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Developing Critical Thinking in the English Language classroom: A Lesson Plan

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to share both theoretical and practical ideas about critical thinking development within English language teaching/learning contexts. First, the authors seek to answer three questions, namely, what critical thinking is, why to integrate and develop critical thinking in ELT, and how to create lessons including an element of critical thinking development. Then the article introduces some extra concepts which prove useful when designing a lesson with a critical thinking objective in mind such as the importance of cognitive and affective domains, and an ABCD model as a convenient framework for the incorporation of necessary components into the lesson plan. A lesson plan is provided demonstrating the application of critical thinking strategies in ELT.

Key words: Critical thinking, English language teaching/learning, lesson plan, ABCD model, cognitive and affective domains, critical thinking strategies

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad ima za cilj da podeli sa čitaocima neke teoretske i praktične ideje u vezi sa razvijanjem kritičkog načina razmišljanja u kontekstu nastave i učenja engleskog jezika. Autori prvo pokušavaju da daju odgovor na tri pitanja: šta je zapravo kritičko razmišljanje, zašto ga uvesti u nastavu engleskog jezika i kako stvoriti časove koji uključuju element razvijanja kritičkog razmišljanja. Nakon toga, rad uvodi dodatne koncepte koji se pokazuju kao korisni pri kreiranju časova sa ciljem razvoja kritičkog razmišljanja, kao recimo značaj kognitivnog i afektivnog domena i ABCD model kao praktičan okvir za uvođenje neophodnih komponenata u plan časa. Na kraju, priložen je plan časa koji demonstrira primenu strategija kritičkog razmišljanja u nastavi engleskog jezika.

Ključne reči: kritičko razmišljanje, nastava i učenje engleskog jezika, plan časa, ABCD model, kognitivni i afektivni domeni, strategije kritičkog razmišljanja

Introduction

Every teacher must have heard at some point throughout their teaching careers the term “critical thinking”. This concept seems to be present daily in educational speeches, articles and syllabuses. Moreover, there seems to be a general agreement on the “correctness” of such term and its usage. For that reason, it might be strange for the reader to discover that little is known about critical thinking, what it is, what it counts and how to incorporate it into our ELT lesson plans.

The aim of this article is to share both theoretical and practical ideas about critical thinking and its application within English language teaching and learning contexts. First, the authors seek to answer three fundamental questions connected with the topic:

1. What is critical thinking?
2. Why to integrate and develop critical thinking in ELT?
3. How to create lessons with an element of critical thinking development?

Then some concepts concerning critical thinking development are introduced which prove useful when designing a lesson. Finally, the authors suggest three objectives with a critical component in each for a particular lesson. The lesson plan and some material for the lesson are provided in the appendix.

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is not a new concept or practice. Most teachers might be impressed to learn that critical thinking can be traced back many centuries ago. In fact, it has been practiced from times immemorial, notably, by Socrates and Plato. (Paul, et al. 1997).

Defining critical thinking might seem difficult, especially because the term tends to be used repeatedly without actually reflecting on its true meaning. To begin with, we can state that critical thinking is a quality able to be developed throughout life. But critical thinking is not a dimension just applicable to education (in the formal sense of the term). So what it is? How can it be defined?

“Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically

consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked.” (Elder, 2007)

It is crucial to be aware of the fact that critical thinking is not “survival thinking”; it requires careful and intentional development of specific skills in processing information, considering beliefs, opinions, solving problems. Schafersman (1991: p.3) states that *“critical thinking means correct thinking in the pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world. Another way to describe it is reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable one to live and act successfully in it”.*

Raymond S. Nickerson (1987) provides us with a whole list of abilities and attitudes which characterize the individual who thinks critically. This individual is someone who:

- ✓ organizes thoughts and articulates them concisely and coherently;
- ✓ suspends judgment in the absence of sufficient evidence to support a decision;
- ✓ attempts to anticipate the probable consequences of alternative actions;
- ✓ can learn independently and has an abiding interest in doing so;
- ✓ applies problem-solving techniques in domains other than those in which learned, to name just a few.

