

# Critical Thinking: An Interview with Bruce Davidson

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In 1996, the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University conducted a survey of Japanese and English speaking faculty from which the current Goals and Objectives for the Freshman English (FE) program were written. The three main areas addressed in these Goals and Objectives are the four skills, culture and critical thinking. The third FE Goal states “Students will develop their critical-thinking and language-learning skills.” The critical thinking objectives within this goal are stated as follows: “Students will increase their use of higher-level thinking skills in English, including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and appreciation. Students will be able to evaluate their own and others’ language, experience, and ideas. Students will be able to produce original language to express their ideas and feelings.” (Morrison and Paullin, 1997, p.139)

In order for teachers to better understand how to meet the critical thinking goal, Bruce Davidson of Hokusei Gakuen University was invited to CELE to conduct a critical thinking workshop in January, 1999. Davidson has done extensive work in the area of critical thinking in English-language education in Japan. He has published numerous related articles and given presentations on critical thinking in the past six years. The following is a written transcription of an oral interview that was recorded with Davidson immediately after his workshop.

GT: *Could you tell me a little about how you became interested in critical thinking?*

BD: Well...I was teaching in an intensive English program in Osaka and I discovered that my students had problems that were bigger than just their lack of knowledge of English. Especially in their writing, they tended to have trouble putting their ideas together logically, and when they used sources in their papers they tended just to believe everything in the book they had read. I thought this was a thinking problem, not just an English language problem.

GT: *Why do you think there is a particular interest in critical thinking in the English language teaching field?*

BD: It seems like other teachers have discovered the same thing that I have. To tell you the truth, I am kind of surprised that there's not more of an interest. I notice that there are a lot of people who are not interested or who may have a little antagonism toward it, but I know a number of teachers who are interested like I am. Basically they've had the same experience that I have and they've discovered that it's helpful to teach critical thinking, that it helps to improve the English ability of their students or it improves their performance in academic English. They just discovered the benefits of it and the problems that students have if they can't do it.

GT: *Do you think that Japan is a special context that has a particular demand for a critical thinking focus?*

BD: I think Asian students in general, because of the passive style of education, are becoming more and more aware that [this] is a deficiency in the educational systems here, that they don't develop much of that. I would say that in Asia in general there is a big movement to implement thinking-skills teaching in education. There is one in Korea, one in Singapore, in Hong Kong . . . so not only Japan. I think it's because until now Asian students have been taught by a teacher who supposedly knew everything and the students passively absorbed whatever he was teaching.

GT: *It seems that there are a variety of definitions of critical thinking and, although they share similarities, I wonder if you could give us the definition that you follow?*

BD: Well, I guess I've followed different definitions at different times. The definition that I generally like the best is Norris' and Ennis' (Norris, 1985, Norris & Ennis, 1989) definition where they call critical thinking "reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do." I like this definition because it talks about "reasonable" and it also talks about being able to decide what to believe and what to do. I think that action and belief are what it all comes down to. It makes sense, it's simple, it applies to my classes. But I like other ones too, for example Harvey Siegel's (Siegel, 1988) which says that it is "being appropriately moved by reasons", but most people who hear that don't understand what that means, so I think the other one is better.

GT: *What do you feel are the biggest challenges in the Japanese classroom in trying to promote critical thinking with your students?*

BD: I think there is a social challenge. Students are not used to explicitly negative judgements of what they hear. They want to be generous and to accept what other people say, even if it is completely contradictory to what someone else has just said. They do it to preserve harmony. Figuring out a way to deal with that is a challenge because it's a very basic thing involving people's communication style. And I think that the weakness in English is another big problem, doing it here compared to doing it with native speakers. If you have weaknesses in English then that becomes a barrier.

GT: *So, if there's a language barrier, then obviously you have a different approach depending upon the level of your students. Could you give me some idea of how you deal with the language barrier and at what level you teach what kind of critical thinking?*

BD: Well, at very, very low levels I don't bother doing much about doing critical thinking. I just teach them how to explain or understand explanations in a way that is more like a native English speaker. That is, giving opinions, reasons, details, examples etc., or restating and paraphrasing things that other people have written or said. Those are things that people can do without a whole lot of deep critical thinking. I do that with very low levels and I don't bother with some of the deeper things, like looking at how valid reasons are or looking at problems with using evidence. I think that's appropriate for higher levels. However, even with higher levels I have to simplify things a lot. With intermediate levels I just make the approach a lot simpler than teachers who are teaching native speakers would.

GT: *So with lower levels would you actually recommend against trying to teach critical thinking or do you know of situations where people are managing to develop activities? Or would you say that it's better left to someone who speaks the language of the students?*

BD: Well, it depends on how low *low* is. If it's elementary students, people who just know the alphabet and have trouble making sentences, I would say stay away from it until they advance to a higher level. I've given it up myself so it's kind of hard for me to argue that others should do it. But I think that students who've had 6 years of high school English and are reasonably intelligent and are interested in deeper things could do a lot more than people expect. The social welfare students can in my school. I don't think teachers should give up too easily. I'd recommend just trying it and if it's too difficult or time consuming I'd say, "Give it up," and help them with what they need more. Because basically we are English teachers more than anything and I think we shouldn't forget that English is the main thing and after that, I think we are educators who can teach critical thinking.

GT: *We've talked about critical thinking in the TESOL context, but how about in Japanese mainstream education? Do you think that there's a movement to begin working with critical thinking in the L1?*

BD: I'm not sure, but I see signs that the general Japanese educational world is aware that students lack critical thinking. [By] the fact that the *Monbusho* (Ministry of

Education) has explicitly said, “We want there to be development of Critical thinking,” in some of their statements. I personally don’t know how much the *Monbusho* people know about what critical thinking is, but at least officially they’ve said so. From what I’ve heard, the schools are getting this block of free time every week, three hours of what they call general education time and individual schools are free to do whatever they want to with that. Some of them are doing basic English or English conversation classes. Others are having students do volunteer work. Schools are doing various things but I haven’t noticed any across-the-board movements to make critical thinking a required course or part of a course. However, there is the Oral Debate C class that high schools are supposed to have. This is the result of a movement in high schools to have more and more English debate, which is a movement in the right direction, I think.

GT: *And is that a movement initiated by the Japanese teachers?*

BD: Yes, it’s the Japanese who’ve created this and a lot of foreign high school teachers are the ones who actually carry it out. I hear that schools are doing it with varying degrees of success, but some teachers have been very successful. For example Charles Lebeau, Michael Lubinsky and David Harris have written a book called Discover Debate and they’ve been [using] it with high school students with a lot of success. And they’re not the only ones. There have been quite a few articles in *The Language Teacher* about teaching debate at the high school level so that’s very encouraging. I think that’s the most positive change that I’ve seen. A lot of what they do is critical thinking-type training.

GT: *I find it interesting in my contact with people who seem to be interested in critical thinking, that many of them are Japanese English professors. \* I'm wondering if that is a trend that you've noticed as well?*

BD: Absolutely. I see a lot of interest among Japanese teachers and actually, since I've begun promoting critical thinking, I have not yet had any Japanese disagree strongly or oppose what I've been trying to do. The biggest critics are native English speakers. They are the only ones who've raised big objections. I've had a lot of encouraging feedback from Japanese teachers like at Asia University. At presentations that I gave four or five years ago, people like Ken Matsuta came up to me afterwards and said, "I think this is great and we're doing this at our school. When I was a student in the States, I thought this was really, really important." At my previous school a number of teachers came up to me and said, "I agree completely with what you are talking about. This was my problem when I was a graduate student abroad." Quite a number would say things like that. I have had more encouraging feedback from Japanese teachers than foreign teachers, in general.

GT: *It sounds like the Japanese teachers appreciate it simply because they've experienced having a lack of that kind of training and the challenges that they met as a foreign student abroad. Would you say that's an accurate assessment?*

BD: Yes, I've heard that from a number of people.

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\* According to Ken Matsuta, treasurer of the JACET Critical Thinking Special Interest Group, 17 of 18 members were Japanese, 1 was American.

GT: *You said you've met a lot of resistance from English speaking foreigners living in Japan...*

BD: I don't know if I'd say I've met a lot of resistance in Japan, but I've noticed some resistance in the English-teaching community worldwide just because there are some people who've published stuff in TESOL, like Dwight Atkinson and some other people, who argue against this sort of thing and say that it's not appropriate. But it's interesting that those people have been answered, for example, by a Japanese person named Komoruta who wrote a response arguing in favor of critical thinking education. I personally haven't run up against a lot of doubt or hostility. I guess I am disappointed that I haven't seen more stuff in this area being written or published and I'm disappointed that people like the TESOL organization are encouraging more articles about critical pedagogy and articles about that than critical thinking which I think is more appropriate for teachers. It seems to me that critical pedagogy has kind of a social or political agenda rather than a teaching agenda. I see a lot more interest in the ESL field in that than in critical thinking. That's kind of disappointing to me because I'd rather see unadulterated critical thinking.

GT: *Do you think that's because much of the TESOL community is more concerned with ESL than EFL and perhaps they are dealing with refugee issues and minority issues?*

BD: Maybe that is part of it.



GT: *What are the biggest reasons that people suggest that it's inappropriate to work on critical thinking in language teaching and what are your responses to those criticisms?*

BD: The main objection is that it's a kind of Western, chauvinistic, individualistic mindset that isn't suitable for Asians who value conformity and submission to authority and harmony. Also that critical thinking is an adversarial thing that encourages people to fight with each other and that Asian societies don't want to be fighting, but rather working together in peace and harmony and doing what the elders or higher-ups tell them. This has some truth to it, but the problem is that a lot of those societies are changing politically and they're becoming less and less like that as democratization progresses. Also, the world is being internationalized and people are having to deal with lots of people from different cultures. And I think rationality and critical thinking [are] a kind of common currency of communication that people who are dealing with the whole world need and so I don't see that as a very strong objection.

GT: *I don't see the connection between the definition of critical thinking that you gave before and chauvinism.*

BD: They [take] chauvinism to mean that Western countries and people like me are looking down upon the Asian society. So, it's a patronizing idea that we need to give them these skills that they need because they don't have the necessary skills to understand and communicate in their own culture. That is their view of what I'm doing. But I don't look at it as a patronizing thing because I think American students need it

just as badly as Japanese students. I think everybody needs it, it's just that Japanese happen to also need it, not that they necessarily need it more.

GT: *And I understand that critical thinking does not necessarily have to be individualistic. Could you say a little about that?*

BD: People in the critical thinking movement have responded to these critics and one of the points that they've made is that it isn't individualistic, that the best place to do critical thinking is in a group. People understand better and learn better if they are interacting with each other and raising questions to each other and that it's a social thing. It's not an individual thing at all. Some particular people are even stronger about that. Matthew Lippman believes that you can't do it in an individualistic way, that you will not become a good thinker if you are working by yourself. You have to be with other people discussing and interacting. I don't know if I'd go that far, but that's his view. So there are actually people who reject individualistic Critical thinking and I don't know how people can say that it's an individualistic thing when there are Critical thinking teachers who say "No". In every conference I've been to, people discuss and interact and it's not somebody just lecturing and saying "You must all accept this."

GT: *So, would you say that many of the biggest critics of critical thinking are making a lot of assumptions about critical thinking that aren't necessarily true?*

BD: Yes. I know it sounds harsh, but I don't really think they know what they are talking about. I really wonder if they've ever been to a critical thinking conference or

read very many books by critical thinking writers. It seems they've read a little and formed kind of a quick judgement about what it's all about and then they respond to that.

*GT: Back to what you said about what some people have said about it being the West imposing a Western way of thinking on Asians, and thinking of all of the positive responses from Japanese professors, do you think it's safe to say that there are actually a lot of Asian academics that have observed that there is a need for this and that it's not so much that it's being imposed but rather requested?*

**BD:** Yes, I think so. I think the fact that the government of Singapore wanted to sponsor the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thinking two years ago, and that they've made developing thinking skills one of their main goals for education in the future is a very strong piece of evidence that they are aggressively pursuing this themselves. Nobody's bringing it, it's being invited in. And other places are too, such as Hong Kong. It seems to be the more Westernized parts of Asia. Japan and Korea are doing the same thing.

*GT: Why do you think these countries are treating it as a priority recently?*

**BD:** Well, because there is a lot of change and competition and they're realizing that their old way of doing things isn't making them competitive. Right now and into the future, these economies are beginning to decline. They used to be ahead, but now they're starting to get scared. I think money is a big reason. They are realizing they

have to produce people who can come up with new ideas quick and get rid of unproductive and inefficient ways of doing things. That's the way Singapore looks at it anyway, and Japan also realizes that. Business motivation seems to be one of the strong motivations as far as I can tell. At least when I was in Singapore, money was the one thing they were mainly worried about: "Are we going to keep ahead in the future?" "Are we going to produce people that will think of new ways of making money and be able to beat out the Americans or Europeans?" And they realized, "No. We won't produce that kind of person unless we start educating them differently or educating them the way they do in the West or in America." I'd say that's the biggest reason.

In my opinion, critical thinking is taught more out of other motives than economic in the States or in Europe. I don't think they think of it as an economic thing. However, in Asia my feeling is that they feel it's a matter of economic survival.

*GT: Finally, I was wondering if you had any advice for teachers who are interested in critical thinking and are interested in learning more about it and how to implement it in their classrooms?*

BD: My main advice is to read books about it and to go to conferences and train yourself as a critical thinking person. My impression among English teachers who are interested in critical thinking, myself included, is that we learn a little about it and we leap ahead and start teaching it and designing materials and I think it's a little premature. I think you have to get familiar with it pretty deeply. Of course, you can

start teaching it as soon as you can, but I think a deeper familiarity and some training or going to conferences or at least reading some books [is preferable]. Go places where you can learn and get training and just develop yourself. If you're not doing that, it's kind of like the blind leading the blind. We sort of confidently assume that "I'm already doing this because I was educated at a university," and so on, but a lot of us have our own deficiencies. I've learned a lot through the critical thinking education and I think I'm doing better than I used to. My thinking is clearer and I am more aware of mistakes and weaknesses than I used to be. When I'm making some kind of fallacious argument, it's harder for me to kid myself that I know what I'm talking about when I really don't.

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