

Research paper

The Homogenizing Power of "Critical Thinking" in Non-Western Higher Education: Reconceptualizing Agency and the Right to Be Uncritical

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking (CT) has been integrated into educational systems worldwide. However, Western-oriented approaches and tools may contradict students' cultural and educational backgrounds, especially in non-Western and non-English-speaking countries. To assess how CT is defined, fostered, and evaluated in non-Western higher education, a scoping review of 17 articles published mostly between 2020–2024 was conducted. The findings show that CT knowledge originating in the West threatens indigenous knowledge structures and collaborative learning methods, whereas its application in contemporary classrooms often risks being more homogeneous than empowering. Thus, by pushing CT as a universal ideal, the education industry risks imposing a standardized way of thinking, thereby potentially marginalising alternative cultural, philosophical, and epistemological traditions. Overall, this study demonstrates the need for non-Westernising critical research and culturally sensitive strategies to develop a global CT paradigm. Extending beyond CT, this article introduces the right to be uncritical as an ethically grounded and context-sensitive response to sustained institutional pressure. Rather than positioning uncriticality as a cognitive deficit or pedagogical failure, the study conceptualizes it as a deliberate and responsible stance that calls for the careful reconsideration of Western educational approaches whose uncritical adoption may undermine local pedagogies, knowledge systems, and cultural practices.

Keywords: critical thinking, english hegemony, western epistemologies, neoliberalism

Contemporary scholarship on the global dominance, or hegemony, of English reveals the myriad ways in which this dominance contributes to the homogenization of epistemologies, approaches, and ways of knowing across educational settings across the world, as well as the erasure, displacement, and marginalization of indigenous and regional languages and ways of knowing (Tsuda, 2023). In the context of globalization and neoliberal capitalism, proficiency in English has become synonymous with academic and professional success, compelling students in countries in which English is not the dominant language

to engage in English language learning to become competitive with other learners in the global marketplace. Scholars have pointed out how the deep entanglement of English proficiency and professional success is deeply intertwined with contemporary neoliberal capitalist approaches to education and labor in the context of globalization (Block et al., 2012; Phillipson, 2008). These neoliberal approaches to education favor competition over collaboration, as well as individualism and privatization over collective orientations of caring for communities and the planet. However, neoliberalism is not merely an assemblage of economic values and beliefs rooted in free markets, entrepreneurship, and privatization; as Harvey (2005) points out, neoliberalism has become an organizing principle of how many people across the globe interpret and navigate the world.

The logics of neoliberalism also shape motivations to learn English, as neoliberal discourses and ideologies transform individuals who work hard on their English proficiency into “a better form of human capital through increasing his/her formal or measurable competence in English” (Warriner, 2016, p. 495). However, linguistic homogenization not only disadvantages those who are less proficient in English but also reinforces Western epistemological dominance, shaping students' thinking to prioritize Western reasoning and problem-solving over indigenous intellectual traditions. Homogeneity can be defined as the standardization of thought into a single Western style that ignores socio-culturally specific practices. This subjugation - and at times erasure - of indigenous intellectual traditions and ways of knowing in favor of Western knowledge traditions contributes to the loss of identities, heritage languages, and values, as well as to further disparities between those who are already in power and those who have been disenfranchised by European colonialism (Guo & Beckett, 2007).

One central educational concept and measure of student preparation is the concept of critical thinking (CT), which is increasingly taken up in educational settings worldwide (Davies & Barnett, 2015; Thorndahl & Stentoft, 2020). After initially becoming central to K-18 and higher education in the United States during the 1970s (Facione, 1990), CT has now been recognized internationally, with applications across various fields. Furthermore, its importance remains undiminished, despite the lack of universally accepted definitions (Davies, 2015; Moore, 2011). Ennis (1987) defines CT as “reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 10), while Facione (1990) describes it as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which judgment is based” (p. 3). However, even during its rise in Western educational settings, scholars pointed out the complexities of adopting and assessing a “skill” or “skills” without clear definitions and boundaries. For example, McPeck (1990) critiques general applications of critical thinking, as “there are almost as many kinds of critical thinking as there are different kinds of things to think about” (p. 10). Given the definitional complexities, some scholars argue that CT can be considered from several perspectives. Framed from the socially active perspective, CT scholarship focuses on the personal qualities and characteristics of those involved, promoting respect for others' viewpoints, open-mindedness, and education (Facione, 1990; Lewis & Smith, 1993).

Given the evidence-based positive impact of CT, the desire to foster CT has become a core objective and pedagogical strategy in many educational contexts. In Western educational systems, CT is considered essential to encourage understanding diverse perspectives among students, prepare them for global careers, and enable them to meet international academic standards (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Biesta et al., 2015; Larson et al., 2024; Su, 2024). The pursuit of CT in Western-based pedagogies has led to the implicit goal of applying it globally with the apparent rationale of applying CT to foster a uniform global approach to education. While some consider CT an essential skill, how and why it is taken up often contributes to the entrenching of neoliberal practices, in which students are considered consumers and education and “skills” become primarily means of creating value for the individual, rather than the value of “democracy or civilization, or simply being educated people” (Giroux, 2002, p. 643). Creating a standardized educational framework that diminishes local knowledge systems, cultural practices, and diverse epistemologies can be seen as an extension of neoliberal pushes for globalization that decenter the power of individual states and regions in favor of creating a global marketplace (Kotz, 2002). However, this standardization contributes to an educational landscape that marginalizes forms of intellectual engagement that are not aligned with the

objectives of neoliberalism, thereby excluding valuable local perspectives (Omodan, 2024) and further contributing to the marginalization of non-dominant languages and ways of knowing.

