

THE VALUE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The ability to think and make proper conclusions independently is referred to as critical thinking. Because of its prominence in teaching a foreign language, fostering critical thinking in students is now regarded as one of the objectives of foreign language educators. Critical thinking is a continuously evolving endeavor that values reading, investigating, and analyzing current events. Strategies to promote critical thinking in language learning may be adopted at all levels of language acquisition, from beginner to advanced, although the level of difficulty of the activities may vary based on language command. This article aims to discuss critical thinking in teaching a foreign language by highlighting first the importance of critical thinking, and then by presenting a series of strategies that help language educators in implementing critical thinking in language classroom.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, independent language learners, language teaching, communicative competency

1. Introduction

Perhaps one of the most recent concerns in education and language teaching is the development of critical thinking, which fosters strong-minded and open-minded people with unbiased judgment abilities. The ability to think or reason and choose wisely on one's own is referred to as critical thinking. Because of the value of critical thinking in teaching a foreign language nowadays, empowering this ability in language learners is viewed as one of the main purposes of foreign language professors.

Some educators hold the opinion that critical thinking cannot be taught, while others hold the opinion that it does not need to be formally and purposefully taught (Fok, 2002, apud Rezaei, Derakhshan, & Bagherkazemi, 2011). Even when they agree in the premise, some educators fear they lack

the ability or confidence to teach students critical thinking abilities. However, there is a broad agreement critical thinking abilities are not innate qualities and students must be educated to acquire them; therefore, critical thinking can be taught. Numerous educators have presented a variety of definitions for critical thinking. These definitions do not really differ from one another, though. According to Elder and Paul (1994, apud Shirkhani, & Fahim, 2011), critical thinking is the capacity of people to control their own cognitive processes and create acceptable norms and criteria for evaluating their own thinking.

English educators have attempted for a long time to incorporate critical thinking techniques in teaching English as a foreign language through the utilization of tasks and assignments such as problem-solving, thought-provoking questions and discussions.

Also, language educators may aid language learners in developing critical thinking abilities by controlling the methods of testing; this is why it is important to select the appropriate assessment tools. According to Harizaj and Hajrulla (2017), the learner's capacity for critical thought and action is one of the aspects that influence their communication. Learners who engage in critical thinking become highly proficient communicators in English. Therefore, encouraging critical thinking encourages independent learning. Learning a new language is challenging, and one of the priorities of both teachers and students is making the most of the ways and opportunities for language practice in the classroom. Therefore, the teacher's role in enhancing critical thinking abilities to students in addition to linguistic capabilities is crucial.

Marin & De la Pava (2017) mention that critical thinking impacts emotions, metacognition, argumentation, problem-solving, decision-making, independent learning, and communication competence. In order to enhance knowledge, and engage in both individual and group action, educators should build on a communicative strategy that includes task-based and project-based training with the goal of developing moral citizens who are dedicated to the welfare of others and the common good.

2. Critical Thinking and Language Teaching

It is essential for the educator and the student to concentrate on developing the communicative competence. Different facets of language proficiency are included in communicative competence, such as understanding how to utilize language for a variety of various uses and purposes, or understanding how to adapt our language use to the situation and the audience (for example, understanding whether to speak in a formal or casual manner or when

to write instead of speak). The communication ability also consists of the ability to create and comprehend a variety of texts, including narratives, reports, interviews, and discussions, and also the ability to continue communication despite having limited language proficiency (Harizaj & Hajrulla, 2017).

You may teach languages without considering how to incorporate critical thinking skills, but only if your objective is to teach a basic vocabulary and you employ activities that require only listening and repeating, which is common for lower levels of English. However, as soon as students engage in any work in the English language that involves personalization, research, or problem-solving, they must use critical thought. These sorts of communicative tasks are typical in current language technique since they include the learner in real communication, which is essential for obtaining an intermediate level. Success in such jobs, as in life, depends on the ability to communicate clearly and critically.

