Lecturer self-efficacy as a predictor of critical thinking skills instruction in Afghan higher education

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Critical thinking skills are essential for students' academic and career success in the 21st century. However, many lecturers struggle to integrate these skills into their teaching practices. This study investigated the predictive role of lecturer self-efficacy in predicting the instruction of critical thinking skills among university lecturers in Afghanistan. Using a correlational survey design, data were collected from 204 male lecturers at Kandahar University through validated questionnaires measuring self-efficacy and critical thinking integration. Findings of descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of both critical thinking skills instruction and lecturer self-efficacy, particularly in student engagement and instructional strategies. The ANOVA results indicated no significant differences in self-efficacy or instruction of critical thinking skills based on teaching experience or educational level. Hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that self-efficacy significantly predicted the instruction of critical thinking skills, with instructional strategies and student engagement being the strongest predictors. The findings highlight the importance of enhancing lecturer self-efficacy to foster critical thinking skills in students, suggesting targeted professional development programs. This study contributes to the limited literature on lecturer self-efficacy and critical thinking skills in the Afghan higher education context, offering insights for policy and practice. These findings highlight important associations that can guide future research into the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships.

Introduction

Critical thinking and self-efficacy are essential competencies that shape students' academic achievement and professional readiness in the 21st century (Orakcı & Khalili, 2025; Saputro et al., 2020). Critical thinking refers to the ability to reflect, reason logically, and make evidence-based judgments (Arviani et al., 2023; Prastyaningrum et al., 2025). It enables learners to question assumptions, analyse information, and make sound decisions in academic and real-life contexts (Spector, 2019; Sarwari & Kakar, 2023). Developing these higher-order thinking skills is especially vital in higher education, where students must be equipped to meet the complex demands of modern professional environments (Franco et al., 2018; Khalil et al., 2025).

In higher education settings, lecturers play a central role in cultivating critical thinking skills through interactive and inquiry-based instruction (Öpengin & Elmas, 2023; Yurt, 2025). However, their success in cultivating critical thinking skills often depends on their self-efficacy. Lecturers' belief in their own capability to plan, organise, and execute effective teaching strategies (Öpengin & Elmas, 2023; Yurt, 2025). High self-efficacy enhances lecturers' confidence in designing discussion-driven lessons and engaging students in reflective problem-solving (Ahmed et al., 2022; Orakcı et al., 2023). Therefore, strengthening students' critical thinking skills is key to ensuring their readiness for various

careers and keeping pace with workforce requirements. Conversely, low self-efficacy can limit the use of learner-centred methods that promote critical thinking skills (Lin et al., 2022).

In the Afghan higher education context, developing critical thinking remains a significant challenge. Although the Ministry of Higher Education has recognised the importance of integrating critical thinking into university curricula, many lecturers struggle to apply these principles effectively in the classroom (Monib, 2023). Afghan lecturers often possess theoretical knowledge of active learning methods but lack the confidence and practical experience to implement them consistently (Khuram & Patmal, 2024; Tareen et al., 2022; Tareen et al., 2023; Tareen et al., 2024). Teaching in many universities has traditionally relied on lecture-based and teacher-centred approaches, with limited opportunities for discussion, inquiry, and problem-solving (Tareen, 2025; Tareen et al., 2025). Although recent educational reforms have emphasised student-centred learning and higher-order thinking skills, the implementation of critical thinking remains inconsistent because of limited professional training, large class sizes, resource constraints, and assessment practices that continue to prioritise factual recall (Tareen, 2026). Strengthening lecturers' self-efficacy is therefore crucial for translating policy emphasis into effective classroom practices (Arslan-Cansever et al., 2021).

Despite the global recognition of the link between lecturers' self-efficacy and students' critical thinking development, research exploring this relationship in Afghanistan's higher education system is scarce. Most previous studies have focused on school teachers or general educational contexts (Arce-Saavedra & Blumen, 2022; Khalil et al., 2025), overlooking university lecturers and the specific sociocultural challenges they face. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how Afghan lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs shape their ability to foster critical thinking in their students. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between lecturers' self-efficacy and their instruction of critical thinking skills in Afghan higher education institutions. Specifically, this study sought to assess the extent to which lecturers integrate critical thinking skills into their teaching, measure their self-efficacy beliefs, examine demographic differences, and determine the predicting role of lecturer self-efficacy in the instruction of critical thinking skills. The findings of this study are expected to inform both policy and practice, offering evidence-based insights to strengthen the quality of higher education in Afghanistan. Therefore, the following four research questions guided this study:

1. To what extent do lecturers integrate critical thinking skills into their teaching practices?
2. What is the level of lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs?
3. Do lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and the instruction of critical thinking skills differ according to the demographic variables?
4. What is the relationship between lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and the instruction of critical thinking skills?

