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LANGUAGE CENTRE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AFFECTIVE CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract:

In today's fast-paced world, especially in professional contexts and for students at the Language Centre, the ability to think critically is extremely important. Despite being recognised as crucial, there is a lack of understanding about how students perceive using affective critical thinking strategies in their future workplaces. This study aims to explore their opinions on how effective past educational methods have been in developing these skills, which is essential for potential changes to the curriculum. The research involved surveying 73 Language Centre students from the National Defence University of Malaysia using a convenience sampling method. The collected data were analysed using various techniques such as descriptive, reliability, inferential, and thematic analyses, employing the SPSS software version 25.0. Descriptive analysis was used to understand respondents' backgrounds, skills, and the relevance of these skills to their jobs. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, and the inferential study employed the Pearson Product Moment correlation to explore the relationship between independent and dependent variables. The findings indicated a link between how students perceive their skills and their importance in their careers. In summary, understanding students' attitudes towards affective critical thinking strategies is crucial for improving educational methods within the Language Centre and beyond. Adapting teaching approaches to meet students' needs could help develop a workforce adept at critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving, which are indispensable in today's rapidly changing professional environment.

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Introduction

The twenty-first century is a fast-changing landscape marked by ongoing technology developments, which makes critical thinking even more important (Mitsea et al., 2021; Supriyatno et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020). Critical thinking is not merely a skill but a powerful cognitive tool (Sinaga et al., 2024; Adhikari, 2023) that allows individuals to effectively navigate the complexities of an information-driven society. Critical thinking involves a multifaceted approach, as scholars like Facione (2011) and Paul and Elder (2006) described, involving the methodical examination and thoughtful assessment of data. Competent critical thinkers can evaluate the reliability of sources, sort through material, and extract significant ideas from deluges of data. Recognising its transformative impact, employers actively seek individuals with strong critical thinking abilities (Karanja, 2021; Polakova et al., 2023) to navigate modern workplace challenges and drive innovation. Furthermore, critical thinking encourages people to analyse their own prejudices and ideas, which in turn promotes intellectual humility and adaptability. In the end, critical thinking transcends conventional bounds and enables people to meaningfully contribute to the evolution of society, making it crucial for personal development (Lukaka, 2023; Tripathy, 2020), professional success (García-Pérez et al., 2021), and a deeper understanding of the world (Winarti et al., 2023).

Critical thinking has been embedded into Malaysia educational system since the early 1990s. In contemporary industries and societies, critical thinking is highly prized as a key skill. Hanif (2017) advocated for the integration of critical thinking skills into pedagogical teaching approaches, particularly tailored for youth education. According to Jalal (2017), to effectively seek employment options in the current world, students must be familiar with critical thinking and learning abilities. Although offering critical thinking as a stand-alone course is not required at the National Defence University, the strategy is to include critical thinking throughout most, if not all, of the university's curricula. For this reason, it would be interesting to find out if students have these abilities and to investigate how they see these abilities helping them in their future careers; hence this study has two (2) research questions as listed below:

RQ1: What are the respondents' perceptions of their own affective critical thinking strategies?
RQ2: What are the respondents' perceptions of the importance of the affective critical thinking strategies in their future employment?

Literature Review

Critical Thinking And Soft Skills

Scholars highlighted the insufficient development of critical thinking among students, urging for its integration into educational curricula. According to Sebastião et al. (2023), "critical thinking" is a soft skill that employers and academics value highly for job advancement. Skills like emotional intelligence, resilience, empathy, creativity, and critical thinking are becoming more and more important in the changing professional landscape to build a competent workforce prepared to face future difficulties (Poláková et al., 2023). Additionally, companies

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simplify their emphasis on soft skills by grouping them together with critical thinking (Sebastião et al., 2023).

Many times, critical thinking is seen as the cornerstone of soft skills. According to Komariah et al. (2023), pupils who acquire critical thinking abilities will flourish academically and, in the workplace, and will therefore no longer be viewed as secondary to professional capabilities. In a world where everything is connected and changing quickly, soft skills are crucial for both professional and personal success. This is so that people can work with others and handle a variety of situations in the workplace and beyond. Soft skills include a spectrum of personal qualities and interpersonal skills (Danao, 2024). Gaining these abilities can result in more fulfilling relationships, greater job opportunities, and an all-around more fulfilling existence (Heine, 2023).

