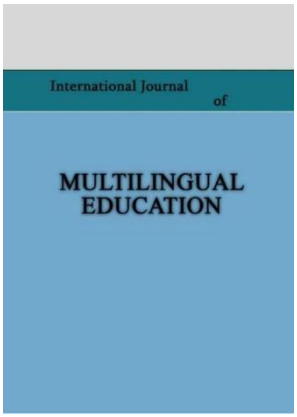

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Development of CT skills in Foreign Language Teaching Process in Higher Education and Labour Market Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Thesis/Aim. One of the major aims of universities is to prepare graduates to be independent critical thinkers who can make research-based decisions and contribute to the development of democracy. Labor market institutions also expect their employees to think critically. Therefore, university curricula should focus not only on developing students' discipline-specific competencies but general competencies as well. The foreign language teaching and learning process is considered to provide favorable conditions for the development of students' critical thinking skills especially when the curriculum is based on an action-oriented approach. This study investigates whether critical thinking is effectively integrated into the foreign language teaching-learning process in higher education and its alignment with labor market expectations.

Method. A qualitative empirical approach involved documental analysis of course descriptions and lecture observations at a higher education institution. The research instrument was an observational sheet containing a rubric listing the variables and indicators of critical thinking development.

Results. The research revealed that the emphasis on critical thinking in foreign language teaching is more implicit than explicit.

Conclusions. While critical thinking is recognized as an essential learning outcome in university curricula, its practical implementation in foreign language education requires further refinement to make its focus more explicit.

Keywords: *critical thinking; foreign language teaching; higher education institution; labor market organization; Think4Jobs.*

Introduction

Critical thinking (CT) is one of the most important skills university graduates should have in the 21st century in order to be prepared for mature participation in our society. As Noddings (2013) argues: "Critical thinking is more important today than ever, not because of the increasing sophistication of technology, but because we are trying to move toward participatory democracy that is capable of deliberation". Societies need citizens who facilitate their progress, therefore CT development must be inherent in all levels of education (Uribe Enciso, Uribe Enciso, Daza, 2017), especially at universities

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that are committed to preparing leaders for our societies. Moreover, research findings suggest that labour market institutions expect their employees to have CT skills and that CT is valued not only insofar as it contributes to one's professional success, but also for personal improvement and the common good (Penkauskienė, Railienė, and Cruz, 2019). Thus, university teachers have to be ready to foster students' CT skills, apply suitable teaching methods and provide learners with opportunities to develop their abilities to think critically.

Although CT development is included in all the university curricula as an important learning outcome, the uncertainty remains if teachers prepare students as good critical thinkers for their future careers and if they know how to teach learners to become critical thinkers. The question that this article is going to address is: do teachers foster students' critical thinking skills in foreign language classrooms at the university level and language schools – labour market institutions? This study aims to carry out a comparative analysis of how critical thinking is being developed in the foreign language teaching /learning process at the university level and in labour market institutions – language centers.

It should be pointed out that this article represents a part of the research within the framework of the Erasmus project *Think4Jobs* (2020-1-EL01-KA203-078797) (https://think4jobs.uowm.gr/) oriented toward the discovery of the links between critical thinking competence in higher education and labor market demands across five disciplines: teacher education, IT, veterinary medicine, economics, and foreign language teaching. The current article focuses on the latter discipline area.

Literature review

Defining Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a complex concept of a multifaceted nature that was analyzed by many scholars from different perspectives. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defined 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 conclusions to which it tends."* This definition makes it obvious that critical thinking is a complicated process, that requires one's determined and self-regulated effort and ability to reflect, question, and verify one's beliefs against the background of the existing evidence-based knowledge. A similar viewpoint was proposed by Ennis (1993) who claimed that critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do, the emphasis being on reasonableness, reflection, and the process of making decisions. The definition provided by Epstein (2006, p. 1) "thinking critically is a defense against a world of too much information and too many people trying to convince us" confirms the need for the skill of critical thinking in our contemporary world when people have to differentiate among reliable and unreliable sources of information.

Although there is no absolute agreement about the definition of CT, there is consensus among researchers that CT consists of both skills and dispositions (Halpern, 1998, 1999, 2006). The current paper follows the definition suggested by Facione (1990) known as the Delphi project consensus definition. Following Facione (1990) CT is considered to be an ability identified by skills of interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation as well as dispositions of truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, self-confidence, inquisitiveness, and cognitive maturity.

CT in higher education and its relevance to labor market demands

Much research has also been done into the relevance of CT skills in higher education, particularly in the last decades. The development of CT is highlighted and generally accepted as vital in every field and stage of learning with the teacher's role being considered of the utmost importance (Bezanilla, Galindo-Domínguez, Poblete, 2021; Da Silva Almeida, Rodrigues Franco, 2011; Lenin, 2019; Nuraini, Rusman, 2018). Some researchers (Stupple, Maratos, Elander, Hunt, Cheung, Aubeeluck, 2017) not only argue that CT is an important focus in higher education and essential for good academic achievement as well as for students' professional life beyond universities in labour market but also offer a diagnostic tool to measure students' CT to identify students who need support in developing their CT skills.

