in Moroccan academia. All respondents believe that stating critical thinking in official documents and manuscripts is inadequate unless practical measures are taken. This idea is confirmed by a respondent who states:

*“It is a problem that requires considerable attention from those in charge of pedagogical planning and decision-making. Teaching critical thinking is limited to documents, while nothing is done to improve it apart from some personal efforts by teachers.”* [Interviewee 8]

Similarly, another teacher [Interviewee 5] expresses his criticism of the educational system when he says: *“This topic poses many questions in terms of clarity and coherence. Although critical thinking is regarded as a crucial soft skill, its operationalization remains vague.”* This statement indicates straightforwardly that the teachability of critical thinking should be readdressed to ensure its transfer in the classroom. Accordingly, implementing critical thinking skills in education is conditional upon a collective orchestration of methods and techniques to facilitate the integration of critical thinking in the curriculum. This idea is reinforced by an informant who points out:

*“The absence of teachers in decision-making has profound ramifications on the quality of the educational system. All stakeholders, especially practitioners, are supposed to take part in designing the policy of education because they are the ones who execute its procedures.”* [Interviewee 4]

Similarly, another informant drew attention to reforming the educational system. She considers that:

*“As long as reforms are bureaucratic, we will not reap their fruit. That is why detrimental governance is not supposed to be the status quo. What we need in Morocco is the strong willingness to implement critical thinking.”* [Interviewee 8]

These quotes show that teachers’ answers demonstrate a negative sentiment concerning the educational challenges of implementing critical thinking in Moroccan higher education. Therefore, understanding the profound impact of educational-related constraints on the implementation of critical thinking in higher education is crucial for reshaping curricula, pedagogical approaches, and institutional policies to better nurture this vital skill among students.

### **Cultural related constraints**

Other teachers bring to the limelight other factors related to culture. For some participants, culture can stand as an obstacle. In this regard, an instructor states:

*"Sometimes, one gets the impression that critical thinking is considered a threat to the Moroccan values because thinking about political or religious issues might cause problems not only to teachers but to students as well."* [Interviewee 7]

Another respondent informs,

*"Critical thinking is about uncovering realities of historic pitfalls. Most importantly, teachers consider that critical thinking can sometimes oppose religious ideologies because thinking calls for objective and courageous analysis of many issues. In contrast, the religious discourse is based upon truisms that are out of the question."* [Interviewee 1]

Teachers seem cognizant that teaching critical thinking is contextualized because it differs from culture to culture. Furthermore, teaching critical thinking is primarily influenced by historical, religious, political, and social backgrounds. This idea is confirmed by an informant who indicates that:

*"Each culture encompasses habits, practices, traditions, values, etc. Culture constitutes the non-concrete side of people, whereas civilization is incarnated in material existence. Taking the Moroccan culture as an example, we could say that its existence relies heavily upon conserving values that find roots in religion. Critical thinking as a practice is surely determined by the culture wherein critical thinking operates."* [Interviewee 9]

Teachers' responses inform that critical thinking requires taking some intellectual risks. At the same time, one can elucidate that teaching critical thinking goes beyond teaching the canon of rationality and logic as long as it depends on some socio-cultural considerations. Hence, the cultural embeddedness of critical thinking determines the topics teachers use and the study's scope. Also, it is essential to add that teaching critical thinking in non-Western cultures is to some extent, censored because it should not transcend some political, social, and cultural well-established limits. For example, an interviewee states:

*"Cultural studies largely depend on critical thinking because it encourages independent thought. Cultural studies motivate students to break the status quo and stand apart from the collective thinking. However, it represents a big challenge in non-Western contexts as it raises questions about many issues, especially those connected with politics and religion."* [Interviewee 2]

### **Class size related constraints**

As to class size related constraints, all informants report that this challenge hinders the development of critical thinking. Teachers who affiliated with the faculties of letters and humanities show higher complaints than their counterparts in other faculties. One instructor who belongs to the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences says,

*"Actually, large classes have a strong effect on students' learning. Teachers would find it challenging to engage all students in workshops and debates. Therefore, the method which prevails is the traditional one."* [Interviewee 9]

Accordingly, overcrowded classrooms do not motivate students to be active learners as they need to have the chance to practice or give feedback on the course content. Similarly, another teacher explains:

*"Year after year, classes are becoming increasingly larger in higher institutions. Instructing critical thinking to undergraduate students is always circumscribed by classroom size. For example, overcrowded classroom obstructs the teacher from monitoring the students' learning."* [Interviewee 5]



In this case, the integration of critical thinking in large classes is challenged by different factors, such as lack of monitoring and engagement in open discussions. Moreover, an instructor notes:

*"If we are to teach critical thinking, we need to establish a conducive atmosphere [...] By this, I mean that teachers should consider the affective challenges. In overcrowded classrooms, it is difficult for teachers to remember his/her students' names. This can demotivate students and limit their desire to participate in courses that require critical thinking. [Interviewee 9]*

From a different perspective, some teachers relate this issue to the nature of higher institutions and the academic level. For a teacher,

*"Indeed, classrooms which do not exceed twenty-five students ensure successful transfer of critical thinking instructions[...] When students get enrolled in Master's programs, for example, they are more likely to improve their critical thinking skills because they become more active and visible as well. Whereas teaching critical thinking in the amphitheater setting poses many questions." [Interviewee 10]*

In light of this quote, the quality of transfer of critical thinking instruction differs from academic level to another. The more class size decreases, the more teachers can engage his/her students in critical thinking activities. As to the academic setting, teachers inform that integrating critical thinking in regulated access institutions eases the transferability of their instructions. In this respect, a teacher postulates:

*"I admit that teaching in business schools, such as the National School of Business and Management or the School of Technology, allows university teachers to integrate critical thinking easily as students are active and motivated to use their problem-solving skills. Also, teaching a tiny group of students allows teachers to monitor students and ensure they are all attentive." [Interviewee 9]*

For teachers, class size varies from one institution to another. In regulated access establishments, students undergo some procedures, from pre-selection to testing and enrolment. These filtering stages can decrease the chances of low achievers accessing these institutions and, therefore, reduce class size. Tiny classes positively impact students' learning and acquisition of subject contents and increasing their familiarity with critical thinking skills. On the contrary, open-access institutions can host a significant number of students. These institutions are often characterised by large classes and low students' academic backgrounds, which impedes teachers from incorporating critical thinking skills. As it is confirmed by all respondents, overcrowded classrooms are hazardous for learning. Most significantly, informants agree that applying techniques of teaching critical thinking is, to some extent, impractical and futile. Overall, teachers associate overcrowded classes with the constraints to teaching critical thinking skills, and this negatively affects the transfer of critical thinking instructions in higher education.

## 8. Discussion

The results of the current study provide insight into the significant hindrances of critical thinking in Moroccan higher education as perceived by EFL university teachers. The findings of this research align with previous studies, which found that student related characteristics are considered the most agreed-upon obstacle to implementing critical thinking. For instance, Shell (2001) concludes that students related constraints are the most significant barriers to critical thinking. Rana (2012) points out that several learners need help to develop their language skills. Therefore, enhancing their critical thinking skills in the EFL context is a by-product of teaching English.

Enabulele's (2011) results also reveal that students' low-level academic background is a challenge to developing critical thinking skills. The qualitative findings of this study detail some of the latent causes behind students related constraints. In addition to students' poor linguistic levels, informants stressed some affective factors, such as shyness and lack of eagerness. According to Yildirim's (1993) research, learners are believed to lack inquisitiveness and eagerness to develop new insights on various course contents. Instead, they opt for their instructors' linear, structured learning method. This finding is consistent with Tama's (1989) and Sparapani's (1998) results, which indicate that many students are unwilling to get engaged in activities that require mental skills. In the same vein, Elfatih (2017) asserts that "Many students do not venture to participate in class discussion if it is a large class because of inhibition or fear of being judged" (p. 15).

Regarding the educational system related constraints, respondents acknowledge that practical measures should be considered to address students' higher-order thinking skills. The interview responses revealed that teachers' participation in decision-making is mandatory since they are active agents in ensuring critical thinking transfer in higher education. In this respect, Maan (2012) points out that for critical thinking to be successfully integrated into the Moroccan educational context, this requires a coherent and consistent framework, which can only be achieved via the collaboration of all stakeholders. In their comments to overcome this barrier, EFL university teachers' suggestions propose a strong willingness, which starts from primary and secondary education, to nurture thinking habits in all educational levels. Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella (2020) advocate that nurturing the habit of thinking at an early age is conditional upon designing suitable curricula that train students to practice critical thinking starting from elementary education. This builds upon Halpern's (1998) assumptions that children are predisposed with the necessary mental capacities to engage in many of the same cognitive processes as adults. Accordingly, policymakers are invited to find a place for critical thinking in primary school curricula. Cultural related constraints were also extracted from teachers' interviews. The findings showed that cultural norms can influence the extent to which critical thinking is emphasized in the classroom. EFL teachers inform that the practice of critical thinking should respect some religious and ideological boundaries. In this regard, Atkinson (1997) points out that "Not only is critical thinking a culturally based concept, but many cultures endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose it" (p. 73). It is essential to recognize that cultural constraints are not fixed and that there is often diversity within cultures. Based on teachers' testimonies, instructing critical thinking can be achieved if they balance respecting cultural norms and fostering critical thinking skills that empower students to analyze, question, and engage critically with information and ideas. Differently put, developing awareness of cultural factors may also significantly influence how critical thinking is implemented in education.

In addition to the previously mentioned barriers to critical thinking, teachers report that class size presents problems that impede their instructional practices. Bataineh and Alazzi (2009) indicate that large class sizes poses a challenge to effectively implementing critical thinking. In this study, informants attribute this problem to the nature of educational institutions and the educational level. Integrating critical thinking skills in regulated access institutions can be ensured thanks to different variables ranging from tiny groups to students' high academic levels. Furthermore, in such establishments, teachers can monitor their students' academic progress and employ many teaching strategies that encourage active participation and reflection. On the contrary, open-access institutions host a great deal of students. Large classes, can be challenging to foster meaningful discussions and provide

individualized attention. Therefore, maintaining student engagement and ensuring active participation becomes more difficult. Overcoming these obstacles in open-access institutions requires a concerted effort from administrators, faculty, and support staff to ensure that critical thinking is effectively taught and nurtured among university students.

## 9. Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study have provided invaluable insights into EFL university teachers' perceptions regarding critical thinking obstacles in higher education. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study has uncovered various challenges university instructors encounter while fostering critical thinking skills among their students. These obstacles are mainly connected to students, educational system, cultural norms, and large classes. By acknowledging critical thinking barriers in higher education, further research is mandatory to underscore the significance of suggesting practical solutions to train students' higher-order thinking skills at an early age. Addressing critical thinking is also essential to invite educational stakeholders to orchestrate updated pedagogical plans that aim to integrate critical thinking in higher education, and create a fruitful atmosphere that ensures a practical educational experience for university students.

## 10. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## 11. Acknowledgement

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