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Viewpoints on the Development of Critical Thinking Skills in the Process of Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education and the Labor Market

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the different viewpoints of the participants in four focus groups discussing critical thinking (CT) in teaching/studying foreign languages. Three of them were conducted at Vilnius University and one at the Public Service Language Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania. All of the interviewees agree about the importance of critical thinking, although they define it differently and emphasize a number of various aspects needed for its acquisition and application. Both students/trainees and instructors/trainers describe several classroom activities that stimulate CT and suggest implicit and explicit methods for evaluating it. The focus group discussions were conducted as part of the international projects Think4Jobs, whose main task was to determine the gap between CT as it is taught at institutions of higher education and in the labor market. Answering this question, the participants mention the unpredictability of the labor market, the usefulness of CT for many different jobs and the importance of teaching it for the acquisition of foreign languages.

Keywords: critical thinking; focus groups; higher education; labor market; Think4Jobs



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1. Introduction

This paper is a result of the Think4Jobs initiative, which aims at improving students' critical thinking (CT) skills and dispositions by promoting collaboration between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Labor Market Organizations (LMOs). The project was funded by the European Commission/EACEA, through the ERASMSUS+ Program. In the first part of the undertaking, the task was to trace and map the methods and/or techniques in which CT is currently employed in HEIs and LMOs' classes and training sessions. The focus of the investigation was the pedagogical aspects of CT development and the implementation of critical thinking.

This paper discusses only one of the tasks from the first Intellectual Output 1 (IO1) of the 2019–2023 project: interviews with four focus groups. The first interview was held with instructors (teachers) from the Vilnius University Institute of Foreign Languages, the second with Vilnius University students, the third with the trainers of the Public Language Training Centre (PLLC) in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the fourth with the PLLC employees, who are also teachers, but in this case, they are in the role of trainees. The first two belong to the HEI, and the last two to LMO. Even though it is an institution that trains teachers and offers classes in different languages, the Public Language Training Centre was chosen as the LMO partner of Vilnius University, because students at the Institute of Foreign Languages are trained for teaching jobs in organizations such as this one. The labor market partners of other higher education institution participants in the project are as follows: an experimental school in Greece, a veterinary hospital in Portugal, a software company in Germany and a bank in Romania.

In general, all of the interviewees agreed about the importance of critical thinking, although they define it differently and emphasize various aspects needed for its development and application. Both the students/trainees and instructors/trainers describe

several classroom activities that stimulate CT and suggest implicit and explicit methods for evaluating it. The four focus groups made a significant contribution to the project because their discussion highlighted the difference between the approaches and perception of critical thinking at the Vilnius University and the Public Service Language Center. As CT is needed in the process of foreign language teaching and learning, the qualitative results obtained present a clear indication of the discrepancies between the university and the labor market.

After presenting the theoretical background, this paper describes the course of the four focus groups, discusses the stakeholders' views and attempts to compare and contrast their findings. Special attention is given to the perception about critical thinking of those who have not examined it closely versus those who have been dealing with it on a regular basis. Another important focus is directed towards the difference between the approach and application of critical thinking at a state university and a foreign language learning institution.

2. Literature Review

The importance of critical thinking has been recognized ever since the triumph of reason over intuition in Ancient Greece. The English word "critical" comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *krei-, "to sieve," thus "to discriminate, distinguish." In Greek, the verb *krinein*, "to separate, decide", gave rise to *kritikos*, "able to make judgments." In Latin, the derivative noun *criticus* meant "judge, censor, estimator." The word *critique* appeared in French in the 14th century, and *critick* in English in the 1580s [1]. Thus, the origin of this word tells us about the human ability and need to discern, appraise and make judgments.

One of the earliest records of the application of critical thinking is found in Plato's dialogues. The so-called "Socratic method" represents a stimulation of dialogue in the form of questions and answers aimed at revealing one's prejudices, beliefs and convictions. Plato contrasts it with the method employed by sophists, teachers of rhetoric, mainly designed to manipulate and persuade in order to prepare students for a political career. In his Academy, Plato made his students engage in dialectic through constant dialogue, by which they were supposed to reach a consensus regarding moral and epistemological truths [2].

Beginning with the rise of rationalism and empiricism in the 17th century, the call for defining and systematizing critical thinking has consistently increased. In the past 100 years, there have been many definitions of the concept. John Dewey, the famous American philosopher and educator, describes critical thinking as "an active, persistent, careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" [3]. According to the American psychologist Edward Glaser, the concept involves "an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience", "knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning," and "some skill in applying those methods" [4].

