The Interplay between EFL University Students' knowledge of Conditional Sentences and their Critical Thinking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Students' critical thinking skills potentially support them to succeed in academic scenarios and to meet the goals of the curriculum. Assuring students' critical thinking can help to yield problem-solving students. The current study explored the association between EFL university students' knowledge of conditional sentences and their critical thinking skills. Specifically, the students' level of conditional sentence knowledge and their critical thinking skills were studied. A correlational research design with mixed methods of data collection was used. 46 freshman students of Salale University took part in the study. A conditional sentences test, a critical thinking skills test, and an interview were used to collect relevant data. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to analyze students' scores on the conditional sentences test and critical thinking skills test. Inferential statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient, was used to analyze the relationship that exists between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills. Qualitative data was analyzed qualitatively to support the quantitative one. The Pearson correlation coefficient of the two tests (conditional sentences test and critical thinking skills test) was r = .949, p = .001, which was found to indicate a high degree of correlation between the two variables. Besides, the freshman students at Salale University demonstrated a high level of grammatical knowledge and critical thinking skills. The data gained from the interview showed that the students' knowledge of conditional sentences is correlated with the critical thinking skills: making inferences, assumptions, and deductions; interpreting; and analyzing. Hence, practicing conditional sentences is promising to develop students' skills of critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical thinking skills, Conditional sentences, problem-solving, English language proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective language learning is the result of students' knowledge, comprehension, and application of the target language in the real context (Harmer, 2001). It further includes students' achievement of learning through analyzing, synthesizing, deciding, and selecting information. Thus, students' critical thinking skills are one of the accounts of educational requirements (Dewey, 2007; Halvorsen, 2005). Besides, through critical thinking, students relate their pre-existing knowledge with the current information in order to select, gather, analyze, and evaluate it effectively. It is the way to reason out and reflect on the lessons or information. Thus, students solve problems with critical thinking (Berkeley & Barber, 2015). Likewise, in EFL classrooms, critical thinking skills help students to ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable conclusions about the lessons that guarantee their language skills (Cottrell, 2000). Hence, they need the skills of critical thinking to read beyond what is provided or literal, to frame convincing written ups, to express their ideas with adequate supporting evidence, and to argue the other students' opinions (Brown, 2000; Bensley & Spero, 2014). Hereafter, the students should use the target language and know the meaning and should be able to display critical thinking through the language.

Thus, the process of teaching-learning is expected to empower students' critical thinking skills in the EFL classes (MoE, 2015; Wondifraw, 2018). Language learners can be able to examine the information gained whether or not it belongs to a problem, fact, or assumption, and they can analyze, draw a conclusion, and check the validity and reliability of sources of information. Also, critical thinking skills encompass students' intellectual competence, which has the self-controlled process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication (Abbot & Ryan, 2001). Precisely, it potentially improves students' intellectual ability to examine the clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, immensity, and equity of lessons (Browne, Neil, Stuart & Keely, 2001). This implies that language students are expected to gain appropriate skills of critical thinking in order to maintain English language proficiency.

Apparently, EFL students are required to equip themselves with the knowledge, comprehension, and application of language in the real context, which is lower-order thinking. Here, students' knowledge is the initial step to start activating intellectual abilities (Thayer-Bacon, 2000; Van Gelder, 2005; Fisher, 2011). Besides, the students need to memorize vocabulary, the meaning of new words, grammatical rules, and common names in the target language, and then try to comprehend the lesson by demonstrating their understanding via paraphrasing the memorized words in the relevant context to communicate in the target language (Tan, 2007; Tang, 2016). Beyond this, students need to provide correct answers for listening and reading skills questions and translate a text. In the final stage, students deal with a task to apply what is learned.

Further, the students analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the relevance of lessons in the higher-order thinking. To do so, the students are expected to start from the simplest concept to understand the complex one so that they can heighten their critical thinking (Swartz, 2004; Sun, 2015). Critical thinking here includes students' ability to analyze the lessons by using contextual clues, logical connectives, and linguistic devices to guess the meaning of new words, make inferences, and formulate opinions, and then use evidence to validate the opinion (Gunning, 2008; Bensley & Spero, 2014). Students can synthesize the lesson by applying their pre-existing knowledge and experiences to construct new knowledge. To secure this, language students may interrelate their knowledge of the language (grammatical and vocabulary) with the contents of a lesson (Berkeley & Barber, 2015; Tang, 2016). Students can provide a short summary of the contents of the lessons to develop the skills of synthesizing; summarizing needs students' understanding level of the texts, vocabulary items, and language structures of the learned text (Halpern, 2007; Beyer, 2008; Ennis, 2011; Fung & Howe, 2014). At last, students try to evaluate and reflect on the relevance of the text depending on their opinion and values. Overall, students' critical thinking skills and language proficiency are positively interrelated. Hence, the study analyzed the interplay between students' knowledge of conditional sentences and their critical thinking skills.