It is said that workers lack soft skills. Davidson (2016) brought attention to the growing challenge that companies around the country confront in separating out exceptional workers from those who only fulfil the minimum requirements because of a deficiency in some characteristics, commonly known as soft skills. His research made use of critical thinking-based guided analysis and suggested instructional recommendations for the development of critical thinking abilities, which can be a useful tool for improving the development of soft skills in instructors and students through literature. Additionally, Deep et al. (2020) asserted the significant role of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), an immersive instructional method promoting critical thinking, in fostering soft skills across various disciplines. Their research found conclusive empirical evidence demonstrating the acquisition of communication, conflict resolution, leadership, and interpersonal skills through PBL. González-Cespón et al. (2024) expressed hope that university education would prioritise student-centred approaches aimed at fostering employment-related competencies, encompassing both academic knowledge and socially relevant skills (soft skills). Finally, Mamleeva (1914) promoted the application of critical thinking to build soft skills through a guided examination of literature based on the discipline. According to all these research, educational institutions have a duty to cultivate and disseminate soft skills, acting as a conduit between graduates and the workforce.

In learning development, Bloom's Taxonomy, developed in the 1950s, outlines these three domains of learning: the Cognitive Domain which involves knowledge and the development of intellectual skills, the Affective Domain: Involves emotions, attitudes, and feelings, and the Psychomotor Domain: Involves physical movement, coordination, and the use of motor skills. Paul and Elder (2006) concentrated on both the cognitive and affective domains in developing the 35 critical thinking strategies, which are recognised as a systematic and disciplined method of thinking. Figure 1 below depicts the nine (9) affective critical thinking strategies and highlights the role of soft skills within the critical thinking framework proposed by Bloom (1956).

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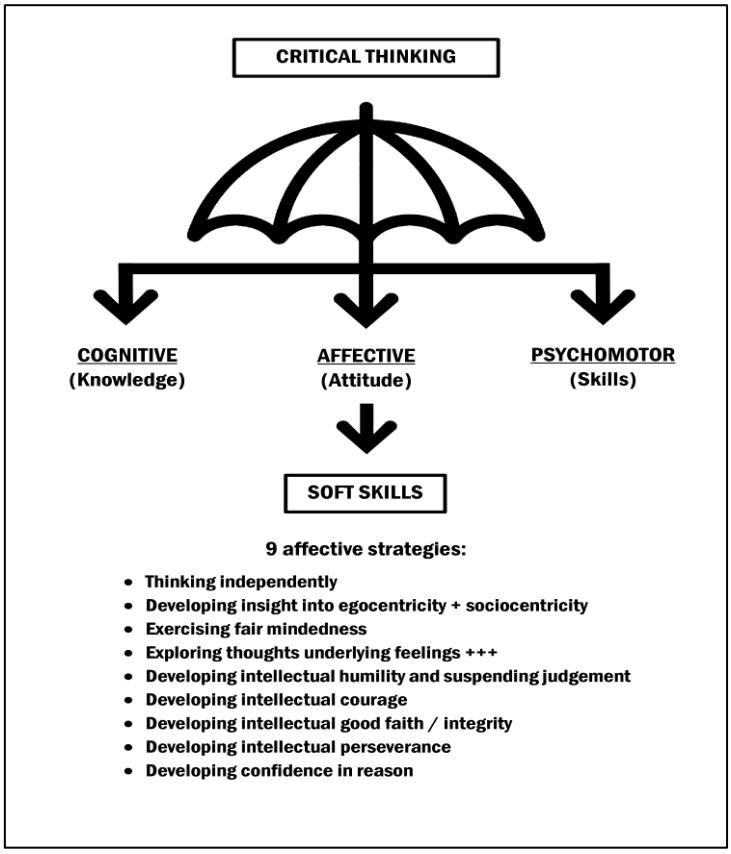

Figure 1: Soft Skills Under The Umbrella Of Critical Thinking
Adapted from Ab Aziz et al. (2023)

Affective Critical Thinking Strategies

Scholars in the Paulian tradition have continued to build upon the complete approach to critical thinking that Richard Paul (1937–2015) pioneered. Paul's concept of critical thinking centers on the idea that it entails actively improving one's way of thinking. It's not just about thinking; it's about improving your thinking all the time. He emphasized the importance of standards in this process and proposed that critical thinking is a form of self-improvement directed by standards of evaluation. Paul's definition of critical thinking boils down to a process of self-improvement viewed through the prism of accepted norms. (Paul, 2013, p. 7).