In 1990, a panel of 46 experts from many different disciplines in the area of humanities, sciences, social sciences and education participated in a research project for two years on behalf of the American Philosophical Association. The results of the research were presented as the Delphi Report on Critical Thinking. Jointly, the scholars came up with six "Core Critical Skills" shown in the following table (Table 1):

Table 1. Core Critical Skills [5].

SKILL	Experts' Consensus Description	Subskill
Interpretation	"To comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria"	Categorize Decode significance Clarify meaning

Table 1. Cont.

SKILL	Experts' Consensus Description	Subskill
Analysis	"To identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions"	Examine ideas Identify arguments Identify reasons and claims
Inference	"To identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to reduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation"	Query evidence Conjecture alternatives Draw logically valid or justified conclusions
Evaluation	"To assess the credibility of statements or other representations that are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion; and to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statements, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation"	Assess credibility claims Assess quality of arguments that were made using inductive and deductive reasoning
Explanation	"To state and to justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based; and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments"	State results Justify procedures Present arguments
Self-Regulation	"Self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, and evaluation to one's own inferential judgments with a view toward questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results"	Self-monitor Self/correct

The panel also made a list of dispositions towards critical thinking, including the approaches to life and living that characterize CT, approaches strong critical thinkers have toward specific issues, questions or problems, and statements with which they would agree and disagree [5]. Over the years, the following dispositions towards CT have been crystallized: attentiveness, habit of inquiry, self-confidence, courage, open-mindedness, willingness to suspend judgment, trust in reason, and seeking the truth [6].

In one of the more recent influential definitions of critical thinking, Paul and Elder [7] describe it as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self/corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism." The two scholars emphasize this imperative of overcoming personal and collective prejudices and biases as one of the most important aspects of critical thinking. They also list four steps in the process of assessing the information and drawing adequate conclusions:

A well cultivated critical thinker:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- thinks openmindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems [7].

As this paper deals with the teaching and learning of CT skills during organized instruction, the educational aspect is one of the most important areas to be taken into consideration. In an insightful experimental study of the impact of instruction on the development and enhancement of critical thinking skills, dispositions and student achievement, Abrami et al. (2015: 311) [8] found that the opportunity for dialogue, mentoring and the exposure of students to authentic or situated problems and examples increased the CT skills, and that they were most effective when combined. The study also revealed that a separate instruction in critical thinking in which students are encouraged to think critically increased its impact.

Hanesová and Theodulides (2022) trace all the gaps between study programs and missing competences [9]. According to their findings, the greatest difference between actual and expected “transversal competences” are communication skills and the ability to identify problems and provide solutions, and to take responsibility (p. 16). The authors develop a method called Critical Reflection Analysis (CRA) in order to provide the opportunity to conduct an evaluation of the transversal competencies needed for the digital era, one of the most important being digital, media and information literacy.

In foreign language teaching and learning, a significant factor is the assessment method, because it directs the students toward developing critical thinking skills and dispositions [10]. Different studies have confirmed the importance of CT skills in improving English as a Second Language writing ability, language proficiency and oral communication skills. In the Action-oriented approach, initially laid out in the Common European Framework for Languages [11], the goal in classes is to reproduce real-life situations, assign tasks, take into account the different resources and capabilities of their learners and develop their competences and ability to learn. There is a shift from the student as learner to the student as a “social agent” participating in projects with a real aim and purpose [12]. According to the research conducted by Chapple and Curtis (2000) [13], the empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills along with a foreign language. Cognitive abilities and language are not only closely related, but also interdependent, and the ability to find the most efficient way to acquire a foreign language is directly related to critical thinking skills and dispositions.

Some of the most recent studies also confirm that only explicit instructions in general critical thinking skills has high effectiveness in English language learners. Wilson (2016) [14], who studied the potentials of developing critical thinking in English for Academic Purposes, asserts that nurturing students’ critical disposition in particular requires refined “scaffolding” to support their development as critical meaning-makers. El Soufi and See (2019, p. 141) [15] conclude that “research in this field is still rather immature and more large-scale,” and that “replicable robust studies are needed to advance the field.” Therefore, the present inquiry aims to be such a “robust” study, intended to bridge the gaps left in the previous research and contribute to a better understanding of the role of critical thinking in foreign language learning. Moreover, an analysis of the opinions expressed by the focus groups of teachers, trainers, students and trainees regarding critical thinking has never been conducted; thus, this study is aimed at contributing to the ongoing research related to the application and significance of critical thinking.

