

Representation of Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Algerian Syllabus: The Case of "New Prospects", Third Year Secondary School Textbook

تمثيل مهارات التفكير النقدي في المناهج المدرسية الجزائرية: دراسة حالة "New Prospects" الكتاب المدرسي للغة الإنجليزية للصف الثالث الثانوي

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ABSTRACT:

Few decades ago, the concept of critical thinking was featured in taxonomies which is a complex process that requires higher level of cognitive skills in the processing of information. This study responds to the idea of critical thinking, English Language Teaching (ELT) and Algerian students by investigating critical thinking in "New Prospects", the Algerian English language textbook intended for third year secondary school students. The study poses two research questions: (1) To what extent does "New Prospects" help fostering Critical Thinking Skills (CTS) among second year secondary school students? (2) What are the English language teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the manifestation of critical thinking skills in "New Prospects"? To answer these questions, the study adopts a content analysis methodology focused on text-based questions and the interview as a tool for participating teachers. The interview is conducted mainly to investigate whether the tasks and questions within "New Prospects" make students think. The study took place in four secondary schools in Laghouat, Algeria. Participants of the study were secondary school teachers of English. This study shows that the Algerian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook, "New Prospects", contains more textually-explicit questions than questions that promote critical thinking. The present study makes some noteworthy contributions to the current literature

Keywords: Critical thinking, Secondary school education, Textbook evaluation, Thinking skills.

الملخص:

قبل بضعة عقود، ظهر مفهوم التفكير النقدي في التصنيفات، وهو عملية معقدة تتطلب مستوى أعلى من المهارات المعرفية في معالجة المعلومات. وبناء عليه تستجيب هذه الدراسة لفكرة التفكير النقدي أثناء تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية من قبل الطلاب الجزائريين، وذلك من خلال التحقيق في التفكير النقدي في الكتاب المدرسي "آفاق جديدة"، وهو كتاب اللغة الإنجليزية بدولة الجزائر والمخصص لطلاب الصف الثالث الثانوي. تطرح الدراسة سؤالين بحثيين: (1) إلى أي مدى يساعد محتوى الكتاب في تعزيز مهارات التفكير بين طلاب الصف الثالث الثانوي؟ (2) ما هي آراء مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية وتصوراتهم تجاه إظهار مهارات التفكير النقدي في محتوى هذا الكتاب؟ للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، تبني الدراسة منهجية تحليل المحتوى التي تركز على الأسئلة النصية والمقابلة كأداة للمعلمين المشاركين. يتم إجراء المقابلة بشكل أساسي للتحقق مما إذا كانت المهام والأسئلة الموجودة والتمارين في الكتاب تجعل الطلاب يفكرون. تمت الدراسة في أربع مدارس ثانوية في الأغواط بالجزائر. العينة تتمثل في مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الثانوية. أظهرت الدراسة أن هذا الكتاب المدرسي للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، يحتوي على أسئلة نصية أكثر صراحة من الأسئلة التي تعزز التفكير النقدي. تقدم الدراسة الحالية بعض المساهمات الجديرة بالملاحظة في الأدبيات الحالية.

كلمات مفتاحية: التفكير النقدي، التعليم الثانوي، تقييم الكتاب المدرسي مهارات التفكير

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1- Introduction:

Progressing toward a more democratic society and a more economically stable state that is located in a very strategic area, Algeria may require qualified human resources. Education is a potential means to produce Algerians who could bring the country to greater prosperity and to its fullest roles a part of the global community. Through education, Algerian students are expected to be critical, creative, independent, innovative, confident, tolerant, socially sensitive, democratic and responsible. These are some of the qualities clearly stated through the recently led educational reforms. However, there seem to be some constraints on achieving these objectives. Unless the practices in education are not clearly tailored towards those goals, it may not be easy to produce people with the aforementioned qualities.

In terms of developing learners' critical thinking skills, Algerian education is still lagging behind. As for English Language Teaching (ELT), teachers claim that English language textbooks in Algeria do not support the development of learners' higher order thinking skills such as evaluation, creation, problem solving and analysis. Bessick claims that enriching instruction materials with these skills plays a great role in fostering CTS among language learners (2008, P64). Like in most countries, critical thinking has been part of Algerian educational agenda. Despite the fact that Algeria has declared the importance of incorporating critical thinking aims into education systems in order to reform education and face the global competition, it seems that critical thinking has failed to move from theory to actual practices.