1.2. Problem Statement

Abundant pieces of literature revealed that the majority of the EFL students have inadequate skills of critical thinking and English language skills at once (Birbirso, 2014; MoE, 2015; Kitaw, 2017). The EFL students are acutely hindered with insufficient ability to examine and conceptualize the

relevance of lessons taught and learned in EFL classes. In the Ethiopian context, where English is taught and learned as a foreign language, the majority of the students are reported to have the poorest skills of critical thinking and deficient language competency in the English language (Amlaku, 2010; Habtamu, 2011; Ebissa & Bhavani, 2017). Wondifraw (2018) revealed that most of the university students had little or no insights regarding intellectual standards of critical thinking. Alamirew (1992) reported that in spite of the number of years the students are exposed to English, their proficiency in all four skills of the language is low. Kedir (2006) & Mekonnen (2008) showed that the problem of using English across the curriculum still continues to be acute, notwithstanding the significant role it maintains in the country. To avoid this difficulty, EFL instructors must utilize activities and tasks that empower students' critical thinking; this, in turn, can help them realize language competency.

To this end, communicative grammar (Celce-Murcia, 2002; Bybee, 2006; Ariel, 2008), mainly conditional sentences, is found effective in improving students' critical thinking. Conditional sentences are helpful in creating students' reasoning about information learned in the class. It expresses possibilities, hypotheses, and consequences. Language is central to communicate ideas or feelings. Critical thinking supports the students' understanding via reasoning and analysis in the target language (Teschner & Evans, 2007; Fintel, 2009; Ruth, Byrne & Johnson-Laird, 2019). Thus, using conditional sentences guarantees students' prediction of the content or reality, planning, and conjecture rather than paying mere focus on what is said. A conditional sentence is used to indicate the cause and effect or temporal relationship between two events. It engages students in tasks or activities that require the skills of judgment or assessment; thus, it can aid them in developing critical thinking. Conditionals mark the logical association of a certain precondition and its possible result (Rips, 2010). This means it points out a condition that is necessary for a particular outcome to occur (Fintel, 2009). Hence, the fulfillment of the event in the consequent clause is relevant to the degree of reality of the event in the antecedent clause. This can help ELF students to reason out and imagine correlations.

Likewise, conditional sentences are used to assure coherence of ideas because they use cohesive devices and semantic and logical connectives within the underlying layer of a text (Norris, 2003; Ramírez, 2005; Liu, 2011). It is made up of bi-clauses involving an adverbial clause, the antecedent, which states the conditions under which the proposition expressed by the main clause,

the consequent, is true or valid. It also centers on identifying a possible scenario that may or may not be actual (Elliott, 2006; Walsh & Bryne, 2004; Johnson-Laird, Lotstein & Byrne, 2012; Byrne & Johnson-Laird, 2020). The verb forms used in conditional sentences reveal important aspects of interpretations, reasons associated with them, or the speaker's and the listener's knowledge, which constitute the background for reasoning.

A conditional sentence is one component of grammar used to develop students' understanding of the text via guessing and inferring the meaning (Santamaia, Espino & Byrne, 2005; Sellen, Oaksford & Gray, 2005; Rips & Edwards, 2013). It is further used to assure the coherence of ideas; thus, semantic and logical connectives are employed to increase students' comprehension of the message. Besides, it shows the central aspect of interpretations and helps to relate the students' pre-existing knowledge of the language with the current one and points to the reasons associated and the background for reasoning. This means conditionals can empower EFL students' skills of analyzing, conceptualizing, and synthesizing lessons. Regular practice of conditional sentences in EFL classes is found effective in creating learners' engagement in a task of analyzing, conceptualizing, criticizing, and guessing the meaning (Quelhas & Byrne, 2003; Ragni & Knauff, 2013). English students may not be able to express their ideas easily because of their limited English grammatical knowledge. To cope with this, English teachers can integrate, provide, and activate their students' skills of thinking critically with conditionals. Thus, teachers should be creative and skillful in using activities or tasks that activate students' critical thinking. At the same time, the activities or tasks should be prepared for lower and higher thinking levels of students, and they should enhance their skills of analyzing and evaluating in the target language. Besides this fact, the teaching materials should incorporate relevant or sufficient tasks, exercises, and activities that encourage students' critical thinking and language achievement.

