What We Think About Critical Thinking

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The term "critical thinking" has become to EFL pedagogy what "postmodernism" is to social theory: everybody's talking about it, few can agree on a definition of it, and nobody knows quite what to do with it. At the same time, teaching critical thinking is a mandate at a growing number of educational programs in Japan, including at the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University (AU). Currently, CELE lacks a coordinated training program on the issue of teaching critical thinking. One of the problems confronting the creation of such a program is the issue of the multiple definitions of critical thinking. Other problems include the debates over the cultural roots of critical thinking, and the appropriateness of teaching critical thinking in Japan. This article reviews these debates within the critical thinking movement, in order to show the complex issues surrounding teaching critical thinking as CELE Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs). Also, in July 1999, CELE VFMs answered a questionnaire for the purposes of clarifying what they know about critical thinking and how important they think it is in their role as EFL teachers. This article analyzes the results of this questionnaire in light of CELE's stated goals and concomitant mandate.

The Mandate and Its Problems

Of the three goals of the Freshman English program at Asia University, goal number three states, "Students will develop their ability to express critical thinking skills in the English language and improve their language-learning skills" (Morrison and Paullin, 1997, p. 139). This goal includes the following points:

- 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 (e.g. self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, etc.).
- Students will be able to produce original language to express their ideas and feelings.
- Students will develop study skills for autonomous, life-long learning.

While this goal is clearly stated, CELE has no orientation nor training program specifically intended to teach VFMs about critical thinking issues, nor to bring the VFMs to a consensus on how to teach it. The CELE staff consists of twenty-two VFMs who rotate in, and then out, of Asia University on a series of three one-year employment contracts. Thus, the state of understanding and consensus on critical thinking and how to teach it is in flux. The current staff of VFMs arrived at CELE bringing their own background, or lack of background, on the topic of critical thinking. Understanding about critical thinking can and, as the questionnaire revealed, does differ among VFMs. Consequently, fulfilling the mandate of goal number three in a coordinated effort is problematic.

The Issue of Multiple Definitions

The American Heritage Dictionary (1983, p. 165) defines "critical" as, "characterized by or requiring careful evaluation and judgement." The same (p. 705) defines "think" or "thinking" as, "to have as a thought, formulate in the mind. . . to ponder. . . to reason. . . to consider." Employing our own critical thinking, we may conclude that in a common dictionary definition, removed from the context of academic jargon, critical thinking means using the mind to carefully judge and evaluate. Would that we could leave it at that.

But in the broader EFL environment "critical thinking" is a buzzword, a now-confusing term and concept about which our academic colleagues — and we ourselves at CELE — have yet to come to a consensus regarding even its definition.

On the issue of the multiple definitions of critical thinking in the EFL literature, Bruce Davidson has stated, "many who use the term cannot seem to define clearly what they mean by it and a variety of definitions have been offered by those in the critical thinking movement" (1998, p.120).

According to Garside (1996), the grandparents of all definitions of critical thinking are Watson and Glaser, who, in 1939, defined critical thinking as, roughly, the attitude and skill to systematically and logically examine evidence supporting conclusions, examine the reasoning linking evidence to conclusions, and to produce statements supported by sound evidence and reasoning. Garside states that most contemporary definitions of critical thinking are merely elaborations on this early definition by Watson and Glaser. Below are some of those definitions.

Critical thinking is "the educational cognate of rationality" (Seigel, 1988, p. 32, cited in Davidson, 1998).

Critical thinking is "reasonable and reflective thinking that is focused upon deciding what to believe and do" (Norris and Ennis, 1989, p.3).

"Critical thinking is the process of evaluating statements, arguments, and experiences" (D'Angelo, 1971, p. 7-8, cited in Shoemaker, 1993).

Beyer states that critical thinking is "careful, precise and objective analysis of any knowledge, claim or belief in order to judge its validity and/or worth" (1985, cited in Garside, 1996).

And just when you thought it was all beginning to zoom into focus comes the blurring: "Critical thinking is thinking about your thinking while you're thinking in order to make your thinking better" (Paul, 1992, p. 1).

Yet, Davidson also concludes that while "a variety of definitions of critical thinking have been offered and. . . they differ to some degree. . . it is difficult not to notice large areas of overlap. In fact, the definitions are often simply paraphrases of the same idea. The definitions usually connect critical thinking to rational judgement" (1998, p. 120). Indeed, none of these definitions stray too far from the simple one we put together with the American Heritage Dictionary.