Other researchers pay attention to curricular development. The findings of Bećirović, Hodžić, Brdarević-Čeljo (2019) point to an urgent need to revise the existing curricula and design more adequate ones that would focus not only on academic achievement but on fostering CT skills necessary for professional careers of students. In a similar vein, empirical research findings of Niu, Behar-Horenstein, and Garvan (2013) revealed that there are numerous attempts of pedagogical interventions to foster students' CT skills in different domains of studies, however, not all of them prove to be effective.

Despite that, however, there is research that looks into the ways how teachers could contribute to CT development more effectively. According to Thomas (2011), CT skills are complex, and due to that fact, teachers should scaffold students' development of CT skills from the very beginning of their studies at universities and raise students' awareness of the importance of CT skills for further studies and their future professional careers. A similar view is expressed by Wilson (2016) who claims that nurturing students' critical dispositions requires delicate scaffolding to support their development as critical meaning-makers. Wilson (2016) maintains the view that developing students' ability to read critically is vital for the development of CT skills. The author considers the 'Courses in English for

Academic Purposes' (EAP) to be very suitable for that matter. EAP courses generally include the development of students' reading skills, however, if attention is paid to critical reading mostly depends on the teacher's general approach to teaching.

The research conducted by Nappi (2017) specifies effective ways to be used to develop CT, one of them being questioning. Although lower-level questions are easier for teachers to formulate as they seek information retrieval and repetition, the author highlights that teachers should attempt to purposefully formulate higher-level questions that require students to further examine the concept(s) under study through the use of the application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation differently from lower-level questioning that simply requires students to memorize and recall information. Some scholars (Peterson and Taylor, 2012) highlight that both teachers and students will benefit from questions that are purposefully designed as students will acquire the ability to make connections to prior learning as well as make meaning of the world around them. However, formulating questions that require high-level thinking might be a more complicated and time-consuming task for educators, especially language teachers who might focus more on language accuracy rather than the meaning-making process. According to Wilson's (2016) research findings**,** teachers differ in their approach to CT skills development, and this factor determines their approach to teaching. For instance, in some 'English for Academic Purposes' (EAP) classes, students took a performative role (simply 'doing' the task); whereas in other classes, students demonstrated a more intense engagement with the content of their reading.

It should be pointed out that teachers' viewpoints on the development of CT skills are addressed by many scholars (Bezanilla, Galindo-Domínguez, Poblete, 2021; Karakoç, 2016; Uribe Enciso, Uribe Enciso, Daza, 2017). Some researchers (Radulović and Stančić, 2017) highlight the role of teachers in designing more contextualized syllabi to foster the CT skills of students; while others (Nappi, 2017; Popil, 2011) devote their research to various ways and methods of teaching CT in different study programs at the university level; others (Grosser, Lombard, 2008) focus on the CT abilities of prospective teachers. Some researchers identify the reasons why CT development is not so successfully implemented at the university level. In his article, 'The State of Critical Thinking Today' Paul (2005) identified three main obstacles to the acquisition of CT in higher education. First, universities are not aware of their lack of understanding of the concepts of CT. Second, they thought they knew what CT was and were already teaching it to students. Third, lectures, rote memorization, and short-term learning habits are the norm in higher education. Some believe that CT is a single-subject discipline and thus should be taught as logic or study skills. As a result, lecturers expect students to be able to analyze complex concepts but have no idea how to teach them. According to

Elder and Paul (2005), teachers expect intellectual standards from their students but do not have a clear idea of what is considered an intellectual standard or how to formalize it. A comprehensive overview of the extant literature on teaching CT skills provided by Alsaleh (2020) also revealed that teachers tend to focus more on subject content rather than CT development. Moreover, the results indicate a gap in teaching CT skills in terms of innovative methods, particularly in the use of new technologies. The need for further research to investigate new approaches for teaching CT skills is also highlighted. Thus, the way teachers organize the teaching/learning process depends on their awareness of the importance of CT skills development within the framework of their disciplines.

CT in foreign language teaching

Other researchers investigate the ways of teaching CT skills in the foreign language teaching process. Atkinson (1997) argues that it is very difficult for language teachers to nurture students' CT skills, as language teachers are often more concerned with language accuracy than the critical appraisal of texts. They found out that in many cases, the materials used in the language classroom do not encourage students to think critically. Wilson (2016) also provides reasons why EAP teachers do not focus much on fostering their students' CT skills, which partly coincides with Paul's (2004) ideas mentioned above. Firstly, the very concept of CT is not quite clear to teachers themselves; secondly, the content of EAP has no prescribed discipline, in most EAP course books the content of students' reading jumps from one topic area to another, not allowing students the time to reflect deeply, to build up knowledge and understanding in any particular content area, most often focusing on the form rather than the content. Thirdly, the testing system should be improved in terms of CT assessment, because if CT skills are not tested directly, students may feel that it is irrelevant. However, in Wilson's (2016) opinion, EAP teachers have a responsibility to develop students' CT skills and dispositions by providing "delicate scaffolding" to students.