Paul delineated 35 critical thinking strategies, with nine (9) falling under the category of affective strategies and the remaining 26 classified as micro and macro cognitive strategies. Significantly, the affective strategies are prioritised, listed before the cognitive ones, hinting at their heightened significance in the contemporary millennial professional landscape (refer to Fig. 1 below). These methods fall under the emotional domain of critical thinking and are referred to be soft skills since they are both intentional actions or behaviours intended to achieve a specific goal or outcome. Furthermore, even though soft skills impact and intersect with all three of a person's domains—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—their largest correlation is seen in the affective domain because here is where feelings, emotions, and attitudes are largely found. Sebastião et al. (2023) and Ab Aziz et al. (2024) suggested that within the umbrella of critical thinking, soft skills are identified as particularly fitting within the affective domain.

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Soft Skills And Employment

It was said that the graduates are often found to lack soft skills, which can negatively impact their employability and marketability in the job market (Mohd Basir et al., 2022; Nadarajah, 2021; Nazrona et al., 2017; Norshima et al., 2022). Pedersen and Hahn (2020) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the skills desired by employers in fresh graduates and the skill repertoire possessed by these new entrants to the job market. According to employers, they prioritise candidates with robust soft skills, research capabilities, critical thinking, and problem-solving acumen (Stewart, Wall, & Marciniec, 2016). Their research examined the body of literature to determine the discrepancy between the skills that fresh graduates bring to the profession and what employers are looking for. Identifying these differences can provide important information to colleges looking to improve their teaching methods and better prepare their students for the workforce.

Highlighting the significance of soft skills, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) Malaysian has identified seven (7) key areas crucial for enhancing the employability of recent graduates. These encompass communication skills, professional ethics, entrepreneurship skills, problem-solving and thinking skills, continuous learning and information management skills, leadership skills, and teamwork skills (Mohd Majid, Khatijah, & Sidek, 2008, Shakir, 2009). This identification also brings attention to the issue of a "skill gap", where the curriculum in higher education institutions may not align with the actual requirements of the professional world (Bhatnagar, 2021; Makasiranondh, Maj, & Veal, 2011; Saunders & Bajjaly, 2022;). How are graduates taught soft skills in Malaysian higher education institutions? Do all universities have to implement the seven (7) soft skills that the Ministry of Higher Education has specified, or is it up to each institution to decide? Should these abilities be included in the curriculum, are they taught as part of the course material or are they taught in separate courses? Finally, how is the learning in these soft skills assessed? It is difficult to verify the previously mentioned questions since, when it comes to the country's soft skills, a generic framework or a list of important areas is unreliable. This emphasises how important it is to comprehend how students see themselves using affective critical thinking techniques in their future careers, which is the main goal of this study.

Problem Statement

The problem statement emphasises the importance of affective critical thinking in the workplace, especially in relation to the Language Centre at NDUM. In addition to using logic, affective critical thinking entails the assessment of data, and the formulation of conclusions based on individual values and feelings. This calls for abilities like empathy, self-awareness, and emotional self-control, all of which are crucial soft skill components (Esmaeili & Bagheri, 2015; Hasanpour et al., 2018). Although affective critical thinking skills, also known as soft skills, are widely acknowledged to be important, little is known about how students at the Language Centre view their own ability to use these skills and how they plan to use them in the future. Students are not fully aware of soft skills and the importance of soft skills for their future employment (Ngo, 2024; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020; Ramlan & Ngah, 2017). The fact that critical thinking is included into a variety of courses instead than being offered as a stand-alone subject could be a factor in students' ignorance of the abilities they possess. Given that these students represent the next generation of professionals joining the global workforce, this knowledge gap is very important. It is crucial to investigate their viewpoints because they have a direct bearing on whether or not earlier teaching approaches were effective in promoting critical thinking skills and whether or not curricular adjustments are warranted.