Why to integrate and develop critical thinking in ELT?

Critical thinking is associated with quality thinking and, if sufficiently developed, provides learners with a more skillful way of communicating with other people, acquiring new knowledge, and dealing with ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. In all these areas language plays a crucial role. We may need to distinguish between the language as a communicative vehicle in everyday situations and the use of

the language beyond the survival level. In fact, a lot of verbal communication occurs in everyday situations which do not require much thinking but a number of situational clichés and factual information.

However, when a foreign language is taught/learned, even the survival language level may require more thinking of how to communicate in a foreign language. This is because languages are culturally determined (see David Crystal's book *The Stories of English*, 2004). And as cultures differ, so do languages. Traditions and mentality reflect in the language, its vocabulary, grammar structures, modality, etc. When learning the target language, students need to accept these cultural differences not as a deviation from the natural way associated, as they may think, with their mother tongue but as a fully natural, though different, way of verbal expression within a different cultural domain. Practicing thinking critically when trying to identify similarities and differences in how one and the same cliché is put in words in another language makes the learning process more enjoyable and culturally enriching even at the beginning level.

Moreover, the English language took the role of the lingua franca and is used globally by non-native speakers of English for intercultural communication. Critical thinking skills are indispensable when practicing such intellectual traits as empathy and tolerance thus getting ready for communication in multicultural contexts.

One more aspect justifying and even requiring critical thinking introduction in the ELT class arises due to the rapidly growing international student mobility trends and the use of English as the language of instruction in universities around the world. Researchers of the American Foundation for Critical Thinking (www.criticalthinking.org) argue that critical thinking is not as a natural skill as speaking or running, it is a deliberately developed complex set of skills and features which takes years to acquire. Similarly, a foreign language acquisition needs years of persistent training. So practicing both simultaneously saves time and provides a synergy effect: developing the former we improve the latter and vice versa.

Finally, critical thinking requires active and interactive learning. It does not tolerate passive learning, taking new things and opinions as ready-made words of wisdom. In our experience, students tend to learn better by actively

communicating with each other in a particular academic content, especially if they are encouraged to apply critical thinking when comparing their views and ideas, when evaluating arguments, when probing into the intellectual standards of clarity and accuracy, breadth and width, relevance and fair-mindedness, etc. Engaged in the interactive activities while practicing both communicative skills and critical thinking, students have a better chance to improve their self-consciousness, their understanding of their abilities and of their limits and thus paving the road to self-improvement as learners, as future professional, and as individuals.

How to integrate critical thinking in a lesson plan?

So far we have focused our attention on exploring some theoretical aspects of critical thinking, but as every English language teacher knows, it might be hard to find the way to apply and develop lesson plans that address critical thinking in viable and realistic ways. As usual, there are different contexts and student characteristics that may influence the degree to which critical thinking can be introduced and developed, but we firmly believe that the first steps are planning, experimenting and reflecting. Our own practice and students feedback will provide the teacher with the necessary information to start redesigning lessons so that they involve students in the development of critical thinking, i.e. to adapt content, language tasks, learning strategies in cognitive and affective domains.

Undoubtedly, writing a lesson plan helps to organize our thoughts and have a framework that indicates how to take our students to certain “learning destinations”. In order to develop plans that include the development of critical thinking some essential elements or components are typical for any lesson plans, yet some other components need to be added and adapted in order to integrate a critical thinking element. After all, if we want to develop critical thinking in our foreign language class, we need to include some specific lesson components into the lesson plan, in addition to traditional components of the lesson description such as prerequisites, instructional objectives, supporting activities, and assessment.