Specifically relevant to the current research paper is the review article by El Soufia and See (2019) who sought to establish whether explicit teaching of critical thinking is effective in enhancing the CT skills of English language learners in higher education. The authors reviewed articles published from 1990 to 2018 searching specifically for studies about teaching CT to English language learners in higher education. Almost all the studies in this review turned out to be very small-scale and had serious methodological flaws. It also revealed the absence of a single agreed-upon definition for CT, which made the comparison of studies difficult as different studies may have measured different things. El Soufia and See's (2019) review revealed that only explicit instruction of CT skills was found to have the best evidence of effectiveness. They claim that despite the emphasis on CT in higher education

there is little evidence that such skills are taught explicitly and systematically at the undergraduate level.

It should be pointed out that a new updated version of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume* (2020) and a new language teaching/learning methodology Action-oriented Approach (AoA) presented by Piccardo and North (2019) provide a more expanded theoretical framework of language teaching and learning. The AoA opens new pathways for language teachers and curriculum developers and empowers them to rethink and reshape their approach to language teaching and learning. The AoA focuses on the learner as a social agent, on student-centeredness, on the social context, and performance of cognitively challenging and engaging real-life tasks that are targeted not only at the development of communicative-linguistic competence of learners but require the activation of general competencies and CT skills as well. Thus, it can be assumed that the application of the AoA in a foreign language teaching and learning process provides more opportunities for the development of learners' CT skills.

The analysis of scientific literature showed that there has been a considerable amount of research carried out into different aspects of CT. It also demonstrated that there should be more attention paid to the development of CT skills in HE in all subjects, and foreign languages including as well. Having taken into consideration the fact that explicit teaching of CT skills seems to be the most effective, this article attempts to contribute to the current research and offers a comparative analysis of the development of CT skills for English language learners in higher education and labor market institutions.

Methodology of the research

This research was carried out within the framework of the European Commission-funded project *Think4Jobs* (2020-1-EL01-KA203-078797) (https://think4jobs.uowm.gr/) in 2020-2023. The project partners from five countries (Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania) brought together a multidisciplinary team involved in the research into CT education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Labor Market. The project partners developed collaboratively the theoretical-methodological framework for the research into the development of CT skills across five different domains: teacher education, IT, veterinary medicine, economics, and foreign language teaching. The project partners proposed hypothesis-driven research, that was tested by three research methods, using three corresponding instruments in five domain areas. The general hypothesis stated that there are differences between higher education institutions and labor market organizations

regarding critical thinking development. The current article focuses on the description of the tasks of the first Intellectual Output 1 (IO1) of the Think4Jobs project, mainly aiming at the elucidation of two research methods applied, i.e. class observation and documental analysis, and their respective findings in the area of foreign language teaching and learning at the t university level. The current research into the development of CT in the process of foreign language teaching /learning was operationalized by two *variables* and a number of *indicators* for each variable (Facione,1990) as presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below:

Figure 1. Research variable 1 and its indicators.

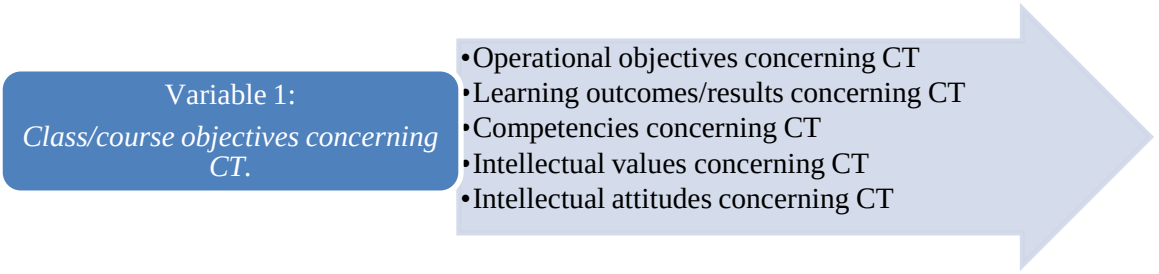
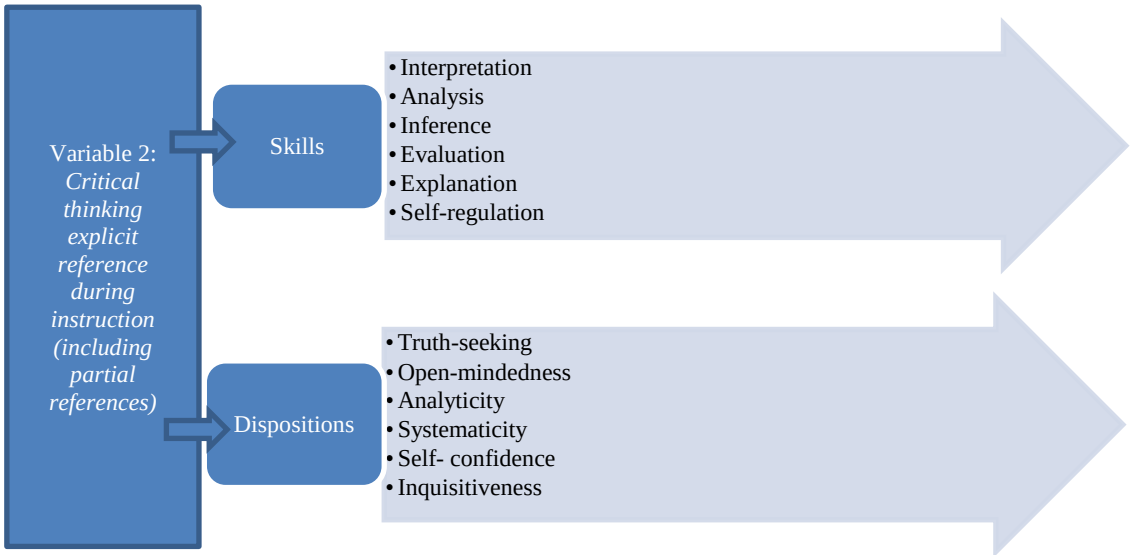