3. Methodology and Procedure

The following research was part of the first out of five Intellectual Outputs conducted at five different countries, with two representatives from each country: a higher education institution (HEI) and a labor market organization (LMO). In Lithuania, two government bodies participated in the project: Vilnius University (VU) and the Public Language Learning Centre (PLLC). The aim of the international Erasmus Think4Jobs project was to improve students’ CT skills and dispositions by promoting collaboration between the HEIs and the LMOs. The goal of Intellectual Output 1 (IO1) was to trace and map the methods and/or techniques by which CT is currently employed in the two institutions, and to describe and

suggest work-based learning scenarios that could bridge the gap between the HEI and LMO's curricula and to secure the requirements for students' CT development and improvement.

IO1 consisted of three research methods: observation, focus groups and documentary analysis. In the first part, four different classes by three VU and PLLC instructors were observed and a rubric related to the use of critical skills in the teaching process was filled out. In the second part, an interview with four focus groups, lasting between 70 and 90 min, was conducted by a moderator asking them questions and initiating discussion. The four groups consisted of 6-8 participants, and they all answered the five given questions, after which a discussion ensued. In the third part, six different VU course descriptions were analyzed and evaluated using another rubric. Each research instrument included a set of variables organized into three categories: the pedagogical aspect of CT development (including class objectives, teaching strategies/methods, tools/materials and evaluation regarding CT), CT aspects (including the ways CT is nurtured, triggered and explicitly taught during instruction) and the implementation of CT (including elements of CT presence in these disciplines).

The interviews in the focus groups were conducted during the winter semester 2020/2021. As they were carried out during the lockdown, they took place online. All of the participants were invited to attend the focus group interviews by sending them the invitations and consent agreement that they had to fill out before attending the interviews. The recordings were made with their consent, and later on the transcriptions of the interviews were made. The content analysis method was applied in order to identify the categories and subcategories that emerged in their answers to the interview questions.

The first group consisted of seven lecturers at the VU Faculty of Philology Institute of Foreign Languages; the second of seven students from the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Philosophy and English Philology; the third from three trainers from the PLLC with four instructors from the VU Institute of Foreign Languages asking them questions; and the fourth from six trainees of the PLLC, interviewed by the trainers. Each interview was transcribed and thoroughly analyzed in a report. The report, together with the reports from the participating HE institutions from four different countries, was published in the *Think4Jobs Toolkit: Ten-work-based learning scenarios* [16].

The questions given to the VU teachers and PLLC trainers are almost the same, but the question given to the VU students and PLLC employees differ slightly. They are as follows:
Teachers and trainers:

- (1) What does CT mean to you?
- (2) How do you teach it? (aims, content, methods/strategies, time) Do you communicate CT specific concepts to your students/trainees?
- (3) How do you know your students/trainees learnt CT? (assessment, methods, instruments?) Is CT necessary for passing the exam?
- (4) Which are the materials that support CT learning? (syllabi, documents produced for students or given)
- (5) Do you believe there is a gap regarding CT between what you teach and what is needed on the labor market?

Students and employees:

- (1) What does CT mean to you?
- (2) How is CT taught in your university? Can you give some examples? (aims, content, methods/strategies, time)
- (3) How do you know you acquired CT skills? Through self-evaluation, peer evaluation or teacher evaluation?
- (4) Which materials supporting CT learning did you receive? (syllabi, other documents produced for students)
- (5) Do you believe there is a gap regarding CT between what you learnt in university and what you believe is necessary on the labor market?

After the four focus group interviews were completed, the researchers had to fill out a rubric containing all of the variables and indicators, providing the relevant quotes from the participants. This paper represents a narrative report of the results from the four focus groups. In the first part, the summaries of the four focus groups interviews are given, and in the second, discussion related to the difference between the HEI and LMO regarding the teaching of CT is conducted, with the ensuing conclusion. The qualitative research method is mainly employed in this endeavor.