2- Research problem and questions

This study responds to the idea of critical thinking, ELT and Algerian students by investigating critical thinking in "New Prospects", the Algerian English language textbook intended for third year secondary school students. The study poses two research questions:

1. To what extent does "New Prospects" help fostering Critical Thinking Skills (CTS) among second year secondary school students?
2. What are the English language teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the manifestation of critical thinking skills in "New Prospects"?

In the attempts to provide answers to the questions above, a set of hypotheses is laid:

- Based on the types of questions and tasks included in New Prospects, the textbook doesn't help foster criticality among second year secondary school students.
- Most English language teachers agree that lower order thinking skills are overlooked on the expense of higher order thinking skills, mainly in Prospects.

The framework upon which the present work hinges upon is Bloom's taxonomy. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on two main points. The first main point is to investigate the extent to which Algerian English language textbooks contain elements of critical thinking and see whether the instructions made by the late reforms are put in practice.

The second point is the importance of each skill in the textbook, and the teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards such CTS in "New Prospects".

3- Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a generally recognized educational goal. Its definition is debatable, but conflicting views can be viewed as different interpretations of the same underlying concept. Allen (2004, P98) describes critical thinking as "the ability to analyze information objectively and make a reasoned judgment. It involves the evaluation of sources, such as data, facts, observable phenomena, and research findings". Boss defines it as "a characteristic set of principles for assigning basic rights and duties and for determining the proper distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation" (2017, P15). Also, it is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment". The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes it as: "the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion"

Based on the above mentioned definitions, critical thinking is apparently a process that involves analysis in order to reach an objective result or judgment. Critical thinking therefore involves the mind. In order to better define what critical thinking is, we have to define "thinking" first. Thinking is the foundation of all cognitive acts or processes. It entails manipulating and analyzing data gathered from the environment. Abstracting, reasoning, imagining, problem solving, judging, and decision-making are all used to manipulate and analyze data. The beginning of thinking study may be traced back to when humans first realized they could think. One of the characteristics that distinguish humans from other living organisms is their ability to think. Manipulation or change of some internal image is referred to as thinking (Halpern, 1998, P451). According to Descartes, thinking is reasoning, and reason is a sequence of simple concepts linked by using strict logic principles. Howell and Kemp (2002, P121) argue that learning and thinking are two notions that complement and complete one other. When seen from this perspective, despite the fact that learning styles and critical thinking concepts have different qualifications, they can be employed together. Similarly, a review of the literature reveals that there are studies that combine learning styles and critical thinking principles. In his paper "Regarding the Definition of Critical Thinking", Beach and Marshal (1991, P67) state that "Critical thinking is thinking about your thinking while you're thinking in order to make your thinking better".

According to Critical Thinking Cooperation, Critical thinking is a skill that goes beyond memorizing facts. Students who think critically are taught to think for themselves, to challenge assumptions, to evaluate and synthesize events, and to go even farther by formulating new hypotheses and testing them against the facts. Questioning is the foundation of critical thinking. It is the basis of knowledge formation; it should be taught as a framework for all types of learning. Students' attitudes towards learning are common shaped by their experiences in teacher-led, textbook-driven classes. This is a troubling position for contemporary teachers, and

as a result, they would prefer to use the most up-to-date models and methods that are more effective in getting students to think. When students analyze, evaluate, interpret, or synthesize information and apply creative thought to build an argument, solve a problem, or reach a conclusion, they are engaging in critical thinking. Critical thinking therefore aims to encourage independent thinking, personal autonomy, and reasoned decision-making in thought and action (Aguirre, 1997, P104).

Researchers have found several of features in common included in critical thinking. Ennis in his book *A Taxonomy of Critical Thinking Dispositions and Abilities* summarizes the main features of critical thinking into four areas "clarity, basis, inference, and interaction" (1987, P16). He divides clarity into two categories: elementary and advanced and includes focusing on a question, analyzing arguments, and asking and answering questions of clarification and/or challenge in the elementary category, while defining terms and judging definitions and identifying assumptions are included in the advanced category. The ability to support one's judgments and appraise evidence is Ennis' second essential element of critical thinking. He involves assessing the source's reliability and observation and evaluating of observation reports. The third area, inference, includes deducing and judging deductions, inducing and judging inductions, and making value judgments. The final area, interaction, focuses on interacting with others and deciding on an action. It also includes: "a) define the problem, b) select criteria to judge possible solutions, c) formulate alternative solutions, d) tentatively decide what to do, e) review, taking into account the total situation, and decide, f) monitor the implementation". Brookfield (2003, P92) mentions four basic components of critical thinking in his book *Developing Critical Thinkers*. Identifying and challenging assumptions, challenging/recognizing the importance of context, imagining and exploring alternatives, and engaging in reflective skepticism. He argues that critical thinkers are skeptical about universal truth claims. They are reflectively dubious of ultimate answers due to their grasp of assumptions, context, and alternatives.