Literature review

Lecturer self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a context-specific construct rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT), which explains human behaviour as the reciprocal interaction of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1977). Within this framework, self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capability to organise and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. These beliefs influence how individuals approach challenges, regulate effort, and persist in difficult situations. Rather than developing independently, self-efficacy evolves through four primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1977). For lecturers, these sources include successful teaching experiences, observing effective colleagues, receiving constructive feedback from students and supervisors, and managing teaching-related emotions.

SCT provides a theoretical foundation for understanding lecturers' instructional behaviours. Lecturers with stronger self-efficacy are more likely to adopt innovative instructional strategies, actively engage students, and effectively manage classroom environments. These instructional behaviours subsequently create learning conditions that foster students' critical thinking skills. Thus, instructional strategies, student engagement, and classroom management represent behavioural mechanisms through which lecturer self-efficacy contributes to the development of critical thinking. Lecturers' educational level has also been identified as an important demographic characteristic associated with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Higher academic qualifications may strengthen lecturers' pedagogical knowledge and confidence, thereby enhancing instructional effectiveness. However, empirical findings regarding the influence of educational level and teaching experience on self-efficacy remain inconsistent, suggesting that demographic characteristics alone may not adequately explain variations in teaching effectiveness (Duan et al., 2024).

Teacher self-efficacy has consistently been associated with successful teaching and learning outcomes (Morris et al., 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Teachers with high self-efficacy demonstrate greater willingness to implement innovative instructional approaches and adapt to changing classroom demands (Achurra & Villardón, 2012; George et al., 2018). Conversely, teachers with lower self-efficacy tend to avoid challenging instructional tasks, underestimate students' abilities, and provide fewer meaningful learning opportunities (Al-Azmi, 2018; Karim et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2022; Mehmood, 2019). Collectively, these studies suggest that self-efficacy functions as an important psychological resource that supports effective teaching practices and may contribute to students' higher-order learning.

Critical thinking skills

Critical thinking is widely recognised as an essential competency for addressing complex problems and making evidence-based decisions in contemporary society (Arviani et al.,

2023; Orakcı & Khalili, 2025). It enables students to analyse information critically, evaluate alternative perspectives, and formulate logical conclusions. Because these skills do not develop naturally, they require intentional instructional support and learner-centred pedagogical practices (Hidayati & Sinaga, 2019). Consequently, lecturers play a central role in creating classroom environments that promote critical thinking skills. Previous research indicates that lecturer self-efficacy is positively associated with teaching practices that facilitate higher-order thinking. Teachers with stronger efficacy beliefs are more likely to integrate instructional approaches that emphasise inquiry, problem solving, and critical thinking (Öpengin & Elmas, 2023; Sari & Balkas-Yasar, 2024; Shafie et al., 2021; Tareen, 2026). Likewise, problem-based learning has been shown to improve teachers' own critical thinking skills, highlighting the value of learner-centred instructional methods (Saputro et al., 2020). These findings collectively suggest that self-efficacy supports instructional practices that encourage students' critical thinking rather than influencing learning outcomes directly.

However, existing evidence also reveals important limitations. Quiño and Corpuz (2021) reported that although teachers generally demonstrated high self-efficacy in teaching communication, collaboration, and creativity, they expressed relatively low confidence in teaching critical thinking skills. Moreover, while educational qualification significantly influenced 21st century teaching practices, teaching experience did not. Similarly, Aouaf et al. (2023) found that insufficient interaction between teachers and students limited opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking skills. These findings indicate that possessing confidence alone may not guarantee effective critical thinking instruction unless it is accompanied by appropriate instructional strategies, meaningful student engagement, and supportive classroom management.

