Teaching Critical Thinking

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Currently in the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University (AU), most teachers use communicative language teaching methods to teach the skills of speaking and listening in Freshman English (FE). The main purpose of FE is to increase students' communicative competence with an emphasis on speaking and listening skills as the most important focus. Goal three of the Freshman English Goals and Student Learning Objectives is, “Students will develop their critical-thinking and language-learning skills” (Morrison & Paullin, 1997, p. 139). Included in these goals are the following:

1. Students will increase their use of higher-level thinking skills in English, including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and appreciation.
2. Students will be able to evaluate their own and others' language, experience, and ideas (e.g. self-evaluation, peer-evaluations, etc.).
3. Students will be able to produce original language to express their ideas and feelings.
4. Students will develop study skills for autonomous, lifelong language learning (p.139).

Meeting CELE'S Goals and Objectives

Goals one and two of FE are the following respectively, that students will improve their English communication skills in the four areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing and that students will increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures. The majority of the textbooks that were selected for FE are written in such a way that a teacher who uses the textbook will meet the goal of improving English communication. Some of the textbooks address cultural issues as well, but finding an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook that teaches critical thinking is the most challenging task. This situation requires teachers to use supplementary materials to teach critical thinking and language-learning skills. However, at this time the number of teachers who provide activities that encourage critical thinking is not known.

Since critical thinking is a part of our curricular goals and objectives it should be included in our classes. But is it? Which teachers are planning activities that will teach critical thinking? Are there certain levels of FE in which critical thinking is not appropriate? At some levels perhaps the students' speaking ability or writing ability is too low to perform critical thinking tasks in the target language. And finally, is critical thinking something the parents of our students and our students value enough to spend time on in class?

In this paper, I will review definitions of critical thinking as well as illuminate the ways critical thinking has traditionally been used in English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL instruction. It is my intent that after reading the various definitions of critical thinking and the classifications of behaviors reflecting critical thinking, the reader will be able to ascertain whether or not his or her activities in class encourage critical thinking. And finally, I would like to provoke the reader to consider the relevance of teaching critical thinking at AU. There is a demand on teachers to meet all of the goals, but in light of how little time we have to do this, the goals that have the most relevance to the teacher are the ones that are turned into the daily activities and use class time. That is to say, teachers' classroom goals come from a combination of an evaluation of the students needs as well as activities that reflect the teachers' educational philosophies, personal interests and personalities. Each teacher must decide on the activities and amount of time spent on teaching critical thinking and language-learning skills for his or her class.

What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is a familiar educational term to most, but it is worthwhile to investigate the various definitions of it. To begin “Critical thinking, in contrast to rote memorization or simple information recall, has as its goal, the simulation of analytical and
evaluative processes of the mind" (Paul, 1992, p. 8). The following is an inventory of critical thinking skills that can be developed in the classroom (Norris & Ennis, 1989, p. 14):

**Elementary Clarification**
1. Focusing on a question
2. Analyzing arguments
3. Asking and answering questions that clarify and challenge

**Basic Support**
4. Judging the credibility of a source
5. Making and judging observations

**Inference**
6. Making and judging deductions
7. Making and judging inductions
8. Making and judging value judgments

**Advanced Clarification**
9. Defining terms and judging definitions
10. Identifying assumptions

**Strategies and Tactics**
11. Deciding on an action
12. Interacting with others

The following is Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, et al., 1956), which gives a six-level classification of critical thinking. A person begins with level one and then progresses to level six working through the analytical thinking process to reach the final process of evaluation. This taxonomy suggests that a person who goes through steps one to six will arrive at an analytical evaluation and not reach an evaluation based on impulse, emotions or sensations.