One significant force driving this homogenization is the global adoption of standardized benchmarks, such as high-stakes English proficiency assessments (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS) or global university ranking systems. These frameworks prioritize skills like linear analytical reasoning and individualistic critique, which reflect Western academic norms. However, they fail to account for cultural differences in learning styles and intellectual traditions. In many non-Western societies, for example, collective decision-making and respect for authority are core values, which conflict with the Western emphasis on individual critique and self-directed inquiry. As a result, students from collectivist cultures may struggle with assessments that favour individualistic modes of thinking, creating an educational environment that feels disconnected from their cultural realities.

One of the challenges hindering the transformation of CT in non-Western educational contexts is their reliance on Western theories and models, particularly neoliberal ones (Kubota, 2023). Such dependence results in a failure to recognize or incorporate local contexts into CT and teacher agency (Chagalakonda, 2024). The consequent cultural friction between Western-centered theories and frameworks, on the one hand, and non-Western research and educational settings, on the other, may inhibit fostering teacher agency and critical inquiry. Scholars who investigate non-Western settings should aim to resolve this friction through both the promotion of contextually suitable approaches to critical inquiry and the acknowledgment of the right to avoid critical orientations as a valid expression of agency. From the standpoint of this framework, agency is the capacity of individuals (e.g., students and teachers) to act with independence, exercise informed decisions, and determine how, when, and whether a critical orientation is ethically and pedagogically appropriate (Duff, 2012; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019). Employing the right to avoid a critical orientation does not indicate passivity or insufficiency; instead, it is a reflection of adequate empowerment, autonomy, and capacity not only to challenge externally imposed epistemic norms but also to safeguard local pedagogies, cultural priorities, and relational learning approaches. It is possible to understand the right to avoid a critical orientation as a student's intentional non-participation in the critical thinking process, which is an act of agency that researchers frequently overlook (particularly those operating in non-Western settings). Performative, visible data such as hand-raising, continuous output, and verbal debates are privileged by neoliberal educational metrics, to the degree that Western pedagogical frameworks treat speech as evidence of learning; in this way, such frameworks reflexively view a silent student as a "lack of data" or "inability to understand." Although this silent agency unfolds directly within the teacher's view, the diagnostic instruments available to teachers cannot detect it. Contemporary research tends to attribute a lack of "growth" to institutional failure or inadequate teacher training. By contrast, this research suggests that students frequently do not receive permission from institutions to decide on silence as an acceptable stance. Scholars seldom regard non-participation as a strategic decision (i.e., one made for friction avoidance and identity safeguarding), centering instead only on accounting for how students have "failed" to achieve critical thinking standards.

From this perspective, recognizing the right to adhere to local and regional cultural norms and values becomes an ethically grounded response to assessment regimes that reward standardized critical performances while marginalising alternative epistemic orientations. The right to be uncritical is not an argument for passive learning or the erasure of critical inquiry. Rather, it constitutes a direct critique of hegemonic critical thinking specifically, institutional frameworks that equate critical capacity solely with Western, individualistic, and performative displays of verbal critique.

The research questions: (1) How is critical thinking conceptualized and implemented in non-Western higher education contexts, and in what ways do Western and neoliberal frameworks shape this implementation? and (2) What challenges do teachers, students, and institutions face when adapting critical thinking pedagogies and assessments to local cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical contexts?

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we employed a scoping review design. According to Mays et al. (2001), the primary aim of a scoping review is “to rapidly map the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available” (p. 194). We adopted this design because it allows researchers to identify and summarize the literature on a topic, regardless of the study design. Arksey and O’Malley (2005) outlined four main reasons for conducting a scoping review: to (a) examine the extent and nature of research activity; (b) summarize and disseminate research findings; (c) determine whether a systematic review is needed; and (d) identify gaps in the literature.

We selected studies for inclusion based on five predefined criteria: context, population, publication type, timeframe, and access model. For context, we included studies situated within non-Western higher education institutions. Regarding publication type, we included only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English. The 2020–2024 timeframe was chosen to ensure the review captures the 'post-pandemic' reality of higher education and the specific epistemic challenges introduced by generative AI. Open-access articles were prioritised to ensure that the research findings were accessible, transparent, and inclusive. These two events have completely changed how students are expected to demonstrate critical thought, making a contemporary focus essential to understanding today's classroom dynamics. By focusing on open-access publications, we aimed to remove barriers to knowledge sharing, particularly for scholars, educators, and institutions in resource-constrained settings. All articles were open-access except for *The Development of Critical Thinking: What University Students Have to Say* (Lee et al., 2021) and *Pedagogies for Critical Thinking at Universities in Kenya, Ghana, and Botswana* (Schendel et al., 2020) (see Table 1). Owing to the high costs of open-access publishing to researchers, which particularly affects those from less wealthy countries, there are few open-access journal articles that report research in non-Western countries. However, non-open-access articles were included when they offered valuable insights from underrepresented countries or contexts, ensuring that the review captured a comprehensive and diverse perspective.