Education is the process of human development, and it is possibly the most basic need for people. The goal of education, according to Carroli (2008, P74), is to nurture the individual, to assist in realizing the full potential that already exists within him or her. There has always been a school of thought that believes that enhancing a child's thinking should be the primary goal of schools rather than an afterthought, if it happens at all. Qualified education should show students the route in terms of what to study and how to learn it. Students' critical thinking talents are demonstrated as they analyze what they have should be the primary goal of schools rather than an afterthought, if it happens at all. Qualified education should show students the route in terms of what to study and how to learn it. Students' critical thinking talents are demonstrated as they analyze what they have learnt and their learning techniques. One of the goals of education should be to develop students' thinking and motor skills, which is a basic goal of contemporary educational techniques. When kids practice critical thinking, they are not passive but active (Aguirre, 1997, P36). One of the major goals of education is to generate well-

informed learners, which means that students should be able to comprehend important, helpful, beautiful, and powerful ideas. Another goal is to develop students who are eager to think critically and analytically, to apply what they have learned to improve their own lives and to contribute to their society, culture, and civilization.

According to Forehand (2005, 135), when it comes to teaching and measuring higher-order thinking skills, the taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom and his associates for information processing skills is one of the most often recognized tools for educational practitioners. Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchical classification system, with "comprehension" at the bottom and "assessment" at the top. Critical thinking sometimes is described as the three greatest levels (analysis, synthesis, and assessment). Bloom's taxonomy is a collection of three hierarchical models for categorizing educational learning objectives according to their complexity and specificity. That Lists address cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor learning objectives. Most traditional education has focused on the cognitive domain list, which is widely used to build curriculum learning objectives, evaluations, and activities. The models were named after Benjamin Bloom, the chair of the taxonomy's development committee of educators (Ibid). The basic cognitive skill sequences were knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

4- Textbook Evaluation

The essential constituents of many EFL and ESL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. Skierso (1991, P55), textbooks play a major role in any language classroom for both teachers and learners. He states that the textbook is an almost universal element of English language teaching, and numerous projects have been set up to produce them in various countries (1991, P124). Grant says, "The most important factor is to determine what goals the textbooks are designed to achieve. Are they to be primarily sources of information, builders of reading, writing and critical thinking skills, purveyors of ethical models, or promoters of patriotism?" (1987, P14). However, there are also potential negative effects of textbooks. Consequently, we must make every effort to establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms (Cunningsworth, 1995, P91).

Evaluation is a dynamic process which investigates the suitability and appropriateness of an existing practice. It is a useful device for both teachers and material writers as an underlying element in the development of innovations and modifications within the teaching /learning context.

Cunningsworth (1995, P57) and Ellis (1997, P46) have suggested that there are three different types of material evaluation. They argue that the most common form is probably the 'predictive' or 'pre-use' evaluation that is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook. The other types of textbook evaluation are the 'in-use' evaluation

designed to examine material that is currently being used and the 'retrospective' or 'post-use' (reflective) evaluation of a textbook that has been used in any respective institution.

The process of collecting and analyzing information about a textbook for purposes of decision making is referred to as textbook evaluation. This process goes through three main stages: initial evaluation, detailed evaluation and in- use evaluation (Grant, 1987, P23). Besides, textbook evaluation makes use of methods such as the impressionistic, the checklist and the in-depth methods. Approaches to materials evaluation in a textbook include a predictive approach and a retrospective approach.

Abd ElWahab (2013, P63) prescribes three basic methods for evaluating textbooks: The impressionistic, the checklist method and the in-depth method. Ellis (1997, P201), distinguished two types of materials evaluation, namely, predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation.

5- Research Methodology

As mentioned earlier, there are two research questions posed in the study. The first research question is "To what extent does New Prospects help fostering CTS among third year secondary school students?", and the second is "What are the English language teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the manifestation of critical thinking skills in "New Prospects"?" To answer the first question, the study adopts a content analysis methodology focused on text-based questions. The questions are analyzed as to whether they contain the elements of critical thinking as defined for this research.