Despite growing interest in teacher self-efficacy and critical thinking, several research gaps remain. First, previous studies have frequently examined self-efficacy as a single global construct, providing limited understanding of how its instructional dimensions contribute differently to critical thinking instruction. Second, many investigations have focused on school teachers, whereas empirical evidence involving university lecturers remains limited. Third, little research has examined these relationships within resource-constrained higher education systems such as Afghanistan, where limited professional development opportunities and institutional challenges may influence lecturers' instructional practices.

The current study addresses these gaps by examining the relationships between the three dimensions of lecturer self-efficacy, and critical thinking skills among university lecturers. Guided by SCT, the study proposes that lecturers' efficacy beliefs influence instructional behaviours, which subsequently shape students' opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. By investigating these relationships in the Afghan higher education context, this study extends existing knowledge on lecturer self-efficacy while providing empirical evidence to inform professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening critical thinking instruction.

Method

Research design

This study explored the relationship between lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and their instruction of critical thinking skills, employing a correlational survey design within a quantitative research framework. A correlational design examines the direction of the relationship between two or more variables at one point in time (Cresswell, 2012, p. 358).

Population and sample

The target population of this study consisted of all university lecturers from Kandahar University in Kandahar province under the Ministry of Higher Education where their perspectives were investigated. These lecturers teach in various faculties and voluntarily participated in the current study. The intended population included 294 lecturers. A convenience sample of 204 lecturers (all male) participated in this study from the total population (N = 294). Studies on Afghan education (e.g., Barlas et al., 2024) have highlighted systematic barriers to female lecturers' participation in teaching at universities, justifying a male-only sample for the feasibility of this study. According to Rose et al. (2019), for a population of 294 subjects, a sample size of 170 subjects is required to represent the entire population. Although the minimum required sample size for a population of 294 was calculated as 170, the researchers intentionally distributed 204 questionnaires to account for non-response, incomplete responses, and potential data loss, which are common challenges in survey-based studies.

Oversampling is a widely recommended practice in quantitative studies because actual response rates are often lower than expected, and additional cases help ensure adequate statistical power and representation (Dillman et al., 2014). Fowler (2013) emphasised that oversampling improves the reliability and generalisability of survey findings, particularly in educational and social science research. The participation of individuals in the target population was based on their willingness to participate, meaning that all members of the target population had an equal chance of being included in this study. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, involves selecting study participants based on practical considerations including accessibility, location, temporal availability, and readiness to participate, rather than random selection (Etikan et al., 2016). Additionally, the sample included lecturers with diverse experiences in the field and diverse educational backgrounds. The participants' demographic details are presented in Table 1.

Data collection instruments

The researchers divided the quantitative survey questionnaire into three parts: Section A demographic profile (findings in Table 1), followed by two validated data collection instruments: Section B teacher self-efficacy scale, and Section C critical thinking skills.

Table 1: The respondents' demographic profile

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age	25-30	50	24.5
	31-35	89	43.6
	36-39	27	13.2
	40-45	28	13.7
	Above	10	4.9
Teaching experience	2-5	72	35.3
	6-9	53	26.0
	10-13	57	27.9
	Above	22	10.8
Highest degree earned	Bachelor	43	21.1
	Master	145	71.1
	Doctor	16	7.8
Discipline	Social science	107	52.5
	Natural science	52	25.5
	Engineering	26	12.7
	Medical sciences	19	9.3
Total		204	100.0

The test results in Table 2 indicate that the factor loadings of the indicators seem to be greater than .40. The findings confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the three-factor (self-efficacy) structure (X^2/DF=2,472), RMSEA=0.082, SRMR=:0.045, CFI=0.95, TLI=0.93, IFI=0.95. and P< .000).