In order for our students to acquire the desired level in the STANAG language test that they take before graduating the academy, they definitely need to develop the communicative competency; they need to comprehend the types of learning techniques they must employ, how to cultivate critical thinking abilities, and how to utilize them appropriately for various objectives and contexts. Furthermore, it is the educator's role to assist students in developing their language abilities and encouraging critical thinking in their students.

Some scholars, such as Sanavi and Tarighat (2014), argue that students require deliberate practice to enhance their critical thinking abilities. Sanavi and Tarighat (2014) mentioned that the preliminary findings of their study revealed that specific instruction in critical thinking teaching had a significant beneficial impact on the

speaking skills of adult Iranian female learners. However, other researchers such as Pithers and Soden (2000, apud Sanavi and Tarighat, 2014) disagreed that critical thinking should be taught as a distinct topic and thought it should be considered as a method of teaching and learning in any discipline. The findings are in line with those of a study conducted by Cosgrove (2011, apud Sanavi and Tarighat, 2014) at Oxford University, which found that teaching critical thinking needed to be explicit and systematic because students were largely missing the implicit components while internalizing the explicit and necessary ones.

No matter if it is taught on purpose or not, everybody recognizes the importance of developing critical thinking for a number of reasons, as Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) mention in their study. First of all, language learners can keep track and assess their own training more effectively if they can control their own thoughts. Second, critical thinking expands students' learning opportunities and offers the language a deeper meaning for them. Third, critical thinking and student achievement have a close relationship. Numerous researches have demonstrated the value of critical thinking in enhancing writing, reading and speaking skills. If learners are motivated and given the skills to demonstrate critical thinking in foreign language classroom, they can become proficient language users. To do this, the learners must reflect on the ideas they produce and be able to defend these ideas critically with logical arguments. Since thinking and language development go hand in hand, educators should have a better understanding of it, in order to create independent learners who are capable of critically evaluating their own learning process.

Critical thinking is an ongoing process that values reading, challenging, and analyzing current events. Students can take advantage of the use of critical

thinking at any level of their language learning, although the complexity of the activities will change based on the language proficiency. Educators recommend debates, role-plays, oral conversations and presentations about interesting subjects, project-based activities, problem-solving tasks, decision-making tasks, essays, and self-evaluation activities as the best methods for promoting critical thinking (Marin & De la Pava, 2017).

Additionally, Hughes (2014) stresses the importance of genuine texts or real writings that have been modified for the language level but retaining the writer's or speaker's original meaning that are used in the modern language school. Students must understand the meaning of a text (spoken or written) that contains facts and opinions expressed by the speaker or writer (such as a news article or a blog post), separate the facts from the opinions, match the arguments to the supporting evidence, and then respond to the text by expressing their own opinions. In other words, students are forced to view texts critically very early in the process of acquiring a language. However, we must take into account the source of the texts that students will encounter in addition to the prior point regarding how we approach a text.

As we prepare our students for the requirements of the STANAG language exam that our students must pass, we as educators should definitely take into account growing their ability to think critically to help them do better. Just like Cambridge or IETLS examinations, STANAG consists of a listening, reading, speaking and writing component. With the purpose of responding to the questions of the reading texts, students need critical thinking to understand well the texts and for the speaking and writing part they must reply to prompts with opinions and justifications for those opinions.

3. Implementing Critical Thinking Activities in Language Classroom

According to Marin & De la Pava (2017) students need to be given opportunities to exercise critical thought, besides the thinking abilities, attitudes, and other components mentioned in the specialized literature. Rather than using standardized multiple-choice tests with one correct answer, language learners should be confronted with conversations, activities, tasks, and tests that assess their academic achievement relying on both individual and collaborative criteria, with open questions that require students to use their thinking abilities.

Hughes (2014) provides a series of activities meant to develop critical thinkers at different level of learning. At early stages of learning English, he mentions introducing the language of expressing opinion, agreeing and disagreeing, and then practicing expressing opinion with opinion expressions and giving reasons, practicing the language of asking open questions, which are more effective than closed questions. Another activity is to talk about an image in different situations to be able to see an argument from all sides, and make them understand how the context of an image or text may change our view or understanding of it. An activity that brings all phases of critical thinking together and incorporates important concepts is the group presentation.