Lastly, all of the researchers have signed a consent form, which includes detailed information about the nature of the research. The participants were informed that the personal data provided by them was passed through rigorous procedures for confidentiality and anonymity. This is verified by the Ethics Permission No. 180000-S-224 signed by the Dean of the Vilnius University Faculty of Philology.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Focus Group with Teachers

The focus group with the teachers was conducted on 12 January 2021, with seven participants. They are all currently lecturers at the Vilnius University Faculty of Philology Institute of Foreign Languages. The first category was the definition of CT. Generally, the participants define CT as the ability to scrutinize a specific topic from different perspectives. The discussion revolves around the differences between opinions and arguments. The transition from opinion to arguments was perceived as an intellectual process fuelled by CT skills. The participants stressed the importance of a fundamental CT component, defined in 1984 by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking as “the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using skills to guide behaviour” [17]. All of the participants recognize the importance of CT skills in foreign language teaching, but their awareness of its importance and their readiness to develop it differs.

The second category was the means of teaching CT skills. First of all, the participants mentioned the importance of creating a safe and comfortable intellectual environment in the class. In its absence, students might feel discouraged to express their thoughts freely. A balance needs to be maintained between the need for scientific accuracy and free-floating thoughts. The latter might indicate CT, but in the absence of precision and proper terminology, it quickly becomes the opposite.

The next category is the evaluation of the acquisition of CT skills. Special attention was dedicated to discussing the instruments used for teaching CT. The participants mentioned the need for authentic materials that refer to real-life situations. Thus, CT becomes less theoretical. The use of research articles in class develops cognitive skills and dispositions by encouraging students to compare different academic sources before drawing conclusions [5]. Such practice contributes to the development of intellectual humility, an essential CT intellectual trait.

The participants raise the question of efficiently assessing CT, which was the following category in the research. There is a general consensus regarding the presence of CT in the university curricula, but the assessment is regarded as a problem to be addressed. The question raised is whether CT skills should be assessed separately or incorporated into various activities during class. Currently, at Vilnius University, CT skills are developed by multiple activities, as mentioned by the participants: debates, case studies, essays etc. The participants discuss the criteria for assessing CT, in line with the approach proposed by Peter Facione (1990) [5]. The main challenge when assessing CT is the significant degree of subjectivity in the process. Thus, the separate assessment of CT skills seems a pedagogic goal rather hard to achieve.

As part of the last category, the participants discuss the relation and the gap between CT and the labour market. Some think that in the labour market, not all jobs require CT skills. Others believe that as the labour market is continually changing, CT skills enable students to cope better with its fluidity. The adaptability might be a direct result of the inference, a fundamental cognitive skill described by Facione (1990) [5].

4.2. Focus Group with Students

The objective of the focus group with the students was to find out what students think about critical thinking, whether it is used at their university and whether it corresponds to the requirements of the labor market. A better understanding of what students think about CT, whether it is used in the classes they attend and whether it prepares them well for the labor market was to be achieved.

The answer to the question of what CT means to you were various. Mainly, the students associate CT with open-mindedness and the ability to assess different perspectives. There is a debate about the connection between skepticism and CT. Several students agree that a skeptical stance is a good prerequisite for critical thinking; the starting point should always be not accepting everything at face value.

The second question was how CT is taught in your university. The students were also supposed to give examples in terms of aims, content, methods/strategies, time. Generally, they think that CT is taught at their university, but not always explicitly. They mention the following activities connected to CT: debates, discussions and argumentative essays. The participants also mention the Socratic dialogue as a technique used by teachers to cultivate CT.

The next question was how do you know you have acquired CT skills? Through self-evaluation, peer evaluation or teacher evaluation? Some participants seem to believe that CT skills are acquired through self-evaluation, while others think that the aforementioned skills are cultivated through teacher evaluation. One participant thinks that, generally speaking, the evaluation is not CT-oriented as it does not give students enough room for expressing their own view. The participants reach a general consensus: although its existence is easy to recognize, CT is difficult to assess.

The fourth question was about the materials supporting CT learning that they have received (course descriptions, other documents produced for students). The students consider the texts they have to read a good supporting material for CT learning, particularly when they express different, opposing views. As a general idea, the participants think that the materials used for learning do not explicitly mention CT.

The last question asked the students to say if they believe there is a gap regarding CT between what you learnt in university and what you believe is necessary on the labor market. Although the participants believe CT is of paramount importance, many of them identify a gap between university education and the labour market. They think the gap depends on what kind of field one chooses. Even though they have not entered the labour market yet, most students have had various jobs, and think that CT helps them in the decision-making process, but most of them also agree that there are certain jobs that do not require much critical thinking at all.