Another place to find convergence instead of divergence on the problem of definition, is the general consensus among critical thinking devotees on the use of Bloom's Taxonomy. First published in 1956, Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* lists six categories of thinking skills: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (cited in Shoemaker, 1993). A student progresses sequentially from the first through the last of these categories to develop critical thinking skills. Thus a student who can not only memorize facts and use them in simple problem-solving, but a student who can also understand component parts of information, put them together to form a new whole, and then make judgements about the value of that information, is said to possess critical thinking skills. The categories of Bloom's Taxonomy have been widely accepted in the literature as forming the distinctions between lower-level thinking and critical thinking. And, again, by accepting Bloom's Taxonomy as a defining guideline for understanding critical thinking, we return to the idea that critical thinking can generally be defined as rational, analytical, evaluative thinking.

As discussed, the definitions of critical thinking are syntactically varying yet generally in conceptual agreement. It really isn't that hard to agree what critical thinking is. However, it will be important to come to a clear, consensual, working definition in any discussion about the importance of teaching critical thinking at CELE.

The Cultural Debate

Another of the controversies confronting anyone teaching critical thinking in an EFL classroom in Japan is a debate over culture and critical thinking. Essentially, two contentious questions shape this debate: Is critical thinking a Western concept, and, if it is, how appropriate is teaching critical thinking within the Japanese educational system?

Discussion of the culture question can begin by looking at the above-cited definitions of critical thinking. Davidson (1998) notes that many such definitions mention nothing about culture. Atkinson (1997, cited in Davidson, 1998) points out that researchers must consider the cultural roots of critical thinking and not promote it as just simply another cognitive skill. And, while further research by Davidson and Dunham (1997) has implied that critical thinking skills can indeed be learned by EFL students in the Japanese classroom through intensive academic instruction, Atkinson's question lingers in the background of such findings: Is such instruction culturally appropriate? To begin, we must consider the cultural origins of critical thinking.

As it was not difficult, above, to come to general agreement about a definition of critical thinking, it should not be difficult to conclude, for all practical purposes, the cultural origins of the concept of critical thinking. Consider the following: The widely accepted definitions of critical thinking come from Westerners; the major test of critical thinking — the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test — has been developed and promoted by Westerners; critical thinking has been a hot topic in Western universities since the 1980s (Ganer, 1989); critical thinking in Japan is being debated in the context of English language instruction.

This author will go out on a limb and state that the origin of the concept of critical thinking is Western. That is, that the current emphasis on critical thinking in education has originated in the West. (Which is not to conclude that critical thinking is the exclusive domain of Westerners or should be.) This author is not the only one to conclude so. For example, Davidson states that Atkinson views critical thinking as "Western, masculine, individualistic, adversarial, and coldly rational" (1998, p.121). And Gieve describes a "mainstream, White male, U.S. critical thinking culture" (1998, p.123).

Having concluded thusly that the trend toward critical thinking education originates in the West, we can move the debate to the appropriateness of teaching it in Japan through institutions such as CELE. One of the major defenses for teaching it in Japan is the argument that Japanese students should at least be exposed to Western, critical thinking that can prepare them for business, travel, graduate study or other interactions with Westerners. Davidson (1995, 1998) and Ganer (1989) summarize this argument.

The problem with this argument is that it fails to make a distinction between an academic survey course in the history of critical thinking, and a skills-based course aimed at developing critical thinking skills. A survey course could do no harm in exposing Japanese students to an understanding of the way Westerners think. This course would not run afoul of concerns over linguistic imperialism. Any skills-based course, however, still must wrestle with the question of appropriateness of expecting Japanese students to think like Westerners as a measure of success in their course and the achievement of a good final grade.

As a parallel, we could imagine a course in the practice of fasting. There would be a great difference between a survey course in which students learned the history and benefits — and dangers — of fasting, as opposed to a skills-based course in which their final grade was determined by the number of days they went without food. The proponents of the above argument are trying to rationalize a survey course, whereas most of the debate about critical thinking centers on English-language learning courses whose goals include developing critical thinking skills. Therefore their argument is not valid in this regard. This debate remains active and unresolved. Those promoting critical thinking still have to address the appropriateness of teaching it in the Japanese classroom.

The next important question is this: Is critical thinking indeed foreign to Japanese culture and educational systems, as is implied in some of the applied linguistics literature? Whereas critical thinking as a concept may be Western in origin, is there anything about it that conflicts with styles of Eastern thinking and cultures?

Ryuko Kubota (1999) claims that much of the applied linguistics literature on critical thinking assumes that Eastern and Western societies and people are bound by such culturally determined presuppositions as claiming that critical thinking is foreign to the Japanese. For example, by stating that the West favors individualism, self-expression and critical analytical thinking, and that the East favors collectivism, harmony and memorization, this literature limits educators' views of their students and their abilities and backgrounds. She states that such stereotyping of Japanese students and their culture come from an "Orientalist discourse" rather than from evidence compiled by objective research, which offers a different view (Kubota, p.14-15). While confirming that the influence of examination-oriented instruction in Japanese secondary education emphasizes memorization, objective research shows that nonacademic activities at this age foster creativity, original thinking and self-expression in Japanese students (Kubota, p.24). And Kubota cites many researchers who have shown that, at the Japanese preschool and elementary school levels, curricula promote creativity, original thinking and self-expression. Kubota emphasizes that EFL educators and researchers need to use their own critical thinking to examine the cultural stereotypes of the Japanese student and education presented in the literature, instead of accepting them as objective truth. Keeping these issues in mind, we can examine the state of understanding of critical thinking at CELE.

The Questionnaire and Its Results

In July, at the halfway point in the 1999 academic year, VFMs answered a questionnaire about the need for education within CELE about critical thinking. Eighteen of twenty-one (86 percent of) questionnaires were returned. The author refrained from participating in his own survey. The twelve questions and possible answers are detailed below. The numbers in parenthesis show how many VFMs chose that answer.

Explanatory notes: At Asia University, FE (Freshman English) class levels are determined by a placement test administered at the beginning of each academic year. Students are placed in FE classes based on their score. Advanced is the highest. Level 1 is the next highest and 21 the lowest. Also, please note that not all respondents answered all twelve questions.

1. How would you describe your understanding of the meaning of Critical Thinking?

Unclear	Somewhat clear	Very Clear
(1)	(15)	(2)

2. Roughly how many articles have you read on the subject of Critical Thinking?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	more
(1)	(1)	(1)	(7)		(3)	(1)				(4)

3. To teach Critical Thinking effectively to your FE students, how much more education on the subject of Critical Thinking do you think you need?

No more	A little more	Somewhat more	A lot more
(1)	(3)	(11)	(3)

4. Do you think you could give a clear definition of Critical Thinking that others could understand?

No	Yes
(4)	(14)

5. Do you think you could give a clear definition of Critical Thinking that others could agree with?

No	Yes
(8)	(9)

6. Did you try to teach Critical Thinking to your FE classes this Spring Term?

No	Yes
(7)	(11)

7. If yes, how effective do you think you were in teaching Critical Thinking?

Not very	Somewhat	Very
(1)	(10)	(0)

8. Again, if you answered yes to #6, how did you try to measure your effectiveness in successfully teaching Critical Thinking?
(See discussion below)

9. How important do you think Critical Thinking is to teach to your FE students?

Not important	Somewhat important	Very important
(1)	(11)	(4)

10. Do you plan to try to teach Critical Thinking to you FE students next Term?

No	Yes
(3)	(13)

11. How important do you think more education about Critical Thinking is for CELE VFMs?

Not important	Somewhat important	Very important
(0)	(10)	(6)

12. Any comments or opinions about Critical Thinking?
(See discussion below)

The level of your Law FE class is

Advanced	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-21
(1)	(3)	(5)	(2)	(5)

Regarding Question 8, of the ten VFMs who tried to teach critical thinking, only two responded with details of how they measured their effectiveness in successfully teaching critical thinking. Two other VFMs stated no formal measurement process, but said they observed student responses on critical thinking tasks, tests and assignments. The other six VFMs reported no means of measuring their effectiveness of teaching critical thinking.

Seven VFMs responded with comments on Question 12. One VFM teaching level 16-21 wrote: "I wonder how important CT (critical thinking) is at the lower levels. In my classes, there seems to be a need to build confidence in using English first."

A VFM teaching level 1-5 stated: " My impression is that CT is more of an issue in American schools and educational circles than it is here in Japan. Therefore, I'm not sure how CT relates to Freshman English language classes. Also, if CT is not an issue or a concern within the Japanese educational establishment, I'm not sure that it is our responsibility as FE teachers to 'fill in this gap' or to try to 'make up' for these skills that may be 'missing' from our students' academic background."

A VFM teaching level 6-10 said: "CT is an important skill, but not easy to do without having sufficient language skills. " Another VFM from the same level wrote: "Would like to know more of the rationale for its place in language learning/teaching." And a third VFM from the same levels added: "I don't know how feasible it is at the lower levels, but if it's to remain one of our goals then professional development in the area is necessary." One more VFM from levels 6-10 wrote: "It depends on how fluent they are in English -- for some just the language is struggle enough."

And a VFM from levels 11-15 concluded: "I agree very strongly with the goals of critical thinking, but need more ideas for bringing it into the lower level classroom."

These respondents to Question 12 showed that ambiguity remains in the minds of some VFMs regarding the importance of teaching critical thinking at CELE. Note that these responses suggest that special, practical questions need to be asked and answered about teaching critical thinking within Asia University's lower-level FE classes.

To conclude on Questions 8, responses reflect a lack of consensus on the need or the means for objectively evaluating the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking in their classes.

Analysis of the remaining questions shows a further need for education at CELE on the issues surrounding critical thinking. Although Question 2 showed that almost all of the respondents have read articles on critical thinking, Question 1 found fifteen respondents only somewhat clear on the meaning of critical thinking.

Questions 3 and 11 revealed that VFMs think more education is needed at CELE on the issue of critical thinking.

Questions 9 and 10 showed that most VFMs think teaching critical thinking is important and plan to continue to try. However, note that the strong majority of respondents in Question 9 answered that teaching critical thinking to their students was only "Somewhat important."

Question 6 found eleven VFMs tried to teach critical thinking the previous term, yet most of those didn't have a formal evaluation system in place to measure how successful they were, as discussed in Question 8 above.

Finally, Questions 4 and 5 revealed that most VFMs believe they can define critical thinking, yet less are confident that others would agree with their definition.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

While it should be easy to come to an agreement about a working definition of critical thinking, coming to agreement about other issues surrounding critical thinking may not be so simple, and that is as it should be. As concluded above, many difficult and important questions remain unanswered about the cultural appropriateness of teaching critical thinking skills in Japan. I am not alone in concluding so.

Davidson agrees with Atkinson that critical thinking "should not be promoted like a fad or chanted like a mantra without much attention to its meaning or practicality" (1998). Kubota's conclusions include the statement, "I find the issues . . . highly complex and difficult to articulate." In the preface to Davidson's 1995 article "Critical Thinking Faces the Challenge of Japan," in which he struggles bravely with the moral ambiguities of analyzing critical thinking among the Japanese, he confesses, "I feel some sense of fear and trembling," as he sets out to make generalizations about the Japanese people, culture and educational system.

We foreign teachers should always feel uncomfortable drawing broad conclusions about the country we visit and the people we teach. The debates about teaching critical thinking in Japan are rife with the risks of drawing such broad conclusions. Whatever we do conclude, we should not do so hastily, nor without carefully analyzing cultural assumptions through research, as Kubota suggests.

After reviewing the issues on culture, my conclusion is that, while critical thinking is a Western concept, the question of appropriateness of teaching it in Japanese universities is still wide open for debate. If critical thinking is a Western concept, why are we teaching it in Japan? If it's not a foreign concept, why is teaching it being debated in the context of English language instruction? What important distinctions remain to be made between a survey course and a skills-based course on critical thinking? What is the agenda of the obviously foreign teachers promoting critical thinking? Is critical thinking needed or just promoted? Can anyone definitively state, if only for my own amusement, exactly who wants it? How deep are the spurious assumptions about culture that Kubota exposes in the applied linguistic literature? These are questions raised by my research but not answered by it. The issues are complex. However, they must be debated when discussing the importance of teaching critical thinking at CELE.

Practically speaking, results of the CELE questionnaire show that VFMs think critical thinking is important, yet they require and request more education on the topic. VFMs may want to conduct their own research into the important questions, in order to become a part of the informed debate on teaching critical thinking that is needed at CELE.

Finally, before a new program of education on critical thinking is organized and conducted at CELE, a reevaluation of the goal of teaching critical thinking in FE classes may be in order. That is, my research concludes that it would not be out of order to do so.

On a closing, personal note, while my article might imply that I'm down on teaching critical thinking, I am only trying to be thorough in my investigation of its importance and appropriateness. As a newcomer to Japan, to university teaching and to the debate over critical thinking, I want to learn how to do my job well, but not be saddled with imperatives I don't understand or believe in. By the way, I believe I do teach critical thinking. In my lower-level FE classes at Asia University, I have engaged my students with book reviews, movie reviews, article reviews and a weekly journal. I make these assignments as exercises in analysis, synthesis, evaluation and creative self-expression, without any overt explanation of the goals of critical thinking. I have asked them to reflect on various topics, and have found in many cases their writing to be skillful, their opinions forthright and their thinking, well, critical. My point is that the accomplishment of helping students to practice critical thinking may be done without bowing at the altar of the critical thinking gods beforehand.

If it weren't for all the hullabaloo in academia drawing all this attention to something new and big and important — and now controversial — called "critical thinking," wouldn't we all be just teaching our students the skills needed to pay attention to detail, read carefully, analyze logically and write and speak clearly. Who would think of arguing with that? I wouldn't.

We may, in the end, conclude that teaching something called critical thinking, stripped of all its current academic intellectual baggage, really isn't that difficult at all. Is it uncritical of me to think so?

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