Furthermore, being able to discuss about a topic, even an unfamiliar one, and also making connections between topics helps students grow as critical thinkers. Sometimes it is important to make connections with the topics they discussed in their specialized subjects in Romanian, such as leadership, cyber security or international organizations, in order to be able to discuss about them in English. Moreover, debating and encouraging students to express many points of view, even contradictory points of view is helpful

in growing critical thinking. In addition, being able to express your opinion with reasons is also a characteristic of an advanced level of language. Students might be asked to do a role-play in which they have to talk about a topic by understanding the other person's point of view.

When we try to develop students' writing competency, and especially that of writing opinion or argumentative essays, it is essential to make the distinction between fact or opinion, and to identify main arguments and supporting evidence, in other words they should read the model essay critically. The same approach is valid for a pro and con essay.

In the same manner, Hughes (2014) presents a number of engaging exercises for encouraging critical thinking in language classrooms, such as: generating arguments and opinions, and critical questioning; understanding context; determining the validity of the sources; highlighting key points and supporting details; making predictions about the text's substance; planning a group conversation; scoring presentations (for further information on these activities' processes, see Hughes, 2014, 8–26). In order to provide students a model for critical thinking, and to foster a relationship of trust between educators and students, instructors must model critical thinking while carrying out all of these tasks in the classroom (Saleh, 2019).

As Rezaei et al. (2011) argue in their paper, it is typical practice in language instruction to use challenging and inference questions to develop critical thinking skills while teaching students reading and writing. Cook (1991, apud Rezaei et al., 2011), who sees reading as fundamentally a process of thought, stressed the value of getting pupils communicating to one another about the texts they read. In a similar vein, Elder and Paul (2004 apud Rezaei et al., 2011) emphasize that students need to learn well, they must read well, viewing critical thinking as the skill of

attentive reading. They stress the significance of asking questions of oneself frequently when reading, in order to enhance critical thinking.

In her paper, Moge (2022) states that critical thinking may be taught or stressed in all aspects of the classroom, including lectures, assignments, term papers, and tests. The educator will need to put in a little additional work, but it will be worth it because the outcomes are so beneficial to the student. During lectures it is not necessary nor recommended to teach critical thinking explicitly, instead educators can ask students questions that demand not only that they comprehend the content but also that they can evaluate it and apply it to new scenarios. Also, educators may require students to submit a short paper about the most important lesson they learnt during the lecture and a particular thing they don't understand after the lecture, but before the class closes. The laboratories, on the other hand, can create the perfect environment for exercising critical thinking. Homework and term papers are an excellent way to promote critical thinking, because writing allows students to think through their ideas, reflect on their subject, analyze their evidence logically, and persuasively express their conclusions.

As far as the exams are concerned, Moge (2022) mentions that it is possible to create exam questions that encourage critical thinking over rote memory. This is true for both multiple-choice and essay-question used in examinations. If adopted, it is recommended that at least one of the following instructional methodologies or techniques be employed in one or more of the aforementioned course areas to teach

critical thinking. Students should be required to write on exams, or at the very least to ponder. Essay questions that may be short of long-answer are the natural choice for written exams. For instance, a small number of short-answer essay questions are included in each exam paper to gauge students' abilities to evaluate data and develop conclusions. By itself, this widely utilized method aids in the development of critical thinking.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is strongly advised that educators help their students develop the critical thinking abilities they will need to deal with the challenges and changes brought on by the information age. When it comes to classroom language teaching, educators who effectively employ questions, include students in conversations about difficult and inspiring subjects, and perform various types of reflection, encourage students to engage in fruitful critical thinking processes. Frameworks that encourage and appreciate inquiry as well as a teaching and learning environment that respects many, often conflicting points of view are also essential in helping students grow on their critical thinking skills. Presentations, interviews, debates, essays, discussions, role plays, self-assessment, and project-based activities, and other applicable strategies can also be beneficial. Last but not least, educators' use of critical thinking abilities and attitudes as well as their clear explanations of the value of critical thinking and involving them in projects and tasks that require analysis, synthesis, reflection, and problem-solving might help students in developing their critical thinking skills.

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