In conclusion, all of the students freely expressed their opinion and answered all the questions in a concise yet elaborate manner. A better understanding of what students think about CT, whether it is used in the classes they attend and whether it prepares them well for the labor market was achieved. The impression is that the participants understand the general principle of CT. Most of the students think that CT is difficult to formally assess. They stress the subjectivity of evaluating CT. Most of the participants mention that the university encourages CT, although it is not always specifically mentioned. Considering the conclusion of many studies, most notably Abrami et al. (2013) [8] and Wilson (2016) [14], drawing students' attention to the use of CT would help students apply it effectively.

4.3. Focus Group with Trainers

The focus group with the trainers was conducted in January 2021 with six participants: two EFL experts, two German as second/foreign language professionals and two Lithuanian language and literature experts of teacher training. The participants associate CT with open-mindedness and the ability to analyze, accept and assess information and arguments. CT skills relate to the development of tolerance.

Although CT is not explicitly mentioned during the in-service training, participants use various strategies to encourage CT; for example, finding different solutions for the same problem and problem-solving scenarios that cover real-life situations. Teacher trainers try to change the focus from identifying spelling mistakes and filling tables to content and ideas.

A challenging idea is mentioned during the focus group. Some trainers perceive CT as thinking outside the box and denouncing traditional methods of assessment. In their view, in the attempt to privilege ideas and content, sometimes instructions and frameworks need to be bypassed. The participants discuss the specific activities that enhance CT skills, analyze authentic literature and share good practice and training abroad.

As for the assessment, the participants consider that trainees can prove they have internalized the CT skills by actively engaging in sharing ideas and opinions of examples of good practice with others. Although not explicitly mentioned in the focus group, self-regulation or meta-cognition are both elements that indicate the presence of CT in the teaching process. Self-regulation, as defined by Peter Facione (1990) [5], is “maybe the most remarkable cognitive skill of all [. . .]” [5]. It merely translates with the ability to correct and adjust one’s views and perspectives, provided that strong arguments appear.

The participants suggest that in Lithuania, EFL teaching is still deeply rooted in a conservative paradigm. Too much attention is given to forms, rules and rigid frameworks and little to content and ideas. In this context, the “transversal competencies” given by Hanesová and Theodulides (2022) [9] would be particularly helpful.

4.4. Focus Group with Trainees

The participants of the focus group with the trainees included six EFL teachers, PLLC in-service trainees with considerable professional experience in teaching EFL (15–30 years). For them, CT is a crucial skill; they mention that CT enables them to solve problems in a creative way, to stay open-minded and see problems and aspects from different angles. CT, according to them, is highly related to the progress and advance of a society. CT is the analysis of facts or data or any situation and its underlying causes and the ability to learn to see them from different viewpoints, as well as the ability to infer and draw conclusions.

Most of them describe various CT teaching methods in the in-service teacher training programs they attended, starting from brainstorming, classifying and categorizing, as well as comparing and contrasting, to work with listening, reading, speaking and writing materials, not forgetting discussion methods, written exercises, argumentative essays, questioning techniques, debates.

The interviewed teachers use their CT skills in their daily work, emphasizing self-evaluation, identifications, research, identifying biases, inference, determining relevance and curiosity. In teaching, they look for materials that would trigger discussions, reasoning, expressing/forming personal opinions and questioning different views.

The teachers compared their university studies experience, some of them mentioned the gap between what they learnt at university and what is necessary in the labor market, explaining it by the different epoch in which they studied (Soviet period until 1990), when the approach to teaching and learning foreign languages was considerably differently. For one, there was no exposure to the English language through media from a very early age, as young people in Lithuania have today. Others emphasized striking differences on the institutional level, e.g., Pedagogical University, where teachers would not accept a difference opinion or interpretation, and Vilnius University, where professors never gave “right” or “wrong” evaluation, but would let their students draw a conclusion based on analysis. Younger teachers, who studied after 1990, say that the skills they acquired at university, such as analytical and creative thinking, open-mindedness, tact and constructive approach and the ability to solve problems and to ask thought-provoking questions, are relevant in the labor market.