Table 2: Factor loadings

Constructs	Items	Factor loading
Instructional Strategies	SE-IS1	.723
	SE-IS2	.677
	SE-IS3	.627
	SE-IS4	.714
Student engagement	SE-SE5	.750
	SE-SE6	.790
	SE-SE7	.782
	SE-SE8	.571
Classroom management	SE-CM9	.812
	SE-CM10	.723
	SE-CM11	.772
	SE-CM12	.627
Critical thinking skills	CTS1	.703
	CTS2	.721
	CTS3	.796
	CTS4	.749
	CTS5	.765
	CTS6	.727

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In section B, the researchers employed the short-form Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), which consists of 12 items under three main factors, namely, Student engagement, Instructional strategies, and Classroom management. Each component consisted of 4 items (e.g., "How well can you implement different strategies in your classroom?", "How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in university work?", and "How much can you do to control inappropriate behavior in the classroom?". This is a 5-point scale with Nothing=1; Very little=2; Some influence=3; Quite a bit=4; and A great deal=5; in reference to how much lecturers felt they could do in their teaching activities. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy test result was recorded as .830, which indicates that factor analysis should be performed. Moreover, the results of between-subjects testing (BST) were significant (Chi-square = 563.563; p=0.000). According to Hair et al. (2021), factor loadings with low values (below .40) should be removed from the constructs.

Section C of the questionnaire focused on teaching critical thinking skills, using the integration developed by Ravitz et al. (2012) that included 6 items (Table 3).

Table 3: Critical thinking skills

Items	M	SD	Min/Max
Compare information from different sources before completing a task or assignment.	3.32	1.057	2/5
Draw their own conclusions based on analysis of numbers, facts or relevant information.	3.06	1.063	1/5
Summarise or create their own interpretation of what they have read or been taught.	3.28	1.125	1/5
Analyse competing arguments, perspectives or solutions to a problem.	3.47	1.043	1/5
Develop a persuasive argument based on supporting evidence or reasoning.	3.27	1.098	1/5
Try to solve complex problems or answer questions that have no single correct solution or answer.	3.32	1.057	1/5

The Likert scales used in this section of the questionnaire were Almost never=1; A few times a semester=2; 1-3 times per month=3, 1-3 times per week=4; Almost daily=5. KMO was performed for the critical thinking skills scale, finding .833. The data with various variables had a normal distribution, as demonstrated by the Chi-squared statistics reported after the BST. The study's conclusions are also strongly impacted by the BST (Chi-Square = 3173.751; ϱ = 0.000). Following fit indices to evaluate the overall goodness of fit of the model were indicated to good model when CFI = 0.917, TLI = 0.889, IFI = 0.902, GFI = 0.911, SRMR = 0.060, and RMSEA = 0.062 (Heale & Twycross, 2015).

Validity and reliability of the instruments

The initial items were evaluated by three experts in education to confirm content validity, with each item checked for relevance, clarity, and representativeness. Following their suggestions, minor revisions were incorporated to increase transparency and ensure better consistency with the constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficient and McDonald's omega coefficient (ω) were calculated based on the four factors to examine the internal reliability, which indicate that all the categories reported were above .70. Overall, the survey instruments appeared sufficiently reliable for this research. Moreover, the researchers calculated composite reliability (CR) values ranging from .780 to .881, which indicate that the composite reliability is above .7. The results of validity and reliability are shown in the Table 4. Additionally, the researchers performed a discriminant validity test based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 4: Construct validity and reliability

Constructs	α	ω	CR	AVE	Discriminant validity			
					1	2	3	4
Instruction strategies	.778	.773	.780	.470	**.685**			
Students engagement	.738	.744	.798	.530	.437	**.728**		
Classroom management	.751	.756	.824	.542	.484	.394	**.736**	
Critical thinking skills	.839	.841	.881	.553	.371	.396	.283	**.743**

α Cronbach's alpha; CR composite reliability; ω McDonald's omega coefficient; AVE average variance extracted; the values in the bold diagonal are the square root of AVE of the construct.

The extracted square root of the average variance is greater than the correlations among the variables. The discriminant validity was satisfactory and confirmed.

Data collection procedure

The researchers designed questionnaires using *Google Forms*. The online method of providing quantitative survey questionnaires to potential participants minimised researchers bias because all the participants received the same information and communication from the researchers at the same time. The researchers then posted the link in the identified *WhatsApp* groups to invite the lecturers to participate in the study. The invitations included information such as an introduction about the purpose of the study, an overview, a guarantee that respondents' anonymity would be protected, an estimate of how long the survey would take, and a link to complete it using a *Google Form*. The survey questionnaire required lecturers only 8-10 minutes to complete. The researchers posted the same link several times to remind the lecturers to complete the survey. The questionnaires were administered in English. In addition, the researchers sent follow-up texts to the deans of the faculties to complete the survey questionnaire. Finally, a third reminder was sent on 22 November to ensure that all participants had a full month to complete the survey questionnaire. The data collection process lasted for one month (November 2025), and the researchers closed the survey on the specified date (29 November).