Typically, language teachers are quite happy if their students learn some linguistic structures including words and word collocations, as well as grammar structures and practice them, first, in a more controlled exercise and later in the production of their own pieces of text, oral or written. This traditional approach is known as PPP, which stands for Presentation – Practice – Production. The purpose of the initial stage called ‘Presentation’ is obviously to expose the students to a new material which the students can remember, in other words, retrieve, recognize later, and understand, i.e. being able to interpret and explain what they learned, first, through exercises known as ‘Practice’ and, later, to apply what they learned in a new context, a stage known as ‘Production’. Such transfer of knowledge typically from a teacher to a student may not require active learning.

With a critical thinking objective in mind, this is not enough. By including a critical thinking objective, teachers are expected not only to plan a more inquisitive mode of learning new linguistic phenomena but also to engage their students’ in an interactive activity focused on various issues which can be of interest to a particular group of students like world events or problems of personal character. This can be done by relying on the students’ previous experience, by asking questions for clarification in order to make the issue clearer, more accurate and precise, by comparing opinions, by identifying the underlying factors, etc. All this has an effect on the quality of arguments and thinking, thus becoming personal practice in using a foreign language and thinking critically at the same time.

Extra elements of a lesson with a critical thinking objective:

ABCD Model for Writing Objectives: ABCD Model provides a very convenient framework for the incorporation of all necessary components when designing a lesson. Indeed, it is useful to write each objective in one clear sentence structured according to the ABCD model, where ‘A’ stands for ‘Audience’, typically the students, ‘B’ for ‘Behavior’, i.e. lesson activities, ‘C’ for ‘Condition’ meaning the initial prerequisites for the lesson activities, and ‘D’ for ‘Degree’, by which we mean certain measurable criteria for the acceptable student performance. Writing objectives using the ABCD model proves beneficial

because in this way objectives acquire such characteristics as being specific, observable, results oriented, and measurable by either quantitative or qualitative criteria. Three examples of ABCD modeled lesson objectives will be provided when describing the lesson plan.

Cognitive and Affective Domains in Learning: There is a tendency among teachers, students and people in general, to believe that there is only one type of learning, namely, the one which relies on cognitive activity. Indeed, cognition as a mental process is crucial in learning, but this simplistic way of addressing such a complex phenomenon as human learning fails to recognize the role of emotions and attitudes in learning identified and emphasized by Benjamin Bloom in his *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals* published in 1956. The cognitive domain “involves knowledge and the development of intellectual skills. This includes the recall or recognition of specific facts, procedural patterns, and concepts that serve in the development of intellectual abilities and skills.” The affective domain “includes the manner in which we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes.” (Clark, 2010: p.2)

So for the sake of critical thinking development, it is crucial to consider the types of activities from the point of view of how they contribute both to the intellectual and to the affective development.

Critical thinking strategies: In the past decade, learning/teaching strategies have come into light for teachers to take into account in lesson plans. However, we need to be aware of specific critical thinking strategies if we declare our commitment to their developments when teaching anything, including foreign languages. Strategies related to critical thinking can be classified in two categories: cognitive strategies and affective strategies. By these we should understand the way we address issues in question. For examples, critical thinking development can take place if students are given the task involving such critical thinking strategies as ‘*Giving Reasons and Evaluating Evidence*’, or ‘*Recognizing Contradictions*’, or ‘*Distinguishing Relevant from Irrelevant Facts*’, etc. As the students, according to our lesson plan, are expected to discuss personal relations and attitudes, we suggest they also deal with the affective domain, involving such affective strategies as ‘*Exercising Fair-mindedness*’ and

'Developing Intellectual Humility'. Teachers who want to know more about critical thinking strategies can study a strategy list of 35 dimensions of critical thinking which is available at <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/strategy-list-35-dimensions-of-critical-thought/466/>.

Continued development of critical thinking: Critical thinking is knowingly hard and takes time to feel confident in it. If we think about consistent and continued development of critical thinking, we must understand it as a process. One lesson cannot be sufficient to achieve the complex purpose of developing critical thinking. Lessons, units, and a whole curriculum should include critical thinking objectives on a systematic basis, which creates continuity. Moving from traditional homework such as writing an exercise to more creative assignments like writing a paragraph which is focused on a critical thinking strategy can produce continuity in the teaching and learning of critical thinking.