To operationalize this scoping review, our procedures followed the established five-stage framework by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) and PRISMA-ScR guidelines. Accordingly, for our literature search, we identified the following keywords: “critical thinking” and “higher education”. These keywords, along with relevant synonyms, were combined to form the following search string used across various databases: “critical thinking” AND (“higher education” OR “tertiary education” OR university). Second, to ensure both the breadth and depth of our review, we selected eight databases and platforms for our search and limited our results to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English. The databases chosen were the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, Taylor & Francis, Emerald Publishing, EbscoHost, ProQuest, Springer, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Wiley Online Library. Third, retrieved records underwent a two-phase screening process: an initial title/abstract screen followed by a full-text evaluation against our predefined eligibility criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) outlines the systematic approach used to identify, screen, and select studies for this scoping review on critical thinking in non-Western higher education. In this study, 17 research articles, mostly published between 2020 and 2024, that were directly related to the concept of CT in the context of higher education in non-Western countries were reviewed and synthesized throughout the paper. To analyze the selected studies, we employed a qualitative content analysis model by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), three-phase qualitative content analysis framework: preparation, organizing, and reporting. This model allowed us to identify recurring patterns, themes, and constructs while remaining sensitive to the contextual differences across non-Western higher education systems. Also, we conducted the analysis manually, following an inductive process of reading, coding, and categorizing themes.

The analysis addresses the following key areas: teacher agency, critical literacy, the right to be uncritical, and inclusive policies and institutional frameworks. To achieve transformative pedagogy, it is essential that critical literacy and teacher agency are inclusive and attuned to local and cultural contexts rather than restricted to supposedly universalised CT skills. Critical literacy builds on CT by addressing not only individual reasoning, but also the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge. This approach aligns with Kubow’s (2019) emphasis on incorporating local cultural contexts when studying social phenomena, and advocating for a shift from restrictive Western-centric theories to neoliberal models. By fostering critical

literacy, this study highlights the potential for integrating local knowledge, multilingual practices, and community-driven methods to meaningfully empower teachers and students. The themes of teacher agency and critical literacy reveal how CT is practiced in classrooms, while the problems with Western models and the need for cultural relevance highlight its ideological framing. Together, these themes show that CT must be reconceptualized in ways that empower educators and learners within their own cultural contexts. By challenging the commodification of education, this study promotes the decolonisation of pedagogical practices that foster critical literacy and transformative actions in non-Western settings. Additionally, it critiques the global standardization of CT, which risks homogenizing diverse cultural and epistemological traditions, and aligns education with neoliberal agendas focused on market demands. Emphasizing cultural responsiveness, this study supports tailored educational practices that respect and leverage students' cultural backgrounds, thereby fostering intellectual diversity and creating an inclusive learning environment.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram

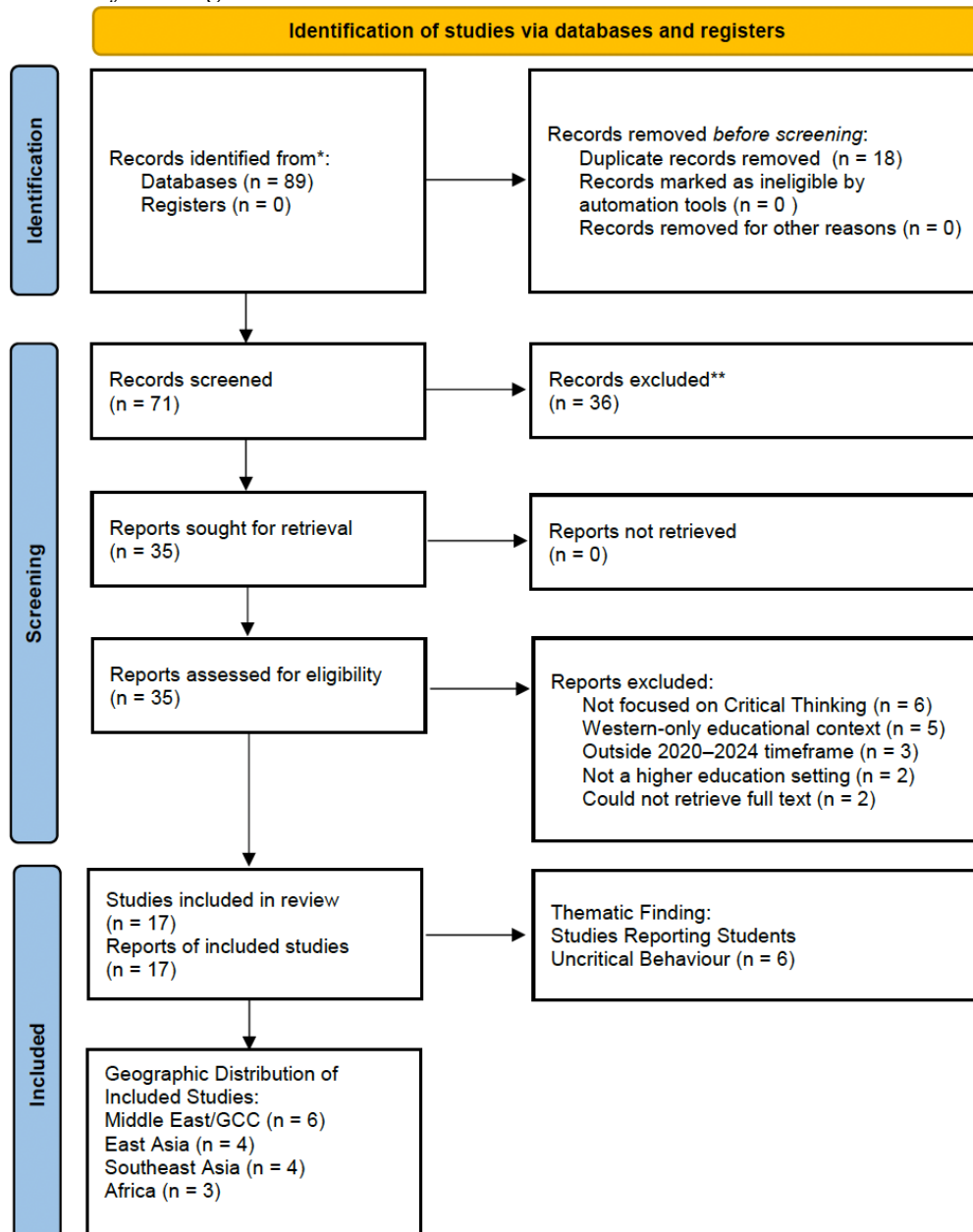


Table 1

Critical thinking (CT) in the non-western context

Title	Context of Application
The Development of Critical Thinking: What University Students Have to Say (Lee et al., 2021) (Not open access)	Higher education context, focusing on university students globally (Singapore)
Unveiling Critical Thinking Pedagogy: Classroom-Based Assessment Strategies in Higher Education (Tam & Tien, 2024)	These students were in their first year of education at Swinburn Vietnam. This program is part of an effort to embed CT into higher education curricula while aligning it with the cultural, educational, and professional demands of the local context.
Critical Thinking in Higher Education: Faculty and Student Perspectives within an Outcome-Based Framework in Oman (Syahrin et al., 2024)	The study is set in Oman's higher education context, involving 74 faculty members and 877 students.
Promoting L2 Learners' Critical Thinking Skills: The Role of Social Constructivism in Reading Class (Le & Nguyen, 2024)	Vietnamese higher education in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.
Developing Project-Based Learning-Based eBook "Critical and Creative Reading" to Improve Students' Critical Thinking Skills (Himawan et al., 2024)	University students enrolled in critical and creative reading courses across six universities in Indonesia.
West Africa: Media Literacy and Critical Thinking (Mustapha et al., 2024)	Survey-based quantitative method with 245 students from multiple West African higher education institutions.
Critical Thinking in Taiwan's Reflective Writing (Yeh et al., 2022)	Reflective writing tasks in EFL courses at Taiwanese universities. The study was conducted with 60 university students in Taiwan.
Biochemistry Education Using the Socratic Method, Healthcare Majors (Ho et al., 2023)	Healthcare education, including medical, pharmaceutical, and biotechnology students during a biochemistry laboratory course (Taiwan).
Pedagogies for Critical Thinking at Universities in Kenya, Ghana, and Botswana (Schendel et al., 2020) (Not open access)	Higher education institutions across Kenya, Ghana, and Botswana. Focuses on pedagogical practices in diverse academic disciplines.
Perceived Barriers to Critical Thinking Development in Moroccan Universities (Aouaf et al., 2023)	EFL education in two Moroccan state universities. Focuses on barriers students face in developing CT in academic settings.
The Influence of Using Smart Technologies for Sustainable Development in Higher Education Institutions (Shishakly et al., 2024)	Applied in higher education through the introduction of the Technology-Integrated Framework of Educational Sustainable Development (TIFESD), focusing on factors such

	as green campuses, smart education, smart campuses, and sustainability-driven curricula to foster a sustainable mindset among students in the United Arab Emirates.
Ethno-ECLIPSE Learning Model (Indonesia) (Priyambodo et al., 2023)	Applied within science education using Ethno-ECLIPSE to explore collaborative and cultural contexts for problem-solving. Targeted biology students from various universities in Indonesia
Impact of Social Media Use on Critical Thinking Ability of University Students (Cheng et al., 2022)	Conducted within a university setting, the study focuses on how students interact with social media and its implications for their academic and personal growth. The study is situated within the broader conversation about digital literacy and the role of technology in education (China).
The Impact of Problem-Solving Programs (Elbyaly & Elfeky, 2023)	Implemented in higher education at Najran University, KSA the first level of the Department of Curricula and Teaching Methods in the College of Education
Chinese University Students' Growth in Critical Thinking: Accounting for School Transition and Selection Effects (Luo et al., 2024)	Data from the National Assessment of Collegiate Capacity (NACC) in China,
Emotional Intelligence and its Relation to Critical Thinking Skills and Self-esteem of Nurse Students (Ahmed et al., 2024)	All female third-year nursing students affiliated to the General Secretariat for Mental Health, Ministry of Health in Egypt.
Correlation Between Critical Thinking Dispositions and Self-esteem in Nursing Students (Vasli et al., 2023)	First- to fourth-year undergraduate students enrolled at Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran, and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

FINDINGS

In the following sections, the findings are integrated and analyzed under four interrelated themes. This study challenges the idea that CT is a universal solution or a single pillar that can address all educational challenges. Instead, it calls for a more open and inclusive way of thinking that values diverse perspectives, respects cultural differences, and extends beyond the confines of Western-centric frameworks.

Teacher agency

Teacher agency has emerged as a crucial determinant of whether CT is effectively integrated into classroom practice. Several studies (Lee et al., 2021; Tam & Tien, 2024) have shown that when instructors actively model critical inquiry through reflective questioning, structured debates, or student-led presentations, students' analytical capacities increase. Equally significant is how institutional structures empower or restrict teachers' capacities to adapt curricula and assessments to local contexts. For example, Tam and Tien (2024) reported that teachers who employed classroom-based assessments, such as reflective writing and real-world case studies, cultivated students' abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. In these instances, teacher autonomy was relatively high. Teachers were not merely "deliverers" of knowledge but rather "facilitators", adapting tasks to the sociocultural realities of their students. From the perspective

of the right to be uncritical, such facilitation also involves teachers' ethical judgment about when critical engagement should be foregrounded and when alternative, less confrontational or more supportive forms of learning are pedagogically appropriate. In this sense, teacher agency includes not only the capacity to promote critical thinking, but also the authority to act as mediators who suspend or soften critical demands in response to students' linguistic, emotional, or cultural readiness.