**Bloom's Taxonomy**
1. Knowledge = Specific Facts
2. Comprehension = Understanding of facts
3. Application = Generalizing facts to other situations
4. Analysis = Breaking problems down, recognizing connections between subparts
5. Synthesis = Combining separate elements to form a coherent whole
6. Evaluation = Critically using information to make (reasonable) judgments (p.9)

**The Behaviors of Effective and Ineffective Thinkers**

Another way to define critical thinking is the following model which makes distinctions between the behavior of effective and ineffective thinking (Beyer, 1991). The model suggests a dichotomy between good and bad thinking and is rooted in the assumption that people can be categorized in one area or the other. However, the author (Beyer, 1991) states that a person cannot be pigeon-holed into one category. For example, one may be a good thinker in financial matters and a poor thinker in personal matters. Here are the behaviors of good and bad thinkers as defined by Beyer (1991):

**The Good Thinker:**
- Welcomes problematic situations and is tolerant of ambiguity.
- Is sufficiently self-critical; looks for alternate possibilities and goals; seeks evidence on both sides.
- Is reflective and deliberative and searches extensively when appropriate.
- Believes in the value of rationality and that thinking can be effective.
- Is deliberative in discovering goals.
- Revises goals when necessary.
Is open to multiple possibilities and considers alternatives.
Is deliberative in analyzing possibilities.
Uses evidence that challenges favored possibilities.
Consciously searches for evidence against possibilities that are initially strong,
or in favor of those that are weak.

*The Poor Thinker:*
Searches for certainty and is intolerant of ambiguity.
Is not self-critical and is satisfied with first attempts.
Is impulsive, gives up prematurely, and is overconfident of the correctness of initial ideas.
Overvalues intuition, denigrates rationality; believes that thinking won’t help.
Is impulsive in discovering goals.
Does not revise goals.
Prefers to deal with limited possibilities; does not seek alternatives to an initial possibility.
Ignores evidence that challenges favored possibilities (p. 275).

Language-Learning Strategies and Content-Based EFL Classes

Language teachers and linguists have explored the connection between cognitive development and second language acquisition (Davidson & Dunham, 1997). In this section, I will discuss two established areas of ESL/EFL instruction that have been influenced by the concept of critical thinking. Learning strategy instruction, which has been taught in ESL classes, reflects critical thinking. In teaching learning strategies, teachers encourage the development of metacognitive awareness by asking students to describe their thoughts, to explain how they found an answer and to share their own techniques for learning and remembering English. Learning strategy instruction needs to be explicit so that students can become consciously aware of which strategies work best for them for different kinds of tasks. The research of Carrell (1987) suggests that,

“Teachers of ESL reading need to be aware of the important role in ESL reading of background knowledge of text content, especially cultural content, and they must often be facilitators of the acquisition of appropriate cultural content knowledge. ESL reading teachers also need to be cognizant of the rhetorical organization of texts and should teach students to recognize and use the top-level rhetorical organization of text to facilitate comprehension and recall.” (p. 480).

Chamot (1995) has identified five kinds of instruction that provide students with the chance to demonstrate and develop their thinking and says that they can provide the framework for developing a community of thinkers in the language classroom:

1. Recognizing and building on students’ prior knowledge
2. Providing meaningful learning tasks
3. Engaging in interactive teaching and learning
4. Focusing on learning processes and strategies
5. Helping students evaluate their own thinking (p. 16).

The second area that promotes critical thinking is content-based foreign language classes. Some foreign language programs at the university level include content-based EFL courses. Teaching English using a meaningful content invites the teaching of critical-thinking skills. If we ask students to think in English, we must be sure they have access to ideas and topics worth thinking about. Learning activities must be challenging, whether they are assigned by the teacher, developed collaboratively, or chosen individually. One of the many advantages of content-based language programs is that this approach brings some of the important and interesting content topics from different subject areas into the language classroom. Language in such programs is learned in the service of knowledge. It is desired that by being provided with discussion, reading and composition about subjects requiring
serious analytical attention, students will naturally engage in critical thinking. Content-based programs also provide opportunities for activities that capitalize on students' learning strengths rather than focusing only on linguistic intelligence and abilities (Charmot, 1995).

Critical Thinking and Communicative Language Teaching: Are the Two Compatible?

As stated earlier, the main purpose of FE is to increase students' communicative competence. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the methodology reflected in most of the EFL textbooks available in Japan. So, how is critical thinking different from CLT, and can the two be compatible? CLT focuses on learning language through communication. Nevertheless, language function and pragmatic performance are taught rather than used for the display of analytical and evaluative thinking. Some people have criticized CLT because the methodology excludes reflection on the language that is being processed by the brain and the time required to do that. Reflection may be necessary for some language learners to improve their acquisition. Tarvil and Al-Arishi (1991) state, “Many activities in the communicative language teaching classroom discourage reflection or contemplation and the emphasis is on conspicuous action and spontaneous response. Conspicuous action tends to be more highly valued than the need of all participants to pause unilaterally and stand back from and reflect on what they are doing” (p. 10).

In the fall of 1997, former TESOL president Robert B. Kaplan came to AU and facilitated a discussion entitled, An Informal Discussion Concerning the Validity of a Communicative Approach and the Role of Critical Thinking in an EFL Environment. His general view was that teaching English critical thinking skills in an EFL environment was xenophobic, and if it is to be done at all, it should be entitled, Teaching Western-style Thinking or teaching a way of thinking that is valued in institutions of higher education in the West. He was concerned that teaching critical thinking was forcing a way of thinking that is distinctly western on Japanese students and that we should strongly consider whether or not that is what the parents of our students want. During the discussion, issues such as the length of time required for second language acquisition were raised, and in light of how little time we have with our students, the possibility that there is adequate time for teaching critical thinking was questioned. It was also mentioned that part of the rationale behind bringing so many foreign teachers to Japan is to present different ideas on education in order to bring about an “internationalization” in Japan.

Many of the freshman students at AU have never had a foreign teacher before, and it takes them time to adjust to the different expectations of the foreign teacher. One of the expectations of a CELE teacher may be that the Japanese students have studied critical thinking in their Japanese high school. More than likely, this is not the reality, and therefore the teaching concepts involved in critical thinking probably will not be a direct transfer. In Japanese public schools students traditionally learn by rote memorization and there is little classroom discussion or dialogue between student and teacher. The subject matter to be studied is controlled by the government (De Mente, 1995). The Japanese system of education and perhaps Japanese culture as well, has taught students that there is one right answer and it is the answer that comes from the authority figure. There is no need to evaluate the answer or to question the source of the knowledge. If we are asking the students to perform tasks that they have little experience with and also asking them to perform those tasks in English, it may be more difficult and require more class time than we have. There is a relationship between being able to express oneself in the target language (TL) and being able to do critical thinking tasks in the TL.

Conclusion

In this paper I review definitions of critical thinking as well as illuminate the ways in which critical thinking has traditionally been used in ESL/EFL instruction. A curriculum based on CLT is faced with critics who feel there is a lack of time for students to reflect and to process language in the ESL/EFL classroom. These critics say that students in a language classroom are encouraged to be spontaneous and produce language immediately. Thinking through the steps of Bloom’s Taxonomy requires time and reflection by the students and
teachers before there is expression of thinking. On the other hand, there is also the concern that teaching English critical thinking skills to Japanese students is xenophobic and may not be valued by the administration or the parents of the students.

The educational philosophy of each CELE teacher will determine the amount of time spent on critical thinking in FE. The teacher makes the daily decisions about class activities, so it is worthwhile to consider one’s thoughts about this issue. Answering the questions below may help to clarify one’s beliefs about critical thinking (Costa, 1991):

**How Thoughtful Is Your Classroom?**

1. Does your community and staff value thinking as a primary goal of education?
2. Does the staff believe that with appropriate intervention human intelligence can continue to grow throughout life?
3. Have you reached consensus on or adopted a model of intellectual functioning?
4. Are students aware that intelligent behavior is an instructional objective?
5. Does the teachers’ language (questioning and structuring) invite students to think?
6. Do the teachers’ response behaviors extend and maintain higher levels of thinking?
7. Are learning activities arranged in order of increasing complexity and abstraction?
8. Do instructional materials support higher cognitive functioning?
9. Is adequate instructional time devoted to thinking?
10. Does instruction provide for differences in modality strengths?
11. Are concepts and problem-solving strategies encountered repeatedly throughout, across, and outside the curriculum?
12. Do students and teachers discuss their thinking (metacognition)?
13. Do evaluation measures assess intelligent behavior?
14. Do significant adults model intelligent behaviors?

In conclusion, there needs to be an awareness of the definition of critical thinking by CELE teachers as well as individual accountability that this goal and the subsequent objectives are a part of the CELE syllabus. Also, time needs to be spent in locating or developing supplemental activities that teach critical thinking and meet the needs of AU students.

**References**