Data analysis

The data analysis procedure for the quantitative part consisted of several stages after collecting the data from online *Google Forms*. For example, the researchers downloaded the response files from *Google Forms*, from which the data were transferred to an *Excel* file. The researchers subsequently collected the data and imported the data into the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 24 for further quantitative analysis. A key assumption when conducting parametric tests is that the data must follow a normal distribution (Büyüköztürk, 2015). The researchers calculated frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation to describe the data. The analysis employed descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. As per the inferential statistics, ANOVA was employed to assess statistically significant differences across teaching experience and educational level, while hierarchical multiple regression analysis explored predictive relationship between lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and critical thinking skills. Results were considered statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Ethical issues

All ethical issues were addressed during data collection. Any social study, including education, that addresses people's beliefs, values, and lives has significant ethical implications (Lutabingwa & Nethonzhe, 2006). Since Kandahar University does not have an institutional committee for ethical approval, for this study the researchers presented the research proposal only to the university's research committee, ensuring that this research was carried out in accordance with ethical standards. The researchers obtained verbal approval from the committee on 25 September 2025 after careful evaluation of the research proposal. In addition, the researchers obtained participants' agreement by signing a consent form to participate in the current study. This consent form included a statement requesting that participants read and check a box containing 'I agree to participate in the study'. The statement introduced the study and its purpose, and aimed to inform the participants that their participation was completely voluntary. In the consent form, the participants were assured that their data would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. The researchers subsequently obtained written, informed consent.

Findings

RQ1: To what extent do lecturers integrate critical thinking skills into their teaching practices?

Table 5 shows that lecturers' teaching of critical thinking skills was at a moderate level ($M = 3.29$, $SD = .818$). This indicates that lecturers occasionally integrate activities promoting analysis, evaluation, and reasoning, but critical thinking has not yet been consistently embedded as a routine instructional practice across courses.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of critical thinking skills

Variable	N	M	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
Critical thinking	204	3.29	.818	.096	-.963

RQ2: What is the level of lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs?

Table 6 shows that lecturers' self-efficacy was moderate across all dimensions: Instructional strategies (M = 3.88, SD = .635), Student engagement (M = 3.59, SD = .638), and Classroom management (M = 4.09, SD = .657). Overall, the findings indicate a moderate level of lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of self-efficacy

Variables	N	M	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
Instructional strategies	204	3.88	.635	-.580	.119
Student engagement	204	3.59	.638	-.123	-.184
Classroom management	204	4.09	.657	-.697	-.083

RQ3: Do lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and the instruction of critical thinking skills differ according to the demographic variables?

Table 7: ANOVA: Self-efficacy, critical thinking skills and years of teaching experience

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Instructional strategies	Between Groups	2.437	3	.812	2.047	.109
	Within Groups	79.373	200	.397		
	Total	81.810	203			
Student engagement	Between Groups	1.668	3	.556	1.372	.253
	Within Groups	81.047	200	.405		
	Total	82.714	203			
Classroom management	Between Groups	2.670	3	.890	2.093	.102
	Within Groups	85.060	200	.425		
	Total	87.730	203			
Critical thinking skills	Between Groups	.919	3	.306	.454	.715
	Within Groups	134.963	200	.675		
	Total	135.882	203			

Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and the examination of skewness and kurtosis values (Table 8). The Shapiro-Wilk test was statistically significant for both self-efficacy (p = .008) and critical thinking skills (p = .006), indicating departures from perfect normality.

Table 8: Test of normality total SE and critical thinking skills

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	df	Sig.	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Self-efficacy total score	.072	204	.050	.981	204	.008
Critical thinking skills	.063	204	.051	.980	204	.006

However, given the relatively large sample size (N = 204), the Shapiro-Wilk test is highly sensitive to minor deviations from normality. Therefore, skewness and kurtosis values were also examined. The skewness values ranged from -0.697 to 0.096 and kurtosis values ranged from -0.963 to 0.119, all of which were well within the commonly accepted thresholds of ±3 for skewness and ±8 for kurtosis. Accordingly, the distributions were considered sufficiently normal for the application of parametric analyses, including ANOVA and hierarchical regression. According to Büyüköztürk (2015), parametric analyses are generally robust to moderate violations of normality when sample size exceed 200.