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Methodology

The target population for this study encompasses all students enrolled at the Language Centre of NDUM and a total of 73 students participated in this study. Employing a quantitative research design, data collection was facilitated through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. Quantitative research, as elucidated by Aliaga and Genderson (2002), involves the elucidation of phenomena through the collection and analysis of numerical data using statistical methods. This approach enables the measurement of study variables through instruments that yield numerical data, as highlighted by Creswell (2009). Notably, this design offers the advantage of efficiency, as numerical data can be swiftly analysed using statistical techniques, as noted by Daniel (2016). Therefore, the main tool used to record students' impressions in numerical representations was a questionnaire. Version 25.0 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the collected data. Somekh and Lewin (2005) emphasised that a questionnaire acts as a standardised tool for collecting both structured and unstructured data from respondents, ensuring consistency in data collection methods. It was determined that using it in this study was the most practicable way to get the information needed from respondents.

For this study, the Likert scale is used to measure the responses. The Likert scale is a scale introduced by Renis Likert in 1932 and it is widely used to measure attitudes in survey studies (Göb et al., 2007). A 5-point Likert scale is chosen in which the respondents defined their agreement towards each statement by selecting a point based on Table 1.

Table 1: Likert Scale

Grade (r)	1	2	3	4	5
Agreement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

As presented in Table 1, the grades of the Likert scale are set in ascending order of agreement. The r=1 is interpreted as Strongly Disagree, r=2 is interpreted as Disagree, r=3 is interpreted as Neutral, r=4 is interpreted as Agree, and r=5 is interpreted as Strongly Agree.

The reliability of the questionnaire is also crucial to be considered in increasing the research quality (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010). Reliability of instrument means the degree to which the instrument can produce consistent and accurate results. One way to test the reliability of the research instrument is to find the internal consistency coefficient through Cronbach's coefficient alpha developed by Cronbach in (Cohen & Swerdik, 2018). The internal consistency provided information about the extent to which each item in a set of items correlates to one another within the set (Cortina, 1993). It has a range in value from 0 to 1 that can be interpreted as in Table 2.

Table 2: Interpretation of Cronbach Coefficient Alpha

Coefficient Alpha	Internal Consistency
$\alpha \geq 0.90$	Excellent
$0.80 \leq \alpha < 0.90$	Good
$0.70 \leq \alpha < 0.80$	Acceptable
$0.60 \leq \alpha < 0.70$	Questionable
$0.50 \leq \alpha < 0.60$	Poor
$\alpha < 0.50$	Unacceptable

Source: George and Mallery (2003)

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To evaluate soft skills, descriptive statistics compute mean scores (Macmillan, 2022). It is critical to determine which soft skills have the greatest and lowest mean scores. In comparison to respondents with lower mean scores, those with higher mean scores are more likely to acquire and use that skill. Additionally, compared to skills with lower mean scores, those with higher mean scores suggest greater importance of such skills in the future job of the respondents. On the other hand, according to Gravetter and Wallnau (2021), inferential statistics entailed doing a correlation study between two variables: students' opinions of their current skill set and their convictions regarding its significance in the workplace.

A normality test is conducted to assess whether a dataset follows a normal distribution pattern (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2021; Mertler & Reinhart, 2021). This test is important because many statistical techniques assume that the data being analysed are normally distributed. Running a normality test helps ensure the appropriateness of chosen statistical methods and enhances the reliability of study findings.

The choice of any correlation test depends on whether data are normally distributed or not. The most used correlation coefficient is Pearson's correlation coefficient (r), although other types, such as Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau, may be used depending on the nature of the data. Aggarwal and Ranganathan (2016) posited that even if two variables are strongly correlated, it does not necessarily mean that changes in one variable cause changes in the other. Other factors, known as confounding variables, may be influencing the relationship.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile section comprises two (3) questions aimed at capturing the characteristics of the respondents, encompassing gender, and year of study. In response to Question 1 about gender, 75.3% of the respondents (n = 55) are female, and 24.7% (n = 18) are male. Regarding Question 2, which looked at respondents' years of study, 65.8% (n = 48) were in their first year, 21.9% (n = 16) were in their second year, and 12.3% (n = 9) were in their third year.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha is a way to measure the internal consistency of a questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating that the survey or questionnaire is more reliable. An online questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and 73 students completed the survey. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items and the value for Cronbach's Alpha for the survey was $\alpha = .917$. Referring to Table 2, the questionnaire has excellent reliability.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.917	18

Comparing Mean Scores For The Affective Critical Thinking Strategies

As stated earlier, comparing mean scores helps in making informed decisions, drawing conclusions about populations, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions or treatments.