Figure 2. Indicators of the Research variable 2: Critical thinking explicit reference during instruction (including partial references).



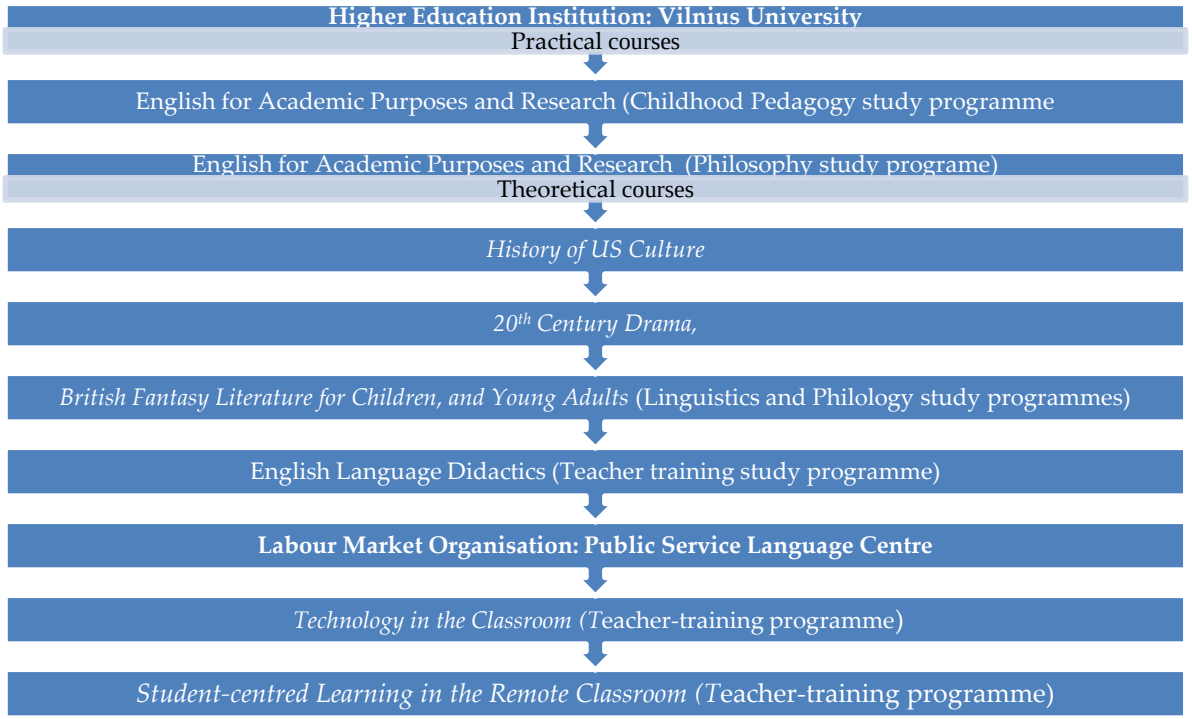
For both research methods mentioned above, class observation and documental analysis the corresponding research instrument was an observational sheet (developed according to Facione, 1990), containing a rubric listing the variables and indicators with a frequency scale for each indicator to be marked by a researcher. The researchers had to provide concrete examples if /when they identified the indicators in the curricular documents or class observations. Documental analysis of course descriptions of the same subjects as their respective class observations was carried out.