Contrary to this, the local studies have been restricted to studying the description and structure of conditional sentences of different languages among Ethiopians (Abdu, 2010; Ongay, 2000, 2004; Debela & Meyer, 2004). None of these studies was actually intended to examine the relationship between conditional sentences and critical thinking. Henceforth, based on the assumption that conditional sentences can improve students' critical thinking in English classrooms, the researcher was initiated to undertake this study. Therefore, the findings of this study are believed to benefit English as a foreign language curriculum developers, teachers, and students to understand, plan,

and practice conditional sentences to develop students' critical thinking. By considering the existing problems and the importance of English teaching and learning, the current research was aimed at analyzing the interplay between conditional sentences and students' critical thinking skills of freshman students at Salale University, Fitche, Ethiopia. It tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What is Salale University First Year students' level of grammatical knowledge of conditional sentences?
2. What is Salale University First Year students' level of critical thinking skills?
3. Is there any significant relationship between students' knowledge of conditional sentences and their critical thinking skills?

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between conditional sentences and critical thinking. To achieve this objective, the researcher employed a correlational research design with mixed methods of data collection. Thus, the researcher tried to see the association between grammatical knowledge (conditional sentences) and critical thinking skills in the natural setting. The researcher utilized a correlational research design for the sake of overcoming students' problem of critical thinking through the use of conditional sentences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003; Creswell, 2014). Correlational research is carried out to predict likely outcomes; it usually explores the relationships between measures of different variables obtained from the same individuals at approximately the same time to gain a better understanding of factors that contribute to more complex characteristics. If a relationship of sufficient magnitude exists between two variables, it is possible to predict a score on either variable if a score on the other variable is known. Therefore, the researcher was interested in using one or more other variables (the predictor variable, conditional sentences) to project performance on one or more other variables (the criterion variables, critical thinking) (Frankel & Wallen, 2000). After all, the correlation design helped the researcher to explore the relationship between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills in the study area (Dörnyei, 2007; Adams, Khan & Raeside, 2014; Creswell, 2014).

2.2. Study Population

For the sake of exploring the interplay between conditional sentences and students' critical thinking, 46, one class of freshman students, from Salale University was selected. The selected students were one class (n=46) of freshman students of Salale University who were attending a regular program in the year 2024/25. Through comprehensive sampling techniques, all the students (n=46) were selected, and then a grammatical skills test (conditional sentences) and a critical thinking skills test were administered for all of them at first to check the correlation that exists between the study variables. Next to this, an interview was carried out with ten purposefully selected students who scored higher points in both tests to explore the students' response to the relationship that exists between the variables. Interview items were prepared and administered in English.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Conditional Sentences Test

To collect relevant data for the study, the researcher collected quantitative data by the application of conditional sentences test. The students' knowledge of conditional sentences was checked by the conditional sentences test. The grammatical skills test was adapted from the TOEFL of Longman and then fairly contextualized to the study area. This was checked by two TEFL instructors. First, a pilot test was given to five students who were not part of the actual study. Then, all of the students (n=46) took the conditional sentences test. The test was composed of items from all kinds of conditional sentences. The adapted test incorporated 50 items to test the students' knowledge of conditional sentences. Besides, the grammatical skills (conditional sentences) item is integratively developed with speaking skills and reading skills; thus, the students were required to sort out the items in both speaking skills and reading skills tests in the multiple-choice, matching, reading comprehension, and dialogue forms.

2.3.2. Critical Thinking Skills Test

An adapted critical thinking skills test was used to check students' level of critical thinking in the study area. The critical thinking skills item was adapted from the Watson-Glaser (2010) critical thinking skills test. 50 items were constructed and administered to the students to check their level

of understanding to critically think or not in EFL classrooms. Thus, various constructs of critical thinking skills were studied with the support of the test. For instance, inferences, assumptions, deductions, interpreting, and analyzing are included. The items were carefully designed using a multiple-choice form. Besides, the researcher tried to focus on the relevant formats and item-constructing formats of correlational research.

2.3.3. Interview

The researcher also used interviews to gain pertinent data on the relationship between students' knowledge of conditional sentences and their critical thinking skills. Ten items were prepared and used to collect the relevant data for the research problem. There were two reasons why the interview was conducted after administering the tests. Firstly, because interview questions might give a clue to the respondents about what the researcher is attempting to study; and, secondly, because issues left out of the other instrument would be presented to the participants so that further information could be obtained from the participants themselves directly in a natural setting.

2.4. Data Analysis

Sufficient data was collected through a conditional sentences test, the critical thinking skills test, and the interview. Then, an analysis was carried out as follows: The researcher used quantitative data analysis to analyze data gained through tests and qualitative data analysis to analyze data gained via interview. The results gained from the conditional sentences test and critical thinking skills test were calculated quantitatively by SPSS, version 22 to check the mean and standard deviation using descriptive statistics. Besides, the two-tailed Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was utilized in order to explore the association between the study variables. To analyze the interview data, the researcher used thematic analysis and interpreted the results. He defined the units of analysis and the various themes based on the research variables and coded the responses as "S1," "S2," "S3," etc., where "S" stands for the student. Qualitative analysis helped the researcher to gain sufficient data on the research problem.

2.5. Validity and Reliability

The validity measure utilized in this study was secured via collection of data from tests and interviews. The reliability measure used in this study was the linear association or correlation between the conditional sentences test and critical thinking skills test that was checked by Pearson

correlation. Strong test-retest reliability was demonstrated by the two tests. This result indicates a high degree of correlation between the conditional sentences test and the critical thinking skills test. As Groves et al. (2004) and Bryman and Cramer (2005) state, positive one (+1) to negative one (-1) is the range of the Pearson correlation. A positive correlation of (+1) denotes a perfect positive correlation, while a negative correlation denotes a negative correlation. A correlation value of +1.00 denotes a complete positive connection.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Students' level of grammatical knowledge of conditional sentences

Table 1**:** Mean score and standard deviation on the students' conditional sentences test

Test	Mean	Number	Sta. Deviation
Conditional Sentences Test	46.28	46	1.409

In the above table, the mean score and standard deviation of the students' conditional sentences test score is revealed. The table depicts that freshman students at Salale University scored the mean (M = 46.28; S.D = 1.409) in the conditional sentences test. The freshman students at Salale University demonstrated a high level of knowledge regarding conditional sentences on this test.

3.1.2. Students' level of critical thinking skills

Table 2**:** Mean score and standard deviation on the students' critical thinking skills test

Test	Mean	Number	Sta. Deviation
Critical Thinking Skills Test	46.15	46	1.247

Table 2 indicates the mean score and standard deviation of the students' critical thinking skills test score. The table further depicts that freshman University students at the Salale University scored the mean (M = 46.15; S.D = 1.247) in the critical thinking skills test which is nearly similar with the first test score, conditional sentences test. The freshman students at Salale University demonstrated a high level of critical thinking skills.

3.1.3. Relationship between students' knowledge of conditional sentences and their critical thinking skills

Table 3: Correlation result of conditional sentences and critical thinking skills

		Conditional Sentences	Critical Thinking
Conditional Sentences	Pearson Correlation	1	.949**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	46	46
Critical Thinking	Pearson Correlation	.949**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	46	46

**. Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2-tailed).

In the above Table 3, the researcher used the two-tailed Pearson correlation to compute the association between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills. The analysis revealed that the two-tailed Pearson correlation is significant at .000, which is below the cut score of P < .05. Hereafter, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (.949) shows that the strength of the correlation between the two variables (conditional sentences and critical thinking skills) is found to be high/strong. The analysis shows that conditional sentences have a high/strong correlation with critical thinking skills. Besides, the researcher used interviews to collect relevant data from the study participants. The respondents were asked to provide their response on the skills of making inferences, assumptions, and deductions, interpreting, and analyzing using the conditional sentences. The interview gave an opportunity to the researcher to gain sufficient data on the interplay between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills. Thus, qualitative analysis is made as follows:

3.1.4. Making Inferences

Interviews were used to gain further data for the study. The students were interviewed on whether or not conditional sentences and critical thinking skills are interrelated. The respondents reported that conditional sentences can be used to make an inference or logical conclusion or a reasonable guess based on evidence. S3 said that "…with conditional sentences, one can identify a

precondition or premises, ask a question about what is happening, look for clues, list relevant details, and guess the possible conclusion." Thus, making inferences is a strategy that incorporates using evidence and reasoning to reach a conclusion. Students can use their previous experience to connect unknown facts with the known information. With regard to this, S4 reported that "…conditional sentences help to make inferences by deducing a conclusion based on specific evidence and prior knowledge. Thus, to infer, we analyze events, facts, ideas, objects, and feelings and compare them with what you have already known. For example, in the following sentence, 'If I read harder, I will pass an exam,' one can infer or easily provide a conclusion because the phrase 'If I read harder…' can lead students to what will come next. The process of making inferences with conditional sentences can develop critical thinking skills." Therefore, conditional inference is part of critical thinking skills by which the student follows the process of making conclusions from the premise. In this process, a conditional inference holds true when the consequent can be inferred from the antecedent or when the antecedent provides a reason to accept the consequent.

3.1.5. Assumptions

The interview was also utilized to gain pertinent data on conditional assumptions. The respondents revealed that conditional sentences show a consequence under the assumption of an antecedent. The antecedent is the clause that comes after "if," and the consequent is the clause that comes after "then." Besides, S1 revealed that "the zero conditional is used to point out assumptions or beliefs that are accepted as true without evidence or justification." Additionally, S9 depicted that "identifying assumptions in conditional sentences can develop critical thinking skills because it helps to improve understanding, avoid biases, develop better arguments, and evaluate the strength, validity, and relevance of reasoning."

3.1.6. Deductions

Based on the interview, the students responded that conditional sentences can provide a chance to start with a general statement or hypothesis and then draw a specific conclusion that follows, which means deduction. With regard to this, S6 revealed that "…conditional sentences help our skills of deductive reasoning. For instance, if I have a meeting at 4:00 AM and it takes 30 minutes to arrive there, I will leave at 3:30 AM. In this sense, deductive reasoning points out a certain requirement

that must be required or fulfilled, or in the above scenario, it is implied that if I become late, I will miss the meeting. Thus, I am expected to begin my journey earlier than the meeting time. The respondents further argued that deductive reasoning is used with established principles or laws. It is also used in academic contexts and everyday life. Deductive reasoning helps to draw specific conclusions from general premises; verify the truth of the premises and the logical coherence of the conclusion; avoid logical fallacies; recognize the limits of deduction; observe everything around you, including small details that might go unnoticed; and ask questions for better understanding.

3.1.7. Interpreting

In the interview, the majority of the students responded that conditional sentences can help to assign meaning or significance to information learned. With conditional sentences, it is possible to categorize, decode significance, and clarify meaning. Thus, conditionals help to examine something carefully; draw conclusions based on experience; examine evidence to make a judgment; and explain or present a rationale to help understand how or why something occurs. Interpreting conditional sentences includes identifying the condition and the result. The condition is the part of the sentences that sets up the situation and is often introduced by 'if' or 'unless.' The result is the part of the sentence that marks what will happen if the condition occurs. Conditional sentences are a type of complex sentence that describes a hypothetical situation and its possible consequences. There are different forms of conditional sentences that employ different tenses to express various meanings. The zero conditional talks about general truth; the type one tells about a probability.

3.1.8. Analyzing

The students were asked whether the skill of analyzing is supported by conditional sentences in the interview. Many of the participants responded that analysis is a key part of critical thinking skills, which is the ability to objectively examine information and draw conclusions. Analysis incorporates examining information, i.e., carefully analyzing a problem or text, understanding meaning, making sense of information, explaining its implications to others, and drawing conclusions or reaching well-reasoned conclusions based on evidence. S7 revealed that "…to make

analysis, conditional sentences help more because they help to create students' reasoning of information learned in the class." To make analysis through conditional sentences, it is necessary to follow various steps. Students must focus on the structure because conditional sentences have two clauses: the 'if' clause (subordinate clause) and the 'main' clause (result clause). The 'if' clause contains the conditions or premises, and the 'main' clause contains the result. There are different types of conditional sentences, including future, present, and past. Conditional sentences are used to make promises, predictions, and threats.

3.2. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the interplay between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills. 46 freshman students from Salale University took part in the current study. The conditional sentences test, the critical thinking skills test, and the interview were used to collect data. The analyzed data showed that students' conditional sentence skills and critical thinking skills showed a positive correlation. Besides, the data gained from the interview showed that conditional sentences supported the students with the skills of making inferences, assumptions, and deductions and of interpreting and analyzing. The above finding is consistent with Quelhas & Byrne (2003), Ragni & Knauff (2013), Rips & Edwards (2013) that the conditional sentence was effective in developing students' skills of interpreting. It supports the students in assigning meaning or significance to information learned. With conditional sentences, it is possible to categorize, decode significance, and clarify meaning. Conditionals help to examine something carefully, draw conclusions based on experience, examine evidence to make a judgment, and explain or present a rationale to help understand how or why something occurs. A conditional sentence is used to develop language students' understanding of the text via guessing and inferring the meaning (Santamaıa, Espino & Byrne, 2005; Sellen, Oaksford & Gray, 2005). It is further used to assure the coherence of ideas; thus, semantic and logical connectives are employed to increase students' comprehension of the message. Besides, it shows the central aspect of interpretations and helps to relate the students' pre-existing knowledge of the language with the current one, pointing out the reasons associated and background for reasoning (Rips & Edwards, 2013).

Furthermore, conditional sentences can support the students to examine information, understand meaning, or make sense of information and explain its implications to others, and draw conclusions or reach well-reasoned conclusions based on evidence. Conditional sentences help to make

analysis; conditional sentences help more because they help to create students' reasoning of information learned in the class. This means conditionals can empower EFL students' skills of analyzing, conceptualizing, and synthesizing the English lessons. Regular practice of conditional sentences in EFL classes is found effective in creating learners' engagement in a task of analyzing, conceptualizing, criticizing, and guessing the meaning (Quelhas & Byrne, 2003; Ragni & Knauff, 2013). English students may not be able to express their ideas easily because of their limited English grammatical knowledge. Conditional sentences express possibilities, hypotheses, and consequences (Santamaria, Espino & Byrne, 2005). Besides, conditional sentences support the students' prediction of the content or reality, planning, and conjecture rather than paying a mere focus on what is said (Sellen, Oaksford & Gray, 2005; Rips & Edwards, 2013). Conditional sentences show the cause and effect or temporal relationship between two events, and this assures the students' engagement in tasks or activities that require the skills of judgment or assessment (Ragni, Eichhorn & Kern-Isberner, 2016).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusions

The basic aim of the current study was to examine the interplay between conditional sentences and critical thinking skills among freshman university students at Salale University. The findings of the study revealed that there is a positive correlation between students' knowledge of conditional sentences and critical thinking skills. Strong test-retest reliabilities were demonstrated by the two tests. The Pearson correlation coefficient over the two tests (the conditional sentences test and the critical thinking skills test) was $r = .949$, $p = .001$, which is found a high degree of correlation between the conditional sentences test and the critical thinking skills test. Besides, the freshman students at Salale University demonstrated a high level of grammatical knowledge and critical thinking skills. Data gained from semi-structured interviews showed that the students' conditional sentence knowledge is correlated with the critical thinking skills of making inferences, assumptions, and deductions; interpreting; and analyzing. Conditional sentences supported the students' skills of making an inference or logical conclusion or a reasonable guess based on evidence and prior knowledge. The conditional sentence is used to point out assumptions or beliefs that are accepted as true without evidence or justification. Students were favored by the conditional

sentences to develop deductive reasoning to draw specific conclusions from general premises, verify the truth of the premises and the logical coherence of the conclusion, avoid logical fallacies, recognize the limits of deduction, observe everything around them, and ask questions for better understanding. Conditional sentences can support the students in examining information, understanding meaning or making sense of information, explaining its implications to others, and drawing conclusions or reaching well-reasoned conclusions based on evidence. Finally, this finding will help students with a problem of critical thinking skills in the EFL context.

4.2. Recommendations

To develop university students' critical thinking skills, English instructors are expected to integrate, provide, and activate their students' skills of thinking critically with conditional sentences. English instructors should be creative and skillful in using activities or tasks that activate students' critical thinking. At the same time, the activities or tasks should be prepared with a lower and higher thinking level of students, and it should enhance their skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creativity in the target language. The teaching material or module should incorporate relevant or sufficient tasks, exercises, and activities that boost students' critical thinking and language achievement. Otherwise, students' critical thinking skills and language competency cannot be achieved in EFL classes.

Declaration of competing interest

The author of this research declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Consent

All procedures undertaken during data collection involved obtaining legal consent from the University and participants. Besides, all informants' identity was kept confidential, and literatures used were dully acknowledged.

Data Availability

Data will be made available upon request from corresponding author.

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