To answer the second question, the researcher adopted the interview as a tool for participating teachers. The interview is conducted mainly to investigate whether the tasks and questions within "New Prospects" make students think.

The study took place in four secondary schools in Laghouat, Algeria. Participants of the study were secondary school teachers of English. They were mostly 23 - 47 years.

Table 1. Distribution & experience of participants

Nbr	Male	Female	Experience
School1: 4	1	3	2-7
School2: 3	2	1	3-14
School3: 4	2	2	1-7
School4: 4	0	4	2-5

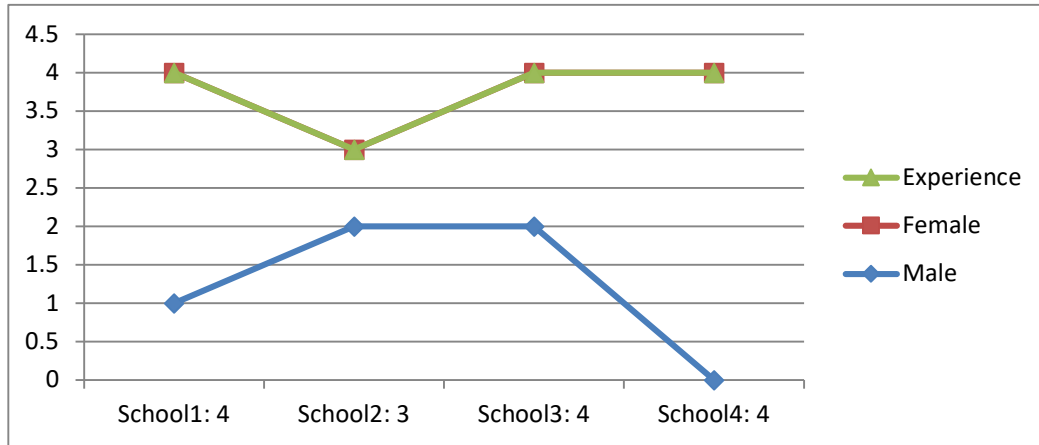


Fig. 1. Information about the participants

Based on the data gathered, most participants have an acceptable experience in terms of academic life. This was likely to influence the interview that tapped teachers' opinion of critical thinking and textbook content.

The two research methods adopted in the study were content analysis and interviews. The study focuses on questions (tasks) found in the textbooks. All types of questions and tasks that follow the proposed texts or graphic features (genre) such as articles, poems, leaflets, letters, short stories, advertisements, song lyrics, tables, charts, diagrams, cartoon, illustration, etc. are analyzed.

According to Butter (2013, P198), the interview is a fundamental and effective method to investigate people's mind, opinion, feeling, perception and interpretation of the world, especially when the researcher cannot observe their behavior directly. For this study, teachers were interviewed to gain insight into their opinions, feelings and experiences regarding their study and aspects of critical thinking. Further, the interview process might unveil more information relatively easily and directly from the interviewees.

There are four main questions asked to the teachers related to the second research question posed in this study. The first question asks whether the reading materials encourage students to think. When the response is positive, participants are asked to mention which questions most encourage students to think. The next question asks whether they found difficulty in answering the questions. If the response is 'yes', they are asked to point out the most difficult questions. Finally, the participants are asked to comment on whether students are given a chance to think, comment and argue in any other school subjects.

The interviews last for 10-20 minutes with each participant. Each interview begins with an introduction of the researcher and purpose of the study. The participants are informed of the treatment of the recordings before signing the consent. They are also informed that their names would not be revealed. Interview data in this study are used to support the content analysis of the Algerian English textbook. The results of interview are also used to see whether students are actually willing to receive the teaching of critical thinking skills since critical thinking has been incorporated in the country's education objectives.

6- Findings

“New Prospects”, the Algerian third secondary education textbook is designed on the grounds of Competency-based Approach (CBA) principles, responding to the reform launched by the Ministry of Education, and learner-centered approach as an alternative to teacher-centered approach that fell short of expectations. Secondary Education, Year three, English textbook is composed of five units. Twenty (12) hours are approximately the average timing for each unit. The latter is divided into four sequences, listening and speaking, reading and writing, developing skills and consolidation and extension. As mentioned earlier, the textbook is mainly built up of units, sequences, and sections.