However, not all educational contexts offer autonomy. Studies by Aouaf et al. (2023) and Syahrin et al. (2024) documented that faculty in non-Western contexts often face top-down curriculum mandates or large class sizes, which constrain the implementation of dialogic student-centred strategies. For instance, in Aouaf et al. (2023), Moroccan university instructors cited rigid syllabi and high-stakes standardized tests as major barriers to nurturing CT in ways that are supportive of learners' development of deep, multifaceted understandings. Amghar (2026) locates this context, as well as the lack of human and material resources in Morocco's pursuit of and dependency on "neoliberal social, socioeconomic policies" (p.12). This shift reduces educators to content deliverers, rather than facilitators of critical inquiry, preventing the development of more dynamic, context-sensitive teaching practices.

Le and Nguyen's (2024) research drew attention to the ethical significance of the right to avoid a critical orientation. The imposition of a critical outlook in pedagogical settings risks transforming a learner-centered strategy into a source of academic anxiety, as illustrated by students who may feel compelled to ask questions that did not occur naturally. Acknowledgement of this right implies that teachers should exercise agency not solely through the promotion of critical thinking but also through discerning when not to emphasize it. For students who communicate unreadiness or express a preference for remaining within a supportive learning mode characterized by less confrontation, a teacher's persistent emphasis on evaluative performance can overlook the student's existing emotional or linguistic boundaries. To accept the right to avoid a critical orientation is to reposition the teacher from being an enforcer of critical thinking to being a mediator who must determine when to lessen or avoid critical demands based on a student's cultural background or emotional state.

Additionally, the study identified that the student's emotional landscape constitutes a vital boundary within which teacher agency must operate. Ahmed et al. (2024) highlighted that nursing students with limited emotional intelligence training struggled with self-esteem and CT, which impacted their ability to manage academic and clinical challenges. While the study does not focus on teachers, it suggests that emotional intelligence plays a key role in developing professional competence. Insisting on critical engagement with emotional resources risks becoming exclusionary rather than empowering. Recognizing the right to be uncritical allows educators to prioritise emotional security and relational learning before demanding evaluative or critical performances, particularly in high-stakes or professional programs.

Critical literacy

Critical literacy strengthens CT by integrating social, cultural, and power-awareness dimensions into how students engage with texts or media in ways that question authorial intent, cultural assumptions, and power structures behind information dissemination. Critical literacy is regarded as synonymous with critical thinking in certain studies. In Le and Nguyen's (2024) research, the authors highlighted an explicit connection between authorial motive i.e., an author's views or purposes and textual bias expressed as opinions vs. facts in their assessment of critical thinking. These researchers operationalized critical thinking as a skill that can be rapidly developed within a constructivist model. In their study, critical thinking is regarded as a group of skills associated with reading and writing, which activities such as critical engagement, reflection, and active learning can enhance. In an EFL context in Vietnam, the authors demonstrated how collaborative reading and discussion activities improve students' awareness of contextual interpretation, textual bias, and authorial motive. A similar finding was reported by Himawan et al. (2024), where the researchers investigated project-based learning eBooks that motivated students to interpret and synthesize reading materials, thereby integrating critical literacy into daily classroom activities. The authors reported that creative thinking emerged when students applied their ideas to activities

involving the reproduction of text. In literacy theory, the act of text reproduction, or assembling/compiling a new text from existing ideas, is an act of reconstructing meaning.

Mustapha et al. (2024) stated that media literacy and CT should be integrated into the curriculum not as separate, standalone subjects. Instead, they should be woven into different areas of study in a coordinated and interdisciplinary manner. This approach ensures that students can apply these skills in real-world contexts, thereby making the learning process meaningful and impactful. Critical literacy has been associated with real-life problem-solving, as Mustapha et al. (2024), showed how the use of media literacy in West African classrooms assisted learners in distinguishing between credible and non-credible sources of information and their effects on society. Its application in real life enables the transfer of CT from the theoretical realm to the practical one, as well as to the democratic process and moral decision-making.

By integrating emotional resilience, students are better prepared to handle the emotional challenges that arise from environmental issues, such as weather variations or pandemics. This combination of CT and emotional strength empowers students to remain engaged, proactive, and make informed decisions while managing the stress and uncertainty that often accompany global environmental challenges. Elbyaly and Elfeky (2023) showed that CT is most effectively developed through a clear, structured, and stepwise approach. Their study highlighted how a problem-solving program has a powerful impact on improving students' CT by combining teamwork, practical real-world tasks, and culturally relevant activities. Tam and Tien's (2024) research operationalized critical thinking at the performance level, where critical thinking was identified through active participation in peer reviews and debates. The authors assessed critical thinking performance using seven student-centered methods: reflective writing, peer reviews, teamwork projects, case studies, mini-research projects, creative idea labs, and structured debates.

Critical literacy is not just learning how to think but also learning how to question, interpret, and act. Subsequent educational innovations could embed CT in literacy practices by extending discussion into meaning-making and text production, to ensure that CT is contextualised and not trained in isolation.