A lesson plan: reading a story and thinking critically

Let us take a lesson which has been developed for university undergraduates in order to develop their reading comprehension and speaking skills by applying some critical strategies relevant for the activities of the lesson. For that purpose we have chosen a humorous story of a failed romantic relationship between a boy and a girl in a university context with the plot development around teaching/learning some elements of logic, namely, logical fallacies. So there are two areas of speculation which we thought are open for our students to practice communicative skills of reading, listening, and talking by applying some of critical thinking strategies.

We thought that an exchange of ideas concerning the plot should be supplemented by more complex activities related to the cognitive and affective domains as the students have an opportunity to learn some elements of the science of logic and to think deeply about the factors which have an impact on the relationship developments.

We have planned three objectives, which incorporate critical thinking, for a two-hour lesson and used the ABCD model in the description of the lesson objectives.

Objective #1: *Given the introductory part of the story for reading (C), students divided into small groups (A) will **evaluate** the main hero's attitude to the girl and **compose** (B) one clear and error-free paragraph per group of 60 words assessing the hero's his plan to improve the girl's intellectual skills (D).*

Objective #2: *Given one of the two following parts of the story for skimming and scanning (C) students divided into two groups (A) will **interpret and explain** to each other the fallacies of logic they learned about in their parts (four fallacies per group) fostering understanding by asking questions for clarification; and **elaborate** a clear definition of a fallacy (B) in less than 30 words (D).*

Objective #3: *Having read the last part of the story (C), the students (A) will **fill out** the gaps with the correct names of appropriate logical fallacies (D) and **justify** their choice in the following discussion (B).*

Thus the verbs we used to write the objectives (*evaluate, compose, interpret and explain, elaborate, justify*) can be attributed to different levels of the cognitive domain of the revised Bloom's taxonomy namely, the levels of Understanding, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating.

Final reflections

Incorporating critical thinking in lesson plans is a challenge which language teachers should experience in order to provide their students with a quality learning experience. The important element to bear in mind is that critical thinking cannot be developed overnight, it is a process and as such there are many steps to be taken. We understand that teaching contexts and routines can easily lead to frustration and a quick discharge of innovative practices and that is why careful planning is required.

A "trial and error" approach may be the best way to move towards the incorporation of critical thinking as well as understanding that there is not one exclusive or "right" way to develop and promote it. Ultimately, each teaching and learning context provides the teacher with some food for thought he/she will need to process by applying his/her own critical thinking when making changes in lesson plans. We also acknowledge that, ideally, a move in this direction in a unit

and in a curriculum design would be best, so that students could benefit from the critical thinking component throughout their academic and non-academic lives, but we believe that changes can be made from inside the classrooms and this may eventually lead to changes in educational policies.

To conclude, we would like to quote William Graham Sumner (Paul, R. 2009, p.23) when he mentions the paramount influence of critical thinking within societies and among human beings:

“The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizen”.

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APPENDIX 1. The Lesson Plan

Title of Lesson: Reading a story and discussing issues concerning romantic relationships.

Short description: Working on a short story *Love is a Fallacy* by Max Shulman students engage in communicative, reflective, and analytical activities which integrate both receptive and productive skills and stimulate critical thinking.

Note! The text of the story is available on multiple sites. For the purposes of the lesson discussed, the story has been abridged (from circa 3800 words to circa 2600). **Part 1** for home reading starts with ‘... *I had long coveted Polly Espy.*’ **Part 2** (for one group) starts with “*Wow-dow!*” she cried, *clapping her hands delightedly.*’ **Part 3** (for the other group) starts with ‘*Seated under the oak the next evening I said, “Our first fallacy tonight is called Ad Misericordiam.”*’ **Part 4** begins with the words ‘*Five grueling nights this took but it was worth it. I had made a logician out of Polly.*’ And the last sentence of the text for the lesson: “*Because this afternoon I promised Petey Bellows that I would go steady with him.*”

Duration: One 90 minute lesson (45+45 without a break).