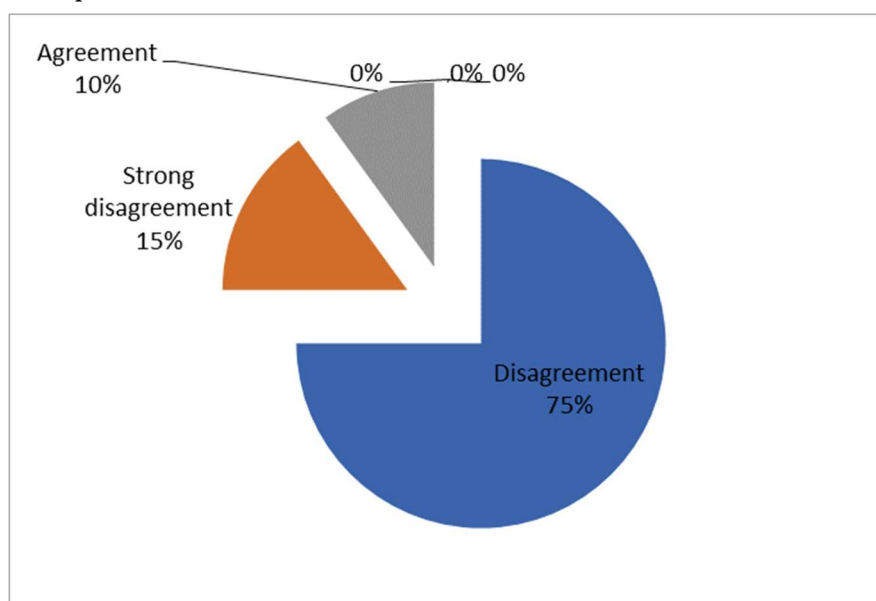


Fig. 2. Types of questions in “Prospects” Textbook

One of the most significant findings is that textually explicit questions dominated the examined Algerian ELT textbook. Some questions were very easy to answer; that is to say, students were unlikely to think when responding.

Though the textbook contains open questions in the form of Wh-questions and various types of closed questions such as true/false, listing information, multiple choice questions, matching tasks and sentence completion, the study has also found that those questions generally fell into the category of textually-explicit questions. Open questions, which according to some authors have enormous potential to include elements of critical thinking, generally did not fall into critical thinking categories in the textbook chosen.

Another finding is that the textbooks contain a few questions that have potential to facilitate the teaching of critical thinking skills. Those few questions fell the analytic categories, such as questions of clarification, questions that probe reasons and evidence, questions about viewpoints. It can be inferred that the “New Prospect” textbook is not sufficient to optimally facilitate the teaching of critical thinking skills.

The results show that most of the types of questions mentioned above are what Amer (2003, P74) referred to as ‘textually explicit.’ Textually-explicit questions mean that “the answer to the question can be found stated directly in the text” (Anderson, 1984, P83). In some units of the textbook, there are questions whose answers could be spotted very easily (Djouima, 2021, P635).

Table 2. Types of questions found in “Prospects” Textbook

Types of questions	Nbr. of Qts.	%
Matching	110	17,97%
MCQ	121	19,77%
Sentence completion	89	14,54%
Open Qts	61	9,97%
Listing	132	21,57%
True/False	99	16,18%
Total	612	100%%

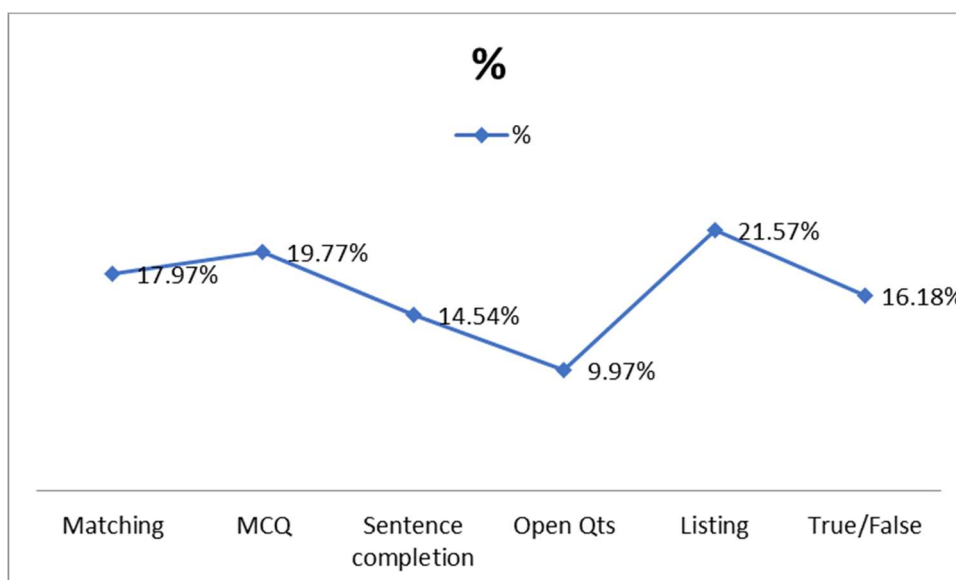


Fig. 3. Types of questions in “Prospects”