One-way ANOVA showed no significant differences among lecturers with different teaching experience in self-efficacy, including instructional strategies (F (2,201) = 2.047, p = .109), student engagement (F (2,201) = 1.372, p = .253), and classroom management (F (2,201) = 2.093, p = .102). Likewise, no significant difference was found for critical thinking skills, F (2,201) = .454, p = .715. Overall, teaching experience did not significantly influence lecturers' self-efficacy or critical thinking instruction.

Table 9 shows that one-way ANOVA found no significant differences among lecturers with bachelor, masters, or doctoral degrees in self-efficacy, including instructional strategies (F (2,201) = .005, p = .995), student engagement (F (2,201) = .918, p = .401), and classroom management (F (2,201) = 2.65, p = .073). Similarly, no significant difference was found for critical thinking skills, F (2,201) = .597, p = .551. Overall, lecturers' level of education did not significantly influence self-efficacy or critical thinking instruction.

Table 9: ANOVA: Self-efficacy and critical thinking skills among the highest degree earned

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Instructional strategies	Between Groups	.004	2	.002	.005	.995
	Within Groups	81.806	201	.407		
	Total	81.810	203			
Student engagement	Between Groups	.749	2	.374	.918	.401
	Within Groups	81.966	201	.408		
	Total	82.714	203			
Classroom management	Between Groups	2.260	2	1.130	2.658	.073
	Within Groups	85.470	201	.425		
	Total	87.730	203			
Critical thinking skills	Between Groups	.802	2	.401	.597	.551
	Within Groups	135.079	201	.672		
	Total	135.882	203			

A series of ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effects of instructional groups on four dependent variables. The results in Table 10 indicated no statistically significant differences between groups of any of the variables: Instructional strategies (F (3, 200) = 1.218, p =.304), student engagement (F (3, 200) = .756, p =.520), or classroom management (F (3, 200) = .296, p =.828). Likewise, the results of the ANOVA for critical thinking skills show no significant difference emerged at the .05 level, F (3, 200) = .824, p=.482.

Table 10: ANOVA: Self-efficacy and critical thinking skills among the lecturers from different disciplines

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Instructional strategies	Between Groups	1.467	3	.489	1.218	.304
	Within Groups	80.342	200	.402		
	Total	81.810	203			
Student engagement	Between Groups	.927	3	.309	.756	.520
	Within Groups	81.787	200	.409		
	Total	82.714	203			
Classroom management	Between Groups	.388	3	.129	.296	.828
	Within Groups	87.342	200	.437		
	Total	87.730	203			
Critical thinking skills	Between Groups	1.659	3	.553	.824	.482
	Within Groups	134.223	200	.671		
	Total	135.882	203			

RQ4: What is the relationship between lecturers' self-efficacy beliefs and the instruction of critical thinking skills?

The fourth research question was to show how lecturer self-efficacy predicts the instruction of critical thinking skills. With this in mind, a hierarchical multiple regression test was conducted.

As presented in Table 11, teaching experience, educational level, and teaching discipline were controlled in Model 1, and lecturer self-efficacy points were added to the model in Model 2. The control variables in Model 1 did not significantly explain the variance in critical thinking skills (R^2 = .021, Adjusted R^2 = .006, F (3, 200) = 1.405, p>.001). After adding self-efficacy points in Model 2, the model significantly improved, explaining 22.5% of the variance (ΔR^2 = .225, Adjusted R^2 = .202, ΔF (3, 200) = 17.339, p<.001). Instructional strategies (B = 0.297, β = .231, p = .003) and student engagement (B = 0.323, β = .252, p = .001) were significant positive predictors of teaching critical thinking skills, whereas classroom management (p = .291), teaching experience (p = .412), educational level (p = .734), and teaching discipline (p = .050) were not significant predictors.

Table 11: Hierarchical multiple regression analysis result

	Variable	B	β	SE	p value
Model 1	Constant	3.507		.235	.000
	Teaching experience	.090	.112	.067	.179
	Educational level	-.123	-.079	.130	.343
	Teaching discipline	-.098	-.119	.058	.092
	R^2	.021			
	Adjusted R^2	.006			
	F	1.405			
Model 2	Constant	.731		.458	.112
	Teaching experience	.049	.062	.060	.412
	Educational level	-.040	-.026	.118	.734
	Teaching discipline	-.104	-.126	.053	.050
	Instructional strategies	.297	.231	.098	.003
	Student engagement	.323	.252	.093	.001
	Classroom management	.098	.079	.093	.291
	R^2	.225			
	ΔR^2	.225			
	Adjusted R^2	.202			
	ΔF	17.339			

Discussion

The findings indicate that lecturers moderately integrated critical thinking skills into their teaching. From the perspective of SCT (Bandura, 1977), this level of implementation reflects lecturers' efficacy beliefs, which influence their willingness to adopt instructional practices that promote higher-order thinking. Although the integration of critical thinking was evident, the moderate level suggests that lecturers may encounter contextual barriers that limit consistent implementation. This interpretation aligns with previous studies showing that interactive and student-centred pedagogies promote critical thinking skills (Prastyaningrum et al., 2025; Sarwari & Kakar, 2023). However, the inconsistency with Aouaf et al. (2023) suggests that the effectiveness of these approaches depends on classroom interaction and institutional conditions rather than instructional intentions alone.

This part of the discussion is relevant to the second research question. Lecturers also reported a moderate level of self-efficacy, particularly in student engagement. Rather than indicating a lack of competence, this finding may reflect contextual challenges associated with motivating students and fostering active participation in higher education. Student engagement requires lecturers not only to possess instructional confidence but also to work within supportive institutional environments that encourage active learning. The lower efficacy in this dimension, compared with previous studies (Orakcı et al., 2023; Upadhyaya, 2019), may therefore reflect differences in educational context, available resources, and student characteristics rather than deficiencies in lecturers' abilities.

In contrast, lecturers reported relatively stronger efficacy in instructional strategies and classroom management. These findings suggest that lecturers are generally confident in organising instruction and maintaining productive learning environments. Nevertheless, confidence in these areas does not necessarily guarantee effective higher-order learning. Previous research has shown that teachers with lower instructional efficacy often rely on teacher-centred approaches that restrict students' cognitive development (Karim et al., 2021). Consequently, these findings imply that strengthening lecturers' confidence should be accompanied by professional development that emphasises learner-centred pedagogies capable of promoting critical thinking.

Contrary to theoretical expectations and with reference to third research question, teaching experience was not associated with differences in lecturers' self-efficacy or their integration of critical thinking skills. While SCT identifies mastery experience as the strongest source of self-efficacy, mastery depends on the quality of professional experiences rather than their duration. In higher education contexts where opportunities for mentoring, reflection, and continuous professional learning are limited, additional years of teaching may reinforce existing instructional routines instead of enhancing instructional confidence. This interpretation provides a possible explanation for the discrepancy between the present findings and earlier studies reporting positive relationships between teaching experience and self-efficacy (George et al., 2018; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Orakcı et al., 2023). It also suggests that experience alone is insufficient to promote instructional innovation unless supported by ongoing professional development.

Similarly, no significant differences were observed in lecturers' integration of critical thinking skills across teaching experience. This finding implies that adopting pedagogical approaches that promote higher-order thinking depends less on accumulated experience than on lecturers' willingness and opportunity to implement innovative instructional practices. Experienced lecturers may rely on familiar teaching methods, whereas early-career lecturers may possess greater enthusiasm for innovation but face institutional constraints. These contrasting influences may explain why teaching experience did not differentiate lecturers' critical thinking instruction in the present study. The inconsistency with Bolat and Deneme-Gençoglu (2024) further suggests that the influence of teaching experience is context-dependent rather than universal.