The procedure of the research

The class observation was carried out at two institutions in Lithuania: Vilnius University (VU) representing higher education institution and Public Service Language Centre (PSLC) representing a Labor market organization – both institutions were participants of the project *Think4jpobs*. There were three lecturers chosen at Vilnius University who agreed that their classes were observed. Four observation sessions for each lecturer were carried out and observed by three researchers of VU (12 lectures 24 academic hours). The classes chosen were from two practical and four theoretical courses of the first cycle study programs, all the lecturers came from the same department – the Faculty of Philology, the Institute of Foreign Languages – whereas the students were from two faculties of Vilnius University: The Faculty of Philology, mainly specializing in linguistics, and the Faculty of Philosophy, specializing in philosophy, childhood pedagogy, and teacher training. All the students at VU were at B1 to C1 level of the English Language.

The class observations were made of the following subjects at Vilnius University: a practical course of *English for Academic Purposes and Research* of the study programs of *Philosophy* and *Childhood Pedagogy*, theoretical courses and seminars on *History of US Culture*, *20th Century Drama*, *British Fantasy Literature for Children, and Young Adults* for the students of different Philology and Linguistics study programs, and *English Language Didactics* for teacher training study program. (See Figure 3 below).

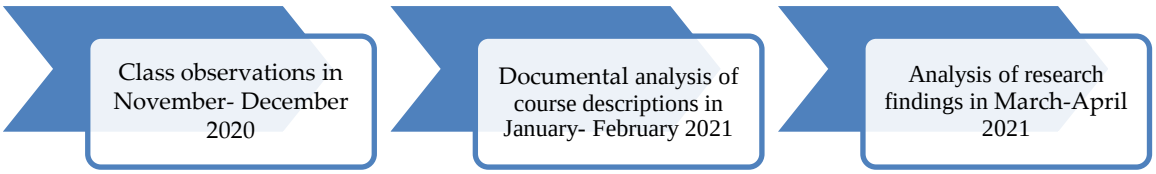
Figure 3. Class observations at Vilnius university and Public Service Language Center.



At the Public Service Language Centre, the class observations were made of an in-service teacher training programmes *Technology in the Classroom*, one of the most popular teacher-training programmes run across the country for teachers of EFL (as well as teachers of other subjects who have level B1 in the English language) and another program of *Student-centered Learning in the Remote Classroom*. They are run by British native-speaking teacher trainers from the UK. Six sessions (four academic hours each) of lectures delivered by two British teacher-trainers were observed by four PSLC researchers, i.e., language teachers and teacher-trainers. The total duration of the lecture observation at PSLC is 24 academic hours.

The whole process of the empirical research is described in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4. The process of empirical data collection and analysis.



As it is evident from the figure above, the whole research was carried out in 2020-2021. Firstly, the class observations of the above-mentioned courses at both institutions, Vilnius University and Public Service Language Center, were conducted. Secondly, documental analyses of the respective courses were performed. Finally, based on the information collected in the observation sheets, the analysis of the empirical research data was accomplished. The principle of researcher triangulation was applied at each stage of the process of the research in order to discuss intermediate insights, possible interpretations, generalizations, and make conclusions about the results of the research.

It should also be pointed out that only CT-related teacher-inspired behaviors and actions were observed during the lectures at both institutions. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no possibility to observe real-time classes in both institutions; therefore, recorded lectures were considered to be acceptable substitutes, with permission granted by participants for recording the respective sessions.

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.

Findings and discussion

Results of class observations at the institution of higher education (Vilnius University)

As it has been mentioned before, the observation of 12 (24 academic hours) classes delivered by three different university teachers took place. The following practical and theoretical courses delivered to BA students were observed: one practical course under the title *English for Academic Purposes and Research* delivered for two study programs of *Childhood Pedagogy* and *Philosophy* at the Faculty of Philosophy, as well as the theoretical courses: *20th century Drama, History of US Culture, British Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults* to the students of Philology and Linguistics at the Faculty of Philology, and *English Language Didactics (and final project)* specifically taught to the students of the teacher training program at the Faculty of Philosophy.

Overall, it has been clarified that CT in higher education is developed and sustained by a variety of teaching methods and activities that are both implicit and explicit. The major observation findings revealed the students' active engagement during the class activities, especially in the practical courses of *English for Academic Purposes and Research*. This was achieved generally by the application of the task-based and action-oriented approaches and specifically by group work, mainly working in teams and students' use of analogies between the current social reality and theoretical issues of concern within the framework of their disciplines. The teachers tried to constantly stimulate students' CT in different ways, most of them however, were more implicit rather than explicit.

In the study program of *Childhood Pedagogy*, the observed classes of the practical courses of *English for Academic Purposes and Research* were interactive, and the student-centered approach as applied. The focus was the analysis of research articles according to the IMRD structure. The students reviewed the texts they had read, they were asked not only to summarize them but to interpret their significance and connect them to the theory they had studied earlier. Thus, an implicit attempt to foster the skills of analyticity, comparison, and inference was initiated. During the other lecture, the students were presented with the Konstanz Moral Dilemma Discussion (KMDD) method (Lind, 2016) which is generally used to induce learners to talk about moral decisions and make important judgments, based on the presentation of pro and counter arguments, which is supposed to lead to a better understanding of a dilemma from different perspectives. Thus, the lecturer made an attempt to foster CT in students in a more explicit way by encouraging students to present their arguments leading to a possible solution of a moral dilemma.