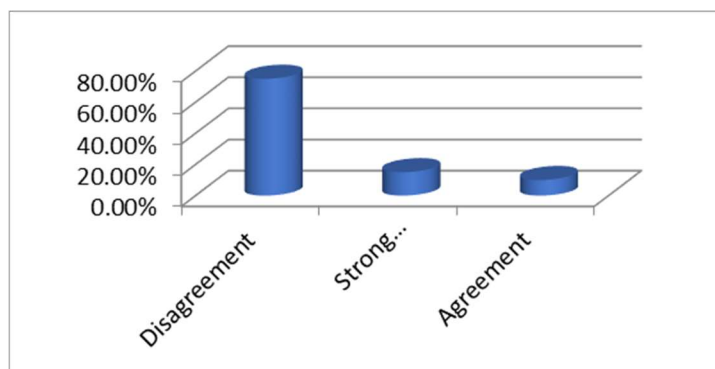
With reference to explicit questions, students are asked to identify whether a question is true or false. Sometimes a correction column accompanied the activity. This may be provided for a ‘false’ response in which students are expected to write the correct one. In addition, the textbook devotes a good deal of activities for pair work and group work at the expense of problem-solving tasks.

For the interviews, the questions investigate if the questions and tasks in the textbook make students think. The results of this investigation show that the majority of participants said that few questions make them think. Students generally do not find difficulties in answering the questions; their difficulties were particularly related to their English vocabulary, grammar and lack of confidence, and they like to have an interactive classroom where they could express their thoughts, give their opinions, have discussions, and even argue points with the teacher. The evidence from the interview questions indicates that these students may be ready for the

teaching of critical thinking. This goes hand in hand with Halpern’s findings (2003, P274) and Baghoussi’s findings (2021, P99).

Fig. 4. Teachers’ Evaluation of the Thinking Skills and Strategies

The results above (Figure 2) display that (75%) of the teachers disagreed that pupils’ thinking skills and strategies have developed, it may be due to the type of questions that follow



texts, (15%) strongly disagreed, and only few of the teachers (10%) were in favor of the textbook’s thinking outcomes. These results show that the majority of the surveyed teachers believe that students’ thinking skill has not improved. Thus, we think, from our analysis of the textbook, that the cause is the emphasis on teaching English for exams wherein teachers focus on pronunciation and grammar tasks.

7- Conclusion

This study showed that the Algerian EFL textbook, “New Prospects”, contains more textually-explicit questions than questions that promote critical thinking. The present study made some noteworthy contributions to the current literature. It constructed a new framework that can be used as a method to investigate critical thinking in education and by teachers as a guideline to promote students’ critical thinking skills. With regard to the limitations of the current study, more research is needed to understand how Algerian secondary school teachers of English perceive critical thinking and how they use textbooks in their classrooms. Concerning the limitations of the research methods, future research might explore other textbooks such as those used in Arabic language, history and geography, to see how teachers of other subjects perceive critical thinking skills and strategies. More broadly, research in connection with critical thinking and strategies to promote critical thinking skills should be carried out in the Algerian educational context.

Improving the teaching of critical thinking skills in “New Prospects” is possible. It can be carried out by the use of tasks that require students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a certain reasoning or argument. As a point in case, learning materials in the textbook can incorporate questions which compel students to evaluate the topic sentence or the concluding sentence of a given reading passage, and the extent to which they are sufficiently supported. Additionally, pictures can be used to improve the evaluation skill. This can be done by asking

students to evaluate pictures and see whether they match the messages they purport to be conveying. Finally, problem solving task is a key thinking skill. In this kind of tasks, the students may be given problems to which they should propose solutions, evaluate those solutions, and suggest alternatives. Students need to practice decision making skills. These lifelong skills may be practiced by activities and questions that probe decisions to be made by students through questions that follow texts. "What would be your decision if you were X?" that is a sample question that may be asked by teachers.

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