The right to be uncritical

The behavior of a student who appears resistant or “uncritical” within traditional higher education settings may, in fact, manifest a highly intentional and agentic decision. While such a student may understand the significance of critical thinking and its value, they may avoid participation in a system whose application they believe evaluates them ineffectively. Syahrin et al. (2024) reported that students place importance on critical thinking in a theoretical sense, but in practice, they regard the application to high-pressure examinations as challenging or inadequately assessed. Additionally, students exhibit resistance when traditional examinations are replaced by constructed-response questions associated with greater cognitive demands.

This sense of structural imposition emerges clearly in qualitative narratives. In Le and Nguyen's (2024) research, participant 8 reported being “forced” to produce questions despite feeling they did not want to ask anything, which resulted in a personal “struggle.” Participant 2 similarly characterized the method as “quite new,” and described themselves as not having “fully exploited the benefits” of the acquisition method. Their decision to combine learning with traditional self-study, as opposed to entering into full engagement with the classroom's critical discourse, reflects a partial rejection of the “posed” critical thinking process. Although Schendel et al.'s (2020) research accounts for the low rate of critical thinking by referencing institutional barriers, e.g., inconsistency in teaching orientations, large class sizes, and misaligned assessments, the authors underemphasized the critical function of student agency and positionality. These researchers maintained that student progress relies on a shift from a “knowledge transmission” approach to a “learning facilitation” approach, yet they neglected to consider that a student's apparent resistance may constitute an intentional decision. In environments characterized by significant pressure, as well as linguistically overwhelming settings, students may exercise the right to avoid a critical orientation as a strategic means to safeguard their cognitive resources and identity. This indicates that the “problem” is not simply an absence of effective pedagogical approaches, but rather a student's intentional decision to avoid

participation in a system that they regard as assessing them ineffectively or functioning as a homogenizing force.

Tam and Tien's (2024) study aligns with a neoliberal narrative of success, in which critical thinking is regarded as a commodity to be achieved through particular techniques. The neatness of such a framing overlooks the complex reality of epistemic resistance. Yeh et al.'s (2022) study found that 88% of participants exhibited heightened patience, while 77% described a greater appreciation of life. Between 12% and 23% of students, however, did not report these shifts. It is common practice within the literature to exclude such minority outcomes from analysis. In failing to perform the expected transformation, these students enact a form of epistemic agency that the success-focused narrative of the study neither documents nor values.

Luo et al.'s (2024) study indicated that STEM majors do not necessarily excel in critical thinking; on the contrary, they scored, on average, 0.31 points lower in their senior year than in their first year. This pattern indicates that, despite their high capability, these students may be exercising a strategic choice to remain uncritical, a choice made to navigate a high-pressure system, conserve cognitive resources, and minimize friction with the curriculum. Additionally, Mustapha et al. (2024) found that critical thinking skills function as a mediator. That is, a media literacy course does not, in isolation, directly counter misinformation; rather, it operates through enhancing students' critical thinking, which in turn enables them to address misinformation. The Adjusted R-squared value for the relationship between critical thinking and misinformation was only .116. By implication, critical thinking skills account for only approximately 11% of the variance in whether a student detects misinformation. Consequently, 88.4% of the factors shaping whether a student identifies or shares misinformation remain unaccounted for by the study's variables. The researchers highlighted this limitation, noting that their propositions were only partially supported. The authors did not pursue further investigation of the unexplained 88%, which constitutes a substantial portion of the variance.

Inclusive policies and institutional frameworks

Transitioning from teaching to policy, several studies highlighted the importance of the institutional contexts within which CT happens, arguing that policies that are sensitive to language, class, and the local employment market are more likely to support rich CT environments. Focusing on Oman, Syahrin et al. (2024) found that CT embedded within a range of outcome-based frameworks in line with the National Vision 2040 was more effective in engaging Omani university students because of its congruency at the institutional level. Similarly, Schendel et al. (2020) found that institutions must provide solid support for CT initiatives to be successfully implemented and sustained in Kenya, Ghana, and Botswana. This support includes investing in faculty development, offering opportunities for faculty members to collaborate across different subjects, and giving teachers the time and resources they need to reflect on and improve their teaching. Without this support, efforts to promote CT may not be effective or long term.

Shishakly et al. (2024) indicated the need to address digital literacy and accessibility challenges to make CT education more inclusive in UAE universities. They noted that students who struggle with internet access or lack strong English skills—the main language of instruction—are at risk of being left behind. To address this, adopting inclusive digital strategies, such as using smart technologies and creating personalised learning environments, was recommended to ensure that all students, regardless of their technical or language abilities, can fully participate in and benefit from sustainability-focused education.

Similarly, Cheng et al. (2022) found that while social media provides opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop critical literacy, it also presents challenges. Students often struggle to identify credible sources, navigate misinformation, and manage information overload. Without proper guidance, their engagement with social media tends to remain superficial, limiting in-depth critical analysis. The study emphasizes the need for digital literacy training and structured activities to help students evaluate and synthesize information effectively, enabling them to think critically in the digital age. Also, Aouaf et al. (2023) revealed that large classes and an exam-centric culture deny students in Morocco the opportunity to engage in rigorous learning. In these contexts, radical policy changes are needed in the

current assessment regimes, teacher-to-student ratios, and curriculum to enable students to succeed. At the policy level, this raises the ethical question of whether students are ever allowed to disengage, reflect, or withhold critique, particularly in systems where assessment regimes reward constant visible displays of criticality.