In another lecture that was observed students were supposed to discuss trust and independence in the classroom. Based on the overview of a video about the Finnish education system, students were asked to comment on certain aspects of the film, and then compare that to their experience in schools,

draw comparisons, and provide arguments about what level of trust would be possible in the Lithuanian educational system. Each student was encouraged to speak and present his/ her views, the discussion was carried out in an open-minded manner. Thus, it could be assumed that the lecturer inspired the CT skills of analysis, interpretation and evaluation as well as dispositions of truth-seeking, open-mindedness, and analyticity.

In *Philosophy* study programme course the teacher stimulated students' CT by asking challenging questions and encouraging students to give their own perspectives on the concept of Artificial Intelligence. The teacher provided the students with the proper background, initiating the discussion about Artificial Intelligence by playing a short video with a relevant scene from the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey". The scene offered the students the pretext for an exciting discussion on the dangers posed by Artificial Intelligence and the delicate relationship between the creator (humans) and the creation (AI). The teacher tried to keep a fair balance between subjective opinions and objective arguments. Considering the students' field of study (Philosophy), the teacher's method triggered fruitful debates and the initiation of CT skill of interpretation and evaluation as well as the dispositions of analyticity, and open-mindedness, however, in an implicit way. Even though CT was not explicitly mentioned, multiple pedagogical techniques were used to address it and to stimulate it in students.

Class observations of the theoretical courses: *20th Century Drama, History of US Culture, and British Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults* revealed that they were more teacher-centered, although numerous attempts were made by the teacher to make these lectures more interactive. For instance, an important part of the lecture on *20th Century Drama* was dedicated to presenting students with different perspectives on the topic of Bertolt Brecht's theories on theatre, following the main literary trends and the most relevant concepts. The latter were properly illustrated with a video explaining the main Brechtian ideas. The students were not always engaged in the presentation. The teacher gave students the opportunity to reflect on the information presented to trigger their inquisitiveness. Students asked questions and manifested a real interest in the topic analyzed. The teacher often initiated the discussions by challenging students to share their own experiences as spectators of the theatre and encouraged them to make connections between the concepts and their own personal aesthetic experiences. Thus, the teacher was implicitly encouraging students to think critically, make inferences, and interpretations and draw comparisons.

In the theoretical course *History of US Culture,* the lecture that was observed focused on the theme of free time and family. The teacher drew different cultural parallels between the British and the American culture. The teacher elicited students' general knowledge to guide the discussion towards theoretical aspects of the topic (the social function of sport). Although the teacher did not mention

specifically the CT skills, he commenced a discussion of sports in a thought-provoking manner. The students actively participated and asked for more information; thus their inquisitiveness was initiated. The American family was the next subject the teacher touched. It was presented from a historical perspective. The teacher tried to make students comfortable enough to discuss controversial and delicate topics (the family, divorce, etc.) making an obvious attempt to foster their open-mindedness. Thus, it could be stated that CT skills and dispositions were addressed in a more implicit rather than an explicit way.

In the lecture on *British Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults,* the topics under discussion were the fantastic literature from C.S Lewis to J.K Rowling. The class discussion started with a brief presentation of the series of popular novels "The Faraway Tree" (Enyd Blyton). The students expressed their views on Roald Dahl's books. The teacher proposed a CT approach by asking students to find valid arguments for understanding the immense success "The Paddington Bear" enjoyed in British culture. He guided the students' discussion in such a way that enabled students to come up with various hypotheses for which they found cultural arguments. The teacher encouraged students to find arguments to justify their preference for books discussed during the class. The teacher used popular culture references to make analogies so that students understood them easier.

In the lectures of the course *English Language Didactics (and the final project)*, the participants were primary and secondary school teachers who taught different subjects and wanted to re-qualify themselves to teach English. The theme of one of the observed lectures was dedicated to Learning English Through Visual Arts. The teacher encouraged students to always think about how their current or future students can be given a chance to evaluate their experience and knowledge in the wider context of art and culture. Frequently parallels between how language and cultural artifacts reflect meaning construction in language were drawn, which made students more engaged and interactive during the class.

During another observed class various English teaching activities through the medium of arts prepared by the students were discussed. It has been shown how the integration of visual arts can develop students' creativity and empower their cognitive skills through learning geometrical shapes, becoming more involved in the critical discussion of pressing social issues, or becoming more open-minded about them. It has been clarified that engagement in arts is also beneficial for the class atmosphere: the students seemed to be relaxed and also more engaged and were never hesitant to raise questions and offered their vision of how a certain activity could be implemented.