Participants: 12 university undergraduates, upper-intermediate language proficiency level (CEFR).

Prerequisites:

- Students are familiar with the dynamics of group work and pair discussion.
- Students have had some controlled practice in asking questions for clarification and can differentiate between lower-order questions and higher-order questions.
- Students have had regular practice in writing one-sentence definitions.
- Students are not acquainted with the science of logic.
- Students have been given a homework task to read the introductory part of the story (Part One) before the lesson and to think about the main hero’s plan concerning the girl.

Supporting Activities for Objective #1

- **Introduction to the topic** (10 minutes)

Students bring forward their ideas of love and romantic relationship based on their experience, reading and knowledge. In doing so they answer the questions: Why do people fall in love with someone? What is there in someone, which makes him or her special to you? Should a decision to marry someone be based on feelings or on a rational idea? Why?

- **Working in small groups** (25 minutes)
 - a) Students discuss the hero's plan of improving the girl's thinking skills, the underlying attitudes, focusing on the concepts of fair-mindedness, prejudice, and arrogance.
 - b) They summarize their opinion in a paragraph.

Supporting Activities for Objective #2

- **Reading and discussing** (35 minutes)

Students are divided into two groups. Each group reads one of the two following parts of the story (Part 2 or Part 3).

 - a) In groups, they analyze the meanings of the fallacies which the hero teaches to the girl.
 - b) They share what they learned with the other group and use questions for clarification to ensure they understand the meaning of all eight fallacies described in the story.

Supporting Activities for Objective #3

- **Reading and after reading** (20 minutes)
 - a) All students read the last part of the story (Part 4) and fill out the gaps with the names of the appropriate fallacies which the girl identifies in the hero's arguments.
 - b) In two groups they compare their results. If there are differences, they analyze the arguments by asking questions for clarification.

Follow up activity (for homework):

Students are given a home assignment to write an essay of 350 words which analyzes the factors which brought about the hero's failure in building a romantic relationship with the girl in the story. At the next lesson the students exchange their works and evaluate the partner's variants using the assessment rubric.

APPENDIX 2. Examples of questions for clarification

1. What do you mean by ____?
2. Could you put that another way?
3. Is your basic point _____ or _____?
4. Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _____ or _____?
5. How does this relate to our problem/discussion/issue?
6. What do you mean by this remark?
7. Can you summarize in your own words what your partner said?
8. Is this what you meant?
9. Could you give me an example?
10. Why do you say that?

APPENDIX 3. Paragraph Evaluation Scoring Rubric

Directions to the reviewer: Read each question and mark YES, PM or NO.

Each "YES" answer = 10 points

Each "PM" (Partially Mastered) answer = 5 points

Each "NO" answer = 0 points

A perfect score is **100**.

	Questions			
1.	Does the paragraph clearly and directly answer the question?	YES	PM	NO
2.	Does the main point of the paragraph demonstrate deep understanding of the factors causing the hero's failure?	YES	PM	NO
3.	Is the writer's opinion totally convincing?	YES	PM	NO
4.	Is the argumentation well explained and justified?	YES	PM	NO
5.	Did the writer succeed in avoiding unnecessary	YES	PM	NO

	facts and details?			
6.	Does the paragraph have appropriate linking words ensuring cohesion?	YES	PM	NO
7.	Is the paragraph error-free (grammar, punctuation)?	YES	PM	NO
8.	Are all the words appropriately used?	YES	PM	NO
9.	Do the linguistic features of the paragraph perfectly exemplify the upper-intermediate language proficiency level?	YES	PM	NO
10.	Is the length of the paragraph as required?	YES	PM	NO

SCORE: _____ /100

Reviewer's possible suggestions about the improvement of the paragraph:
