



## Fostering Critical Thinking Competence in EFL Classroom

XU Qing<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>College of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, China.

Lecturer. M.A. in Applied Linguistics.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 23 February 2013; accepted 28 May 2013

### Abstract

The paper points out the importance of critical thinking in college English learning, it attempts to analyze the obstacles that prevent the development of critical thinking. The paper also calls for the necessity of integrating critical thinking into English teaching and provides some constructive strategies to achieve the goal.

**Key words:** Critical thinking; Reflective teaching; Autonomous learning

XU Qing (2013). Fostering Critical Thinking Competence in EFL Classroom. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(1), 6-9. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130701.2717> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130701.2717>

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, teachers have increasingly realized the necessity of developing students' ability for critical thinking, which is regarded as a central responsibility for higher education and an educational ideal in college English teaching. Over the past two decades, many works (Browne, 2006; Ennis, 1995; Fisher, 2001) about critical thinking have been published.

Nowadays, critical thinking is greatly appreciated, it is also an indispensable part of college education as well as an important quality that a confident and independent learner must possess. Critical thinking contributes a lot to English communication. The process of fostering critical thinking competence deals with stimulating students'

reverse thinking and cultivating their independent thinking ability, then students may consciously apply their previously acquired knowledge into practice.

Nevertheless, owing to the current problems and reform trends in foreign language teaching, critical thinking is not given enough attention in English teaching which tends to focus more on language skill training. As a matter of fact, in the context of English learning, critical thinking should take on a more dynamic role than simple skill acquisition.

### 1. DEFINITION OF CRITICAL THINKING

Ennis (1985, 45) defined critical thinking as "reasonably reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do." Critical thinking involves learning to evaluate, draw inferences and arrive at conclusions based on the evidence (Zintz & Maggart, 1984). In other words, critical thinking is thinking critically, it has both cognitive and attitudinal dimensions. On one hand, a learner must know how to think critically, on the other hand, one must be inclined to do so on appropriate occasions.

Critical thinking is viewed as a mental habit which promotes reflection, it enables one to develop the abilities to analyze, criticize, advocate ideas and reach conclusions. Researchers like Paul, Binker, Jensen, and Kreklau created a list of 35 dimensions of critical thought (1990, p.56). Basically, critical thinking includes some of the following components: (1) Looking at information within its proper context; (2) Evaluating the logic and validity of an argument; (3) Recognizing assumptions that are not directly stated in the text; (4) Using language clearly and accurately.

#### 1.1 The Importance of Critical Thinking

In many western universities, educators usually view enlightenment and exploration of truth as their missions, so the cultivation of critical thinking ability of students is

given enough attention. By contrast, English teaching in our university has paid too much attention to cultivating students' English language knowledge and skills, while the cultivation of students' critical thinking is far from satisfaction. As a matter of fact, students should be equipped with critical understanding and adaptability before stepping into the labor market, which requires the capacity to become a critical and autonomous learner.

Critical thinking means correct thinking in the pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge. A learner who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions. Therefore, it is highly important to initiate the development of students' quality of critical thinking.

Critical thinking is both reflective and creative. Critical thinking competence can broaden students' horizon, build their self-confidence, and create excellent opportunities for their future career. Given students' deficiency in the critical thinking skills, it is urgent for our educators to equip students with critical thinking competence. As a learned ability, critical thinking can be taught during lectures, laboratories, homework, term papers, examinations and so on.

---

## 2. A CASE STUDY

---

### 2.1 Objective and Methodology

We conducted an investigation about critical thinking among non-English majors in oral class over a time span of one term. The study aims at understanding the relationship between language and logic, which would foster students' ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively, and to reach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief (Lazere, 1987, p.72). More exactly, the study is to find whether the students' behavior changes after the instruction on critical thinking in oral discussion and summarize some strategies for cultivating critical thinking ability. According to the Qualitative Critical Thinking Skills Instrument, the survey was made among 180 college freshmen concerning students' autonomous learning ability and critical thinking disposition inventory.

As regard to this research, questionnaires and interviews, self-evaluation, and the instructor's field notes were used as the data collection tools. A questionnaire was designed and delivered to all the students and 6 teachers in 3 different majors. Three months later, they were provided with questionnaires as a part of follow up activity.

Considering the features of oral class, the English proficiency of the learners, as well as the discussion topic, the research focuses on only four critical thinking skills in

oral discussion: to define and interpret, identify bias and unfairness, analyze and synthesize, question as well as challenge.

### 2.2 Findings of the Project

In this project, on the average, students scored  $83.6 \pm 10.1$  and  $274.5 \pm 27.3$  in autonomous learning ability and critical thinking ability respectively. The autonomous learning ability of students actually keeps in the middle level. A positive relationship between students' autonomous learning ability and critical thinking ability can be noticed.

It is found that if one wants to become proficient in oral English, student must be creative in his production of ideas, and critically support them with logical explanation, details and examples. Nevertheless, creative and critical thinking skills should not be taught separately as an isolated entity, but embedded in the subject matter and "woven into the curriculum" (Mirman & Tishman, 1988).

The investigation has confirmed that a classroom instruction can facilitate the advancement of students' critical thinking skills, increase their initiatives, and improve their comprehensive ability. According to the study, the findings indicate that a variety of strategies are effective in improving students' critical thinking ability. One strategy is self-directed learning. Critical thinkers are good at applying logic to solve problems and make decisions.

---

## 3. STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING

---

### 3.1 Reflective Teaching

Critical thinking is a consciously controlled by reflective thought. It is believed that critical thinking skills require predicting, data gathering, decision making, comparing and contrasting, inferring, evaluating and so on. Needless to say, a learner needs to develop a sharp, open, and analytical mind. Thereby, the teacher's role needs to be alternated, from a decision-maker, facilitator and resource person to help the students learn to be autonomous.

Implementing reflective teaching and improving critical thinking instruction are two important goals in teacher education. Reflectivity is the essence of quality teaching and learning. Undoubtedly, reflective practice can improve teachers' classroom teaching skills. For instance, teaching critical thinking skills through oral discussion prepares students for the rigor of oral English. Students used text-connected expressions as support for their ideas or as cited sources of their information. Teachers need to refrain from expressing their own bias, allowing the students to debate and resolve problems on their own.

Reflective teachers are doing better in helping their

students. They are able to solve the classroom problems more confidently and competently. Several skills are related to the enhancement of critical thinking abilities. Such as teachers keep regular reflective diary, involve their students in classroom discussion and report the progress of the students. Some teachers are promoting interaction with students as they learn, because learning in a group setting often helps each member achieve more. During a group discussion, teachers are helping students to find and evaluate problems. It is advisable to ask open-ended questions with more than “one right answer”. Questions like these may encourage students to think and respond creatively, not to worry about giving the “wrong” answer.

Furthermore, in order to cultivate students’ critical thinking ability, teachers should encourage students to take a skeptical, objective attitude to think about questions independently. Teachers should create an atmosphere where students are encouraged to read deeply, question, engage in active thinking. Meanwhile, students should be given sufficient time to reflect on the questions asked or problems posed, especially those students who are lagging in problem-solving and thinking skills. Critical thinking has little to do with snap judgment; students are expected to think carefully, the immediate answer may not always be the best response.

More importantly, teachers are expected to teach for transfer. Teachers are supposed to provide opportunities for students to see how a newly acquired skill can apply to other situations. Teachers are also suggested to adopt a more flexible attitude towards their teaching and not be too dependent on textbooks. Moreover, the aspirations of the learners need special attention, how to exploit the potentials of the learners is a major task.

### 3.2 The Autonomous Learners

Critical thinking means that one is actively and constructively engaged in the process of learning. A student-centered classroom environment renders students to participate in the learning process more actively. Students are expected to manage their time and learning, engage in multi-domain learning and practice autonomous learning. Many factors may have an impact on autonomous learning ability, such as educational background, major interest, learning motivation and so on.

In order to become critical thinkers, students need to value their own thinking, compare their thinking interpretations with others, revise or reject when it is necessary. Learning that involves both personal and collaborative encourages critical thinking. It is said that students who are reading, writing, discussing, and interacting with lots of learning materials in various ways are more likely to become critical thinkers.

Critical learners are active learners, throughout the learning process; they question, confirm, and judge what they learn. Students who mastered active learning strategies and critical thinking skills are likely to

become self-directed, independent English learners, in the long run, it is helpful to achieve their academic and career goals.

### 3.3 Some Feasible Suggestions

During the past few decades, teaching students how to think is a universal goal of educational institutions. The ability to think critically is essential if one is to live, work, and function effectively in our current and changing society. How can we teach critical thinking skills? What active learning strategies are needed? How can teachers challenge students to think effectively?

Teachers sometimes worried that academic rigor in their students is not adequate, the thought process of students is immature. Besides, some students have trouble working cooperatively with others. Take oral discussion as one example, teachers may encourage discussion topics or offer background knowledge to set the stage for critical talking. By encouraging the thinking skills, students are able to think and speak effectively and make choices, evaluations, and judgments thoughtfully.

English teachers are supposed to foster critical reflection by following the teaching principles, establish equal relationships with students and encourage the students to participate actively through new approaches. For example, oral discussion in the classroom provides intellectual exploration and depth of thought. In order to achieve active, critical speaking, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry. They need to encourage students to question, make predictions, and organize ideas. Problem solving and learning to reason through speaking are two techniques needed for developing critical thinking abilities. In addition, teachers may integrate critical-thinking material into courses, developing student thinking skills through assignments and classroom activities.

On the whole, teachers should challenge learners to think critically, they are responsible for employing active learning strategies to create a student-driven and problem-centered classroom, which helps to cultivate independent and critical English learners.

---

## CONCLUSION

Critical thinking is an important topic in modern education. The process of becoming a critical, autonomous and reflective learner is challenging. By combining the teaching of English and the training of the students’ critical thinking, we are likely to achieve the goal of having better critical thinking skills and more efficient English lessons.

---

## REFERENCES

- Beyer, B. K. (1985). Critical thinking: What is it?. *Social Education*, 49, 270-276.

- Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 191-206.
- Bryson, C., & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44, 349 – 362
- Chen, S. (2005). A tentative study on the cultivation of thinking ability in foreign language education, *Journal of Chengdu Education College*, 2, 81-83.
- Dewey, J. (1993). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Ennis, R. (1985). *A logical basis for measuring critical thinking skills*. *Educational Leadership*, 44-48.
- Ennis, R. H. (1995). *Critical thinking*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Facione, P. (2006). *Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts*. California: California Academic Press.
- Fisher, A. (2001). *Critical thinking: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- French, J. N., & Rhoder, C. (1992). *Teaching thinking skills: Theory and practice*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Halvorsen, A. (2005). Incorporating critical thinking skills development into ESL/EFL courses. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 11, 3.
- Jarvis, M. (2005). *The psychology of effective learning and teaching*. London: Nelson Thornes Ltd.
- Lambright, L. (1995). Creating a dialogue Socratic seminars and educational reform. *Community College Journal*, 65, 30-34.
- Lazere, D. (1987). *American media and mass culture: Left perspectives*. University of California Press.
- Luo, M., & Li, X. (2008). Cultivation of critical thinking in college English teaching. *Heilongjiang Higher Education Research*, 7, 183-185.
- Mirman, J. & Tishman, S. (1988). Infusing thinking through 'Connections'. *Educational Leadership*, 45(7), 64-65.
- Paul, R., Binker, A., Jensen, K., & Kreklau, H. (1990). *Critical thinking handbook: A guide for remodeling lesson plans in language arts, social studies and science*. Rohnert Park, CA.: Foundation for Critical Thinking.
- Ren, W. (2007). English speaking class and cultivating ability and quality. *Chinese Foreign Language*, 6, 66-70.
- Simpson, A. (1996). Critical questions: Whose questions?. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 118-126.
- Stapleton, P. (2002). Critical thinking in Japanese L2 writing: Rethinking tired constructs. *ELT Journal*, 56, 250-257.
- Sun, L. (2008). Cultivation of critical thinking in reading teaching of English majors. *Heilongjiang Science and Technology Information*, 15, 196.
- Weast, D. (1996). Alternative teaching strategies: The case for critical thinking. *Teaching Sociology*, 24, 189-194.
- Yang, Y. (2003). Advocating critical thinking and constructing a new model of teaching culture. *Higher Normal Education Research*, 2, 72-76.
- Zintz, M. V., & Maggart, Z. R. (1984). *The reading process: The teacher and the learner*. Dubuque, Iowa: W.C. Brown.