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Table 4: Mean Scores For Affective Critical Thinking Strategies

Affective Critical Thinking Strategy (Example)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Thinking independently (I self-monitor myself).	73	3.6918	.79770
Developing insights into egocentricity and sociocentricity (I am aware of my egocentricity or sociocentricity).	73	3.9863	.66652
Exercising fairmindedness (I confront with unfamiliar ideas).	73	4.0137	.70204
Exploring thoughts underlying feelings and vice versa (I consider the positive aspects of my life, when I am depressed).	73	3.8425	.74943
Developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment (I recognise the limits of my knowledge, and I am not afraid to admit it).	73	3.8973	.72629
Developing intellectual courage (I am courageous enough to admit the truth in my own thinking and ideas).	73	3.8014	.68079
Developing intellectual good faith and integrity (I am consistent in application of the intellectual standards which I apply to myself and others).	73	3.8425	.71626
Developing intellectual perseverance (I recognise significant change requires patience and hard work).	73	3.9795	.75203
Developing confidence in reason (I come to my conclusion through reasoning where it is thinking democracy).	73	3.8904	.73714

As can be seen in the table above, all mean scores are above 3 (neutral) except for the third affective strategy (agree). This shows that respondents can relate or see themselves as practising or having the affective strategies but not to the highest level. The highest mean score is "Exercising fairmindedness" ($\bar{x}$ = 4.0173) and the lowest is "Thinking independently" ($\bar{x}$ = 3.6918). Generally, students acknowledge the existence of these affective strategies, but their responses lack conviction or confidence. Therefore, there remains a need to reinforce or teach these strategies to enhance their soft skills for future employment opportunities.

In practicing **fairness of mind**, students evaluate the benefits and cons of opposing points of view, deliberately putting themselves in other people's shoes to fully understand them. This aids in overcoming their innate tendency to associate reality only with their current impressions or deeply held beliefs. These abilities enable them to reason from premises, assumptions, and concepts that are outside of their own and to accurately reconstruct the viewpoints and arguments of others.

Regarding **independent thinking**, students must be taught to use critical thinking techniques and insights to evaluate and reject ideas that lack empirical backing. They should independently analyse problems, challenge unreliable authorities, and recognise the contributions of legitimate authorities rather than obediently accepting the ideas of others. This method makes

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sure they are resistant to influence and gives them the ability to evaluate the importance of the material, use concepts wisely, and apply skills correctly.

Table 5: Mean Scores For Affective Critical Thinking Strategies By Gender

Examples of Affective Critical Thinking Strategies	Gender					
	Male			Female		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I self-monitor myself.	18	3.5833	.77174	55	3.7273	.80977
I am aware of my egocentricity or sociocentricity.	18	3.7778	.62361	55	4.0545	.67132
I confront with unfamiliar ideas.	18	3.8333	.56880	55	4.0727	.73547
I consider the positive aspects of my life, when I am depressed.	18	3.8333	.68599	55	3.8455	.77503
I recognise the limits of my knowledge, and I am not afraid to admit it.	18	3.7778	.73208	55	3.9364	.72683
I am courageous enough to admit the truth in my own thinking and ideas.	18	3.4444	.63914	55	3.9182	.65802
I am consistent in application of the intellectual standards which I apply to myself and others.	18	3.8056	.70999	55	3.8545	.72439
I recognise significant change requires patience and hard work.	18	3.8889	.69780	55	4.0091	.77275
I come to my conclusion through reasoning where it is thinking democracy.	18	3.5833	.73264	55	3.9909	.71680

Almost all the mean scores do not reach 4 (agree) and in between 3 (neutral) to 4 (agree). These scores indicate that students perceive their opinion or feeling as somewhat leaning towards the "Agree" option but not entirely agree. It only indicates a strong inclination towards agreement, underscoring the importance of reinforcing or teaching these strategies to improve their soft skills for future employment prospects.