DISCUSSION

This paper explores CT in non-Western contexts of learning on a small scale, analyzing its conceptualization, pedagogy, and assessment, particularly considering the impact of neoliberal ideologies. Four themes that have been identified in this study include teacher agency, critical literacy, the right to be uncritical, and Inclusive Policies and Institutional Frameworks. The study indicates that CT in non-Western contexts has been utilized more as an intellectual tool of Western dominance than a tool of empowerment (Canagarajah, 2003). Kubota (2023) argues Western epistemologies continue to predominate in producing and publishing in English, which sidelines non-Western perspectives. This is corroborated in this study, which indicates that CT in non-Western contexts is constructed on Western-centric paradigms, which have little respect for local pedagogy, culture, and language. Besides, as Kubota and Miller (2017) and Kubota (2023) observe, neoliberalism has co-opted critical pedagogy, which is now aimed toward individual achievement in learning rather than toward transforming education, further reinforcing its status as a market commodity rather than an empowerment tool.

CT must not just be employed for intellectual debate but also as a policy change and school reform tool so its broader contribution can be made to society. Le and Nguyen (2024) and Himawan et al. (2024) indicate that critical literacy in such contexts is all about the active reading of the text, in which learners analyze data rather than receive it passively. Mustapha et al. (2024), however, argue against this by insisting that critical literacy must extend beyond classroom contexts and extend its usage to everyday contexts, in which learners employ CT in active ways to address social, political, and economic predicaments. This supports the idea that CT is not a universal skill but something shaped by culture and context, where learners make critical choices in their communities. Within this view, recognizing the right to be uncritical becomes essential, as learners may choose restraint, reflection, or non-engagement as culturally appropriate and ethically grounded responses rather than performative displays of critique. Aligning with the findings of Pennycook (2022), who critiques Western epistemologies in applied linguistics, this study illustrates how Western CT models act as an epistemic tool of dominance, reinforcing univocal forms of reason and discounting culturally situated forms of criticality. For an actual transformation of education, CT must be reconceptualized beyond its marketized orientation, which is situated in culture, language, and social realities. The findings underline the imperative for pedagogy attuned to contexts, which makes learners active, rather than passive, consumers of knowledge and critical change agents in societies.

Teacher agency is not an individual capacity; it is strongly shaped by institution-wide structures, professional discourses, and the broader learning culture. The findings of Aouaf et al. (2023) and Syahrin et al. (2024) suggest that educators face a constraint imposed by prescriptive policy in education, which inhibits them from making autonomous professional judgments. In several cases, institution-wide restraints position educators as policy executors rather than active contributors in pedagogy-related decision-making, inhibiting room for pedagogy-related innovation. Educators who actively debate curricula and pedagogy-related change have a greater possibility of utilizing agency in professional action, as highlighted by Biesta et al. (2015). This resonates with the idea that pedagogy itself can create spaces for agency and innovation. In this sense, debates, case studies based on actual contexts, and reflective writing can be seen as powerful strategies that not only enhance learners' critical thinking but also open room for teachers to exercise professional judgment (Lee et al., 2021; Tam & Tien, 2024). However, Biesta et al. (2015) caution us against a scenario in which educators see themselves as policy executors rather than decision-makers, in which case, room for utilizing pedagogy-related innovation is highly restricted.

Priyambodo et al. (2023) illustrate how ethno-ECLIPSE empowered Indonesian students by interweaving Western scientific paradigms and indigenous ways of knowing, pointing to possibilities for engaging and empowering learners through more pluralistic approaches. Likewise, Yeh et al. (2022) found

that Confucian-value-rooted reflective essays assisted Taiwanese students in developing CT in a manner that also supported social harmony, suggesting that local cultural traditions can be drawn upon to enrich pedagogical practice. However, as Luo et al. (2024) lament, the homogenizing tendencies in education risk marginalizing such efforts, since students from privileged contexts have a greater probability of adopting Western paradigms of CT, thereby displacing other epistemologies. Motha (2020) posits that education and applied linguistics have been shaped by colonial ideologies for decades, reinforcing epistemic dominance that excludes non-Western forms of knowing. This underscores how deeply historical power relations continue to influence present pedagogical practices. In a similar context, McIvor (2020) re-emphasizes that language and knowledge education must take root in local culture, rather than being imposed by universalised expectations, pointing to the importance of grounding critical thinking pedagogy in culturally situated epistemologies. The results of this study affirm the contention that standardized CT paradigms struggle to accommodate the hierarchical, collectivist, and culturally embedded learning practices of many non-Western societies, ultimately reinforcing intellectual dominance rather than inclusive critical thinking.

Additionally, such a sustained reliance on Western-centric modes of assessment, such as standardized testing and checklists, ignores culturally appropriate modes of CT. This exclusion further isolates students who learn through cooperative, tacit, and community-driven ways of knowing (Syahrin et al., 2024). In response to this homogenization, CT pedagogy must embrace contextual adaptation, ensuring that students develop a critical understanding that preserves their respective cultures. The research study shares these anxieties by supporting the adoption of CT teaching methods, which focus on action-based critical investigation of relevant cultural issues instead of abstract reasoning that ignores student experiences. This way, CT can transform into an educational tool that serves transformation as well as pluralism, linguistic diversity, and social justice by understanding the diversity of epistemologies and agency empowerment alongside culturally adapted teaching methods. However, without such adaptations, the continued dominance of Western-centric CT frameworks risks marginalising local ways of thinking and reinforcing the imposition of standardized Western paradigms in non-Western classrooms. Educational researchers should move beyond the homogenizing tendencies of success-oriented metrics and acknowledge that unaccounted-for students constitute a significant locus of epistemic agency rather than merely a statistical deficit. Accurately representing non-Western higher education requires that mainstream scholarship refrain from pathologizing student silence and instead examine it as a purposeful, protective exercise of the right to be uncritical.