The other lecture was devoted to the presentation of student-centered group discussions in the classroom and discussed its strengths and ways of facilitation. A comparison of the IRE (initiate,

respond, evaluate) model with the productive discussion model was made followed by an explanation of what constituted a productive classroom discussion. The strategies for engaging all the students equally in the discussion and the difference between the Teacher-guided and the student-driven discussion were presented. Even though it was a theoretical lecture, the teacher made attempts to make it as interactive as possible by raising questions and drawing parallels with the personal lives of students and life in general. The presentation about discussion in class not only showed how to initiate a good discussion, but it went into the essence of stimulating critical thinking in a classroom. It can be argued that CT skills were encouraged by the teacher's active engagement of students through the topics that were relevant and challenging.

The other observed class aimed to present a method of story-telling through various resources and tools by offering students more creative and contemporary ways of telling a story. It was also indicated how story-telling improves socializing skills via group activities and peer review, while intellectual skills are developed through inferencing and raising a set of context-related questions. Students were also encouraged to use story-telling as a means of creating a student-friendly atmosphere, in which CT skills can be easily integrated and developed with more success. Storytelling activities were demonstrated as a great tool for initiating innovative, critical, and creative thinking in students, and the instructor presented them well.

In addition, in the observed classes, it has been noticed how the teachers always encourage students to discuss and consider a multitude of perspectives on the same pressing social issue (e.g., discrimination, technological impact on human relationships, a lack of motivation, etc.). This allows students to learn the skills of negotiation, reasoning, and tolerance of different views and opinions. The reasoning line was mainly developed using discussion and debate. Thus, it could be stated that the dispositions of truth-seeking and open-mindedness were developed.

Furthermore, the notion of creativity seemed to play a significant role in developing CT skills at the university level. Teachers encouraged students to be more creative by offering them a combined approach to using language in a variety of contexts such as looking for a solution by analyzing a specific case, debating on a specific issue, overviewing opposite views, integrating art as a means of exploring social reality, etc. Thus, it could be maintained that the CT skills of interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation were infused in the class activities, although in a more implicit rather than explicit manner.

Most of the teaching time was student-centered, while the teacher only undertook the role of a facilitator. Nevertheless, there were a few instances when the teacher used most of the time to speak and did not fully engage the students in the class activities. This happened during the theoretical

lectures when the teacher tried to share a lot of information with the students. This one-sided teaching method becomes a reason why students tend to lose interest in the topic and prefer to stay silent during the class. This might be explained by the nature of the class (i.e., theoretical lecture), or by the fact that the teacher may not have a specific plan of action on how to critically engage students by drawing a parallel between the theoretical/historical issues and the status quo. Despite that, it can be argued that most of the teachers focused on student speaking time and their active engagement in class activities, during which students analyzed, interpreted, reasoned, and created meaningful interaction within the real-life scenarios, thus developing their CT skills more implicitly.

Results of the documental analysis at the institution of higher education (Vilnius University)

The analysis is based on six different Higher Education course descriptions: two practical courses - *English for Academic Purposes and Research* for the BA study program of *Childhood Pedagogy* and the study program of *Philosophy*. The other four courses were theoretical ones taught to the students of the Faculty of Philology of the study programs of *Philology* or *Linguistics*: *20th Century Drama*, *History of US Culture, British Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults*, as well as the course of *English Language Didactics (and final project)* for the teacher training program at the Faculty of Philosophy of VU.

A thorough analysis of course descriptions made it evident that critical thinking skills are clearly stated as one of the skills that students would develop during the courses. Critical thinking skills are developed and nurtured through self-reflection and peer review, task-based learning methods integrated with the student-centered approach via discussion, debates, project work/assignment, case studies, research proposals, problem-solving, and reflections. Students are encouraged to understand and critically evaluate authentic research articles and popular scientific media sources when reading. What is more, students are encouraged to convey information by formulating problems, and presenting different views and arguments, while writing or speaking. Based on the analysis of course descriptions it can be assumed that students should actively engage in class activities and alongside the development of linguistic-communicative skills were expected to nurture their CT skills as well.

One thing that is left not clear in course descriptions is how HEI teachers evaluate students' ability to think critically, keeping in mind that CT skills are distinctively mentioned as competence to be developed during the courses. It can be understood that evaluation of CT skills is implicit and depends on what content students create, how good their information analyses are, and how sound their arguments are – both in written and spoken forms. However, this evaluation should be defined more specifically and explicitly, bearing in mind that there should be a starting point and a clear progress evaluation system if CT skills come as one of the competencies developed during the courses.

Results of class observations at the labor market organization (Public Service Language Centre)

The observations of six sessions (four academic hours each) delivered by two British teacher trainers-lecturers of two programs *Technology in the Classroom* and *Student-centered Learning in the Remote Classroom* were observed by four PSLC researchers, i.e., language teachers and teacher-trainers. The total duration of the lecture observation is 24 academic hours. The observations revealed that most of the time is devoted to the teacher or presenter. The teaching was generally presenter-centered, and the listeners were not actively engaged in the process. Thus, most of the CT skills were tentatively evoked, and it was not very clear whether the listeners or participants of the courses were practically engaged in the activities the teacher was trying to initiate. This could be explained by the nature of the analyzed material, as well as the fact that those were theoretical lectures. Thus, it was the teacher who played a pivotal role in the delivery of the materials, while the listeners were backgrounded.