For the interviewees, CT is a crucial skill that helps them stay open minded, solve problems in a creative way and trigger their students' CT skills. All of them describe different CT teaching methods in the in-service teacher training programs they attended, including written exercises, argumentative essays, questioning techniques and debates. The teachers use their CT skills in their daily work, emphasizing self-evaluation, identifications, research, identifying biases, inference, determining relevance and curiosity. They look for materials that would trigger discussions, reasoning, expressing/forming personal opinions and questioning different views. Teachers of different ages, who studied before or after 1990, evaluate the gap between what they learnt at university and what is necessary in the labor market differently. They stress the difference in the teaching and learning approaches between two different epochs and different universities.

4.5. Differences between the Institution of Higher Education and the Labor Market Organization

The main observable difference lies in the form of the presentation of the classes: in the case of HEI, the classes are student-centred, while in the case of LMO, they are all lecturer-centered. Thus, the level of the active participants' engagement that is crucial in CT development and what kind of objectives are offered are completely different. In the case of HEI, the students immediately demonstrate how they apply CT skills and how they try to reach the objectives, while in the LMO they are all tentative, as the listeners are only the recipients of the provided information rather than the active doers [16].

From the teachers' perspective, CT skills are part of the courses offered, although they are not mentioned explicitly. On the other hand, some trainers say that CT objectives need to be cultivated by bypassing the rigid academic framework. Thus, they criticize the traditionalist paradigm under which the higher education institutions still function. A discrepancy is observable as while teachers identify CT in the curricula, some trainers identify a gap that needs to be filled. One of the means of encouraging critical thinking is the commitment to the CEFR (2001) [11] and the recent application of the Action-oriented Approach, described in Piccardo and North (2019) [12].

The objectives of the courses offered by the university and the teacher training institution are composed, in many ways, similarly, with the exception that the objectives concerning CT at the university are usually spelled out more specifically and they mention CT more explicitly. Whether they abide by the objectives is another question. From the higher education institution perspective, CT skills come as a competence that students would develop during the course and those CT skills are mentioned explicitly in course descriptions, as well as others, which also can be assumed as CT skill components.

Explicit reference to CT is not as obvious, although it is more common in HEI. There were a few instances in the HEI when the teachers explicitly mention CT, while in the LMO, there were none during the instruction. Generally, both teachers and trainers speak about a need for more explicit references to CT. As VU courses follow the task-based approach, implementing activities such as debates, conferences, case-studies etc., there are moments and scenarios where CT skills are explicitly mentioned. Trainers, on the other hand, have fewer opportunities to mention CT explicitly. Nevertheless, they incorporate some CT tasks into their activities [16].

There is not much difference between the perception of CT between the university students and the labor market trainees. Both the students and trainees think that critical thinking is one of the most important parts of the training of future professionals in most disciplines. While students think that subjectivity is needed to formally assess CT, the trainees, as experienced teachers, are familiar with all of the techniques that stimulate critical thinking. Perhaps some of them have not thought explicitly about them as CT, but they are aware of the importance of CT well enough to be able to immediately identify them and describe how they contribute to the development of critical thinking.

There is an observable difference in providing a model of a good critical thinker offered by HEI, as most of the classes are based on the practical implementation of CT skills during their activities. The students are actively engaged in CT through a set of well-organized activities that have a clear structure and a well-defined outcome, e.g., their own presented reasoning line in the debate activity, their own created solution to the pressing issue in the case study, their own analysis of the polarity of views in the moral dilemma discussion etc. In contrast, in the LMO, the listeners are not actively engaged in terms of action, they are more in the role of listeners. Thus, it is unclear whether they are able to practically apply those recommendations provided by the instructor. In addition, in HEI, there is a lot of teamwork, which is another essential skill for the development of CT, while in LMO, there is more focus on individual and autonomous learning.

For both teachers and trainers, the model of a good critical thinker revolves around problem-solving, the habit of analysing subjects from a different perspective and the flexibility in tackling problems. Nevertheless, teachers are also concerned with what Facione (2011) [5] defines as self-regulation, the ability to identify and correct one's own mistakes based on reason, deduction and logic. For the trainers, a good critical thinker is oriented more towards the others.

In the focus group with the students, no one really mentions this issue, but members of both focus groups imply that the examples are given by instructors themselves and are exemplified by their ability to stimulate critical thinking in students. This is partly observable in the documental research. One can assume that a HEI considers the student a good critical thinker if they understand and critically evaluate authentic research articles and popular scientific media sources, convey information by formulating a problem, present different views and arguments, and those who can represent themselves in a debate, who also has problem solving skills and so on. On the other hand, LMO give more credit to the practical aspect of the knowledge and its usage.

There is a clear difference in triggering improvements in students' CT between HEI and LMO. In HEI, students are encouraged to immediately reflect on their progress at the end of the class and sometimes during the instruction, also students must submit a research-based essay as a part of their university class. By comparison, in LMO, the instructor only encourages their listeners to use a variety of testing tools; however, how this variety can be combined and practically implemented remains unclear.

From the teachers' perspective, CT skills are part of the courses offered, although they are not mentioned explicitly. On the other hand, some trainers say that CT objectives need to be cultivated by bypassing the rigid academic framework. Thus, they criticize the traditionalist paradigm under which the higher education institutions still function. Both teachers and trainers speak about the importance of authentic literature in triggering improvements in students' critical thinking. Nevertheless, the focus group for teachers reveals a broader understanding of "authentic literature". The teachers include various texts from research articles to essays or even fiction here. The trainers are more inclined to use less theoretical texts suitable for solving practical problems that might appear in everyday life. The difference follows the general tendency; the labour market narrows down CT to make it practical, while teachers manifest a propensity for theory.

The students think that CT is encouraged at university, but they are not aware of it being specifically mentioned. Trainees, on the other hand, consciously use CT in their daily work, while emphasizing self-evaluation, identification, research and pointing out prejudices. They also look for materials that would trigger discussions, expression of personal opinions and questioning different views [16].

In both the HEI and the LMO, there is an on-going reference to one's future or current profession of being a teacher. Nonetheless, it could be argued that it is more CT nurturing in the HEI, as the profession of the teacher is always analyzed in a wider social context, which is more beneficial for the students and for their professional vision in the long term. By contrast, in the LMO, it is only teacher-focused and teaching-in-the-classroom-focused, there is no wider application and social extension of the professional domain to other areas.

In the process of evaluating the required skills for the labor market, the participants have to rely on their own experience, and they are markedly different. If a student has had serious full-time jobs, those were temporary jobs that would help them earn some extra money and sustain themselves, so they are not as aware of the requirements of the labor market, in general, as the trainees are. The students slightly disagreed about the level of critical thinking required in manual jobs, for example, and most of them have not had jobs for which CT is highly significant.

There is an observable difference in terms of the very specific and well-structured activities that are offered by the HEI such as debate, moral dilemma discussion, storytelling, integration of visual arts, team projects, etc. All of these activities have a clearly defined structure and sequence based on the development of CT skills, such as building an argument, using an analogy, developing a reasoning line, providing specific evidence, defining the status quo, overviewing the key concepts by using a variety of sources, etc. In the case of the LMO, the activities are of a more generalized nature, where the specific structure and the sequence line are not presented.

The labour market prefers to use various forms of Socratic dialogue and brainstorming to trigger improvements in students' critical thinking. Teachers favour teamwork and use the Socratic dialogue as an adjacent element rather than the main one. This would be hard to deduct with students and trainees, because CT is only part of the task for both institutions, albeit a very important one, but it is not part of any higher strategy. That would require refocusing the entire teaching process solely toward CT.

The HEI uses case studies, the task-based approach, debates, conferences, self-reflection, peer review, writing assignments, discussions, team projects, etc. Those are very specific activities that are mentioned in the HEI course descriptions and those activities help to develop students' CT skills. That means there are strategies to teach CT in HEI. While looking through the LMO teaching programs, one can assume that CT teaching methods are incorporated in the teaching process, but are not distinctively mentioned.

In addition, most of the CT teaching methods in the HEI focus on teamwork, mainly based on the view of students as social agents involved in meaningful projects, as described in the Action-oriented approach [12], while in the case of the LMO, independent and autonomous learning is emphasized. The teaching methods developed by the higher education institution encourage the development of general skills, as defined by the course descriptions and curricula. Receptive, productive, interactive and mediation skills are equally covered. For the labour market, teaching strategies are oriented towards specific competences. After analysing the focus group with the trainers, they favour interactive and mediation skills.

The teaching methods in the HEI are more directed towards students, they emphasize teamwork and not only develop CT skills but also other general skills. The LMO is more oriented towards practical knowledge usage, so the teaching methods are more oriented towards specific competences and independent learning.

Although both the higher education institution and the labour market stress the importance of authentic literature in developing CT skills, the approach seems different. The trainers prefer to use authentic literature as an educational tool for problem-solving tasks. The higher education institution includes theoretical texts (research article) in the category of authentic literature. They become part of various activities such as case studies, debates, research proposals, etc.

It could be argued that in the HEI, the evaluation approach is more content-based, i.e., there is more focus on how the content is created by the students themselves and how they are able to use their CT skills to make this content high quality in terms of using the context for analysis, interpreting the data, drawing conclusions, etc. In the LMO, there is more focus on the testing of pre-made questions that have preselected answer options. Testing in this way undermines the creativity factor, which was highly emphasized by the LMO.

There is a consensus about the difficulties of assessing CT. The labour market does not discuss the possibility of evaluating CT separately. The trainers describe assessment tools for CT as part of the general evaluation. At the higher education institution level, there is a debate about the need to evaluate CT independently. Both parties are aware of the important degree of subjectivity involved in assessing CT.

There is no specific mention of the evaluation approaches of CT in the HEI course descriptions nor in LMO programmes. It could be maintained that in the HEI, there is more presence of discipline-related CT in terms of the activities that encourage students to look deeper into their future professions, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses and looking for specific solutions to very specific problems in their professional area and beyond. By comparison, in the LMO, there is more emphasis on the generalized mode of teaching and its effectiveness.

The higher education institution offers courses where CT is explicitly mentioned in the course description. It is usually indirectly dealt with; nevertheless, it represents an important part of the learning/teaching process in foreign language education. Each case should be studied separately, but from the answers to the questions, it could be concluded that there is no marked difference between the students and trainees regarding this question. More or less all members of the two focus groups are aware of the importance of CT in education. Whereas trainees have to use these skills to teach, students have to apply them in different situations depending on their future career, which is not always directly related to what they have studied. The CT mechanisms have to be applied in most jobs and they are sometimes not overly explicit. CT also involves social and communication skills, which is not taught anywhere, but students acquire this only by being in a collective and having constant interaction with their peers.

5. Conclusions

The interviews with four focus groups conducted at Vilnius University and the Public Language Learning Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania, gave a lot of useful insights into the way the teachers/trainers and students/trainees perceive critical thinking. In general, they all recognize the importance of critical thinking in the learning process and at work, but their opinions about the way CT should be taught, encouraged and implemented understandably diverge.

Some notable differences between Vilnius University and the Public Service Language Centre could be more explicit if the observation of HEI and LMO would follow the same categorization pattern. In the HEI, practical tutorials were observed where the number of students would not exceed 16. In the LMO, these were lectures that were delivered to a group of 30 teachers, who were in the role of passive listeners rather than active participants or so-called doers. In addition, the focus student group in the HEI is very specific, and there are specific aims to be achieved that are very context-related and also more personalized and individualized. By contrast, in the case of LMO, the aims are very generalized, and the audience is quite varied, with different aims that are not necessarily to be achieved during the delivered lectures.

It should also be noted that the assessment of the difference between what was taught and learned at the university and the labor market by the trainees is very specific, because a number of them completed their studies before the breakup of the Soviet Union, when the educational system and the labor market were based on different ideologies and principles. The education and training they received could not, therefore, correspond to the changing labor market based on the free market economy that was gradually, and in some areas not so gradually, introduced in the 1990s. There is also a considerable difference between those who have studied at different universities in Lithuania, because the methods seem to have differed considerably. The Vilnius Pedagogical University of Vilnius, later renamed Lithuanian Educational University, and now extinct, apparently did not encourage CT as much as Vilnius University did, according to some trainees. The reason for this conclusion might lie in the different quality of teaching or particular inherited practices, but they could

also be based on subjective impressions. The changes were mostly gradual, however, and the teachers had time to adapt, learn new techniques and realize the importance of CT in higher education [16].

What both the higher education institution and the labor market organization could emphasize more is the “refined scaffolding,” which would help students and trainees develop critical-thinking skills and dispositions [15]. Considering the new, global context of this digital era, they could also place more stress on the digital, media and information literacy, as well as collaborative problem solving, as described by Hantesová and Theodolides (2022) [9]. A preliminary instruction on the use of critical thinking, described by Abrami et al. (2013) [8], would be beneficial as well.

Overall, the interviews with the Lithuanian partners in the Think4Jobs international and interdisciplinary project greatly contributed to the general aim of the research. The preliminary Intellectual Output provided valuable information about the application and significance of critical thinking and the differences between its development and implementation at the university and the labor market regarding foreign language learning and teaching. It served as a solid base for determining the importance of critical thinking and the means by which it could be improved.

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