According to the table above, male respondents tend to favour the strategy related to having **intellectual perseverance** which is "I recognise significant change requires patience and hard work" ($\bar{x}$ = 3.8889), while female respondents prefer the strategy related to **exercising fairmindedness** which is "I confront with unfamiliar ideas" ($\bar{x}$ = 4.0727).

Conversely, male respondents least prefer the strategy "I am courageous enough to admit the truth in my own thinking and ideas" ($\bar{x}$ = 3.444) which relates to the 6th strategy of **developing**

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intellectual courage, whereas female respondents least prefer the strategy "I self-monitor myself" ($\bar{x}$ = 3.7273) which relates to the 1st strategy of **thinking independently**. Overall, both genders have different preferences and aversions regarding these strategies.

Normality Test

Analytical methods used to test normality in this study are Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk Test. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test compares the empirical distribution function of the data to the theoretical normal distribution. Again, a p-value above the significance level indicates normality. On the other hand, the Shapiro–Wilk Test is a statistical test that assesses normality based on sample data. If the p-value is greater than a chosen significance level (e.g., 0.05), the data are considered normally distributed.

Table 6: Test Of Normality for A

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
SUM-A	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
	.116	73	.017	.943	73	.003

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test shows that the distribution of students' perceptions regarding their affective critical thinking strategies is not normal (D = 0.116, p = 0.005). Because the data is not normally distributed, the Spearman's rho non-parametric test is used for correlation analysis.

Table 7: Test of Normality for B

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
SUM-B	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
	.111	73	.027	.936	73	.001

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates that students' perceptions of the importance of affective critical thinking strategies for employability do not follow a normal distribution (D = 0.111, p = 0.005). Therefore, the Spearman's rho non-parametric test is employed for correlation analysis.

Correlation Analysis Through Non-Parametric Test

The Spearman's rho test, also known as Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, is a non-parametric measure of rank correlation. It assesses the strength and direction of association between two ranked variables. Spearman's rho evaluates how well the relationship between two variables can be described using a monotonic function, which can be either linear or non-linear.

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Table 8: Correlation Analysis

Correlations			SUM-A	SUM-B
Spearman's rho	SUM-A	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.555**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	73	73
	SUM-B	Correlation Coefficient	.555**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	73	73

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

Spearman's rho (ρ) is 0.555, it indicates a moderate positive correlation between the two ranked variables being analysed. This means that as the value of one variable increases, the value of the other variable also tends to increase in a somewhat predictable manner, but not perfectly. The correlation is statistically significant which means that it is unlikely to have occurred by chance, and there is a real association between the variables in the population from which the sample was drawn.

The relationship suggests that students' perceptions of their own proficiency in these emotional critical thinking skills and their perceptions of the practicality of these talents for their future jobs are related. For example, students who are highly confident in their emotional critical thinking abilities may also strongly feel that these abilities will be useful in their future careers. This emphasises how crucial it is to teach and support students' affective methods so they can grow a strong feeling of self-efficacy and understand how important these abilities are to succeeding in the workplace.

Conclusion

The study's conclusion emphasises the need for further research on how Language Centre's students view their ability to think critically and affectively, as well as how they expect to use these abilities in the future. Although the analysis found a lack of conviction and confidence in the students' responses, it also identified significant emotional tactics that students feel they employ more frequently and find advantageous for their future professions. This emphasises how important it is to educate or reinforce these techniques to help students develop their soft skills and increase their employment chances.

The unfamiliarity with "Thinking Independently," especially among female students, can be attributed to factors such as early conditioning and an educational system that prioritises rote memorisation and standardised testing over critical thinking and independent analysis. This environment discourages students from questioning or thinking beyond the given material, fostering passive acceptance instead of active inquiry.

Educational institutions must assume accountability since affective critical thinking techniques play a crucial role in the development of soft skills like effective communication, leadership, and personal wellbeing. These tactics need to be aggressively promoted by universities and incorporated into the curriculum to provide students the emotional and social skills they need to succeed in both their personal and professional lives. Universities may better prepare students for the challenges of the modern industry by doing this, giving them the skills and confidence they need to succeed.

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