Implications

Higher education in non-Western contexts urgently requires a shift away from imported, standardized Western frameworks toward models grounded in local epistemologies and power dynamics. Theoretically, it challenges the uncritical adoption of Western educational frameworks, reframing core academic competencies from standardized, universal skill sets into culturally situated, dynamic practices grounded in local epistemologies and power dynamics. Central to this paradigm shift is legitimizing "the right to be uncritical," which fundamentally reframes student silence, non-engagement, or compliance not through a deficit lens of cognitive incapacity, but as a deliberate, agentic choice by capable learners navigating flawed institutional systems. Evidence from this review demonstrates that student disengagement is often an intentional response to structural imposition and ineffective assessment. Consequently, researchers must explicitly account for silence and non-participation in their methodologies, rather than discarding unengaged or non-conforming outcomes as statistical anomalies. Beyond research design, teachers must cultivate acute pedagogical awareness of this dynamic, recognizing that silence is not a sign of cognitive absence but an expression of epistemic agency. Instructors must act as ethical mediators who discern when to press for critical inquiry and when to prioritize students' emotional security, linguistic readiness, and cultural boundaries. At a structural level, these findings call on higher education policymakers and institutional leaders in non-Western contexts to dismantle rigid, top-down mandates that reduce teachers to passive delivery mechanisms and compel performative compliance from students. Rather than imposing standardized global metrics and restrictive policies that interfere with pedagogical autonomy, institutional

frameworks must preserve space for contextual responsiveness and local ways of knowing. Fostering authentic intellectual engagement requires shifting away from compliance-driven governance and investing in sustainable structural support, including ongoing faculty development, manageable class sizes, cross-disciplinary integration, and equitable digital infrastructure.

Limitations

While this scoping review offers substantive theoretical and empirical insights into CT and student agency in non-Western higher education, several methodological and conceptual limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this scoping review is based on a synthesized corpus of 17 research studies. While this targeted corpus enabled an in-depth, qualitative examination of the literature, the small sample size necessarily limits the broad generalizability of the findings across the vast, diverse spectrum of non-Western higher education systems. Second, in alignment with a commitment to knowledge equity, this scoping review's retrieval strategy prioritized open-access publications. Although this approach ensures broader accessibility, excluding non-open-access studies may have introduced publication bias. Third, grouping diverse geographical and socio-political regions, such as East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, under the overarching label of "non-Western" risks conceptual oversimplification. While these regions often share common structural friction points, such as EMI challenges, grouping them may obscure distinct local cultural, epistemological, and political dynamics unique to each institutional environment.

CONCLUSION

In this scoping review, we explored how CT is conceptualized, taught, and assessed in non-Western higher education contexts, with a particular focus on recent research (primarily from 2020 to 2024). Collectively, the findings of this scoping review affirm that CT is indispensable for navigating the complexities of the modern world; however, it cannot be divorced from the cultural, institutional, and pedagogical ecosystems in which students learn. Pennycook (2022) critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies in applied linguistics, advocating for a more inclusive, decolonial approach. Similarly, this study underscores how the incorporation of CT models for neoliberal principles, such as competition in a global marketplace, obtaining returns on investments for individuals, and pursuing education solely for economic gain, can result in operationalizing CT as an instrument of epistemic dominance, promoting a singular notion of rationality while overlooking culturally embedded forms of critical thinking that may not be aligned with neoliberal values. This study extends the debate by foregrounding teacher agency, assessment practices, and the everyday pedagogical realities in which CT is embedded. In doing so, it introduces a perspective that links the macro-level critique of epistemic dominance with the micro-level struggles of teachers and learners.

This review shows that student silence, strategic non-compliance, or structured withdrawal are active, protective acts of epistemic agency within overwhelming or Western-centric assessment regimes. Educational researchers must look past the homogenizing impulse of success-oriented metrics and recognize that these unaccounted-for students represent a vital site of epistemic agency rather than a statistical deficit. The notion of a plurality of criticalities reminds us that this issue is not confined to CT; it applies to all educational theories borrowed from other cultural contexts, which must be reinterpreted and reshaped rather than uncritically transplanted. Ultimately, the findings call for a shift away from the homogenizing tendencies of neoliberal education. Instead, they promote a vision of education that values pluralism, nurtures intellectual curiosity, and empowers learners to engage critically and empathically with their communities and the world (Canagarajah, 2003). By embracing this transformative approach, educational systems can foster meaningful learning experiences that respect and celebrate diversity while preparing students to address the complexities of a globalised society.

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No ethical approval was required for this study.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

KA: Conceptualization, theoretical development, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, and project coordination. As corresponding author, also responsible for final revisions and manuscript submission; PH: Critical oversight of theoretical development, analysis of English-medium instruction hegemonies, comparative Western/non-Western epistemological discussion, and critical review and editing; TB: Critical analysis of the global CT paradigm's philosophical implications, expert input on cultural and ethical aspects, drafting of culturally sensitive strategies section, and final proofreading.

Data availability

No new data were created or collected in this study.

AI disclosure

The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence or generative tools were used in any part of this work.

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