Despite that, it can be argued that there were some CT skills and dispositions fostered during these lectures. Firstly, a genuine and lively atmosphere was created by the teacher that might have engaged the listeners, which was noted by all the observers. Secondly, in all cases, the teacher tried to encourage creativity by providing examples of how various teaching resources can be combined and their effectiveness tested. Another noticeable observation was the teachers' focus on autonomous and independent learning which was emphasized throughout the sessions. However, it still remained unclear how this could have been specifically achieved by the trainees after the workshops. Besides, there was a clash between engagement and autonomy that served different purposes of CT development. Finally, the last observation should be made about the emphasis on the variety of resources mentioned by the teacher-trainer. In all cases, it was observed that the variability factor was emphasized. Nonetheless, how to deal with the variety of tasks or tools, which could have been misleading and overwhelming for the trainees, still remained unclear.

Results of the documental analysis of the labour market organization (Public Service Language Centre)

The documental analysis was based on two in-service teacher training programs which are considered the most popular teacher-training programs for teachers of EFL (as well as teachers of other subjects who have level B1 in the English language) as provided by PSLC in Lithuania *Technology in the Classroom* and *Student-centered Learning in the Remote Classroom*. As it has been mentioned earlier, they are run by British native-speaking teachers- trainers from the UK.

The documents on in-service teacher training programs included the information of program

provider, the lecturer's profile with biodata on work experience and competencies, a reference to the survey report done by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, and a short review of the current educational situation in the area in which some changes were expected. Both programs emphasize the practical aspect, which is completely understandable as they were targeted at the audience of working teachers.

The teacher training programs comprise 58 academic hours in *Technology and The Classroom* and 50 academic hours in *Student-centered Learning in the Remote Classroom* and they were offered to over 180 teachers (each). Both programs were designed to empower educators, especially from ethnic minority schools to make their lessons more attractive by using daily devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones for group work, tracking the student performance, evaluation, and cooperation with parents.

The programs consisted of 13 and 11 sessions (webinars), each of them including a short description of activities and resources. Each webinar covered theory, practice, and self-study parts which were strictly limited in time/duration. From the names of those webinars/ sessions, one can assume that CT skills, methods, and strategies are to be included in the process of teaching highlighting student autonomy, encouraging collaboration and hands-on learning, reflection, presentation, practical conference of attendees, etc. Moreover, those programs provided lists of literature sources and resources for the attendees. However, it is not specifically mentioned or explained what kind of methods or teaching strategies lecturers used to implement CT skills in those programs.

Conclusion

The research revealed that CT development is included in the university curricula as an important learning outcome. The documental analysis of HEI course descriptions demonstrated that CT is planned to be fostered during the teaching/learning process through the application of appropriate teaching strategies and methods. Class observations demonstrated that CT is fostered more in an implicit rather than explicit way, especially since some differences exist depending on the type of lecture. Theoretical courses focus more on a teacher-centered approach whereas practical courses were observed to be more student-centered, thus allowing more active students' participation in the performance of tasks. Moreover, practical courses were based on task-based and action-oriented approaches, therefore an assumption could be made that more favorable conditions were created during these courses for the development of students' CT skills. An area that needs to be addressed is the need for a more explicit assessment of CT skills. Based on the documental analysis it could be stated that CT skills are evaluated in an integrated way. Thus, answering the question if university teachers really

foster students' critical thinking skills in their classrooms could be concluded that CT development needs a more explicit focus.

The documental analysis of the teaching programs under the analysis at the labor market institution revealed that CT development is not mentioned directly. This could be explained by the specificity of the training programs, the type of delivery, and the target audience that the teaching process was aimed at. LMO training programs are usually initiated for the improvement of subject-specific competencies, whereas university education is expected to develop not only professionally oriented discipline-related but general competencies, and CT skills as well. Thus, it could be maintained that university education plays a pivotal role in the development of CT skills of their graduates to prepare them for future professional careers and more importantly strengthen their capacity for participatory democracy.

Limitations of the study

It could be argued that some notable differences could be more explicit if the observation of HEI and LMO would follow the same categorization pattern in terms of the type of lectures, target audience, and the number of participants. In HEI, practical tutorials were observed where the number of students was around 16 -20 per group. In 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 the so-called doers.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The animal study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Vilnius University Faculty of Philology (No. 180000-S-224 and 8 December 2022).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Additional data about research can be found in Intellectual Output 1, available at: **https://think4jobs.uowm.gr/results/intellectualoutput1** (accessed on 1 November 2022) and the website of the project at: **https://think4jobs.uowm.gr/** (accessed on 1 November 2022).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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