Educational level also showed no significant relationship with lecturers' self-efficacy or their integration of critical thinking skills. This finding indicates that advanced academic qualifications do not automatically translate into greater instructional confidence or more effective teaching practices. Although doctoral education enhances disciplinary expertise and research competence, it may provide relatively limited preparation for developing student-centred pedagogical skills. From the perspective of SCT, self-efficacy develops primarily through successful teaching experiences and supportive professional environments rather than academic credentials alone. This interpretation helps explain why the present findings differ from studies reporting significant differences based on educational qualification (Nina et al., 2022; Orakcı et al., 2023; Vera et al., 2011). Collectively, these findings suggest that pedagogical competence should not be inferred solely from formal qualifications.

Likewise, lecturers from different academic disciplines demonstrated comparable levels of self-efficacy and critical thinking instruction. This finding reinforces the proposition that critical thinking represents a transferable educational outcome rather than a discipline-specific competence. SCT also supports this interpretation by emphasising that efficacy beliefs emerge from learning experiences and environmental influences rather than disciplinary affiliation. Consequently, lecturers working under similar institutional conditions are likely to develop comparable instructional confidence regardless of subject area. These findings strengthen previous arguments that critical thinking can be effectively fostered across disciplines through intentional pedagogical practice (Bezanilla et al., 2021).

With reference to fourth research question, the regression analysis provides further support for the central role of lecturer self-efficacy in promoting critical thinking instruction. Specifically, instructional strategies and student engagement emerged as significant predictors, whereas classroom management did not contribute uniquely after controlling for other variables. This distinction is theoretically meaningful because it suggests that critical thinking depends primarily on lecturers' confidence in facilitating active learning and intellectually challenging classroom interactions rather than maintaining behavioural order. From the perspective of SCT, efficacy beliefs influence behaviour selectively, with greater effects on instructional practices directly associated with learning outcomes.

Although lecturer self-efficacy significantly predicted critical thinking instruction, the model explained 22.5% of the variance, indicating that self-efficacy represents only one component of a broader system influencing instructional practice. Institutional support, curriculum design, assessment policies, professional development opportunities, organisational culture, teaching resources, and lecturers' intrinsic motivation are likely to shape how critical thinking is implemented in university classrooms. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as evidence that self-efficacy is an important but not exclusive determinant of critical thinking instruction. Future research should therefore adopt broader explanatory models that incorporate both individual and institutional factors to better understand how critical thinking pedagogy can be strengthened in higher education.

Theoretical contributions

This study extends Bandura's social cognitive theory to Afghan higher education by showing that lecturer self-efficacy predicts critical thinking instruction beyond demographic factors. It also highlights that instructional-strategy and student-engagement efficacy are stronger predictors than classroom-management efficacy, emphasising the importance of psychological beliefs in teaching practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the predictive role of lecturer self-efficacy in critical thinking instruction within Afghan higher education. Findings showed that lecturers demonstrated moderate levels of both critical thinking instruction and self-efficacy, with greater

confidence in classroom management than student engagement. Teaching experience and educational level did not significantly influence self-efficacy or critical thinking instruction. However, self-efficacy, particularly in instructional strategies and student engagement, significantly predicted critical thinking instruction. The model explained 22.5% of the variance, suggesting that additional individual, institutional, and contextual factors also contribute to lecturers' implementation of critical thinking skills. The findings suggest that lecturers' self-efficacy, particularly in instructional strategies and student engagement, is more important for promoting critical thinking instruction than demographic factors. Therefore, higher education institutions should prioritize professional development that strengthens pedagogical confidence, encourages reflective and innovative teaching, and supports the integration of critical thinking across disciplines through continuous training and collaborative learning opportunities.

This study did not examine factors that enhance lecturer self-efficacy, despite its positive influence on critical thinking instruction. Future research should use experimental designs to identify effective self-efficacy interventions. As the researchers in the current study relied on a convenience sample of male lecturers from Afghan universities, the findings have limited generalisability. Future studies should include larger, more diverse samples from public and private universities with balanced gender representation.

Participant recruitment through *WhatsApp* groups may have introduced selection bias, limiting the representativeness of the sample. Future studies should use broader sampling methods, such as paper-based surveys, to improve representativeness. Additionally, the regression model explained only 22.5% of the variance in critical thinking instruction, suggesting that future research should examine other factors, including institutional support, curriculum, professional development, teaching resources, and lecturer motivation.

Authors' declarations

Author contributions

HT conceptualised, designed methodology, and prepared original draft. TH conducted reviewing and editing. FA conducted relevant literature.

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Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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